Brave sailor: Mesa Vernell Dobson Lundberg’s beautiful, fascinating but oil-compromised life

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
19 September 2008

Culture Change Letter #202 - Sept. 22, 2008 --

My mother was born in 1920 on September 12 on an Idaho sheep farm -- lost to the bankers in the Great Depression -- and she lived until September 15, 2008. She lived mainly in Utah, California, and the Mediterranean. Rejecting religion as a child, moving to L.A. alone as soon as she could to start a career as a reporter, being an organic gardener (before it was called "organic"), she had all the strength a girl and woman can have. She used it well. For the rest of my life I will be reflecting on and trying to grasp her strength and some of her more subtle accomplishment.

When I was born to her in Mexico she was running a little ranch north of Los Angeles in the 1950s. Besides me she raised four children (two of them her husband’s and his first wife Helen’s), with my little brother born last. Most days her husband Dan was off in Hollywood preparing his weekly muck-raking talk show (KCOP Television) and doing oil industry work that culminated in Lundberg Survey. My mother kept goats for my milk because I was allergic to cows' milk. Later, off the ranch my parents were a little more activist oriented, such as hosting some sailors for a dinner honoring their protest in a nuclear blast zone to stop a test.

In 1965, despite the family's "having it all" including servants and fancy cars, Mesa told her husband to put his money where his mouth was and leave the U.S. with her and their three kids on a world cruise on their 50’ steel ketch "Passat." This was a sacrifice for her because she had finally passed the California Bar after going to night school for years, and she enjoyed the law. My father sacrificed his high life and put my elder brother in charge of the business for a few years. My father noted to me that my mother's only problem with law practice was in not being able to ever judge someone. This character-trait proved key to her future and fate.

About that boat ride: we were gone 4 1/2 years, missing the entire late-60s cultural explosion at home. We were doing our own thing by visiting countries and seeking cultural experiences such as seeing my sister give piano concerts. There was devotion and mutual support to spare in our family. My mother was a brave sailor and first mate. I remember when I was 13 taking watches with her, and once seeing her taking down a jib in a rough dark night in the unpredictable Gulf of Tehuantepec. She also swam calmly in shark infested waters and surfed ashore in dugout canoes with the family. All was well until our pesticide applications for cockroaches on the boat in the Caribbean in 1966. My mother was exposed more, in her effort to clean up. She was never the same again. In the Culture Change magazine of late fall 2001 she had the guest quote: "Shell Oil Company is the reason I don't walk today."

When your mother or other close loved one dies, there’s a tear in the fabric of your universe, so says my friend Charles. That’s exactly the way I feel now. It’s a time for reflection on my mother’s existence and looking at the way she lived and died. I was lucky she lived to 88 and was always there for me, even though for the last eight years it was several hundred miles away against her ... [deletion of a legal reference, January 2013]... Previously I had supervised her living in good health in my and my daughters’ home in Arcata where her happiness among family was obvious.

Something soon went wrong, as the reader can already surmise. I cannot explain it all here and now, as my main personal task at this time is to not let negative thoughts get the best of me. For this is a time when I should just be appreciating my mother and coming together with family.

My four days so far having to live without my mother alive is more real than my previous and lengthy process of worrying about her passing away some day. Her death was both expected for years (and sudden for me and a few others in the family), because she had lived without full use of her body or willpower since 1994, having endured strokes and the exposure to petroleum pesticides used on the yacht.

In 1995 she was ...[deletion of a legal reference, January 2013]...

In 1998 I helped my mother get her own home down the street from mine where she was living with family care and daily professional care. But in 2000 in my absence she left her home to stay in Santa Barbara. I never could get my mother back into her own home where she wanted to be... [deletion of a legal reference, January 2013]

My mother was caught in the quicksand world of the ... [deletion of a legal reference, January 2013]... Without a household to participate in,..[deletion of a legal reference, January 2013]... she spent her days reading and listening to music, and waiting for visitors or phone calls from family and friends that did not come often enough.

Her last quarter million dollars, that came originally from what I'd generated at the family business, were taken ... [deletion of a legal reference, January 2013]... my mother made the best of it she could. It could not have filled her with joie de vivre or hope that her... [deletion of a legal reference, January 2013]

[deletion of a legal reference, January 2013]

Because of what we can call Family Failure Syndrome, and a lack of community interest or support, Mesa Vernell Dobson Lundberg's long and interesting life was tragically....[deletion of a legal reference, January 2013]... one-on-one care is far, far better than institutional warehousing of a conscious, basically healthy person.

[deletion of a legal reference, January 2013]... A stroke victim since the mid 1980s, she needed to "relearn" and regain the ability and motivation to take care of herself. She was making progress in this with one-on-one care in Arcata.

[deletion of a legal reference, January 2013]... Mesa kept her pleasant enough demeanor, and patiently waited to leave the... [deletion of a legal reference, January 2013]... Her well-known sweetness and apparent passivity was marveled at for many decades and won her many admirers.... [deletion of a legal reference, January 2013]... On other subjects she could always speak well enough and with irony, if one respected an elderly lady's slower conversational pace and quiet voice. I spoke regularly with her and had good conversations. She read my essays without any difficulty (and even edited occasionally for our Auto-Free Times), and I'm sure she understood them better than her...[deletion of a legal reference, January 2013]... interested in money.

For many years I've said to myself I could be doing something else, such as being with family and friends, or working on Culture Change, rather than dealing with...[deletion of a legal reference, January 2013]... the family's unraveling...

Although I regret that I have had to concentrate on remedying my mother's misfortunes, I can say she never demanded or even requested anything of me. Her unusual "lack of self" is a quintessential aspect of this amazing person, right to the end. She was delighted at some personal news about my lifestyle I shared her the day before she died. Perhaps she passed away more or less content, resigned to her fate in a culture of materialism and greed. This week a friend of mine was right that we are living in a dark age: we lack wisdom, but we have a lot of information. I pointed out that we have things instead of love.

