

**Eulogy by Richard Norton Smith**  
**Betty Ford Memorial Service**  
**Grand Rapids, MI**  
**July 14, 2011**

“To be remembered with joy,” Betty Ford once wrote, “has to be a kind of immortality.” In her ninety-three years Mrs. Ford imparted more than her share of joy. Her sense of fun was never sharper than when cutting through the gloom of self-absorption or disappointment. Not long after leaving the White House in January 1977, she and the President found themselves on a plane bound for Houston and a dinner honoring the legendary Coach Vince Lombardi. It was exactly the sort of road show event Congressman, Vice President, and President Ford had graced thousands of times over thirty well-traveled years.

And yet it was different, for tonight he was coming as Citizen Ford – a honorable title, to be sure, though one he would have gladly postponed in exchange for another four years in the Oval Office. As they neared their destination, Gerald Ford indulged in some very uncharacteristic brooding. He had accepted the group’s invitation while still residing at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. He hoped his audience wouldn’t feel let down, he said, hearing from a mere ex-president.

Cue Mrs. Ford, exuding sympathy while offering reassurance. “Don’t worry, honey,” she told her husband. “It’s me they’re coming to see anyway.”

Instantly his doubts dissolved in laughter. How many times that scene must have repeated itself since the crisp fall day in 1948 when Elizabeth Bloomer walked down the aisle of Grace Episcopal Church with Grand Rapid’s most eligible bachelor. Her bridegroom’s idea of a honeymoon combined a Wolverine

football game with an outdoor political rally addressed by Owosso, Michigan's favorite son, Thomas E. Dewey. Listening to a bunch of politicians declaim on a frosty October evening in Michigan was not an experience the new bride would remember with joy. But it was good practice for a life defined by the unexpected.

At the time Betty Ford could hardly imagine that, while Governor Dewey would never live in the White House, she would. Once there she quickly established herself as a First Lady unlike her predecessors. Not content to make history, she became one of those rare figures who *make a difference*, a lasting difference, in our public culture and in our private lives. In time Betty Ford's name would enter the language, less for her activities while in the president's house than for her contributions after she left.

More than a liberated woman, Betty Ford was herself a great liberator. Next to the family in which she took a fierce, unbounded pride, perhaps her greatest accomplishment was to help liberate us all from the crippling limits of labels. At once a traditionalist *and* a trailblazer, a Sunday School teacher and a Seventh Avenue model, Mrs. Ford was the feminist next door, a free spirit with a dress code. Above all, she was a wife and mother. If you have any doubt on that score, just ask Mike, Jack, Steve or Susan.

During his years on Capitol Hill, it was Congressman Ford's habit to work Saturdays at the Capitol. Often he brought along one or more of his children. Before they were released to play hide and seek in Statuary Hall, the congressman directed them to a nearby battery of manual typewriters.

"Write your mother a letter," he told them. "Tell her what a wonderful mother she is, and how much you love her."

All this week Americans have been sending their own expressions of love and gratitude to Mrs. Ford. The technology may be different, but the emotions are timeless. Millions who never met her felt as if they knew Betty Ford. Millions more wished they could. They identified with her struggles, and from her courage in the face of adversity they took inspiration to confront their own demons.

Little of this could have been predicted in the summer of 1974, when the Fords of Grand Rapids and Alexandria first attracted the public's interest. Many assumed them to be a family cut from the cloth of a 1950s sitcom. After all, hadn't an early *Washington Post* profile of then-Congressman Ford's wife singled out this onetime Cub Scout den mother for her taste in "quiet suits" and "slightly more talkative hats." More labels. More limits.

In Mrs. Ford's *Living Bible* for August 9, 1974 the day's recommended verse proclaimed, "I will keep a muzzle on my mouth." It was advice she conspicuously ignored. For by then this ladylike revolutionary once mistaken by the *Post* for June Cleaver, had long since found her voice. Among her milestones as First Lady was a history making appearance on the *Mary Tyler Moore Show*. If nothing else it showed how far Mrs. Ford – and the rest of us – had traveled from *Father Knows Best*.

Not everyone went along for the trip. Political advisors cringed over her famous *60 Minutes* interview, in which she candidly addressed such taboos as abortion, pre-marital sex, and youthful drug abuse. One irate viewer wrote in protest to remind Mrs. Ford of the obligations that went with what Margaret Truman once called the "second hardest job in America."

"You are *not* an individual," he informed her, "an American

woman with complete freedom of speech and action – who has only to answer to the family unit, the social requirements of the neighborhood and the laws of her community, state and nation. You are, because of the position your husband has assumed, expected and unofficially required to be PERFECT! It is quite obvious you were never put in your place and told by your husband that in this great country of ours you must retain at all times a position of beauty queen, ‘Mother of the Year,’ high school prom sweetheart, ‘Grandmother of the Year,’ church leader, teacher, nurse, and counselor to American women and girls.”

There you have it – the tyranny of perfection. Betty Ford helped to liberate us from that as well. As First Lady she opened a conversation on subjects once banned from the dinner table and around the water cooler. She confided feelings of emptiness while struggling to reconcile her personal needs against the obligations exacted of the political wife. She acknowledged seeking professional counseling. She distinguished vulnerability from weakness. And she transformed the role of First Lady to reflect not just a husband, but a country, that had come a long way, baby.

