

PREFACE

The Burial

We carried her out then
with the strong chorus of farm folk
resounding “How Great Thou Art,”
carried her from the little country church
where she prayed and served
for forty-nine years,
where she fried chicken and baked pies
for parish dinners, sewed garments for the poor,
cleaned pews, washed linens
and made Jell-O salads for funeral dinners.
The burial entourage walked behind her,
passed a lonely, vacant building
that schooled her eight children,
where she stood up to nuns who went
beyond the boundaries of discipline
and bore the scalding words
of an alcoholic pastor’s false judgments,
yet remained strong and stalwart in a faith

that might easily have crumbled for others
in similar circumstance.

Onward we walked to the cemetery
where a considerable number of tombstones
bore her husband's last name but not one
of her own ancestry. We stood
silently at the gravesite, each mourner's sorrow
bearing the certainty of her death. As the
pastor uttered the last prayer a lone bird,
a robin perhaps, warbled a sparkling song
of commencement. (Did it sing for you, my mother?
And was the soft, gentle breeze sweeping
across our faces a final farewell from you?)

I lifted my eyes beyond the flower-laden casket
to the freshly planted fields beyond,
looked across the flat mile or so to the tall evergreens
marking the front lawn of the family farm.
In that brief moment I glimpsed
the wholeness of life's quickly erased journey,
and marveled at its simplicity.

—Joyce Rupp

A resilient life is not an impenetrable fortress.
A resilient life is more like a calm, deep river
that soothes the suffering soul within us and in those
around us.

—**James Kullander**

Mastering the Art of Resilience

Ever since my mother, Hilda Rupp, died fourteen years ago I have wanted to write this book. The way she lived, aged, and approached her death taught me how I hope to engage with my own. So why has it taken me this long to gather the memories and insights I've gleaned from her life? Why have I started and stopped so often in these years long since passed?

Each time I recalled my mother's presence, tears flowed. I thought, "I'll wait to write about her until the sadness is out of my system." However, the sadness did not leave. I finally took a deep breath and pushed myself into the writing process. Without realizing it, each page I wrote moved me further into my healing.

Is the sorrow gone now? Not completely. I realize I will always miss my mother's presence. She was too dear for me to not retain a certain sense of loss. I have come to accept this.

As I gradually came to know my mother, not only as an aging parent but as a friend, I grew in admiration of her resiliency. Time and again, I recognized how she did not allow ongoing hardships and difficult deaths to dampen her zestful and generous spirit. I ought not to have been

surprised at this once I looked into the etymology of her name and discovered that “Hildegard” comes from a Scandinavian myth in which Hildegard is a maiden who escorts those in battle.

True to her name’s origin, my mother lived alongside some challenging “battles” in her lifetime and managed them with courage. She brought this resiliency of her younger years into elderhood and most of the time it prevailed. Even though I felt sadness about Mom’s increasing frailty, I could not comprehend very well the devastating effect of this emerging diminishment. After Mom’s death, when I thought about the last years of her life, I felt a haunting distress about what I wished I had done and failed to do, and what I *did* do and wished I had not.

A good portion of my tears came from the absence that death brings and from a continual surge of misgivings. How I longed to have been more aware of the inside story of letting go that comes creeping in with the limitations of aging. It has taken me these many years to finally leave those regrets behind and intentionally move on from them.

While I extol my mother’s style of aging and dying, I do not wish to present her as a saint. Hilda Rupp had her quirks and faults, as we all do. They did not, however, prevent her from being admired and appreciated by relatives, friends, and acquaintances.

Nor does the example of how my mother lived and aged deny the experience of countless older persons whose health of body, mind, and spirit differs significantly from her situation and circumstance. Not every aging person

can approach life and death as my mother did. Plenty of physical health problems plagued Mom in the fourteen years before death, but her mind was relatively steady and alert until the end. Countless elderly persons do not have this option due to cognitive issues, such as those associated with dementia and Alzheimer's disease.

Yet it is my hope that what I learned from my mother in her aging and dying process will benefit others, both those entering their later years and those who accompany or care for them. I trust this book will assist those who maintain a relationship with an aging individual not to repeat the regrettable mistakes that ensued from my inability to understand what it is like to "grow old."

I also hope this book will help those in their elderhood find renewed confidence. Perhaps my mother's attitude will lend credence to the belief that the lessening of good health and vitality can be met with a positive approach, one that does not deny the angst of this loss, but also allows for the joy and satisfaction in what is yet possible.

This is not a "rah-rah, cheerleader-for-the-elderly" book. There are enough of those around, suggesting older people must continue to look and act twenty years younger than they are. This type of literature exacerbates the Western world's idolization of youth and lessens the value of leaning into the aging process with dignity and the gutsy honesty that accepts the situation of aging for what it is.

