

My mum was an immigrant: she's gone now but the love remains

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[This is the text of the oration I delivered at my mother's funeral]



Erika Beckett 1925-2009

My mum was an immigrant. She came to this country out of history. She was born into an age where the car and the phone were still novel. She grew to adulthood through the darkest period of Europe's recent past. Erika Thielebein then arrived in London at the start of the second Elizabethan Age, the latter half of the exciting, frightening 20th century. So for me she always represented much more than 'just' a mother.

Her life and her example inspired in me a sense of the importance of the international. And also an understanding that anything is possible, both evil and good.

I think mum always kept that dual sense of what life offers in the modern age. She experienced enough sadness and loss to ensure a sceptical and sometimes melancholy view of the world.

But her response was utterly life-giving. A close marriage, five children and friendships around the world testify to her ability to seize life and demand so much of it.

Where does a human being get the kind of strength that enabled her to go through a World War, to lose her father, to come to the land of your 'enemy', to bring up five children and hold down a job after you lose your husband at such a young age?

The answer is love.

Like all my siblings I have raged at mum. When young I sometimes despaired at her ever 'understanding' me. I made my own way so strongly partly because I knew that distance can sometimes protect affection. She insisted on having her own life, and so it was not surprising that I felt the same way. Her example taught me to be yourself – and that can mean being selfish sometimes.

But above all love.

My mum was a very tactile woman. She would give me the same big hug when she was 83 as she did when I was three. We spoke easily together. She trusted me and I always felt very protective and proud of her.

Our relationship was not always a perfect meeting of minds. I definitely share her wanderlust but my passion for things like politics and poetry were not really hers. And let's be honest, she never really liked football. I will always remember her failure to understand why I didn't celebrate when Germany beat England 3-1 in the 1972 European Championships.

But we never questioned each other's love.

I have a lot of love in my life. I have a wonderful partner and two gorgeous boys that fill me with joy and pride. But the rock of my life and the root of my experience will always be my mum and the love we shared.

Erika Margareta Luisa Beckett nee Thielebein 7.7.1925-15.10.2009

[Thank-you to the many people who have messaged me about this post. It was a self-indulgent exercise but the warmth, thoughtfulness and empathy shown by people has, I feel, justified this intrusion of the personal into what is a professional blog]

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