Where women’s health issues are concerned, American history is divided into two unequal periods: Before Betty and After Betty. Once a lethal silence had enveloped the subject of breast cancer like a London fog. Before 1974 polite euphemisms found their way into newspaper obituaries. Victims died of “a lengthy illness.” There were no 1-800 numbers to call, no patient support groups, no breast self-exam cards. Women visiting their doctor’s office were never asked, “Have you had a mammogram?”

Encouraged by her family, Betty Ford broke the silence. Not for the last time, she became the face, not of a disease, but of

recovery. And even as she inspired other women to emulate her example, so Mrs. Ford's sense of humor and perspective helped improve the quality of life for millions of cancer survivors. Again she was an agent of liberation, this time releasing women, and men too, from private cells of secrecy, shame, and fear.

Greater still was the stigma attached to alcohol and drug abuse, especially for women, whose illness was all too often confused with moral failings. From the start Mrs. Ford insisted that any treatment facility that bore her name must also reflect her special sensitivity toward women and their needs. She wanted it to be affordable, with charges kept low enough, as she put it, that a schoolteacher in Nashville, Tennessee could go there for treatment. She insisted that families be part of the solution, just as hers had been.

With the help of her friend, neighbor, and fellow patient Leonard Firestone, she mastered the not so gentle art of fundraising to create and sustain her vision. One day long before ground was broken, she was part of a group whisked off to Las Vegas on a private plane to see Frank Sinatra perform in concert. On the way back Mrs. Ford told her captive audience about the unbuilt treatment center. Of course, she didn't stop there. Unfortunately there was nothing readily available on which her fellow passengers could write out a pledge. Ever resourceful, Betty found a substitute for pledge cards – and so it came to pass that the first major donations to the Betty Ford Center were written on cocktail napkins after a Sinatra concert.

Her physical recovery was matched by her spiritual growth. Initially she resisted putting her name on the new facility – what if she fell off the wagon, she inquired? Later she went out of her way to disclaim personal responsibility for what everyone else regarded as her most tangible legacy. A higher

power was responsible for the Betty Ford Center, she insisted; she was merely an instrument to be used in carrying out His plan. No one was prouder of her accomplishments than her husband, the first member to join the Center's advisory board, where he introduced himself to newcomers by announcing, "I'm a former president; she's the current one."

When he was on the road, not a day went by that did not begin, and end, with a call to the woman he called "my lovely bride." For him she would always be the glamorous young dancer he'd swept off her feet half a century ago. Mrs. Ford, the more practical of the two, embarked on plastic surgery – for a simple reason, she said. She wanted to look like her White House portrait. They had always loved New York, and on a theater visit in 1977 they fell hard for *A Chorus Line*, the frank, funny, poignant tale of aspiring dancers. They were especially fond of the show's great emotional anthem, *What I Did For Love*.

It could have been written with Betty Ford in mind. Just think of all that she did for love...

- Devoting six decades of her life to a man who adored her in return, sharing her sorrows and rejoicing in her triumphs.
- It was for love that she nursed and nurtured four children, carting them to ballgames and school plays; helping them over the hurdles of adolescence, life in the White House, life after the White House, parenting and grand-parenting.
- For love she reveled in her extended family, in the grandchildren and great-grandchildren who enjoyed nothing more than being in joyous proximity to their beloved G.G.

Of course, that is not all that Betty Ford did for love. Mining possibility from her own pain, she banished the darkness

surrounding addiction. Simply by being herself, she made it easier for countless others to follow suit. The choices she made; the independence she exhibited; the leadership she provided – all entitle her to rank alongside other great champions of women’s rights. In her last years she lived out the feminist credo first conveyed by her nineteenth century counterpart, Elizabeth Cady Stanton.

“In age,” wrote Mrs. Stanton, “when the pleasures of youth are passed, children grown up, married and gone, the hurry and bustle of life in a measure over; when the hands are weary of active service, when the old armchair and the fireside are the chosen resorts, then men and women alike must fall back on their resources.”

More than once in recent years Mrs. Ford asked her children, “When are you going to let me go be with my boyfriend?” Today her wish is granted. “Parting is all we know of heaven,” wrote Emily Dickenson, “And all we need of hell.” For Betty Ford, the last four and a half years were a kind of purgatory, though one whose rigors were immeasurably eased by the loving presence of her family.

In the immediate aftermath of the President’s funeral, friends had questioned Mrs. Ford’s insistence on making the long and physically demanding walk to his gravesite. It was a walk along the banks of the Grand River that she had often taken with her husband. January 3, 2007 was the last time, she realized, that she would make it on her own. It was the least she could do to honor his memory.

Soon we will retrace her steps for ourselves, completing the journey begun so long ago by an ambitious young war vet and his elegant bride. Our sorrow is exceeded by our joy, for we know that the story of Elizabeth Bloomer Ford does not end in

a Grand Rapids hillside. Even as we take leave of her physical presence, we take heart knowing that Betty Ford is where she wants to be – reunited with the love of her life, and radiant in the glory of her ultimate homecoming.

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