

SAVE

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Bookbinder, Mud Angel, San Francisco Legend: Stella Patri at 100

Stella Patri once received a birthday card with the Yiddish saying, "You should live to be 120!" On May 1, Stella turned 100 1/2. Though she's led an extraordinary life, she's not keen on living 19.5 more years to fulfill the blessing. "My advice," she tells me, "is not to get old. It's no fun and it doesn't pay."

This is a woman who watched the swaying street lamps on the night of the 1906 earthquake after she was awakened by her father and carried outside in the morning light of Turk Street. As a 10-year-old girl, she slept for three nights in Golden Gate Park under a tent made from a blanket suspended from a tree. Her family then went to live with a friend in Berkeley until it was safe to return to their apartment and turn on the gas. In October 1989, Stella watched smoke rising from the nearby Marina during another major San Francisco earthquake.

This is a woman who has lived almost a century in the Bay Area (she was born in Montreal). Shortly after Herb Caen's death, Stella tells me how she met Herb when he was 21. "Herb had just come to San Francisco and was beginning to work for the *Chronicle*. On weekends people were always coming over to our house in Corte Madera -- there was an open invitation to visit. Herb would come over with his sister, Estelle, who was a friend of Giacomo [Stella's

then-husband]. I liked Herb, but I don't know if he knew I existed. To him I was probably just a period or a comma!"

When I visit for tea, she is vexed by not being able to find sugar because she can't make out the shape of the box, and wails, "I'm not sure how much longer I can go on." That sentiment, while completely understandable and truthful, can be hard to reconcile with the actual life of Stella Patri: grande dame who survived earthquakes, commenced an illustrious career as a bookbinder at age 64, and still frequents cafes in North Beach. Who gardens at 100 in a pair of baggy Levis; how many times those jeans have come in and out of fashion in her life!

Through the glass door of her Union Street apartment, I see her slowly make her way to let me in; my heart lurches at my good fortune to see her once again. "Just a minute, I'm coming," she says in her high chirpy voice with none of the gravel of old age. I want to bottle that sound, along with her youthful "Hello" on the telephone, always accented on the first syllable.

I have been lucky to know Sella for 25 years. Every time we have gotten together, I'm astonished at her lucidity and humor -- how with it she is, how many marbles she still has. I am touched by her interest in my life. She asks me questions about my children and siblings and all my nieces and nephews. She remembers them, though not always their name. She harbors a particular interest in my brother who is rich, and loves to hear about his latest painting classes in Italy.

Stella was my husband's bookbinding teacher in the early '70s. My husband and I have just celebrated 25 years of marriage -- a milestone in itself -- yet it's just a fraction of the endurance of Stella. Her parting words to me at her 100th birthday party stay with me.

"Oh Jenny, how I wish I could dance!" she said, with strains of the live Dixieland band playing her favorite song "Sweet Georgia Brown." She loved to dance. She used to be able.

Mayor Willie Brown declared November 1, 1996, her 100th birthday, Stella Nicole Patri Day. Over 200 people turned out to pay tribute, to marvel at her still-handsome stature, and to acknowledge her inspiration in their lives. Stella looked the queen: dressed in black palazzo pants and a lavender silk tunic, a yellow rose corsage pinned above a name tag which said simply "100."

She loves the attention -- who wouldn't? -- and told me a few days later she wished she could replay the whole thing; yet she wonders what all the fuss was about. "Oh I like parties, I've always liked parties. But I can't say I jumped for joy when I heard my family was giving me this one. I felt more embarrassed than anything. Really, this party wasn't about charm or intelligence. It's the years that counted, so I'm not basking in anything. The Golden Age -- that's a lot of baloney! It was so much better when I was young and doing things and not just an old lump. Now I can hardly see, and it's so boring."

"But Stella," I say, "you have a rich life; so many people who love and admire you." My own selfish desire for her to continue asserts itself again and again. She looks at me squarely. "Sometimes I think, 'Let's have a little beanie made -- STELLA THE INCREDIBLE.' I am lucky, let's face it. But it's hard being this old. Everybody's gone and there's so little I can do anymore. The spirit will, but the body won't. I suppose it could be harder. I could be dead -- or in a wheelchair!"

