



Rita R. Semel Memorial Celebration Remarks

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San Francisco Interfaith Council

Congregation Emanu-El

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As the Psalmist proclaimed, "How good and pleasant it is for sisters and brothers to dwell together in unity!" If ever there were words emblematic of Rita Semel's life and labors, they are these.

Five score and four and a half years ago, a child was born. A child who was shaped by the circumstances of her family's evolution, a child shaped by destiny for being a Jew, a child shaped by 104 1/2 years of intense and turbulent national and global events. It was this crucible that formed Rita Rohrer Semel, the fierce feminist, the champion for civil and human rights, and the pied piper for interfaith harmony, that broke glass ceilings before the term was ever coined. It was this crucible that formed the Rita Rohrer Semel we all knew, revered, loved and who has drawn us together today, as sisters and brothers in unity, whom we remember, pray for and honor this morning.

On a deeply personal level, I stand before you as one who was both blessed and privileged to count Rita as my closest friend, confidante, colleague, surrogate mother, mentor and, as Reverend Amos C. Brown and the late Congressman John Lewis would say, partner in making "good trouble." Over the past two decades we spent a lot of time together, did good and tried to make our City and beyond a better and more just place. I miss her greatly.

In 2007, when my life and ministry took a dramatic turn, I found myself at the helm of the organization Rita birthed, the San Francisco Interfaith Council. From then on, Rita and I were joined at the hip, traversing San Francisco, day and night, attending both civic and faith-related meetings, social events, religious services, lectures and plotting how, together, we might most effectively and impactfully, "repair our broken City."

In that whirlwind, the moments I most treasured were the conversations in my mustang convertible, driving to those destinations, our debriefs afterwards, at lunch or late night, exhausted, at her favorite restaurants over dinner. It was in those moments that I got a glimpse into who Rita really was and what made her tick.

People marveled at Rita's sharp wit and wisdom, indefatigable energy, then incredible memory, and revered longevity. Her charming tenacity, matched only by her constant urgency to address the pressing issues of the moment were her distinct hallmarks. What people didn't see, as often, was that twinkle in her eye when bending down to greet a complete stranger's infant or toddler on the sidewalk, or that sentimental pause when remembering her beloved Max, and Jane, or beaming with pride at Lis' most recent triumph. Rita also held the distinct title of Dowager Countess in the Resnick-Karlin family with full bragging rights, always doting on her nephew Paul's family. She sat on countless religious and philanthropic boards and would joke, "What's a nice Jewish girl like me doing in a place like this?!" She could have written the SF Chronicle's style and society columns, as she was a regular at the opera, ballet, symphony and theater, and had seen more movies in the cinema than most millennials or Gen Z's could ever watch on netflix. She combed the Chronicle and NY Times daily and was a tv news junkie, calling me me at all hours of the day and night, with urgency to bring to my attention a pressing issue she thought we should address; a rich tradition and mantle that I'm pleased Christine Pelosi has taken up, in Rita's stead... In short, Rita Semel, as she would put it in her own words, was not one to "sit home and play bridge with the girls."

In both the religious, as well as secular spheres, people are motivated to do good for a variety of reasons, some noble, some not so noble. As for the noble, some do good out of deep seeded conviction. As for the not so noble, some seek a reward, either honor in this life, to be memorialized after they pass, for others, some promised blessing in the hereafter. In Rita's case, I would suggest a radically different motivation. The foundation for her fierce commitment to advancing social justice and the Jewish tenet and command to repair this broken world was grounded in her sincere ability to seek and see the image and likeness of the Creator in the eyes of the other, no matter their color, creed, gender, orientation, or whatever. For Rita, it was simply all about relationships. She honestly rejoiced in spiritual kinship. But there was something more... I don't think it a flaw, in her

case, rather the contrary, to acknowledge that, at times, our dear Rita could be both direct and impatient, and perhaps rather than wait and depend upon the Almighty to get the job done, she saw human beings as instruments of change and, would more often than not, take the matter of repairing this broken world into her own hands. Her greater genius was realizing that she couldn't do it alone. If she had a real gift, it was her ability to bring out the best in others and to inspire them to help in the heavy lifting. But there was something deeper that I believe motivated Rita's drive, urgency and pure sense of purpose... When you live for over a century, see injustices and experience loss, you can't help but wrestle with your faith and ask the question, WHY? I believe that she would have been the first to confess that she struggled with, questioned and was skeptical about the premise of a Hereafter. Such is, perhaps, the most honest conflict people of sincere conviction wrestle with as they seek to realize the fulness of their humanity. Rita turned this skepticism into an opportunity to expend every breath, every ounce of energy and every charismatic gift she possessed to make THIS world a better place, to transfigure THIS world into the hamlet of peace and harmony that she believed the Almighty intended.

Sisters and brothers who dwell together in unity, this is the legacy Rita Semel bequeaths to each and every one of us at this fragile moment. Rita heard and lived the Talmudic proverb, "It is not your duty to finish the work, but neither are you at liberty to neglect it." Today, she passes the torch to us to continue the fight for justice and equality. We can't let her down. Let us together transfigure this moment of grief into an opportunity for joy by emulating her words and deeds in all that we say and do, and in so doing truly honor her memory.

Rest in peace and power my dear friend!