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Reflecting on the Life of Rose Friedman

Bob Chitester

"You must convince Rose," he said. Moments earlier W. Allen Wallis, then Chancellor of the University of Rochester had telephoned Milton Friedman on my behalf. Wallis's advice was my introduction to the important role Rose Friedman played in shaping the course of economic science in the 20th Century. I was then President of WQLN, the public television station in Erie, PA.

It was October 1976. The week before Milton had been named the 1976 recipient of the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences. After the December ceremony in Oslo he and Rose planned to move from Chicago to San Francisco. He agreed to meet me there in January to discuss a possible TV project.

Rose, Milton and I met four times in January and February, 1977. They were forgiving of my inexperience in national TV production, even as I brashly proposed to make Milton a "TV star." As Allen Wallis had predicted, Rose's reaction to my proposal was critical to their decision to proceed with what became the TV series Free To Choose and the book based on the TV programs. I have never met a husband and wife more attuned to each others interests; and who could, and did, aggressively challenge each others ideas, though always with mutual respect and affection.

I made the creation of Free To Choose possible. But it was Rose, Milton and producer Michael Latham who made the programs come to life. Each night for nearly 5 months, traveling around the world, they would meet to discuss the next day's recording sessions. There was no written script, only an outline of what was to be covered in each program. Often, Milton and Rose would burn the midnight oil to develop another approach to the subject matter.

For nearly 30 years Milton and Rose worked with me on various media projects. Although Milton was the one who usually appeared on camera, the result was collaboration from start to finish. After Milton's death, Rose insisted she made no significant contribution to his work. I had witnessed quite the opposite. They were a microcosm of the practice of science at its best. He would suggest X, she would ask why X and not Y, and on and on the debate would proceed; often intense, but never in anger.

Having first met in 1932 and after a marriage of 68 years, Milton's death in 2006 was a terrible loss for Rose. Many folks, notably, Cindy Sparks, Chris and Melodie Rufer, Lowell Harriss and Mike Walker, made the effort to try to keep her physically and intellectually active. My contribution was to involve her in another media project, one that would highlight her role as an economist.

When George Stigler died in 1991, Milton mentioned to me, "Now there are only two musketeers." That he thought of himself, Allen Wallis and George in those terms indicates the degree to which they depended on one another, as friends and honest sounding boards for ideas.

Rose's brother, Aaron Director, was also a member of "Milton's inner circle." I occasionally spent the night at the Friedman's Sea Ranch California home. On one occasion Aaron was also there. The discussion at dinner was something to witness. I can't recall a single statement Milton, Rose or Aaron made, that went unchallenged. And interestingly, in most cases, Aaron challenged Milton as being too statist in his position.

When the Soviet Union collapsed, George Will observed, "The Cold War is over and the University of Chicago won it." My own interpretation is that the University of Chicago Economics Department changed the world, and Milton's three musketeers - plus Rose and her brother Aaron Director - were the driving force that made this happen.

Rose finally agreed to "appear on camera" in a number of interviews about this group, who were both close friends and professional colleagues; she talked about the support they provided each other. The story, which I still hope to tell, is about the Chicago tradition, not the "Chicago School of Economics," which has been taken to mean a commitment to free market economics. Milton and Rose rejected this as a distorted and inaccurate description of their work; not to mention that of the Economics Department at the University of Chicago.

This group, whom I call "The Chicago Five," didn't have an ideology. They had a deep abiding commitment to developing theses that could be tested. Much of the facts derived from their research pointed to the success of freedom in promoting prosperity

and equality of opportunity. But their commitment was to the truth, wherever their search might lead.

In his book, *The Chicago School*, Johan van Overtveldt describes the Chicago Tradition as “a strong work ethic, an unshakable belief in economics as a true science, academic excellence as the sole criterion for advancement, an intense debating culture focused on sharpening the critical mind....”

Make no mistake; Rose Friedman was grounded in this tradition and was at the center of the resulting intellectual whirlwind. She said, “One Nobel Prize winner in the family is plenty and I was happy to support Milton in that regard.” After his death she insisted to me, and likely to others, that she contributed little to Milton’s work, telling me “he went out of his way to make it appear that I was his intellectual equal, but without him I am nothing.” Then as now, I say, “to the contrary;” Rose Friedman made enormous contributions to the advancement of freedom and prosperity in the 20th Century.

Since Milton’s death, Rose often mused, “Wherever he is, that’s where I want to be.” I hope she has found him and the peace she so desired.

A Media Company for the 21st Century

Our founder and current President is Bob Chitester. He created the PBS TV series, **Free To Choose**, hosted by Milton Friedman. Free To Choose Media was the ideal name for an organization whose mission was an extension of that work.

The need is to translate serious scholarship into widely understood rhetoric and icons; to accept passion and intuition as an important and perhaps primary source of most people’s decisions.

The challenge is not to teach economics. The challenge is to become much more effective story tellers thus making economic and political concepts accessible to all citizens.

You may think that this approach trivializes the importance of economics or scholarship in general. But consider your own and others actual behavior. Most of us “use” combinations of belief systems, habits and advice of others to avoid the hard work of comprehensive understanding. Most people’s ambitions are relatively easy to meet in a free market, civil society, so the prevailing attitude is “don’t bother me with the details, I’d rather watch *American Idol*.”

Thus the goal is to translate the excellent scholarship of think tanks and independent scholars into engaging material containing easily remembered stories, phrases and images. These will become life-long reminders; think of them as awareness triggers, of the tug of war between freedom and government and the constant need to rein in the latter to preserve the former. This will be particularly productive with young people whose “natural passion for change and freedom” can become a lifelong habit of seeing the many ways government stands in the way of their aspirations.



Personal Reflections on Milton Friedman
by Bob Chitester

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