

EULOGY for ELIZABETH MARY TIRARD

by Bex Bellingham

Delivered at the Celebration of Liz's Life in St. Paul's Church, Honiton

Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you all for being here today, to mark Liz's passing and celebrate her life. If you don't know me, I am Bex, her fourth born and middle child.

Famously, after my mum had her first child - Anna - she sold all her baby gear and said "no more". Then she really emphasised that point by ...having six more children... It's fair to say she was a far better town planner than she ever was a family planner. After Anna came Jennie, Peter, me, Tom, Jasper and Kit.

Ever since Mum first received her diagnosis in March last year, I have known that this moment was on its way. And I have known that when it came, I wanted to stand up and speak, represent our shared respects, send her off well. I cannot describe the ocean of words and emotions that have been chasing each other through my heart and head ever since. Yet when I sat down to write, I found myself at a loss. How to encapsulate a woman who represented so many different things to so many different people across the years. Who wore so many different hats that even she never really knew her true identity? Impossible. Mother, sister, daughter, grandmother, great grandmother, godmother, wife, friend, surrogate parent. Teacher, councillor, governor, manageress, events organiser, people organiser, organiser organiser (!!! :)), interior designer, singer, pianist, speaker, writer, performer, director, hard and soft, hot and cold, creator and destroyer - you name it, she has been it. Anyway, if you don't mind, I'm going to speak about her in the way I knew her best - the way all my siblings knew her best - our mother.

Mum was born in Hammersmith on 4th November 1943 at the height of the London blitz. I've always felt that her arrival into the world the day before bonfire night, while explosions were raining down around her, seemed a fitting way for her to enter the world! Her Jewish Polish parents were sent to a Russian Gulag when Hitler invaded Poland. During that time, they lost their two young sons (brothers whose existence Mum was not even aware of until the late 1980's) When Stalin joined the Allies, they were released and made their way to Britain to join the war effort. They separated shortly after they arrived in this country; by the time Mum met them when she was 21, they were both remarried.

Her father, Stanislaus (Stanley), had been a lecturer in forestry and agriculture at Krakow University in Poland, and became involved in training Polish forces in Scotland. He didn't know Mum existed until she was 21. Helena, her mother, was working with Polish Special Ops and therefore unable to care for her newborn daughter. She took 2 week old Mum down to Devon to be cared for in a baby home. After the war, all the babies were collected except Mum. The nurses who ran the home, Rose Toms (who we all knew as Granny Rose) and her assistant Dorothy Clarke simply continued to care for her. Even in those formative years, Mum's sense of displacement and need to belong, to be like everyone else, was clear in her child's observation (as recounted by Granny Rose many years later) that "As I call Aunt Rose 'mum', I think I should call you [Dorothy] 'dad'." Mum's relationship with Rose was a tumultuous one, full of anger and a mutual struggle to understand and be understood by each other. Nevertheless, in Mum's own words, Rose was "the only mother figure I knew as a child. You did the sitting up and nursing me through illness bit, the mopping up bloody knees, the tearing your hair out with teachers when I was playing up, the worrying, all those things which being a mother is all about."

Mum felt the absence of her parents keenly and discovered when she eventually did meet them that Helena had never stopped looking for her. Mum's Godfather had changed her surname from Lis to Lister however, to help her sound 'less foreign', making tracing her an impossible task. Although initially overjoyed to find them, things did not work out and contact was lost, perhaps because of her parents' new relationships, the language and a culture that was alien to her. It is certainly true that Mum's step mother was very keen for her to embrace her Polish roots completely; this was utterly opposite to the very English nature of Mum's formative years and I think it frightened and intimidated her. Mum's sheer, unbreakable will, and her deep, often unassailable rage, both so much a part of her character, took seed very early in her life, possibly due to the strong sense of rejection that she felt growing up and the bitter disappointment of finding her parents yet discovering that they too were merely human and could not 'fix it' for her.

Mum trained as a teacher at Rachel McMillan College, in Deptford, London, graduating with distinction as a primary teacher in 1965. In her final report, Mum's Principal noted her "lively personality" - so lively in fact that she said it twice in the same reference. Her Principle also observed that Mum's "enjoyment and appreciation of individual children [was] genuine and warm". During her time in training, she worked with under-privileged children, and often recounted in later years how, on a trip to a farm with her class the children refused to accept that milk actually came from cows. It seems that whether or not this was a happy time for Mum, it was certainly an active one

- a pattern that was to repeat itself many times throughout her life. In addition to her studies and placements, she was elected head of the Student Christian Union, (apparently she “tackled this office in a responsible and vigorous fashion”!), she organised the student volunteers, was involved with Girl Guiding, camping, singing (performing in the college special choir), and playing the organ and the piano. She also had a very active social life and a large group of friends. It was around this time that she met my dad, Derek Workman, when she sang in his choir at the Tunbridge Wells Methodist Church.

