

Ava Clark Spencer
Reflection on the Occasion of the
Memorial Service in Honor of her Life
(February 28, 1925 – August 20, 2019)

Saturday, September 14, 2019

Good afternoon, and let me add my thanks, again, to all of you for coming today to honor and celebrate the life of our remarkable mother. I stand up here on behalf of the four Spencer siblings and our families, and the reflections I will share today are drawn from the experiences and insights of all of us.

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In Davidson everyone knew who you were talking about if you mentioned “Ava.” That’s a little odd when you think about it. Usually people who are known by a single name, like Cher, or Madonna, or Oprah, tend to be flamboyant, attention-seeking, big personalities. But Mom didn’t really fit that mold. She was self-contained and highly cerebral, warm and unfailingly gracious to be sure, but possessed of a definite reserve. All of which suggests that Mom’s iconic status came not from seeking the limelight, but rather from a quiet strength and steadfastness apparent to anyone who had the privilege of knowing her.

Beginning with us kids. From the womb, each of us was ushered into the normative universe of Mom, whose laws had the force and fixity of Newtonian physics. Tuna fish was made with Duke’s mayonnaise, not Hellman’s, even though many people mistakenly thought Hellman’s the superior brand. Garlic was not used by sophisticated cooks, and, as far as we know, never darkened the door of Ava’s kitchen. Sunday dinner was steak every other week, a detail particularly important to Reid, with pot roast on alternate weekends. Ellen and I were not allowed to wear new dresses on Easter, “because Easter is not about clothes.” For the boys, no hats inside, and certainly not at the table.

Intellectual that she was, the heart and soul of Mom’s normative universe was language. “Grammar police” does not even begin to describe it. Certain words were verboten – “belly,” “stupid,” “fool.” You “lie” out in the sun, you “lay” a book on a table. You never say “I’m done” upon the completion of a task or, Heaven forbid, a meal. You say “I’m finished.” And what four-year old does *not* know that a counterfactual calls for the subjunctive mood. “If I were a rich man”

All of which served us Spencer kids quite well when it came to the verbal SAT's. But it also resulted in a certain social awkwardness. Reid reports that he and Eddie White got into a fist fight at age 7 over the pronunciation of "Nutcracker Suite," Eddie insisting despite Reid's heated certainty that it was the Nutcracker "suit." The problem was that Mom was so clear, so certain, so consistent in her normative standards that we kids all thought it was perfectly normal to run around correcting our friends' grammar in ordinary conversation.

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Fortunately for all of us, family and friends alike, Mom's clarity of vision and commitment to principle were mitigated -- some might even say delightfully undermined -- by her nose for irony, her ready wit, and her love of a good story. Mom was rarely the protagonist in her own accounts, but her keen powers of observation and, until very recently, her legendary memory meant that she carried the narrative for successive generations of our large extended family and her wide circle of friends.

Mom was the fifth of seven children of Frank and Ava Clark, raised in the hills of southwest Virginia. Her parents died before any of us children were born. But through Mom's stories, we all feel that we knew our grandparents.

Mom loved to tell the story of how her own mother, Ava Harris, while teaching at an elementary school in Hickory, North Carolina, decided to play a little trick on her class. During recess, Ava slipped out, and when the children came back to the classroom, in walked an old mountain woman, complete with straw hat, tattered dress, and crooked teeth carved out of watermelon rind. The kids were completely taken in, and the stunt was greeted with great hilarity all around. So, that evening, our grandmother Ava couldn't write to write a letter recounting the tale to the young man at Union Seminary in Richmond whom she was dating and destined to marry. Long story short, the pious seminarian, appalled by the inappropriate behavior of his intended, fired off a letter by return mail saying that, under the circumstances, he regretted to say that he would never see Ava again. Whereupon his seminary roommate, Frank Clark, said if the roommate didn't mind, he, Frank, thought he'd like to meet this girl.

Mom was also famous for her wry wit. We grew up knowing vaguely that Mom had done something Rosie-the-Riveter-ish during the war years, in Oak Ridge, Tennessee. But she never really talked about it much. So you can imagine Frank's surprise when, during a dinner with his family in recent years, out of the blue, Mom let drop that she had worked on the Manhattan Project. So Frank probed a bit. How did you happen to

get that job? Well, they came to Mary Washington and recruited girls who were good in math, Mom said. And what did you do exactly? Well, each day the project managers would give us pages of figures to calculate and double check. We never knew what the figures were for – that was a big secret – but we knew of course that it was part of the war effort. So, if it was such a big secret, how do you know you worked on the Manhattan Project, Frank asked, going in for the kill. “Oh, some of the boys talked.”

One of Mom’s favorite Davidson stories happened early on and involved one of the college’s most cherished traditions. It was early September, 1951. Sam and his new bride Ava had just arrived the week before from Cambridge and moved into their house on Lorimer Road, Sam’s newly-minted Ph.D. and sixteen-month-old Reid in hand. One morning the doorbell rang, and Mom opened the front door to find Pete Whittle, the Davidson track coach, standing before her.

Long before coaches had budgets for travel and recruiting, the Davidson track program had devised a way of smoking out talent at the beginning of each new academic year. They invited all freshman to participate in a special race that began on the cross country course and ended with a final lap around the track in Richardson stadium, where, just off the finish line, the runners would be greeted by long tables groaning with cakes, homemade by faculty wives.

In an early foreshadowing of post-modernism, the “cake race,” as it has always been known, was really two races running in parallel – the foot race among the freshmen, and the true “cake race” – wherein the faculty wives who had baked the cakes would crane their necks toward the finish line to see whose offering would be chosen first, second, third, and on down the line.