Stella's contribution to the workforce is staggering to consider: she's worked nearly a century. She began as a milliner at 18, then at 30

became a housewife who raised three sons and antagonized the Corte Madera PTA with her radical politics. She was a labor sympathizer and a welder in the shipyards in WWII. All of this she considers prelude to her life's work and passion: bookbinding. At 64, Stella began binding and restoring rare books and manuscripts, and did not stop until her mid-90s, when her eyesight failed her. To this day she hates Scotch tape and Elmer's glue.

At 69, she became a "Mud Angel," working in the Italian winter to save thousands of rare books damaged by the Florence floods. Among the first volunteers for CRIA, the Committee to Rescue Italian Art in the Biblioteca Nazionale, she removed mud from the leaves of vellum books until her fingers would freeze up with the cold. She worked alongside world-famous bookbinders like Bernard Middleton and Christopher Clarkson. That winter in Florence she was known among them as "Stella the Orange" for the bright orange scarf she had once knitted on a train trip from San Francisco to New York, coiled around her neck.

My husband Bob was one of Stella's first bookbinding students. One afternoon, between eager mouthfuls of Stella's legendary oatmeal-raisin-walnut cookies ("rocks" she calls them), she tells a classic "on the road" Bob-and-Stella story: In 1974, the two of them attended a bookbinding conference at the Newbery Library in Chicago. Bob was 29, Stella 78. "We went to the front desk of this famous library. Behind the desk was an elegant black woman who asked if we needed assistance. 'Do you have any rooms?' Bob quipped. And I'm giggling behind, embarrassed, but knowing that Bob with his charm would carry it off. The librarian stammered quite a bit

before she got the joke." From now on, I tell her, I will call the two of them "Harold and Maude."

In addition to her own three sons, all architects, Stella has several "adopted" sons (bookbinders, calligraphers, landscape architects). Despite this, she retains a resolutely unimpressed position about men. Her marriage to artist Giacomo Patri was an unhappy one and ended in divorce. "One marriage is enough and separate houses works best of all!" she declares. Her face darkens when I ask her about her father, and she will only say, "Well, my mother and he -- they were a mismatch from the start." Share a late-afternoon aperitif with Stella and she will freely share her political opinions: "...Bastards, all of them," with a particular distaste for those "damned Republicans."

Stella Nicole Patri, the product of a frugal mother, the Depression, and years of financial hardship, is the soul of economy. A surprising elegance also creeps in somehow. Her blouses are of Swiss cotton. Most days Stella wears a signature gray turtle neck pullover, grey pants, and a black and grey woolen vest. Occasionally her color scheme will be enhanced by a red and yellow quilted vest. Around her neck, looking like an elegant ivory pendant, is a new-fangled device that will call medics if she has a fall or needs assistance. When she goes out, she dolls up a bit; puts on one of her gorgeous Chinese bead necklaces -- "I may not be able to see much, but at least I can see colors!" She takes inspiration where she can find it, and fumbles with the clasp.

On Stella's bedroom wall hangs a photo taken twelve years ago at my daughter's baby shower. Stella, at 88, is sporting one orange stocking and one turquoise stocking, which complement the black,

orange, purple and turquoise dress, Mexican bead necklace and turquoise bracelet. Look out in her garden and you'll see an extravagantly lush bougainvillea and bowers of yellow primroses and magenta gloxinia. Her small apartment is lavish with hardcover books.

When I ask what she loves, she answers immediately, "Reading. Period." Then she elaborates. "It's so frustrating, this not being able to see. The days are long and dull. I can't stand being so dependent on people. If only I could read, that would solve everything. Having someone else read to me is just not the same!" she practically shouts.

Memory is another difficulty. "My head is a sieve," she bemoans, when she can't remember the name of the 25-year-old woman who is her companion from 9-12 on weekday mornings. (Her name, Media, will come to Stella 5 minutes later, in the middle of another thought.) She illustrates by pointing to one eye and then the other. "Things go in one eye and out the other" she chortles, and then makes the proper ear image. "But, you know, Media is just right for me. It's fun to have somebody young as your friend. Well, let's face it, I like them better! I've always loved young people because I've never grown up, I guess. Well, there's *life* there, or something. The only fear I have is seeming like an old lady." Caffè Greco in North Beach is Stella's and Media's hangout; three times a week they share a chocolate croissant and each drink a coffee.

