

A salute to my mother's life

By Okey Ndibe

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My mother turned 83 last Friday, April 18. I'd like to pause to celebrate this most inspiring woman, love personified, a splendid gift God gave to my four siblings and me.

My wife, children and I called her and joyfully croaked "Happy Birthday" to a woman who is entitled to more gratitude than I'll ever be able to muster. When we finished, she let out that energetic laughter of hers that gives me a glimpse into the youthfulness of her spirits. My youngest child then serenaded her with two numbers on the piano. Her delight was palpable.

It's impossible to talk about my mother without talking about my father in the same breath. I wrote on the dedication page of my novel that God flattered me with noble parents. That sentiment was not expressed lightly. I have written elsewhere about my parents' marriage, but that story bears repeating.

My parents married in 1958 when Father was thirty-six, my mother thirty-three. Father's relatives had been scandalized when he revealed the woman he desired as a wife. They told him the woman was too old, and that she would not be able to have children. My father then made the astonishing response that he didn't care, that he still wanted the woman because he loved her.

My mother actually had two counts against her. One was her age. The other was that she had gone to a teacher's college and was a tough teacher. In an era when the "safest" wife was a housewife, a woman who held a job—and who had a reputation as a steely disciplinarian of male and female students alike—was to be avoided like a plague. That was held against my mother.

For some of my father's relatives, his talk about love was just bunkum. For them, the first thing a sensible man ought to be concerned with was his wife's ability to give him children. Once a woman could bear children, all else would fall in place. My father insisted on starting off with love—and having other things added.

When a few of his relatives threatened not to go with him to my mother's relatives, Father told them he was willing to go alone—if it came to that. That served unambiguous notice that he was in deadly earnest. Reluctantly, they "escorted" him to marry the woman on whose account he was willing to "lose his senses."

Mother's life has been a splendid string of surprises. She surprised those who said she was too old to bear children by having five of us, four boys and one daughter.

Throughout their marriage, until my father's death in 1995, they took seriously

the dictum that a married couple became one. One day, I overheard a man who told my father there was a secret he wanted to whisper to him, but asked that my father first swore not to relay the confidence to any other person, including his wife. My father tersely told the man to keep his whisper, that there was nothing he wouldn't share with his wife.

They lived everyday, father and mother, like young lovers who just met each other. They exchanged love letters. They ate their meals together, unless the other was out of town. They held hands and took walks in the evening. At any given moment, each could tell you where the other was—with stunning precision. Early converts to Catholicism, they woke up every morning at 5:30, said the rosary, and then went to Mass. This one still amazes me: they cleaned their teeth morning and night with the same chewing stick!

They strived to give us, their children, the highest moral training. They didn't just preach at us, they lived out, before our eyes, everything that they taught us. They were never materially rich, but they modeled for us what it means to hold oneself to noble moral standards. Throughout our formative years, my parents always drummed it into us that their job as parents would have been well done when they would be able to boast that none of their children would know that something was wrong or evil and yet do it.

When my father took ill and began his last dance, Mother was by his side every step of the way. One night, as one of my brothers drove home from Enugu where my father had gone for treatment, armed robbers threw a huge log in the path of

the car. It shuddered and came to a stop. The robbers emerged from the darkness and robbed them. They snatched my mother's handbag, ignoring her pleas that it contained the medication for her husband who was sprawled in the backseat, too sick to respond to their ordeal. At the end of the robbery, the car would not start. My mother, then close to seventy, helped my brother to push the car for about a mile until they found a house near the expressway. They knocked on the stranger's door. The homeowner, a good Samaritan, welcomed them to spend the night at his home.

In the years since her husband—my father—died, Mother has loomed even larger in my consciousness and in that of my siblings. She has continued to provide us with a center, a moral anchor, a source of inspiration. In our father's absence, Mother has remained a symbol of love and strength, a moral compass.

My life's task, and my siblings' as well, is to strive to be worthy of the moral formation we received from our parents. In all we do, it is our bounden duty to do credit to the clay out of which we were molded. As I celebrate Mother's birthday and the excellence of her life, I am reminded of my duty to give my own children the benefit of the kind of upbringing that my siblings and I were lucky to receive.

On behalf of my siblings and cousins and all who have been touched by you, I salute you, Sweet Mother. I call you by your well-earned praise name: Ngala! You are indeed worthy of pride. From a son humbled by your grace and the generosity of your many enduring gifts, I say: May you remain as warm and

vibrant as the sun. May you continue to shine as an example to us and to others who meet you every day. May you, Mother, see many more birthdays.

Readers' Favorites

1. Nigeria's savaged children
2. The war we ordered is here
3. What I saw in Nigeria
4. Murder Incorporated
5. No Longer at Ease
6. My Vote for Andy Uba
7. Achebe, Soyinka, and the Nigerian Mess
8. My Biafran Eyes
9. My Father's English Friend
10. A female speaker's manly vices
11. The education of Umar Yar'Adua
12. The triumph of barbarism
13. Achebe's apt censure
14. Andy Uba Goes to War (1)
15. Andy Uba Goes to War (11): What OBJ taught Uba
16. Why I Take It Personally
17. Andy Uba's highest bid
18. The folly of the Nigerian elite
19. Fraud Incorporated
20. Etiaba's father, not mine
21. Our laughing president
22. Fayose and God's response
23. My 419 Call
24. A feud of three bulls
25. More reasons to ignore Soyinka
26. Who does Obasanjo work for?

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About Okey Ndibe



Okey Ndibe is a novelist, poet, political activist from Yola, Nigeria. He is the author of *Arrows of Rain*, a critically reviewed novel published in 2000. Ndibe relocated to the United States in 1988, where he founded *African Commentary*, a magazine described as "award-winning and widely acclaimed." Ndibe is also a published poet, and a former associate professor of English at Bard College at Simon's Rock. He currently teaches fiction and African literature at Trinity College in Hartford, CT. Okey Ndibe is finishing his second novel titled *Foreign gods, incorporated*.

Speaking Engagements

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