When Pete Whittle knocked on Mom’s door that day in September to recruit a cake for his race, Ava stared hopelessly at the stacks of unpacked boxes and realized that there was no way on earth she was ever going to lay her hands on her cake pans or find the wherewithal to make a scrumptious icing. Falling back on the only tool she had ready to hand – her trusty iron skillet -- Ava proceeded to bake the only kind of cake she could think to make under the circumstances – a pineapple upside down cake. This is an improbable concoction, where you start by putting slices of canned pineapple in the bottom of an iron skillet, top it with brown sugar, pour cake batter over it, bake it at 350 degrees for 44 minutes, let it cool, and then invert the pan – voila -- to reveal circles of caramelized pineapples atop a golden-brown base.

You all know the rest of the story. The winner crossed the finish line, necks craned, and the victorious runner walked up and down the tables, scanning his options. When

he reached for the pineapple upside down cake, audible gasps were heard, as the newest faculty wife, 26-year-old Ava Spencer, had captured the prize on her first time out.

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The partnership of our parents, Sam and Ava Spencer, was a beautiful thing. Our father was the public figure, the extrovert, the emotionally demonstrative one. But Ava was by no means the “woman behind the man.” Rather she walked squarely beside Sam, every step of the way, perfectly in sync, but also carving out her own distinct and authoritative space.

Ava had a powerful intellect that she stoked through constant reading and a lifelong interest in public affairs. She was one of the few people I know who not only subscribed to the New York Review of Books, but actually read every issue cover to cover. When speakers and other luminaries came to Davidson in the era before hotels or restaurants, they often stayed with us at the President’s house, and Mom hosted the most wonderful dinner parties, with equal parts substance and grace.

Mom was unbelievably organized and competent. She bragged that the staff at the college loved coming to the President’s house to work on things for her, because she always knew exactly how she wanted things done. When she and Dad took an extended trip together, Mom would leave pages and pages of instructions for the babysitter on a yellow legal pad, the final line of which always read, “If you have any questions, ask Ellen.”

I think we would all agree that Ava was not what you’d call “warm and fuzzy.” Rather, Mom was an interior person and a subtle read, who showed her love through deeds. When Frank, at age 12, couldn’t find a tennis partner in Montreat one day, our mother -- the least outdoorsy farm girl ever born -- went down to the courts and hit with him. When, as adults, any of us moved into a new house or apartment, Mom would draw our new dwelling to scale on a quadrille pad and arrange our furniture from her living room in Davidson. And when Reid’s scraggly and underweight rock band from Yale, aptly named “Milkweed,” landed in the driveway behind the President’s house in June of 1970 to begin their Southern tour, Mom looked right past the bellbottoms and shoulder-length hair and graciously invited them into dinner as though they were properly turned out in gray slacks and blue blazers.

Mom had an uncanny ability to enter into the lives and experiences of others with empathy and precision. As our families grew, Mom took a keen interest in our lives as parents and in the exploits and accomplishments of her grandchildren, great

grandchildren, her great nieces and nephews and even her great greats, whose funny sayings she'd narrate with the zeal of an eyewitness under cross examination. Like the time Frank's toddler daughter Aly corrected Ellen's toddler son Sam, when he banged on his high chair demanding more yogurt. "Yogo, yogo," Sam insisted, to which Aly, rolling her eyes, pronounced, "Sam, it's not "yogo," it's "yodrit." All of us in our large extended family, I think, felt grounded being held in Mom's force field of consciousness and care.

Mom always admired the courage of her own mother Ava, who, in her early twenties, set out as a single woman at the turn of the twentieth century to teach school on the frontier in Oklahoma. Over these past several weeks as Reid, Ellen, Frank, and I have compared notes, we have been struck by the gumption and sense of adventure it must have taken for our own mother to troop off, at age 19, to live and work in Oak Ridge, to get herself from Virginia to Penn as a doctoral student at age 20, and then to take on the Harvard Government Department in the immediate post-war years, where she must have been one of a tiny fraction of graduate student women.

But the quality I think we all admire most is the courage with which our brilliant, competent, and self-contained mother accepted her increasing vulnerability in these past few years, maintaining her dignity and grace and never complaining, even as she began to need more help. It takes a village to hold onto joy and optimism and as one ages, and we are so grateful for the village at the Pines that supported Mom. Jack and Betty Kate, next door, who called Ava every morning at 9 am to check in. Jean Berg, who was always ready to talk politics, and introduced Mom to the taco truck in Huntersville, an outing that delighted her. Cary Johnston Townsend and the Sunday brunch gang, Nancy Gardner, innkeeper and comic relief for various visiting Spencers, and Jamie Spencer, Mom's local grandson and personal Uber service over many years.

We owe special thanks to Mia Patterson, who helped Mom on a daily basis over these past several years with such competence and caring, and Susan Rouse, who joined the team more recently. As the offspring from farthest away, I also want to express my gratitude to my siblings and in-laws, Ellen and Gary, Frank and Melanie, and Reid and Candi, who visited regularly, responded in crises, and took care of various details for Mom. Ellen, in particular, stayed in constant touch with Mom and Mia, and took days and weeks out of her own life to come to Davidson to be with our mother.

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I'd like to close with a coda to the cake race story. On April Fool's Day this past spring, the spoof edition of the student newspaper, the *Davidsonian*, ran a story saying

that the college had decided to cancel the cake race once and for all. When asked why the cake race was being “sliced,” Director of Athletics Chris Clunie reportedly responded, “Cakes can cause cavities, and I can’t stand to see another one of those ridiculous upside-down pineapple cakes.”

Immortality takes many forms.