

Eulogy for Roslyn Wiesenfeld Pinker

Steven Pinker

April 29, 2023

“A force of nature.” More than one colleague of my mother described her to me in that way. My mother *was* a strong person, a *shtarker*, as she might have said in one of the Yiddishisms that salted her speech.

My mother had a strong sense of her good fortune. Her own mother remembered the Kishinev Pogrom and the Russian Revolution; her father labored as a slave in a coal mine during World War I. My mother was born shortly after they lost their jobs in the Depression, and she retained childhood memories of World War II throughout her life. She savored the gift of growing up in peace and prosperity, and among those she thanked in her 50th anniversary toast was Canada.

My mother had a strong thirst for knowledge. As my father Harry said in his own toast to her on that occasion, “There is nobody in this world who reads as avidly as Roz does. I watch the news, she reads. I drive, she reads, I sleep, she reads. I talk, she reads, I read, she talks.”

My mother had a strong sense of her values. In her toast to my father on their *60th* anniversary, she contrasted their personalities—she the worrier, he the optimist; she the planner, he the impulse buyer—but highlighted the convictions they shared. In her words: “That the moment you’re responsible for others, you’re an adult. That humor can turn misery outward. That other people’s welfare trumps one’s own. That children of all ages are a priority, most especially if they are yours. That things are things and are dispensable and replaceable. That people are people and are not. That it’s only money.”

She had a keen intelligence. I imagined her as my reader when writing my books, and she commented insightfully on my first drafts. And she had a sharp wit. On the morning of my fiftieth birthday, she called and asked how I was feeling. "I feel old," I said. She shot back, "*You* feel old? I have a fifty-year-old son!"

And she had a strong sense of compassion. The good men do is interred with their bones—women, too—and together with all the acts of kindness and generosity to us that Susan, Rob, and I recall, there are surely many more we have forgotten. It was a compassion she applied to her extended family, to friends, to students, to colleagues, and to strangers. Nothing captures my mother better than a story in an email I received two years ago:

"Hello Mr Pinker. I imagine you are extremely busy but have wanted to email you for years and tell you a story about your mother. I once drove a taxi in Vancouver and got lost one night with your parents, who were tired after a wedding. Your mom had been a wonderful conversationalist with me during a low point in my life. I feel emotional thinking about how patient and sweet your mom was even while exhausted, while I struggled. After finally getting there, I told her how I felt she was one of the kindest, most intelligent people I have ever met. What an impressive lady."