

Preaching lessons at a fundamentalist Bible school

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We called it the spring semester, but it felt like the dead of winter to me. The never-ending Chicago cold months slapped me in the face. I juggled my new schedule along my books, when I walked into the classroom filled with women. I was a student at Moody Bible Institute.

When we were settled, Ms. de Rosset closed off the entrance. Shutting the door was a code at the school, a sort of signal that some of the more edgy profs used. There was not a lot of academic freedom within the walls of Moody, and a professor could get fired for not believing in dispensationalism or he could be reprimanded if his wife was a feminist. Even a janitor could get the hammer for getting a divorce.

The sounds of the latch plate sliding over the strike signaled, "I'm about to say something I'm not allowed to say. I could even get fired if certain people heard me. But I trust you." When a professor closed the door at Moody, it was like when a big brother showed you how to sneak out the house after your parents were asleep. It was like when your older sister explained how to shave your legs way before you were allowed to put a razor to your flesh. It was a bonding experience between the class and the teacher, and de Rosset always closed the door.

Ms. de Rosset certainly made sure that barrier was well shut on the rest of Moody almost every day as she taught us "Message Preparation for Women." It was a Homiletics course, a preaching class, but since women were not allowed to write sermons, we "prepared messages." We had to be separated from the men, so we could learn the exact same process, while using different labels.

De Rosset, an Episcopalian working on her PhD in literature at the University of Chicago, was a literal godsend for fourteen percent of the student body. I wasn't sure what made her stay.

Moody certainly needed her. With the underrepresentation of women on the faculty and in the student body, Moody's accreditation was in jeopardy. Yet, de Rosset had

to endure excruciating humiliation. One morning, she "messed" (not preached, mind you) for chapel, and a group of men, wearing short-sleeved white shirts with black ties sat down in the front row. When she stood in the pulpit, they rose in unison, and ceremoniously stomped out.

"You've got to be kidding," I whispered to my friend, Brandon. "They could have taken a chapel cut, if it meant that much to them." They didn't merely cut chapel because the flock of men wanted to make a clear statement to the entire assembled body that they not be subjected to listen to one of their professors because she was a woman. And even though their tender cheeks broke out in a rash each time they shaved, they were men. Therefore, they had spiritual authority over de Rosset.

I shook my head, "Why does she stay? Why would she put up with that?"

Brandon shrugged, lifted his eyebrows and responded with his usual sarcastic precision, "Because she knows that they are a--holes, so she does not let it bother her." Then he continued to write his column for the student newspaper (which de Rosset staffed).

I had the sense that de Rosset got a job at the Bible school teaching English many years ago, her theology changed, and she remained, for whatever reason. Maybe Moody was paying for her doctoral work. Maybe she was too conservative for an Episcopalian college. Maybe she just needed to pay the bills—like a coalminer who's not completely comfortable with black lung, but knows that he needs to get food on the table.

Or maybe, she suffered that humiliation because she knew when she closed that door, she was saving women like me.

"My name is Rosalie de Rosset," she told the class. "Isn't that a fabulously feminine name? Clearly, my parents filled out the birth certificate before they met me. I assure you, that is the only womanly thing about me."

I smiled. This was the land of floral print dresses. *Every* cover in the women's section of the bookstore resembled a tampon box—pink, pure, petaled, and often pearled. This could possibly be the last campus in the United States where women were told that they were preparing to be their husband's crowning glory. With this backdrop, our preaching prof was standing before us in a black sweater and a long black Hippie skirt. She sported short dyed ruddy hair and black eyeliner. I don't mean that

penciled-on blur. It was brushed-on, strong and bold.

"I have one rule for this class," de Rosset continued without smiling, "If you use the word 'share,' I will fail you. On the spot. I don't want to hear one woman stand up here telling us that you 'wanna share a bit of your heart.' If you do, you will get an 'F' in my class." I looked around and saw many women, smiling broadly, shaking their heads. "I want you to preach. You're not schoolgirls sharing your dolls. You have a voice. You have something to say. And I want you to proclaim it."

De Rosset frequently lifted up the need for a sense of longing. "Longing is something that is not appreciated in our culture. We're a nation of easy credit and quick satisfaction. Yet all good literature has that yearning at its core. When you write sermons, identify the longing in your context. Name it, explore it, and create your sermon around that vacuum. You may not answer the longing, but you need to lift it up."

I sat up in my chair and moved to the edge of my seat. *She's Rosie the Riveting*, I thought, realizing that this was the first college class that I had taken where I felt like the teacher actually demanded something from me, as a woman. De Rosset continued, name-dropping great proto-feminist writing like *Jane Eyre* and constantly quoting Emily Dickinson. Her lectures were sprinkled with women writers that I read and loved, and then she introduced us to women I didn't know, like Charlotte Perkins Gillman and her "Yellow Wallpaper," while weaving the literary/preaching thread from Gillman to her relatives Harriet Beecher Stowe and Henry Ward Beecher.

She left breadcrumbs out there, for interested students. I suppose that most of the women didn't even see them. But after each class, I went to the library with the names and titles that I scribbled along the margins and followed the crumbs, looking up the history and books they represented.

Mostly the path would lead me to the rich history of early feminist writing. Other times it would lead me to more recent authors. And woven along with this literary education, de Rosset introduced us to preachers who were brilliant at weaving narratives into their sermons.

