



Viva! Vida and Ida!

Lewis R. Scudder, Jr.
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There are two names that will resonate with me forever. The one is Ida Sophie Scudder (1870-1960); the other is Vida Dutton Scudder (1861-1954) ... Vida and Ida. The onomatopoetic pair were contemporaries and they both, to use the antique term of their day, remained 'spinsters' single-mindedly committed to their perceived vocations (for them there was simply no space for married life). That they were both born in India of missionary parents, that they were 'driven' personalities, that they reached the pinnacles of their demanding professions, and that they both achieved a degree of renown in the doing is also quite remarkable. Theirs — beginning at the end of the 19th century and carrying on into the mid-20th — were the days when the liberation of women in western society was gathering steam and finally broke out into the open. And these two, each in her idiosyncratic way, were spearheads. I'm quite proud to share their surname and, in Ida's case, a direct relationship. (I'm her first cousin twice removed and had the privilege of knowing her personally.)

There's no doubt the two women knew each other. Correspondence exists even though I've not seen it. Under the circumstances, it would be ludicrous to suppose they didn't know one another — two weathered battleships plowing through their time's turbulent waters, female ascendants in an otherwise male-dominated world. Furthermore, there's absolutely no doubt that they were on the same side regarding the big issues of their day even though they approached them very differently and in contrasting contexts. I have the image of two gray heads bent together as they sip cool drinks under a spreading oak somewhere in New England, sharing their thoughts and dreams, and chuckling over the twists and turns of their respective stories. They were both full of life's joy and bubbled over with humor.

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Vida was heiress to the modestly substantial fortune of Horace E. Scudder, once (1890-1898) editor of the prestigious *Atlantic Monthly* magazine and author of many books for children, a lesser echelon 'Boston Brahmin' resident of Roxbury. Her father, David Coit Scudder, Horace's elder son, was moved by my great-great-grandfather, Rev. John Scudder, M.D., to become a missionary to India. Under sponsorship of the then-Congregational Church, in 1860 he based himself in the Tamil town of Madurai (where Vida was born), but shortly after her birth he was drowned in a flash flood (1862). Mother and infant daughter then returned to the bosom of the family where Vida was provided with all the benefits of an elite upbringing and education.

Vida along with her mother, bolted the Calvinist Puritanism of her ancestors and chose the Anglican tradition, becoming Episcopalians, and in that tradition Vida fervently immersed herself. In the years following her death, the Episcopal Church in the USA enrolled her among its saints (her day in the ecclesiastical calendar is

October 9th). As were many born to privilege in her generation, she was a natural-born activist, a tireless campaigner for the rights of the working class and for women's rights, and she was among the founders of Denison House in Boston, a ministry dedicated to the disadvantaged. She also energetically supported President Wilson's drive to assert justice for all the world's peoples and their right to self-determination. In the early 1940s she rose to become, in essence, the godmother of American Christian socialism and of social justice for all Americans. Struggling to reconcile Marxism with her profound Christian faith, she eventually became an outspoken pacifist. She was an academic and a Big Issues person.

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For her part, Ida S. Scudder was not a 'Boston Brahmin'. Her beginnings were more modest. Ida's grandfather, John, was a New Jersey-born Presbyterian and a religious enthusiast. He studied medicine and established a thriving practice in New York City where he came under the influence of a Rev. Christian Bork. Bork was a disciple of John Henry Livingstone, the man whose preaching and erudition brought the then-*Dutch* Reformed Church into the 'Great Awakening'. Although discouraged by Bork, John Scudder, a man given to precipitous decisions mated to a very stubborn streak, determined that he'd been called to go to India and preach the gospel. With his bemused but hardy and adventurous wife, Harriet, their two-year old daughter, Maria, and Amy, their maid (making her the first Afro-American missionary to India), he set sail from Boston aboard the *Indus* on June 8, 1819. Maria and Amy died early, but John and Harriet did not. And fecundity was a gift they shared.

