



Joan Symington

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What will stay with me most of all about Mum is her smile. A smile that would light up the room, a smile of connection, delight, complicity. A smile that was always somewhere close by even during her times of pain or self-doubt. A smile that she kept right to the end even as other parts of her were gradually stripped away.

Words spring easily to mind to describe our mother. Wise, kind, patient, tough, resilient, thoughtful, calm, brave. She was plagued with health problems in later years but bore them stoically and lived a full life despite them.

Mum was extraordinarily accomplished. She forged a successful, ground-breaking career in child psychiatry and psychoanalysis, being appointed as a Senior Registrar at the Royal Free in London at a young age. Papers that she wrote based on her clinical work are still influential and widely read – just three weeks ago we received an advance copy of a new book whose opening chapter is a reprint of one of Mum's papers. My fiancée Rachel read it to her in the garden of Elizabeth Lodge just the other day. Mum stayed in touch with patients whom she had helped and followed the progress of children that she had treated with care and interest. We received a moving tribute from one of Mum's patients the other day, who noted the difference she had made to this person's life at a difficult time.

At the same time, Mum had a parallel amateur career in the arts. A gifted musician, painter, sketcher and sculptor, she produced works of sometimes astonishing beauty, often infused with her characteristic sense of humour and playfulness. She was also a great reader, a lover of poetry in particular, and someone who was devoted to examination and analysis of her own interior feelings and thoughts. She held herself to a high standard to the point, I feel, of sometimes being overly hard on herself.

Despite her prodigious talents in the professional and artistic arenas, I believe that Mum left an even greater legacy at the personal level. She was a loyal caring friend to so many, her kindness to others and good listening building deep and sustaining relationships with people from all walks of life. Family, too, was very important to her. She was a loving sister to Beth, sister-in-law to John, mother-in-law to Christina and Rachel, cousin to Cornwells and Downses, and in-law to Dad's family.

Mum's 45-year marriage to Dad was a union of two exceptional people. It wasn't always easy – in their different ways they were both quite headstrong – but there was also a lot of love and always the feeling that we were a family. Mum was a caring and loving wife but was also able to flourish professionally and personally despite Dad's sometimes rather large shadow. Dad always encouraged her to pursue her art, often saying that she 'hid her light under a bushel' and needed to believe more in her own talent. I think this helped her express herself more fully. They balanced each other very well in many ways.

Despite all of the above, I think – and I may well be biased – that the gift that Mum had above all others was as a mother. And not just a mother...a grandmother to Jane and Louisa, aunt to Rob and Martin, great-aunt to Max, Yoleni and Oscar and proxy aunt to the children of many of her friends. She loved children and her face would light up with joy when she was with them. As a mother she was so engaged: always loving, always listening, playful or wise as the moment demanded. She organised amazing, creative birthday parties, would chip in as a bowler or gamer when numbers required, would comfort us when we were sick or hurt, cooked delicious treats and imbued us with her love of music, art and poetry. Later, she would visit us in far-flung places and never express a hint of resentment that we were so far away. Whenever she was with you, you felt that you had her full and absolute attention. She was a wonderful mother and will be sorely missed.

While I don't want to dwell on Mum's health problems, they are worth mentioning to highlight her courage and resilience. Diagnosed with Parkinson's nearly 30 years ago, she fought, innovated and adapted to maintain her quality of life as the disease took hold. Though it is known for its physical symptoms, we soon learned that the mental effects are perhaps even worse. Mum would sometimes feel a deep dread of even the most minor things and it is remarkable how she was able to overcome that to jump on flights, present at conferences and maintain her social life. She similarly overcame – or powered on through – many other serious illnesses.

As we farewell Mum today, I have touched upon some of the ways in which she has enriched the lives of family, friends, colleagues and patients. But I would also like to give thanks to those who have shown her kindness throughout her life but especially in these last difficult years. Her good friends from med school in Melbourne, still a close group 65 years later, her good friends and colleagues in Sydney and in the UK, family across Australia and beyond. Your concern for her welfare and support for her have been invaluable and greatly enriched her last years. Thank you.

Which brings me to Elizabeth Lodge. Often when we tell the story of someone's life, the final period in a nursing home is just a footnote or a brief conclusion. But for Mum, her six years at Elizabeth Lodge were a full and rich chapter of her life. She made some wonderful friends, contributed a great deal to the community there and lived happily on her own terms, with her painting and her books. She defied nursing home stereotypes, continuing to conduct supervisions by Skype, bringing in a teacher to help her learn Mandarin, jetting off to Shanghai, and embarking on intrepid explorations of the surrounding bushland, one of which, later nicknamed the Burke and Wills expedition, ended up with her falling off a bridge into a creek and breaking her collarbone.

Nursing homes have had some bad press in the last few years. But the story was the absolute opposite here. What was most striking about Elizabeth Lodge was not just the standard of care that Mum received – which was always excellent – but the way in which it was given. I can see several of the staff here today – thank you so much for coming – and I have to say that the genuine love and kindness you showed to our mother over so many years was both exceptional and truly humbling. I am so grateful that you made her last years happy ones. We will never forget it. Thank you to you all.

Despite all her health problems, Mum had such a thirst for life. I asked her about her faith recently and she told me that for her, life was a gift and that faith was bound up in respecting that gift. This held true right until the end. I asked her regularly as her quality of life deteriorated whether she felt she was ready to go. The answer was usually no. When the ambulance picked her up when she had Covid a few months back she told them sternly 'I'm not ready to die yet'. Recently she told me that she felt ready in one way but she always still looked forward to the new day and then wanted another one after that.

Now there will be no more new days for Mum, but she will live on in what has been left behind with us all. Visiting her towards the end, I sometimes felt that so much had slowly been taken away from her that there was little left but her love and her smile. But what love. And what a smile.

Thank you Mum.

