

## **TRIBUTE TO JANNY PETERS**

**by Edward Peters**

**at a Service of Thanksgiving, Oxford, 31 January 2007**

Thank you to all of you who have come today to remember – and give thanks for the life of – my dear mother. We appreciate more than we can say the effort you have made to be with us. Five from Mum's very large family in Holland, including three of her four surviving siblings who travelled specially from Holland this morning. My English cousins. Friends from Parklands, the retirement community where Mum and Dad lived, and here in Cumnor where they worshipped in this very church. Friends from the network of people associated with the work of Moral Re-Armament (MRA) in Oxford and various parts of Britain. And two special old friends of ours and my parents who have come all the way from Switzerland and the USA.

You all are the physical presence from a much larger throng of family and friends who have sent literally hundreds of wonderful messages to Dad and us. We value these deeply.

Mum was born in the first months of the First World War, the eldest of seven children, in a middle class family in Haarlem, Holland. Some of the family's ancestors had come to Holland centuries earlier as part of the Huguenot exodus from France.

She trained and practised as a teacher. She always loved helping others to grow in knowledge and wisdom. She became engaged to be married, but her fiancé fought in the far east during World War 2, and was killed in action. Before his death he sent her an exquisite campher chest from China – which we have in our home.

Mum's brothers worked in the Dutch resistance against German occupation. She herself gave shelter in her small flat to Jews on the run. Mum's family suffered, as did most Dutch, due to shortages of basic commodities.

Yet, soon after the war ended, she was one of many who felt called to contribute to the rebuilding of shattered relationships among European neighbours. She had earlier encountered the peace-building work of Moral Re-Armament, and after the war she volunteered to work full-time with MRA – something she and my father have done ever since. From 1948 she was among the 200 MRA workers who travelled throughout Germany to assist the reconciliation and reconstruction efforts there. It was here that she met my father, who was part of the same task force.

In December 1950 they got married. On the invitation of friends in Germany, they chose a startling location the marriage of a Dutch woman and an Englishman in post-war Europe – the Ruhr, the industrial heartland of Germany. It was a mark of their love for Germany, and their vision of a new, reconciled Europe. But it was tough for Mum's parents to think of their eldest daughter getting married on enemy territory, so to speak. It was only after a personal letter from a German employer, a friend of Mum and Dad's, in which he apologised for what Holland had suffered during the war, that they agreed to come.

Mum and Dad's lives were dedicated to playing their part in the reconstruction of a continent – and to a vision of a world where the competing forces of communism and fascism would be replaced by a different set of governing values. This commitment led them to make many personal sacrifices. They did not have a home of their own until they were almost 60 years old. The first 24 years of their married life were spent living in the homes of others, or in MRA centres in many countries.

My early years were spent in Germany, Holland, Switzerland, Britain and Nigeria – as Mum and Dad served in different countries. At times they left me for periods in the care of family or friends –

something which hard for them, just as it was for me. In later years, Mum sometimes spoke wistfully of feeling she had stayed away from me for too long at times.

In the autumn of 1961, when I was 8, Mum and Dad made their home with good friends in Dad's home city of Sheffield. This was the beginning of 33 years of having a home base in an industrial city where their MRA work centred particularly on worker-boss relations. Through a quiet, personal work of making friends with people on the shop floor and in the board room, they contributed to the building of trust at a time when British industry was engaged in a period of class warfare.

Another great chapter in these later years was time spent in Rhodesia in the late 1970s – the period leading up to Zimbabwe's emergence as an independent nation. Mum and Dad assisted the work of Rhodesians, black and white, who formed what they called a 'Cabinet of Conscience' – a group of people in senior positions on both sides of the racial divide who sought strategies together for ending civil war and averting bloodshed when independence came. The tragic history of Zimbabwe more recently does not invalidate the extraordinary achievements of that period.

In this trust-building, life-changing work – whether in Germany, Zimbabwe, industrial northern England or elsewhere – one of Mum's great gifts found full expression – her gift of friendship. She had a natural interest in other people, a capacity to listen and live into their concerns. And once she made a friend she didn't forsake them.

Many have referred to this in messages. "We remember with appreciation," wrote one person, "her fabulous memory for birthdays!"

A neighbour wrote: "I was very fond of her, she was the first person who made me welcome when I first came to live at Parklands."

Another old friend: "I think of her.. as a dear and faithful friend... A postcard would arrive, every space filled with her compact writing, the message usually uncomplicated, but from the heart."

A Dutch friend, battling now with cancer: "I first met Janny in Holland, I think it was 1945 or 46. She came to our home and we immediately became friends. I must have been 11 or 12. That is now 60 years ago!! And she has been such a loyal friend ever since. Even this last year she kept sending little notes to say you were praying for me. Somewhere I read: 'Love is not changed in death and nothing is lost and all in the end is harvest.'"

As her son, I was fully on the receiving end of that quality of friendship. In fact I came to think of her as a dear, dear friend even more than a mother.

And I am very lucky that my wife was close friends with my mother long before we married. At one point Elisabeth, who is Swedish, took Mum for to visit friends in Swedish Lapland – how many mothers and daughters-in-law do that kind of thing?! Our family life has benefited immeasurably from this relationship.

Yes, Mum was a very loving person, but she was not sentimental. She flavoured love with the salt of straightness. "She spoke the truth," writes one friend, "with love and with a merry and warm heart."

And she had a certain earthiness, a matter of factness and great common sense.

There is so much that could be said about Mum. She was definitely an evening person, not at her best in the morning; Dad is a morning person, not usually full of beans at night. (As an aside, I have taken after both of them – I am not at my best in the morning or the evening!)

