

Heroines of Ordinary Times

(Column 6: March 17, 2019)

By Lucia A. Silecchia

Since March began, Women's History Month has highlighted famous women and their places in our collective history. However, the private histories of our families hold countless ordinary women who lived extraordinary, but hidden, lives of faith, hope and love. Women's History Month is much impoverished if we let it pass without honoring the ordinary women in our own families.

I am blessed to have such women in my own family tree. History does not know them, but through family stories I do. Two beautiful biographies come to mind:

My great grandmother was born in southern Italy's bucolic hills. When I visit her homeland, it seems like paradise. But, rural life was difficult in nineteenth century paradise. So, she watched her husband leave Italy's shores to see if the United States held more promise for their growing family. Determining it would, he sent word back to her. I am told that she endured a long transatlantic voyage with toddler boys before arriving in New York the same winter as the notorious Blizzard of '88. I often wonder what went through the heart of this young woman from the tropical Mediterranean, as a blizzard engulfed her new hometown. She never again saw the family or country she left behind. She delivered twelve children into the world, but only six of them survived infancy. Her husband died in the winter of 1902, leaving her the single mother of six in a country whose language and customs were still new to her.

Yet, her home became a much-loved gathering place and her life a bridge between the old world and the new. She lived to see her children's children thrive. She was the matriarch of her large family through World War One and the Great Depression, passing from this life in the midst of World War Two. She lived a courageous life lost to history but filled with faith, hope, and love – the same faith, hope and love of so many women who, through the ages, have held the world together.

Her youngest child was another remarkable woman and my maternal grandmother. Born in New York in 1902, she never knew the father who died right after her birth. American women could not yet vote and their opportunities were limited. Yet, my grandmother graduated high school, leaving behind notebooks that reveal a meticulous student with handwriting and mathematical skills that I envy. Serious photographs of her during high school Shakespearean plays show a surprising dramatic flair. She worked at a department store to help support her family and married a dashing Italian mechanic with a pompadour and a motorcycle. She welcomed two daughters just as the country plummeted into the Great Depression that devastated her family. Her meticulous budgets for those

years survive, tabulating all her family's income and the minutest of their expenditures. Long before Airbnb, my grandmother took guests into her home during the 1939 World's Fair to help pay her mortgage and feed her family. She guided my mother through college, graduate school, marriage, and motherhood – making sure her younger daughter's dreams knew no limits.

But her greatest legacy was her love for her older daughter – a beautiful firstborn with bright eyes, dark curls, and a crushing brain injury during her birth. My grandmother devoted herself wholeheartedly to this daughter's care, knowing that love often demands giving away one's life for another. She sewed her beautiful dresses and gave her Christmas presents. Family photographs always show my grandmother next to this beloved daughter, feeding her patiently from the same good china as everyone else. With the exception of one road trip, my grandmother likely never again traveled more than fifty miles from her home; love for her daughter was her world. "Mama" was the only word I ever heard my aunt say. This was the heartfelt, more-than-eloquent tribute to my grandmother, another unknown woman who lived her life with faith, hope and love – the same faith, hope and love of so many women who, through the ages, have held the world together.

These brief portraits capture only two of the good, holy women whose lives are intertwined with mine. Their lives, like those of so many women, will go unknown and uncelebrated this month – if we let that happen. But, maybe we owe them more. It is women such as these who are the heroines of ordinary times.

Lucia A. Silecchia is a Professor of Law at The Catholic University of America. "On Ordinary Times" is a bi-weekly column reflecting on the ways to find the sacred in the simple. Email her at silecchia@cua.edu.