



Joan Symington

David Symington

I guess that finding the words to describe what a mother means to you is difficult for anyone, but it somehow seems particularly difficult with mum. I think that's because she was someone who was always looking to relate to people at a level that went beyond words, that went deeper than words.

In fact, I think Mum approached human relationships in some ways like the artist she was. We have already heard from others what an extraordinary talent Mum had with painting and sculpture. What I will always carry with me is her sketcher's eye. Wherever we went with Mum she would always have her sketch book with her. Even on a short stopover to refuel, she would whip out her sketch book and within a couple of minutes – sometimes it seemed like seconds – she would capture a scene in front of her. What she was nearly always sketching, though, was people. People queuing in line, a couple of old men sitting huddled on a park bench or, sometimes irritatingly, me lounging in some awkward posture.

That sketcher's eye sees people beyond the level of language. The art critic, Roger Fry, comparing the way the artist sees from the ordinary person once wrote, "In actual life the normal person really only reads the labels as it were on the objects around him and troubles no further. Almost all the things which are useful in any way put on more or less this cap of invisibility. It is only when an object exists in our lives for no other purpose than to be seen that we really look at it."

I always felt that Mum lived in that rich reality behind the distracting labels and veil of language and she related to people in that realm. Intellectually, she was therefore drawn to thinkers, like Kant, who had intimations of a reality existing behind and beyond our capacity to categorise and label.

Dwelling in that reality, she saw through to the humanity of almost everyone. To say that she almost never took a dislike to someone would make her seem bland. To say that she saw the intrinsic worth of every person would be to descend into cliché. Mum was the real deal. With her sketcher's eye, she saw through to people's core and was nearly always able to cut through language, to break down the fortresses of noisy conventional conversation that people so often erect around themselves.

Her relations with people were based on shared aesthetic experience, whether art, music, or the bush. In my case, she shared one of her great loves, music. She would always buy season tickets to the opera which she would take me too. Being a spoilt child, I resented these trips for quite a long time. Mum didn't try to hard to explain the operas to me. That would not have been her way. She instinctively felt that trying to interpret music or art was to cheapen it. Susan Sontag used to lament the way critics focus on the "content" rather than the "form" of art. Mum was definitely someone who loved art's "form". So Mum didn't explain things to me. She just had faith that my faculty to apprehend beauty in music would, in the end, be awakened. And so it was. I can remember exactly when, too. It was when she took me to a performance of Handel's "Julius Caesar" with Graham Pushee and Yvonne Kenny playing the title roles. I don't know what it was about that particular performance that made music click for me, perhaps it was those lusciously rich, but comfortingly repetitive "da capo" arias, or perhaps it had also had something to do with Yvonne Kenny disrobing during the scene in which she sings a long aria while seducing Caesar. But, whatever it was, from that moment I was hooked. For quite a while after that, I couldn't move beyond baroque music and, to this day, it is still the place I turn to for comfort. But it opened a window into the world of classical music, which has stayed with me and enriched my life ever since. She shared so much of what she found beautiful and inspiring and I can't even begin to express how much strength that has given me. But her genius for seeing people's core humanity has been her greatest gift to me.

First of all, the mere fact of having a mother who was such an incredible listener must have given me strength in ways beyond what I can even fathom. But she also showed me how to see people as human beings. I have lived in China now for 20 years and I work in a very large Chinese company in which I am the only foreigner in the senior management team. The key to my ability to live in such a different culture for so long and so happily has been, in no small part, my ability to relate to Chinese people. To call it an “ability” is not quite accurate. I love being with Chinese people of all walks of life and take huge joy being in their company. I have no doubt that that ability was given to me by Mum.

Towards the end of her life Mum, as has been said already today, suffered from dementia. That, of course, was a source of huge pain to me. But here again something of Mum’s spirit helped me to cope better with it. Just a few months ago in a Beijing bookshop, I happened to see Oliver Sack’s book “The Man who thought he was a Hat”. I picked it up because I had remembered Mum talking enthusiastically about Sacks when I was young. In its pages I found the case of Jimmy G., the man Sacks treated who had completely lost any short-term memory. In that chapter, Sacks asks difficult questions about the extent to which some retains personhood when they no longer have memory. Sacks, with the instinctive and genuine sense of humanity he had (and which doubtless drew Mum to his writings), comes firmly to the conclusion that Jimmy G definitely did retain his personhood. Sacks saw it in the ways in which he experienced present moments: in the garden, while going through the rituals of a church service etc.

Mum indirectly guiding me to that book, helped illuminate the way to relate to her through her final couple of years. I know that Mum, if ever faced with a friend or family member suffering from dementia, would never have dreamed of dismissing the person’s value by some harsh utilitarian calculus. She, like Sacks, would have related to the person in the moment. That is what I learned to do with Mum. She lived in moments, and, for the most part, they were beautiful moments. She still loved listening to music. She loved the birds outside the nursing home she lived. When hugging her, her eyes were filled to overflowing with warmth. She would ask me to read poetry to her, sometimes poetry she had learned when she was young and in many cases poems that were new to me. She would often ask me to read “’Tis a Beauteous Evening” by Wordsworth. If you’ll allow me, I will read it to you now:

*It is a beauteous evening, calm and free,
The holy time is quiet as a Nun
Breathless with adoration; the broad sun
Is sinking down in its tranquility;
The gentleness of heaven broods o'er the Sea;
Listen! the mighty Being is awake,
And doth with his eternal motion make
A sound like thunder—everlastingly.
Dear child! dear Girl! that walkest with me here,
If thou appear untouched by solemn thought,
Thy nature is not therefore less divine:
Thou liest in Abraham's bosom all the year;
And worshipp'st at the Temple's inner shrine,
God being with thee when we know it not.*

Separated by geography, I often had to read it to her over Skype. I remember on many such occasions reading it to her and when I looked up, her eyes were flowing with tears. To the end, she was still sharing her experience of life’s painful joys with me.