I most wish to convey the inspiration I received from the way my mother met her elder years. She gave me courage

to meet my own. This is not to say my aging process is going to be any easier. Rather, when I recall my mother's approach to life and death I believe that I, too, can maintain a positive outlook. I can learn to live with and accept my physical decline and the limitations accruing with it in a way that contributes positively to my own personal transformation and to the benefit of those companioning me in my senior years.

None of us knows how our final stage of life will affect us until we experience it. We do know that we want to live life with as much quality and verve as possible, for as long as we can. My mother's motto in her last decade was "Fly while you still have wings." She intentionally lived with enthusiasm and gratitude. Then there came a time when those strong wings were not so sturdy anymore. She initially met this reality with fierce resistance. Eventually, she leaned into what could not be changed, doing so with the wisdom of one who believes old age and death can be met with a faith-filled acceptance and confident serenity.

This I learned from my resilient mother.

INTRODUCTION

Sorrow

Memories endure
of a glass-paned door,
the veined hand
behind it
waving
a tender farewell,
the gray smile
pretending to be brave
imprinting itself
on my mind
with permanent ink.

Will this sadness
over my mother's death
never leave?
Will sorrow huddle
in the strong shell
of determined grief
and fix its claim
on my heart
until I, too, depart?

Perhaps.

Perhaps not.

Maybe now,
after these many years,
I can curve
my love with ease
toward sorrow,
until peace
rests like a child
in her mother's arms.

Perhaps I can learn
to receive sorrow
like an old friend
who simply asks
not to be forgotten.

—Joyce Rupp

Those who will not slip beneath
the still surface on the well of grief,
turning down through its black water
to the place we cannot breathe,
will never know the source from which we drink,
the secret water, cold and clear. . . .

—David Whyte

River Flow

An urge to be by water kept stirring as I began writing about my mother. I followed that yearning one day and went for a walk by Saylorville Lake. I chose a perfect day, although I did not know this until I sat by the water's edge on a late afternoon. Perfect because the wind had picked up speed all day and tossed lake water onto the sandy shore with a sound reminiscent of the sea. I closed my eyes and listened to the spirited waters. Slowly I heard something more—the slosh and swish of being in the womb of Hildegard Cecelia Antoinette Wilberding. Then I knew the puzzling yearning to be by water was calling me to honor and remember the intimate relationship with my mother, a bond begun when I dwelt in her watery womb.

In spite of being pregnant, my mother worked long, strenuous days as a farm wife. Already having birthed two young children under the age of five, I doubt she allowed herself to sit down and rest for any significant amount of time. During gestation my tiny, evolving body must have felt a steady movement similar to those energetic waves of lake water moving back and forth.

Thinking about this rhythm of wombed oneness moved me deeply, eliciting unexpected emotion. I marveled, “Here I am today, sixty-eight years of life, the result of my mother’s fertilized egg taking root in the precious cavity of her uterus.” Out of this profound truth a tremendous gratitude arose for the life I received from her.

I had a loving relationship with my mother. Some do not. But no matter—we are all influenced by our time in the womb. For it is there we find the life that initially shapes and forms us into who we are. Whether we are conscious of it or not, when a mother dies a part of us dies too. The umbilical cord of connection might have been severed at our birth, but there remains an invisible link between a mother and the one she brought to life. We cannot have fed and grown inside her without having this experience firmly embedded in our psyche.

Musings about my birth were not the end of water’s ability to lead me to unexpected insights about my maternal relationship. After that initial experience with water, I set aside further writing due to the daily push of endless deadlines. Six months later I paused for a week of writing at Lake Okoboji where I refocused on my mother by combing through more of my daily journals for memories. There, by the waters of this deep glacial lake, I came across an entry in which Mom described my birth: “With you I had lots of water when it broke, more than with any of the other ones.”

No wonder my deeper self kept insisting “water, water.”

Four weeks after Lake Okoboji, I resumed writing when I arrived at Mallard Island in Rainy Lake for a writer's residency program. I had not given much thought as to where I would be, other than knowing Mallard Island was situated close to the wildness of Minnesota's northern boundary waters, away from both internet and phone service. Much to my surprise and delight the coordinator assigned me to Cedarbark Cabin, where my bed rested in an alcove extending over the water. As I went to bed that first evening, lulled to sleep with the lake's gentle lapping sounds, I wondered what new treasures water held for me.

The next morning I left the cabin at dawn and strolled to the end of the small island. There I crossed a narrow stone bridge and walked up to what would become a sanctuary of healing. Before me stood the Japanese House, named most probably for its structural simplicity and openness. Built in a little square with walls of local wood and light-filled windows opening to nature's beauty, it rests over a promontory of stones and lake water.

