

## Eulogy for Rita Delia Dowd

March 17, 1926 - November 29, 2015

Written and read by her granddaughter, Megan Dowd Lambert St. Marie

St. Patrick's Church, Jaffrey, New Hampshire

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When I shared the obituary I drafted for my grandmother, Uncle Ernie reminded me of a Dowd family joke: my grandparents both enjoyed reading, and they indulged this pleasure with *Reader's Digest*. Growing up, my mother, Linda, and many of her siblings thought that it was actually called *Rita's Digest*. I laughed when reminded of this and also thought it an apt description of what I've attempted in this eulogy—I want to record in writing a slice-of-life picture of my grandmother, whom my siblings and I called Mimi. I want it to be touching, and funny, and true, and I hope it captures some of what made Rita Delia Dowd who she was. But, I know I can offer only a condensed version of her life here, a Rita's Digest, if you will, in my attempt to pay tribute to her and to offer you, my Dowd family, some measure of comfort.

The condensing is partially born of necessity since there are parts of Mimi's life about which I know very little. As I wrote in the obituary, she “was a reserved, no-nonsense kind of woman” and although I would describe our relationship as close, she was, in some ways, an enigma. As I grew up, I often wondered about her childhood with Memé and Dot, her teenage years, her early adulthood, but I knew better than to ask prying questions. Instead, I kept my ears open, listening hard whenever she shared something personal, and living in awe of her strength. She was a force to be reckoned with, and I admired her as a woman who knew right from wrong and who understood what was important in life.

Above all else, Mimi's family was important to her. She was a devoted wife to Papa for over 64 years, a fact that gave her tremendous pride. “I took good care of him,” she often told me, and I know he took good care of her too. This reciprocity was possible because they understood each other very well after all those years. There's a story that once when Mimi was feeling a bit...snappish...she said something gruff and walked out of the room. Papa smiled and said to those left behind in her wake, “And she's all mine!” He accepted her for who she was and

was fiercely protective of her in her later years. It brought him great comfort at the end of his life to know that his children would continue to care for his Rita when he was gone.

Papa knew his children well, and he knew that being their mother was central to Mimi's life. She recently told Aunt Susan that when she prayed it was to Mary "because she was a mother" and the bust of the Madonna and child that she had on her wall was a special source of comfort and strength as she raised her seven children with Papa. When I became a mother she wrote a letter to me and said, "I remember my first days with my first baby, Pamela. Waking up every four hours for feedings. Worrying, watching, and wondering." Her empathy and support meant the world to me, and I drew strength from her words. Implicit in them is the love she had for her firstborn child, the sense of responsibility she felt for her, and the great hope she had for her future. As years went by and the family grew, those sentiments extended to Paula, Ernie, Linda, Ellen, Celeste, and Susan, and later to their children and grandchildren. We are the beneficiaries of her love and her sense of duty, the site of her hopes, and now, the bearers of her memory.

Memories are important, and I will share more, but I first want to offer the comforting and sustaining idea that Mimi is still present with us in ways that extend beyond memories; she is ever-present in our lives as a source of ongoing inspiration. Aunt Celeste wrote to her a number of years ago, saying:

*"Mom you are such an inspiration to me. You worked so hard your whole life. I don't know how you did it. You never stopped. All the kids, up early, making breakfast, doing laundry, cooking, baking, sewing, knitting, gardening, making lunches at night for us to take to school the next day, and oh yeah, mixing milk at night after we went to bed. I was 17 maybe 18 years old before I walked into the kitchen and saw you straining the milk clumps out of the dry milk you just made up to mix with the regular milk. And on top of all that you worked outside of the house. Wow."*

Wow indeed. Mimi was a multi-tasker before there was a word for it, and I know because I've always looked up to you, my mother and her siblings, that she instilled in her children a strong work ethic. It's true that she could have a rather stern demeanor (Aunt Ellen recently said to me, "You knew she meant business when she gave you *the look*. And watch out when she middle-named you: 'Ellen Frances! Ernest Paul! Linda Mary Dowd!'") and she was a hard

worker; but as my brother said of Papa in the eulogy we wrote for him, Mimi was not all work and no play. The old labor movement song speaks of fighting “not just for bread, but roses too,” and although Mimi worked tirelessly for bread to sustain her family, she gave us roses, too.