She had a twinkle in her eye – many people have remarked on that – but she never really fathomed the English sense of humour. A joke which would have my father and me laughing till the tears rolled down our cheeks would leave her totally unmoved.

Our children observe that Grandma would sometimes apologize for Grandpa's jokes, thinking them to be rude. This only had us laughing more, as we did not think them rude at all!

"I think of stories my husband used to tell," writes a friend, "of how when the two of you were playing tennis, and calling each other rude names in typically British style, Janny was really afraid you were going to come to blows! No doubt she understood British humour better as the years progressed!" In fact I think she never did.

In this regard, as well as others, she kept her Dutchness. She used to say that when she married an Englishman she decided also to marry his country – and she gave her whole heart to Britain. But Holland, and her large Dutch family, always meant the world to her – even if it was a struggle to visit frequently enough.

Perhaps her love of flowers and plants came partly from the tulip fields of Holland. She loved having plants in her living room, and the first thing she did on waking each morning was to go around with a small watering can to make sure they were all well.

We are very blessed that Mum and Dad decided to move to Oxford 12 years ago, to be close to us - quite an up-rooting at 80! Their proximity meant that we saw much more of each other in recent years. We think particularly fondly of many Christmases spent together as a family, including this past one when we were able to celebrate Elisabeth's birthday, Christmas and Mum's 92<sup>nd</sup> birthday in quick session.

These family times were always precious, often deep, and invariably hilarious. Those who know what a dignified and immaculate lady Mum was – an "almost regal presence", as one friend observed – will appreciate the depths of humility she showed in agreeing to don the ridiculous paper hats that come inside British Christmas crackers. She never gave us the feeling she thought this was beneath her dignity – though she must have felt it! And she even attempted to enjoy the even more ridiculous jokes inside these crackers.

Perhaps easier for her was to find pleasure in the little plastic presents which the crackers also provided. For the small things of life brought her much joy. At birthdays or Christmas, the beauty of the ribbon around the present seemed to mean almost as much as the present itself. And the wrapping paper! She was legendary in our family for her efforts to open a present in such a way that the paper could be used again. Our children confess to this having been a cause of great trial when they were young and eager to get on with opening their own presents!

Mum was a perfectionist, and she used that gift of attention to detail in her care for others. A friend who lived with Mum and Dad in community for some years has a picture of "her bending down and 'spotting' the carpet (removing a stain)... If there are any carpets in Heaven," he writes, "I am sure she will be spotting them."

Perfectionism has another side of course. "She had such a high standard," another friend remarks, "it was impossible to live up to it." That is Mum too.

She was keenly interested in science and nature, devouring the National Geographic magazine each month. She had a keen interest in the night sky, and always asked Dad to cut out 'The sky at night' from the Times each month.

She was very musical and had a lovely voice – perhaps inherited partly from her father, whom one of my Dutch cousins describes as the greatest singer she ever met. Mum was a member of several choirs over the years – including the Bach Choral Society in Sheffield, and the Cumnor Choral Society here in Oxford, from which she only retired at the age of 89, in spite of earnest requests to stay on! One of our family describes her as a ‘turbo singer’ in church!

She was an excellent linguist and could speak four languages fluently – Dutch, English, French and German. This talent was put to special use in post-war Germany where she translated at times for Irene Laure, a French lady who did more than most to heal the wounds of war.

Mum was a brave person. Few knew of how much pain she endured during her life particularly from neuralgia. At times she only managed to keep going with the help of her medication. My Dad suspects that the war years in occupied Holland took their toll.

Amid all that could be said about Mum – the qualities and the weaknesses, her strengths and her foibles – by far the most important was her rock-solid faith in God. As a young woman she put her life at His service and she never retracted that decision. She always sought to follow God’s call. This was no guarantee of getting everything right, and she would be the first to acknowledge many mistakes made. But her faith was rock-solid. She was not pious – she disliked unreality and felt that pious people were often unreal. She struggled with aspects of her faith – for she had a good mind and was intellectually astute – and did not always express it easily.

Some years ago she wrote to us: “There is an English hymn, I think, that says, ‘I long to love Thee more, reveal an open door, Saviour to me.’ I often pray that. Slowly the love of God seems to be more real to me, and to mean more. Not so much in feeling it more, as in trusting that that is so – that God’s love is always there, in any circumstance. [Then in brackets:] (Oh dear, it sounds so complicated. I am not very good at putting the deeper levels of life on paper, as you notice.)”

In fact I think she puts it very well – and I relate in my own experience to what she writes.

I believe Mum is in a better place now. A friend wrote that she “is not gone, just hidden from view”. Another friend reminded us of a saying of the Indian writer Rabindranath Tagore: ‘Death is not extinguishing the light, but putting out the lamp because the dawn has come.’

One of the messages I have found most moving was from a Turkish friend, someone we have known since the early 70s. She writes: “It is so becoming of her to leave so simply and elegantly without creating excitement and ‘trouble’ for anyone. For me she is a true prototype of womanhood: exquisite, feminine, tasteful, thoughtful, faithful, caring in a deep manner, vulnerable – yet determined, and upright in spirit and intellectually active and questioning...”

Mum was an ordinary person. She was also an extraordinary person – though she would never have thought that about herself. Her life reveals in some way how all of us are ordinary people who can become extraordinary when we place our gifts at the service of others. From an early age Mum gave herself in service to a God she felt called her, and to people the world over.

May she now receive the unsought reward for that self-giving.

Mum, your family and friends say thank you, rest in peace, and may your memory bring peace and joy to those who have stayed behind.