As I sat there at the small wooden table provided for artists and writers, the tranquility of the place allowed a strong sorrow to surface. Tears trickled as I thought of the many deceased I loved, particularly my mother. How much I missed her still, more than eleven years after her death. I realized, too, I still had not let go of my regrets—those things I wished I had done more of to ease her last years of aging and dying. I wondered to myself that morning, "Will

I ever be free from this angst that perpetually rises up in me?”

I left the Japanese House that morning with this question still unresolved. All day it hung around nagging insistently for a response while I tried to write about the woman whose life held valuable teachings for me. On the second morning, after another night of sleeping above the water, I again went to my sanctuary of healing. This time, without realizing what I was doing (for so it is when intuition rises and the rational becomes stilled), I sat down on the slender doorsill in front of the table so I could face out to the water and the neighboring islands.

All of a sudden I thought, “Oh! I am sitting on the doorsill, the threshold, the place of being neither in nor out, the place of ‘don’t know.’” I smiled, recognizing how I was led to sit on a spot symbolic of my internal space. Somehow that unplanned move to the threshold freed me to “be.” So pronounced was the harmony and peacefulness of the little house that I easily let the question of what to do with my grief-filled regrets and sense of loss slip away.

I felt the spirit of the place and the lake water embrace me. I had no desire for either a helpful insight or a change of emotion. I just sat in that serene spot over the water, sat on the threshold and waited. For what I did not know.

Sometime during those two hours at the Japanese House, the inner gate opened. As I gazed at the idyllic scene before me, the myth of the river Styx pierced my subdued consciousness like an Olympic diver hitting the water. I remembered the tale of how Greeks placed their dead on

boats so the river Styx could carry them to the other side of this life. Water, bearing the dead. Water, conveying them away in honor. Water, moving them onward with hope of something beyond. Water, comforting those left behind.

Instantly I found clarity regarding my regrets and sadness. I was to let go of the aspects of my mother's death that held me captive. I could place all this upon the water and let it, too, travel onward. I was to focus on my mother's life, to embrace her love, and to surrender my loss. I had done what I could. It was enough.

The sloshing waters of Saylorville Lake led me to remember life in my mother's womb. Rainy Lake led me to accept her death, an entrance into the Eternal Womb. Although I remained behind, I was not bereft and orphaned anymore. Instead, bountiful memories remained to be cherished for the rest of my life.

At that moment of acceptance, I entered into the full circle of life-death-rebirth. There by the northern waters I knew why I was to come to a small island where land barely has a voice compared to the vast speech of water. I understood why each night I was to sleep on the wings of a lake and wake to its exquisite peacefulness.

It is with this peace and acceptance that I now unfold for you the story of my resilient mother's journey.

CHAPTER 1

THE BIRTH *of* RESILIENCE

The Aunts

They came
laden with armfuls
of food
and hearts overflowing
with endless
laughter.

They came
with a sense of well-being
and a generous spirit,
leaving behind
in their own home and heart
tribulations
in need of caring.

They came,
these great aunts of mine,
to steady and strengthen
my motherless mother
tending ten siblings
in the Great Depression.

They came,
not for the purpose
of teaching or preaching,
but to lend a hand
in a troublesome time.

They came
with resilient spirits,
messengers of how to endure
and thrive,
to find joy
in pieces of brokenness.

They came
leaving a legacy
in the ancestral lineage,
the hope
of better times
when all seems lost.

—Joyce Rupp

The art of resilience asks . . . that you make your whole life a work of art. The uncertainties of life, the pain and problems, let them become woven into the fabric of your being—alongside the joys and the triumphs. This is life’s promise to you, not that you will always get what you think you want, but that you can become great enough to embrace it all. Live your life fully—there is no easier way. Make your life a work of art—it is enough.

—**Carol Orsborn**

The Art of Resiliency

No matter how young or old we are, each of us contains a story. The longer we live, the more that story includes. When I look at the history of my mother, Hilda, I see a story based on a quality of inner strength that took shape during a shattering event in her youth. Her story reminds me that resilience doesn’t just happen. The seed of this attribute lodges itself at birth but remains dormant until challenging situations awaken and draw it forth.

I found an unexpected insight related to my mother’s experience in Francis Weller’s *Entering the Healing Ground*.¹ There I learned about “ancestral grief.” “Why didn’t I think of this?” I wondered, as I read his sensitive description of this type of loss. Weller refers to the “unattended pain” of the ancestors, suggesting that “the grief we carry in our bodies from sorrows experienced by (them)” can continue to linger unconsciously in us “in a layer of silence.” When I came across the suggestion that we carry the grief of our ancestors deep in our psyches, it struck a strong chord of