Mum was married five times. In later years, I teased her about going for her namesake Liz Taylor’s record and in our last conversation I told her how disappointed I was that she would be stopping at number five - partly because of her illness but largely because Mike is hands down the best husband since my dad. She agreed... :) Anyway, I digress... Mum’s first marriage, to my dad, was a hugely controversial one due in part to the considerable age difference between them, and the fact that my dad was already married when they met. Nevertheless, as was the case throughout her life, Mum seems to have pressed on regardless. Mum, Dad, Anna and Jen moved from their London base in 1967 and established a home together in Padbury, Buckinghamshire, where they had three more children - Peter, me and Tom. Very sadly, Dad died suddenly in 1978, during a very dark time in our family history, after which Mum married Patrick Bellingham, with whom she had two more children, Jasper and Kit, and during which time she moved to Honiton. The relationship was tempestuous and terrifyingly violent from the outset, and ultimately ended in divorce.

Mum then married John Tirard. This was a more positive experience. He adored her and was good for her, by her own account teaching her something about the giving and, crucially, the receiving of genuine affection. Tragically, however, John died seven years into the relationship, in August 1996. Mum had left Honiton to establish a life with John in Gosport, which she did with her usual gusto, joining the choir at St Paul’s, co-founding the Concrete Horse Amateur Dramatics Society, organising concerts and fetes, managing a charity shop in Portsmouth, breeding pedigree spaniels and throwing her and John’s large house open to any and everyone who needed anything from a coffee to a chat to a bed. In fact even Honiton’s current mayor, David Foster lived with us for a time as a teenager, becoming, for better or worse, part of the extended family. After John’s death, Mum returned to Honiton with Kit - a huge step for her that was made easier than she ever anticipated by the fact that Honiton was possibly the only place in her life she was almost able to consider home. She married again, although this was a short lived relationship for which neither she nor Gordon were ready. She

also had a relationship with Mike Robinson, an internationally known flower expert who she described as her soul mate; but this relationship was cut short by his sudden death in 2009.

Mum married for the fifth time and final time in July 2011 to the lovely Mike Beville. Together they co-founded the Joanna Leach Foundation to encourage musical activities, particularly in and around Honiton. It seems to us that the most important thing Mike was able to show Mum was what it is to be loved unconditionally. As her cancer took hold and it became clear that this battle would not be one she could beat into submission through sheer force of will, Mike was there. When she withdrew, unable even in such extreme circumstances to cede some control and let someone else in, Mike was there. When her many children (and grandchildren) began to descend on the house in Shute with increasing regularity, bringing with us our fears, our hopes, our confusion and our shared memories of a terrible darkness known to very few outside our immediate, sibling circle, and certainly not previously to him, Mike was there. This family owe Mike a debt of gratitude that we may never be able to fully repay, for the love, tenderness, care and absolute acceptance that he gave our mum, an angry, frightened, proud and prickly woman who knew only how to fight. The best way we can repay that debt is to love him right back, and we all do. Mike is a member of the family now and always will be.

Like all of us, Mum had a public face and a private face. Publicly, she was the life and soul, immersed in whichever community she found herself. The condolences we have received as a family are into the many hundreds already and show no sign of abating. The common theme, repeated again and again, covering five decades, is that Mum touched lives. Many, many, many lives. Her friends and colleagues all experienced in Mum a leader, a clear minded, intelligent, cultured, focussed woman with a deep well of compassion for those around her, a keen, infectious sense of humour, a desire to see justice done and with enough 'extra children' to make the Pied Piper blush. She was very fond of the analogy regarding a pebble thrown into a pond, and the inevitable ripples that follow. Well, the ripples from Mum's public life are plain for all to see and a fine legacy in the truest sense of the expression. Her private face was very different and in working through our grief now, reconciling one part with the other is a challenge that all of her children face. The ripples cast throughout our lives and relationships with her have been and will continue to be equally far reaching. It is fair to say that Mum's character could never be encapsulated by pretty adjectives and inane niceties. It is also fair to say that for many, if not all of her children, our lives to date have been defined by a constant battle to understand who she was in relation to us. In this, she was an enigma to her very

last breath. The legacy she leaves us is hugely varied but includes strength of mind and spirit, humour of the darkest order, a bond with each other that, in my experience, few siblings have. She gave us life. She also gave us practical life skills, one of which, according to a sibling of mine who shall remain nameless, was the ability to duck - quickly and with little warning... :))

I can honestly tell you that thanks to the grace of God, we all - every single one of us - loved and love our mum. Thanks also to His grace, at the end of her remarkable, contradictory, powerful seventy years, she finally understood that there was no need to fight any more, nothing to run from. She knew she was loved for who she was, as she was. She was able to put down burdens she had gathered to herself and laboured under for an entire lifetime. Mum left this world surrounded by love, truly knowing the peace that passes all understanding. Her absence now is as tangible as her presence always was and adjusting to a world without her in it is a spectacularly painful, confusing process. But I am comforted by the knowledge that God's timing and purpose is perfect - if I could have asked for one gift for my mum at any time in my life or hers, it would have been exactly that. So, Mum, for one last, eternal time, I bid you to go in peace, to love and serve the Lord.