

Alfonsina Storni (1892—1938)

There are some people who go through large amounts of suffering and yet simultaneously spread large amounts of joy to the people around them. For instance, one of my favorite teachers as a kid, Larry Flom, must have had some deep wounds yet he spent his life bringing laughter to kid's lives. I don't know much about his personal life, but I do know that he was stood up on his wedding day. He bitterly never married. Here in Iowa he lived quietly alone, far from his family in Minnesota. Sometimes if you were looking, if you saw him eating a sandwich alone in his room you could sense a hundred years of solitude about him. You could almost sense some pain behind the smiles. Any interaction with him was cheerful and left you totally engaged in his class. You did not listen to him to learn about history, rather you listened to him talk about history, so that you could learn about him. Mr. Flom died shortly after retiring from teaching.

Alfonsina certainly had her own share of pain. Her family that had emigrated from Switzerland struggled financially in the new country—Argentina. Her parents died when she was young. She got pregnant by a married man 20 years older than her. She then moved to the big city Buenos Aires alone and juggled working as a cashier and later as a teacher while raising her son Alejandro. Single moms in 1912 were not common and she faced a good amount of social disapproval. And while she was young she struggled with breast cancer and breast removal.

With all that, you could imagine that she had some opportunities to be bitter. Having seen the married man, whose identity she never revealed, move on as though nothing happen while her life radically changed, might lead to some bitterness. The financial struggle without any partner, the social stigma she wore of having a child out of wedlock, and the removal of her breasts, are some other reasons Alfonsina could have lashed out at the world and curled up in a cocoon of bitter self-pity.

But that isn't quite the way it turned out. In the midst of all the hectic demands of raising her child, moving to a city she didn't know, teaching, Alfonsina made time to write. It may have been her only refuge. When her son was four years old, she published her first book-- *La inquietude rosal*. She rose through the ranks of teaching and become a professor at a university in Buenos Aires. Her books won her some acclaim and some much needed financial security. By the early 1920 the stress caught up to her and she went through bouts of depression. Doctors told her to slow down. She probably did need to slow down, but still she had to singlehandedly raise her child and pay the bills. By the end of the 1920s, Alfonsina was considered one of the most interesting intellectuals in Buenos Aires. This world she inhabited in the university was dominated by men. She navigated this academic career alone as a pioneer with all the possibilities and burdens of being one of the first Argentinians to cross this cultural / gender barrier.

And while it is not doubt admirable how Alfonsina was a pioneer in her field, it is the nature of what she writes about that strikes me. In one of her famous poems, *Peso ancestral* (Ancestral Weight) she writes a tender poem trying to understand the pain it must be to be a man, because men are told by their grandpas and dads not to cry. On the surface it is a seemingly simple poem. But given her past with an older married man who caused her life so much pain, it would seem she would not be concerned about the suffering men endure. Yet that is exactly what she did. She took pain and turned it into beauty. She tried to understand the other side.

Unfortunately two years after the breast removal, the cancer came back and she was terminally diagnosed. Around that time her best friend Horacio Quiroga had committed suicide. Alejandro, her son, was twenty six years old. And instead of a long slow death, Alfonsina wrote her son a farewell poem that stands as her most famous poem. She then threw herself into the ocean and died at age 46.

While Alfonsina's life was marked by struggle and difficulty, she still managed to make beauty out of it and build bridges of understanding between people who were separated. More than any piece of literature I've taught, Alfonsina's poem has had the biggest impact on me. Her sincere effort to understand others, even others who had wronged her, stands out to me as a powerful Christ-like example. In a divisive time such as ours, Alfonsina's sincere attempt to understand the other side, offers a pathway forward for anyone who is trying to build bridges of understanding.