I asked Stella if she goes to the movies and she said she'd just been to the movies that week with her 67-year-old son, Piero. For the life of her, she couldn't remember the name of the movie. I offered a few suggestions: *Shine*? *The English Patient*? The new Woody Allen movie? She looked at me straight on and frustrated. "Everything is

there," she said, "if it would only come out! Digging and digging doesn't bring anything. It just has to come out voluntarily." This truth galls her, but it is disarming to hear. "You know, the minute you're 90, you're ready to go, you have your ticket ready. So now when I wake up in the morning, I say to myself, 'Oh God, another day?' But that's about it, I don't think that with anger, or joy. If it's a day Media is going to be here, or if Remo [her middle son] is coming to visit, I feel much better. It's very annoying when you have nothing to do. But I've had wonderful memories, great times. More than most people. Still, it's *awful* not being independent.

She pauses for a moment. "I know the help I get is always for the best. I don't resent outside help because, goddamn it, I'm paying for it. It's my own money. But it's the internal help that is hard for me." By internal I knew she means family, especially her youngest son Tito and daughter-in-law Bobby whose house is attached to her apartment. "But Stella," I counter, because I know her family and how much devotion her daily care takes, "don't you feel that part of the reason you've lived so long is because of this great living situation and all the attention from your family?" She thinks for a while. "Well, I can't dwell on it -- that I'm so lucky."

Two weeks later, Stella and I and three friends who are bookbinders (all of whom are near 50) have lunch at a cottage near the Legion of Honor Museum. My 12-year-old daughter is with us, and so is the 9-year-old daughter of one of the friends. We eat and talk for hours. How easily the conversation flows around each female at the table, though we range from third-grader to a centenarian. Laughter is loose, and our talk ranges from a school project on Guide Dogs for the Blind to the San Francisco Girls Chorus to wine and men and

marriage. I find myself brimming with awe and tenderness for Stella. A few days later, when her daughter-in-law asks if I had been part of this lunch, Stella will say *no*, forgetting I had driven her or been there at all.

The following weekend, my son and daughter and I take Stella to see the Pierpont Morgan Library exhibit at the Legion of Honor. When she spots our tall Isuzu Trooper parked on the street in front of her apartment, she exclaims, "Oh dear, you'll need a derrick to get me in that car." She pauses for a moment and says, "I know how to get on that high seat -- derriere first!"

We maneuver through the exhibit which ranges from a Gutenberg Bible to manuscripts by Bach and Charlotte Bronte and Sir Isaac Newton. Stella is captivated, and occasionally gasps with delight, but she's not blindly impressed -- "I'm glad to see people are still interested in bookbinding. But I look at these famous bindings and see all the little mistakes." In front of the 1950 Paul Bonet binding, she critiques: "Isn't that fantastic, but it's too much."

So Stella is 100, and thoughts of death must hover. What about religion, I ask. As you get older do you feel any need for it? "None," she answers immediately. "I was raised Catholic and I even taught catechism. But I doubted everything. I was a doubting Thomas then and I never think about religion now. It doesn't help me at all. Doctors rely on religion for older people to help *them*, the doctors. But I know when I die, that's the end." For emphasis, she adds, "C'est fini. Un point. C'est tout."

For the past 25 years, my husband and I, three other friends, and Stella's youngest son and daughter-in-law get together to celebrate Stella's birthday. At these dinners, I glance at Stella and see her

laughing wholeheartedly or being slightly annoyed as the conversation swirls around her and she can't hear. I wonder what exactly makes Stella so different from other old people I know. Why is it that so many, myself included, brag about being the friend of this 100-year-old lady? And why do so many people oversimplify her as "Stella the Incredible" rather than a person who has lived through countless wrenching experiences - a terrible marriage, the death of two grandchildren, two world wars and the Depression -- and is entitled to her own darkness, who is tired of living and ready to die?

Perhaps in her frugality, she oversimplifies herself. Death, she tells me, is a big bore to think about and she hopes she just goes in her sleep. When I push her to go deeper with proclamations like that, she retracts and says, "I just don't think. Period."

At 100, perhaps a lover of the young and hip, expostulator of cranky infirmities, and serene hoarder of secrets does not need to reflect on her full century of living. You just are. At that big birthday party, her granddaughter Lilan said: "You strengthen me in a world which has never been quite ready for women so bold, dark, wry, autonomous, and talented as the likes of you."

We've been friends a long time, Stella; just 19.5 more years. It's all I ask.

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