

Vartan Gregorian

2013 Edwin Piscator Award Presentation to Barbara Goldsmith

Thank you very much.

Unfortunately, everything I was going to say is being printed already in your brochure— Barbara’s glorious career. But then I am not going to be deterred by that. Now, Barbara is a cultural icon in New York. Even though few of us were given the status of “living landmark”, in her case, I prefer the selection of an icon. Because landmarks often are neglected, they are subject to depletion and outsourced the way oilfields are, they are forgotten, but icons always have to be revisited. Barbara is an outstanding author, scholar, historian, benefactor, and a real decent wonderful human being. There are two ways of earning celebrity in New York, as she wrote in “The Meaning of Celebrity”: There are people who are famous for being famous, like Donald Trump. There are others who buy everything by becoming famous. And then there are others who earn everything. Barbara has earned everything she has written. Every status, everything she has had, she has worked for the hard way. All her works are meticulous but the one I love most is “Obsessive Genius: The Inner World of Marie Curie”, translated now into 24 languages. Only Barbara will go to France, to resurrect one of the great scientists and help popularizing her in the United States. And receive praise not only from literary people but also from the American Physicists Association, as one of the best books written about physics. Barbara has done everything the hard way, not the easy way. She has also been a great editor, one of the founders of New York Magazine, contributed many many articles. The two essays that I like most are “Women on the Edge,” which she published in the New Yorker, and the other I already mentioned “The Meaning of Celebrity”.

Now, Michel Foucault I don’t like, but there is one line of his I like. He said, “People know what they do; frequently they know why they do what they do; but what they don't know is what they do, does.” Well, Barbara knows what everything she has done does. She has left a great impact in New York in philanthropy, unlike many. She has followed the Talmudic principle, where the left hand does not know what the right hand is doing. There are now not many names in Barbara’s name, and when they have, they insisted to have her name as a tribute to her. New York Public Library and

scores of other organizations have been beneficiaries of Barbara's benevolence. One of the things that I like, and it's very appropriate for today, is "PEN Freedom to Write Awards". It's for all the scholars, all the journalists who are denied the freedom to write. I happen to chair this committee and have for the last several years. As is indicated in the program, one of China's dissident writers, Liu Xiaboo was first brought into the international sphere by this committee to advertise his plight.

Barbara also, I would say this without embarrassing her, is in the immortality business. I will tell you what I am talking about. The libraries are the only institutions that can grant you earthly immortality. New York buildings don't last for a long time. PanAm becomes Met, Met becomes something else. All the names are changed like Louisiana cemeteries, one buried on top of the other. So, if you want to be famous in New York, don't name a building after yourself. Sooner or later it will go. But the libraries and their students are for perpetuity. And it's the librarians right, for they decide whether you exist or not. That's one of the reasons why mayor Ed Koch, of all the places, gave La Guardia College his collection, because community colleges they do not have many famous people, but they have Mayor Koch's legacy. Authors write, librarians save, but librarians can decide also whether you exist for perpetuity. I remember Mayor Koch said, "Have you read my book?" "No," I said. "Have you bought it?" "No," I said. "Why not?" he said, and I replied, "Well we would like to receive it." Then he had it hand-delivered. Then he said, "How long will it take to be in the catalogue?" "I said there is a two-to-three-year waiting list." "Why?" he said. "Because we don't have the money for cataloguing." But we did receive money for cataloguing, because even Mayor Koch was interested in being remembered in New York. So Barbara carried immortality to another step.

Barbara just wrote me a letter. Unfortunately, I must read it without embarrassing both of us. "I'm honored to know that you are presenting the Piscator Award to me. I'm attaching a long biography. But bear in mind that my first passion is for writing. And all other activities come from believing one should be proactive and not passive in enjoying going about good causes. I think your giving me this award completes a circle from the day so very long ago when I walked into your office and you said to me, "I read in Newsweek that you are conducting a campaign to have books printed on acid free paper, so they will last three hundred years instead of

deteriorating in thirty. Now why haven't you asked for the help of the New York Public Library? We can be a great force to further this cause." I replied, "Well, how *would* you go about this," and you answered, "I'd make using the right kind of book paper as American as the Fourth of July, apple pie, and Mom. Anyone against that is a villain." And it worked!

And remember Barbara, you brought to the library all the major publishers, hundreds of authors, who signed a pledge that they would not publish their books on acidic paper. Therefore, every author in the United States and around the world owes you three hundred years of immortality, at least, if nothing else.

Last but not least, I'd like to mention something very personal. Barbara has moral and intellectual integrity and honesty. She is one of the most decent human beings we have known— friends who are here and those of us who are elsewhere— we have known. If you have Barbara as a friend you don't need any other friend in the world. Barbara is dedicated to her family, her friends and her causes. Causes include freedom, intellectual integrity, knowledge but most importantly social justice and to do the right thing. Throughout her life she has done the right thing. That's why she is an icon for me and for many others. A great human being, who happens to be a great scholar, great journalist, great essayist, and everything. So thank you Barbara for being famous for what you've done, and not being famous for being famous.