Cutting to the chase, seven surviving sons and two daughters later and a whole bevy of grandchildren and great-grandchildren and even great-great grandchildren grew up and served in India (with a few in Japan or Arabia or among the native Americans or in Africa). But, in truth, all these were always under the shade of the great banyan tree that now shades the final resting place of John and Harriet Scudder in Ranipet, Tamilnadu, India, at the entrance to the Scudder Memorial Hospital there. *All except for one*. Truth to tell, she eclipsed her grandparents and all the other rather remarkable Scudder missionaries ... and *still* does. That one was Ida Sophie, daughter of John and Harriet's youngest son, John Junior, and of his wife, Sophia Weld.

Ida's passion was differently focused to that of Vida. In a sense it was more hands-on, more focused, more practical. Following in her grandfather's and her father's footsteps, she became a missionary physician. Her consuming drive was to provide India's women with access to decent health care. In the end she founded the Vellore Christian Medical Center that continues to be a world-class institution for the training of absolutely top-flight medical professionals in all fields and at all levels.

Ida was a missionary first and foremost. She cast her vocation in terms of small acts that added up to big ones. Moreover, she was a fundraiser of the first water and spanned all American Protestant denominations in her appeal. Methodists claim her, Episcopalians think she belongs to them, Presbyterians think their claims come first, the United Church of Christ has registered its primogeniture, but the Reformed Church in America knows with a certainty that she's one of theirs ... and they're right. It's really quite a marvelous Protestant scramble and Ida delighted in it. It's also worth noting that she also deeply respected and was, in turn, very much admired by Mahatma Gandhi, a Big Issues person if ever there was one. He knew his oats and Ida

was an 'oatsey' person to whom he could relate. She joined her force with his and that has helped bring India into the 21st century. On that score there is no doubt whatsoever.

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The point? The point, of course, is the woman-force. But it is more than that. Here are two formidable women who, in their own respective vocations, challenged the western male dominated system, and did so successfully. I can't help adding that my own mother, Dorothy Bridger Scudder, followed in their train, as did my elder sister, Marilyn Jean Scudder, two decades later. If we believe that the glass ceiling women face in western culture has been shattered and gender equality is now the norm, we've got another think coming. What's amazed me is that Vida and Ida (and Dorothy and Marilyn as well) broke through that ceiling by pure psychic muscle and didn't give a damn for the pathetic shattered male egos they left in their train.

We're not talking about a species divide here. We're talking about human rights and human hope.

In the case of Ida, Dorothy and Marilyn, I personally experienced and know with absolute certainty that their empathy and examples, each in her own generation and each in her own way, fed powerfully into a quiet revolution of women in India, the Middle East and Africa. The flood of women professionals into those environments has been rather earthshaking. Men had better wake up!

We're talking about the majority of the world's population here. Women are an unparalleled force for change and progress that hasn't yet been fully tapped because that in our western culture or any other. Certain personalities have asserted themselves. That's true. But what we need to appreciate now is that in the fraught days ahead we have women rising out of the confusion. They are persons not defined by gender ... they are *persons*! They will seize the moment and become persons in their own right not only in America but throughout the world.

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I guess what I'm pleading for is not gender rights or racial rights or religious rights. In the models that move me I'm pleading for are *human* rights. My models tell me that what we need to focus upon is the person as such. This is our day to break the bigotries of our past and celebrate liberation in its fullest sense. Male and female, we are fashioned in the image of God (so says the biblical text), or we are all animated by his Spirit (as the *Qur'ân* proclaims). And we are free to move into the future. Ours is the reassurance that we can transcend and discover our liberation. What I really enjoyed as I reviewed the stories of Vida and Ida (and Dorothy and Marilyn) was this transcendence. There was in them a kind of purity of soul and an expectation of new beginnings ... broad new horizons that beckon to us all.

Viva! Vida and Ida! and their spiritual descendants no matter their culture or faith, no matter their race or gender. Viva! They take us forward toward the liberation of humanity.

And I greet you from the Lands of the Morning.

NOTE: The longer Reformed Church in America missionaries serve, the more they come to see the ethical implications of Christian faith with the eyes of the people among whom they serve. We treasure our missionaries and are glad to know what they think. However, RCA Global Mission does not, itself, have partisan political views.