One of my favorite writers, Alice Walker, writes of being “In search of our mother’s gardens” in her exploration of what it means to be an African American woman writer drawing inspiration from her ancestors. She explains that while her artistic vocation is writing, the Black women who came before her were artists in their flower gardens and in their quilting, too. She argues with gratitude and resolve that she is the writer, or the artist, she is today because of this artistic legacy of her maternal forbearers. The Dowd family’s French-Canadian, Irish (and maybe a little Italian?) heritage is not the same as Walker’s, and I don’t mean to diminish the very real historical and cultural differences that exist as I nevertheless find common ground with Walker’s homage to her mother as an artist in her flower gardens, where she “order[ed] the universe in the image of her personal conception of beauty.”<sup>1</sup> Mimi’s gardens were artistry. They were one way that she realized *her* personal conception of beauty.

Although I didn’t inherit Mimi’s green thumb, many of her children did, I’ve seen it evidenced in my sister, Keita, and I know that my cousin Molly’s passion was in making things grow. I’m sure the gardeners among you will feel close to Mimi when you see your flowers bloom in the springtime. And, just as Walker cites her mother’s gardens as artistic inspiration, I can take inspiration from Mimi’s flower gardens as I forge my own path as a writer and as I try to, in other ways, realize my personal conception of beauty. My siblings, Sean and Keita, and my cousin Hannah, can, as visual artists, take inspiration from their flower-garden-artist grandmother, too; and, again, I think we can all connect the creative spirit Molly had with her Grandma Dowd’s love of beauty. I hope others among you will think about and take comfort in your own modes of artistry and creativity and rejoice in how Mimi may have planted the seed that gave rise to them.

All that said, I don’t use this roses reference to speak only literally of the flower gardens that Mimi tended with care, that can inspire us, and that made gorgeously manifest the pride she took in homemaking. I name the “roses, too” in order to also recognize metaphorically the *many*

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<sup>1</sup> Walker, Alice. “In Search of our Mother’ Gardens” in *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose*. New York: Harcourt, 1983. 241.

ways that Mimi created beauty in the world and to acknowledge that through these creations she expressed her love to her family.

For example, how many gorgeous sweaters, mittens, scarves, hats, and ear-warmers do you think she made for all of us? I vividly remember seeing Brendan, John, and Dan in their sweaters as little boys, and my own kids have worn many (some handed-down) over the years. She put love into every stitch. When I was in college Mimi made me a purple afghan that remains one of my most prized possessions. She wrote me a letter during the time she was making it and told me how Jennifer, then a very young child, would sit with her while she worked on it, “helping” her make it for me. This afghan is therefore not just a physical gift to me, but a tangible representation of special time Mimi spent with another granddaughter, Jennifer. The gift of time together is another sort of rose from Mimi. I’m sure my siblings and Dowd cousins can all recalling times they “helped” Mimi wash dishes, or hang clothes on the line, or take care of other household tasks. We can also remember working on puzzles, cooking and baking together, bird-watching, and taking walks. When I spoke with Aunt Ellen recently, she said of Mimi and Papa’s many years of living with them, “They’d get down on the floor, playing with Jennifer and Laura, reading with them. They helped Leigh and me raise our girls.” The gratitude in her voice was as apparent as the deep loss she was feeling, and her words also provoked a jolt of recognition in me. I clearly recall my grandparents as playful and delighted companions during my young childhood. In my mind’s eye I can see Mimi under the dining room table with my toddler brother, I remember her kissing his neck and John’s and Dan’s too, I can see her bundled up next to a huge snowman, and can I hear her resolving “never again!” after a tobogganing mishap left her with a broken tailbone.

Amid all of this hard work and play, this bread, these roses, Mimi and Papa lovingly strived to instill core values of respect and responsibility. Uncle Ernie put it this way: *“I remember how with such a large family Mom and Dad always took good care of us, always loved us...not having much money, but we were always fed and clothed, always clean and neat...taught to say please and thank you, told to ‘keep your hands in your pockets when in a store’ and brought us up right.”*

This acknowledgement of what Mimi and Papa gave to their children is profound in its gratitude for not just the basic necessities of life, but for the intangible essentials of love and

respect, as well. They gave everything they could, and in this instill the value of generosity. Aunt Susan wrote to them, *“I remember during a particularly grumpy, complaining stage of mine, you asked if there was anything that I ever really needed or wanted that I didn’t get. All that I could come up with was a pet skunk and a boa. I think that says it all!”*