My mother's troubles, and seeing what can occur even in families that sail halfway around the world and go through a hurricane together, led me to rename my nonprofit efforts Culture Change, in mid 2001. I had been wondering for years how it was society could have such a twisted values-system of paving over the best farmland. When greed is an acceptable trait protected by society's laws, we all suffer. Some individuals, cursed with oil money... [deletion of a legal reference, January 2013]... rue the wealth. My mother stated her troubles were only due to money and that she wished she never had it. She hoped fervently that some of her adversaries... [deletion of a legal reference, January 2013]... would end up in... [deletion of a legal reference, January 2013]

Mesa would never do or say more to... [deletion of a legal reference, January 2013]... This mild-mannered woman whose views and informed awareness of politics, for example, would never allow her to decry Bush, for example, with customary epithets. About another Bush... [deletion of a legal reference, January 2013]

I will hold on to the pleasurable memory of being able to talk at length countless times with her, with never a lapse in her intelligence, humor and wisdom. She appreciated my gifts of books, foods, articles and my writings; getting praise for my essays from as strong a sticker as she was, was gratifying. There were times I foisted quite a few of my songs on her with my guitar during our... [deletion of a legal reference, January 2013]... limited-time visits, but she put up with them because she was so bored when alone most of the time. It was either she listen to some unpolished songs or let me take her for a walk (or later in life, just wheeling in a chair) to a creek to gaze at the bay laurel tree, sycamore and almond. You had to talk her into it because she was easily chilled. So the last time I saw her I gave her a large, soft wool blue shawl I had brought from Chiapas Indians.

One of her few requests of me after she had raised me out of boyhood was in the last year: she pleasantly surprised me by saying she was looking forward to my playing my new songs for her. The one I just wrote this morning, from a dream in the middle of the night, she might have found intriguing, but I'll never know. I did finally get her the rare Neil Diamond recording "Solitary Man." She had a real "thing" for him for years, and even told me of a fantasy of her picking him up in North Hollywood and taking him home in the hills above where she lived from 1970 to 1997. She spoke as if it actually happened, and that she put him to sleep to nap. That was the only time I ever wondered about my mother's state of mind! But, as in any... [deletion of a legal reference, January 2013]... one must devise ways of getting through one's days and nights somehow. In her whole life, she had a lot of good days and nights, and gave my father quite a few of them. Brava Mama, it was nice to know you!

Following is an Egyptian poem written about 3,000 BC that a reader sent me last Wednesday. It seems as good a tribute to my mother and all womanhood that I could ever stumble across:

THE STRONGEST FORCE UPON THE EARTH!

For it is written that woman, in her weakness,
is yet the strongest force upon the earth.
She is the helm of all things human;
she comes in many shapes and knocks at many doors;
She is quick and patient,
and her passion is not ungovernable like that of man,
but as the gentle steed that she can guide e'en where she will,
and as occasion offers can now bit up and now give rein.
She has a captain's eye,
and stout must be that fortress of the heart
in which she finds no place of vantage.

Does thy blood run fast in youth? She will overrun it,
nor will her kisses tire.
Art thou set toward ambition?
She will unlock thy inner heart,
and show thee roads that lead to glory.
Art thou worn and weary?
She has comfort in her breast.
Art thou fallen? She can lift thee up,
and to the illusion of thy sense gild defeat with triumph.

Ay, she can do these things,
for nature ever fights upon her side;
and while she does them she can deceive
and shape a secret end in which man hast no part.

And thus woman rules the world.

For her they will do well and ill,
and seek for greatness, to find oblivion.
But still she sits like yonder sphinx, and smiles;
and no man has ever read all the riddle of her smile,
or known all the mystery of her heart.

mock not! mock not! For he must be great indeed
who can defy the power of woman,
which, pressing round him like the invisible air,
is often strongest when the senses least discover it.

How strange a thing is this love of woman,
that is so small in its beginning
and in its end so great!
See, at first it is as the little spring of water
welling from a mountain's heart.
And at last what is it?
It is a mighty river that flows argosies of joy
and makes wide lands to smile.
Or, perchance, it is a torrent
to wash in a flood of ruin across the fields of hope,
bursting the barriers of design,
and bringing to a tumbled nothingness
the tenement of man's purity and the temples of his faith.

For when the invisible conceived
the order of the universe
this seed of a woman's love was set within its plan,
that by its most unequal growth is doomed
to bring about equality of law.
For now it lifts the low to heights untold,

and now it brings the noble to the level of the dust.

And thus, while woman, that great surprise of nature, is,

good and evil can never grow apart.

For still she stands, and, blind with love,

shoots the shuttle of our fate,

and pours sweet water into the cup of bitterness,

and poisons the wholesome breath of life

with the doom of her desire.

Turn this way and turn that, she is at hand to meet thee.

Her weakness is thy strength, her might is thy undoing.

Of her thou art, to her thou goest.

She is thy slave, yet holds thee captive;

at her touch honor withers, locks open, and barriers fall.

She is infinite as ocean, and variable as heaven,

and her name is the unforeseen.

Man, strive not to escape from woman

and the love of woman;

for fly where thou wilt, she is yet thy fate,

and when e'er thou buildest thou buildest it for her!

"This beautiful prose poem, 5,000 years old (circa 3,000 B.C). is a translation of an ancient Egyptian hieroglyphic inscription by Ted Snook, in 1953. Please share. - James Beal, February 1996"

For more about Mesa and her saga and to see a picture, put "Mesa" into our search mechanism on these webpages.

This article was edited in January 2013 to eliminate legal references.