Each morning, I talked to my friends, Jesse, Brian, and Brandon, about the class. Brandon and Jesse sometimes put down their newspapers and listened, but Brian got excited. He finally found someone who would appreciate all of the trivia he discovered.

One afternoon, he took me to the school's historic archives. We went past the "stuffed D.L.," the likeness of our founder, preaching in his brown three-piece suit. It always made me giggle, because although the men on campus were not allowed to be in the process of growing facial hair, there was a larger-than-life D.L. Moody with a beard. Sometimes, if the Cubbies were in a big game, Brandon would make sure Stuffed D. was wearing a baseball cap. I never understood how he did it though, since the replica was behind glass. Of course, he never took any credit for it. Putting a hat on Dwight was a sacrilege in the school.

We went into a side room, where the old *Moody Monthlies* were kept. (Just like the with the iPad, no one consulted an honest woman about how stupid the name was). Brian flipped through the pages, and pointed to a drawing of a woman, with her mouth open, and her finger in an instructional pose.

"What is this?" I said amazed, even though I could clearly see that it was an advertisement for women's preaching classes at Moody.

Brian smiled, "Evidently it was okay to for women to preach eighty years ago, but it's not now."

"The movement that Moody was a part of in the turn-of-the-century was pretty cool," Brian explained as he kept flipping through the articles. "They started Sunday schools, but it wasn't just about flannel graphs and Bible stories. They were trying to educate the poor children who were working in the factories. And women were on the forefront of it all. You know Emma Dryer?"

"Yes," I only knew her name because there was a men's dorm named after her. Dryer Hall was slightly off the central campus. The guys who lived there got a discount to compensate for having to trudge in the snow a bit. But most of them seemed to prefer being out of the way.

"Well, Emma's the one who actually founded Moody."

"Really?"

"Yeah. She started the school as a place where women street preachers, evangelists, missionaries and Sunday school teachers could get an education," I flipped through the pages, wondering how we had regressed so quickly. The temperance, Sunday school, and suffragist movement gave our country a shot of

empowered women. I was filled with excitement and pride, thinking that I could pick up such a mantle.

Then I remembered of the row of men, standing up and walking out of chapel in protest when a woman spoke. What happened? Was Moody caught in an extended backlash from the feminist movement?

Of course, strong women lead within the evangelical movement. They were involved in politics and organizing. They rose up in the religious political environment, because they were furious about abortion.

They taught us to frame the abortion debate in stark terms. As the pro-life movement gained ground, we were told to contrast it with the “pro-death” movement. We did not refer to “abortion clinics;” they were “abortuaries.” We were constantly told that abortion was the holocaust that was happening under our very noses.

The pro-lifers adamantly opposed the feminists, and they painted them with the same cruel brush that they used with the abortion debate: feminists were bra-burning baby-killers out to destroy the moral fabric of our country. Evangelical women with any hint of backbone or determination joined the movement *against* feminism.

It seemed they made an appalling deal on our behalf. As female pro-life leaders gained a more powerful position in the public sphere, they sacrificed our roles in home and congregations. Many of us were told that women must submit to men and keep silent in church. They even began speaking out again contraception.

Could that have been how women went from running a preaching school to being reminded that they must keep their mouths closed?

Whatever the case may have been, it was clear that women began to find their voices in de Rosset’s classroom.

Sitting in our cold Formica desks, de Rosset taught us the basics of the preaching process, the steps of historic analysis that we needed to take to understand the context of the words. She taught us how to go over the “hermeneutical bridge,” a term that preachers use when they connect those ancient words to our modern context.

Then de Rosset delved deeper and showed us the beauty of narrative sermons. She pointed out how they worked structurally, as only a skilled literature professor could. De Rossett explained how narrative sermons do not have three points, but one point. The stories surround that point, coming back to it, strengthening it, like spokes on a wheel. She wanted all five senses engaged in each sermon—and she would coax the sounds, aromas, and tactile memories out of us.

Though we preached from outlines instead of manuscripts, de Rosset took interest in our words. Why did we choose one word over another? Could the verb be stronger? Could the metaphor be more colorful?

Each day, I listened to the best sermons I had ever heard. There is a particular authority that comes from privilege. When a white man steps into the place where he belongs, he has an internal power with which he was born. He is entitled. Like royalty, he sits on the throne naturally, because that place is caught in his blood.

But, an entirely different power emerges from women who have been told that they are not allowed to speak in church, and suddenly rise behind the pulpit. Something flares up from deep inside of them, and when they have a safe space, the words can come out of them with force and fury.

I experienced this beautiful process each day as the women stood, read verses, and continued with a growing strength. I sat in my desk, wrestling with myself. *These are wonderful. Why would I believe that women shouldn't preach?*

My first sermon was my feminist manifesto. At least that's what it was in my mind. It had something to do with C.S. Lewis and Fyodor Dostoyevsky and bondage. I can't remember the text. Honestly, I'm sure it was a horrible sermon. And the delivery was even worse. My voice shaky, my throat tight with nerves, and I won't even get into the details about my sweat. I mispronounced Dostoyevsky.

Most preachers on their maiden voyage scrape the bottom of the boat and hit plenty of rocks. But it didn't matter. Because, also like most preachers—those strange creatures who have the nerve enough to stand up in front of people and tell them a bit about God—I couldn't wait to do it again.

I had found my voice. De Rosett had unearthed it. I just wondered what I was going to do with it.