Doesn’t it though? What a tremendous tribute that each of their children can stand with grateful hearts in recognition of what they received from them. And the final gift, or rose, or thing of beauty that I want to honor today is the gift of vulnerability that Mimi gave to us all at the end of her life. After Sean and I visited Mimi and Papa in Florida last year while they were living with Aunt Paula, Larry, and my mother, Linda, I told my mom that part of the reason it was hard to see Mimi as she aged was that she had been so “large and in charge” throughout her life. To mix in a few more turns of phrase, she ran a tight ship and didn’t suffer fools gladly. But even as it was difficult to see Mimi losing her strength, and having her memory fade, my mother helped me see how this stage in her life was sacred. It allowed her to accept (albeit sometimes with difficulty) help and nurturance from the children and grandchildren to whom she’d given so much. As I look at you, my Dowd family, and others who loved Mimi, I stand in respect and gratitude for all you did to help and support her in her last years. Your gifts to her are too many to name, and I’m probably not even aware of them all, but I hope that each of you holds in your heart the many and profound ways you enriched and eased her last years of life when she was at her most vulnerable, whether she was in South Burlington, Florida, or here in New Hampshire. It wasn’t easy for her to need us so, but in letting us help her and in accepting our acts of love, she gave us roses, too.

Although she spent more of her life in Massachusetts, Vermont, and Florida, this is where Mimi spent the last year of her life. She spent it grieving Papa’s death and missing him terribly, but was comforted by his photos on her wall (“I talk with him every day, you know,” she’d tell me), the excellent care she received at Summerhill, and the steady presence of her family. For the past year Aunt Susan and Uncle Mark centered their lives around her care and wellbeing, and I know we all did everything we could to support them and to enrich her life. Some very special moments occurred not with family, but through her engagement with the community. She was known as Gigi (for great-grandmother) at the school where Aunt Susan teaches, and the children loved her visits to kindergarten and would clamor to sit on her lap for reading time or to do crafts

and projects with her. I bet my cousin Chelsea, also a teacher, would have loved to have hosted her in her classroom too had this been possible, because, forget about a class pet, who wouldn't want a class Gigi? I witnessed firsthand how special this experience was when I brought Jesse to meet her on her 89<sup>th</sup> birthday, and we spent some time in the classroom. It warmed my heart to see her surrounded by so much love, her own soft heart visible in the company of young children. Inspired by a Margaret Wise Brown picture book *The Important Book*, the kindergarteners wrote the following about Gigi:

*"The important thing about Gigi is that she loves me. She is fun. She is smart and silly. Gigi is brave, she plays games with me and she knows all of the rules. She follows the ABC's at school. But the important thing about Gigi is that she loves me."*

I will add that the *most* important thing about Gigi was that she loved you Pam, Paula, Ernie, Linda, Ellen, Celeste, and Susan, and she loved all of us in your families, too. In recent years, whenever I saw her, she showed me her "baby ring" adorned with each of your birthstones, and she named you one by one—sometimes adding commentary like, "Those two are for my twins," proudly pointing to the stones for Ellen and Celeste, or "That's for my favorite son," about Ernie's gem. She told me of your visits and calls; she shared photos and notes; she pointed out gifts, she told me stories, and she took pride in your accomplishments and your families.

You did much for her, and although her memory sometimes failed her, she was grateful. I don't believe anyone acted out of a sense of indebtedness, though we certainly owed her much; instead, I think we were motivated by love. In this last year, love inspired me, my siblings, and many of my cousins to visit her and to keep in touch with notes and calls. Love inspired Aunt Ellen and Uncle Leigh's calls and visits from South Burlington, and it inspired Aunt Pam and Uncle Dave and Aunt Paula and Larry, Dave and Larry to keep in close touch, especially after spending so much special time together in Florida during Papa's last year of life; it provoked Uncle Ernie and Aunt Kathy to make visits with their new, beloved granddaughter, Nora (and Chelsea and Evan too) to meet her great-grandmother; it inspired Aunt Celeste to do many baking projects in the country kitchen at Summerhill, revisiting recipes Mimi made for her when she was a child; it inspired my mother Linda's frequent visits, too, as well as her help to Aunt Susan in managing doctor's appointments and more; and it inspired Aunt Susan and Uncle Mark

to include her in their everyday lives with visits to the dump and trips out for coffee as Saturday highlights. It allowed Aunt Celeste to read Robert Frost's poetry to Mimi the day before she died, just as Mimi had read it to Papa in his last hours. And just as my mother and Mimi stayed with Papa when he died, love allowed my mother Linda and Aunt Susan to bear witness to Mimi's last breaths.

That love persists. It is the only thing stronger than death, I think. It allows us to remember Mimi and all she was to us, each in our own particular relationships with her, and to honor her as we move forward, inspired by her example, and grateful for the bread and roses, too. Thank you for giving me this opportunity to honor Mimi with this eulogy. I hope I have done her proud, and I hope I've brought some comfort to all of you. I know that this Rita's Digest hasn't said everything important about her, and I hope that in the coming days, months, and years, we will all continue sharing stories, remembrances, and inspiration together.