

## Book Review

**Fly While You Still Have Wings and Other Lessons My Resilient Mother Taught Me**  
Joyce Rupp; Notre Dame IN: Sorin Books, 2015

*They came  
with resilient spirits,  
messengers of how to endure  
and thrive,  
to find joy  
in pieces of brokenness.*

The above quotation from Joyce Rupp's poem **The Aunts** highlights the theme of resilience in aging which frames Rupp's engaging story about her mother in old age and how subsequent reflections (and her own aging) have reshaped her understanding of the mother-daughter caring relationship.

Rupp tells her mother Hilda's story from the point of view of her last years, showing how resilience learned earlier served her well later. Rupp's poetry and self-reflective poetic prose point to the journey of mother-daughter relationships across lifetimes. We learn how the daughter comes to appreciate the mother's life experiences decades later and how writing facilitates this updating of perspective in terms of our own increasing life experiences.

Rupp learned many lessons from her mother beginning in childhood, but the most significant for us concern Hilda's losses and gains in later life and caring for one's mother as she goes through changes in later life. As a widow without responsibilities for anyone else, Hilda experienced some wonderful years of freedom and adventure, including a treasured friendship.

*Fly, fly while you still have wings.  
Fly with buoyancy.  
Do not falter in fervor or waver in eagerness.  
Lift off with a zestful spirit. (poem excerpt)*

*In her seventies and eighties, she explored new vistas, expanded in openness where she had previously held bias, and nurtured beneficial relationships. Although somewhat quieter the final two years, she continued to be a celebrator of life. All this didn't "just happen." A zest for life emblazoned itself on her spirit gradually. The initial source of this zest sprang from her family's ability to celebrate even when times were most bleak.*

Increasingly, though, health changes limited her mobility and energy. She endured a long period of depression, and heart problems intensified. Rupp recounts stories of her regular visits from away, as her sister takes on more and more caregiving responsibility.

*From my experience with my mother, I learned how swiftly we search for what to do for our loved ones when they hurt from aging's impediments. We do this not only to have them feel better, but to release some of our discomfort about their situation. Thus, we figure out ways to help them, but sometimes our help is mostly a nuisance, something they put up with to make us feel better.*

*What I didn't understand when I was trying to help Mom is that when I set out to help, I immediately put myself in the position as the one holding energy and strength. Had I listened to the deeper layer of her words, the place inside of her that ached because of limited physical ability, she would have been comforted, knowing her pain had been heard. She would not have felt alone in her suffering.*

*Only after she died did I realize her experience of feeling weak, worthless, and sad that day. How distraught she felt over the humbling limitations that physical frailty brings. My insistence on "helping" only added to her sense of this. It was okay to thank her for all that she did in the past, but much more importantly, she really wanted a listening heart.*

*Each time any of my siblings or I stepped back and let our mother make necessary decisions regarding her health and well-being, we allowed her still to be in charge of her life. I did not realize at the time what a much needed gift of confidence this gave her.*

*So the question is: "When to be of service and when to stand back and let older people do things on their own?" This decision involves regular discernment. No "one size fits all." Each day can be different than the one before. All might be well one visit and not the next.*

Rupp touchingly described her mother Hilda's contemplation and letting go, while recuperating from a serious heart attack, as she experienced her 'spiritual winter':

*The solitude and stillness allowed Mom to go deeper inside, to let go of her former identity and step into her new skin. ...During her quiet reflection on the sun porch [over days] my mother took a long look at her "wintertime."*

And Rupp takes this lesson:

*Old people, and all of us get older every day, ought to be explorers. There is new and unexplored territory before us—unexplored, at least, by me. I know what it is like to grow, now I must learn what it is like to fade. I know what it is like to be born, now I must find out what it is like to die. Such exploration requires*

*remaining still . . . because it is a matter not of going out but of going in—moving into that vast desolation, the vast, cold waters of the petrel and porpoise.*

*When Mom sifted and sorted through the long journey of her life, she entered a contemplative space that allowed her to let go more fully of her valued productivity, to release her past identity as an active, in-charge woman. With nothing to "do," except sit in the sun porch, she could turn toward the deepest part of her being. In this solitude, she found acceptance of a new identity, that of "being" rather than "doing."*

Rupp's poetic memoir points to the many mysteries of mother-daughter relationships, late life practical and spiritual journey through losses, and helping relationships. Rupp teaches us that the lessons of aging with resilience can be learned with an open heart, humility, and gratitude. And writing reflectively can help us through this process.