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On Friends, Mothers, and Scholarship: A Tribute to Adrienne Fried Block

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On Friends, Mothers, and Scholarship
A Tribute to Adrienne Fried Block
By Carol J. Oja
September 30, 2009

Like many here today, I had a long and close relationship with Adrienne, dating back to my arrival as a student in the Ph.D. Program in Music in the late 1970s. The 10th floor of 33 West 42nd Street was our academic home, and Adrienne was then simultaneously completing both her dissertation on the early French parody noel and, together with Carol Neuls Bates, the bibliography of “Women in American Music.” In fact, I attended Adrienne’s dissertation defense. She must have been well into her fifties at the time. But as a twenty-something I was fairly oblivious to where she stood in life’s course, simply sensing that she was probably a contemporary of my own mother. Over the years, Adrienne remained a solid friend and mentor, always ready to discuss work and chip in ideas. Last February, which was one of the final times we talked alone, I had breakfast at her apartment. Even though she was dealing with the roller-coaster of chemotherapy, her usual standards of elegance were fully intact, with a bowl of fresh berries on the counter, ready to toss on our cereal. We talked about my current work on the early Broadway shows of Leonard Bernstein, and it turns out that Adrienne had seen *On the Town* after it opened in late 1944. She offered her usual volley of tough questions and provocative suggestions, and then she pulled out sheet music for some of the numbers.

As I’ve mulled over what to say today, I have been struggling to articulate the impact of this diminutive powerhouse on my own life and career. How to capture Adrienne in her many roles: conducting and caring, publishing and

prodding, listening and leading? Parenting. Determinedly defying. All without conventional institutional support.

I became newly curious about Adrienne's relationship to Amy Beach -- or, as Judith Tick recently put it, the relationship of A.F.B. and A.B.! – and I returned to her magnificent biography from 1998. Beach, as this audience well knows, was the first American woman to compose large-scale musical works. As I re-read Adrienne's book, it unexpectedly connected with a recent title I have been savoring: that is, *Thinking through the Mothers: Reimagining Women's Biographies*, written by yet another friend, Janet Beizer. So the scholarship of two women-colleagues joined hands.

In *Thinking through the Mothers*, Beizer undertakes an extended rumination about how we women often discover aspects of ourselves through our biographical subjects. "Each biographer has a mission to retrieve a lost woman's life," writes Beizer. "In many if not most cases," she continues, "the hope is to recover illustrious foremothers who might be shown to have mimed the success stories of their better-known male counterparts, or to have dared to carve out transgressive models." (p. 25). Writing biography, then, can become a search to understand our own strategies for bucking gendered cultural expectations in order to do the work that moves our souls – for finding models of how to breach the many boundaries that can contain us. A female biographer, Beizer observes, "cannot aspire to what her mother *was* – historical conditions prevent this – but rather [to] what her mother *would have been*." (p. 34)

With these thoughts in mind, I found myself exploring Adrienne's Beach book afresh. After all, this child of Jewish heritage from New York City wasn't the

most obvious match for a Yankee from late nineteenth-century New Hampshire. Cultural affinity did not bind them. Rather, they shared a gift for music, a sense of human decency, and a whole lot of chutzpah. Time and again in writing about Beach, Adrienne elegantly articulates themes that seem equally resonant of Adrienne herself.

For example, she writes that Beach “helped demolish notions” of the range of possibilities for female musicians – that “she turned . . . defeat into triumph.”

She continues:

To women [Beach] was a heroine, not as glamorous as a diva perhaps, but all the more remarkable for having ventured into a field of composition thought to be the exclusive preserve of men—and having succeeded.

How the passing of recent generations has altered the opportunities for women academics to enter that “exclusive preserve”! Those born in the 1920s – that is, Adrienne’s generation – got a sense of their own potential during WWII, before many became “homeward bound” in the 1950s, as historian Elaine May has articulated it. A few emerged as successes within the academic world – either as the “first” tenured woman at an institution, or, as Adrienne did, by devising their own base of operation. Adrienne’s long association here at the Graduate Center was brilliantly self-styled: she brought in major grants, set up ambitious research projects, mentored scads of students, produced high-profile conferences and publications. She gave and gave – all without a pension-accruing appointment. For the generation of women born in the 1940s, many more professional opportunities emerged than for those of Adrienne’s age-group, yet they too have often peered through glass ceilings. And for my own cohort – born

in the 1950s and '60s – those ceilings have sometimes been pierced by a sun-roof, revealing open sky.

Adrienne could have powered down her computer. But no. She admired the “transgressive model” that she located in Beach, and she managed to offer that same code-defying inspiration to women around her.

Here is another of Adrienne’s observations about Beach:

She was a warm, giving person, much concerned about others, and particularly involved in helping younger women musicians through their organizations and directly as a loving friend.

And yet another:

What made the last few years of her life more than bearable – indeed joyful – were the many friends who visited with her, joined her for lunch or dinner, for concerts and theater, or just to talk, a social schedule that continued the pattern established long before. It was a rare day when she was alone.

Those excerpts scarcely require comment. Adrienne’s friends and colleagues gained much from those same qualities – from her energetic capacity to cultivate old friendships and generate new ones.

And finally, here are Adrienne’s reflections on her relationship to Beach:

This biographer hopes she has neither diminished Amy Beach nor blown her up to superwoman size but rather shown her as a fallible girl and woman who exhibited courage in the face of obstacles, the possessor of enough strength to tackle the most challenging musical tasks.

That final segment couldn’t provide a better epitaph for Adrienne herself. She was a woman who consistently “exhibited courage in the face of obstacles,” who just as consistently possessed “enough strength to tackle the most challenging tasks.”

Janet Beizer writes of how women, as biographers of women, tell “a double story” – that they are “implicated in the biography,” that “they create alter-egos.” Indeed, Adrienne built an intensely close relationship to Amy Beach, at the same time as she approached the task with critical acumen and as an activist, seeking to claim for Beach the respectful position in narratives of music history that this gifted composer had earned but been denied.

I want to conclude with a few words about Adrienne’s impact on me. Perhaps I am most grateful for the example she provided of treating one’s professional and personal life as an intensely integrated organism – of achieving synchronicity between one’s relationships with family and friends and the work that brings such deep satisfaction. Adrienne embodied “wissenschaft” – a German term well-known to musicologists, denoting scientific rigor. She was also a model of grace as a writer, of loving good sense as a mother, and of loyalty as a friend. I said those things to her in various ways over the years. Yet, as can so often be the case while life races by, I wish I had done so more often. I feel certain, though, that she knew the degree to which her high standards and sheer gumption helped pave the way for women of my generation – and those younger than me – to reach for the stars.