

A TRIBUTE TO VERA GILLARD

01/11/1920 – 13/02/2020

I wish to thank all of you for coming here to celebrate the life of this extraordinary woman. We have all been affected by mum's amazing sense of humanity. Her compassion, generosity and understanding would be a common thread amongst all of us in how we view her. A person whose well of love, forgiveness and kindness seemed to have no end.

Her demeanor seemed unchanging in a world of constant change. Able to handle all of life's twist and turns in the same indomitable manner. Mum had that rare gift of being totally comfortable and sure of who she was and how she should conduct herself. She was the rock upon which we could always cling to for safety when the turbulence of the world was looking a bit fierce.

These characteristics alone would make mum a person that we should all look up to and admire. We will all be the poorer in love and spirit with her passing.

But there were other aspects to her character, equally as admirable, but perhaps not quite as well-known which, at least in my eyes, entitle her to be called a hero of her times.

One aspect that was most profound, for me, was mum's role as a social rebel. Now you would not find her storming the barricades or demonstrating in the streets. That was simply not her style. She was nonetheless much more dangerous for the established order than most of those street rebels could ever hope to be.

The danger arose from her strong sense of what is the right and proper way to conduct one's life and her determination never to allow social or peer group pressure to change that sense of what is right without reference to her fundamental moral beliefs.

These beliefs were formed by her at a very early age without the need to read any grand philosophical works or have intense discussions with great philosophical minds. Indeed, she was denied access to all but a very basic education and denied any chance of philosophical discussion with like-minded people by her low social status and the economic necessity of having to enter the work force at an early age.

Uniquely her beliefs were not based on any ideological positioning whether political, cultural or religious. She seemed to find ideologies strangely incomprehensible in that to her they seemed to make something simple and straightforward become tortuous and complicated.

She had an ability to be able to see and understand the most fundamental human desires and instincts shared by all of us on this planet and translate that into a code of conduct of living one's life that transcended religion, culture or ethnic origin.

This was, I believe, because of mum's remarkable gift to be always looking for the things that we have in common rather than looking for those things that separate us.

This gift was at the heart of her concept of love and forgiveness. A forgiveness in which the door was always open to a genuine change of heart. A love where the things we have in common are always more important than those things that divide us.

Her lifelong struggle against the discrimination and prejudice she had to endure because of her social status, her ethnic background, her gender, her marital and family status seemed to only make her stronger in her determination to act on her convictions

Mum never pushed her views onto anyone. She needed neither followers nor admirers to know the truth of what she believed in. She just quietly went on her way with her daily life expressing and reflecting her deeply held views. Her focus was on making sure she lived up to the high standards she set for herself.

Today, we would find many of the belief foundations of mum to be eminently laudable if yet to be widely practiced.

For me there were four core foundation stones to mum's beliefs from which all else flowed.

- Firstly, a person's educational or wealth status is not necessarily a measure of a person's intelligence or human worth. A radical idea in her time when most people never finished high school and higher education was largely the preserve of the established wealthy social class. Those people in lower paid jobs were automatically considered unsuitable for any sort of leadership or governance position, which were seen as the natural right of the educated and wealthy classes. Mum was denied the opportunity to finish her education, but she always believed that she would have excelled if allowed the chance. Her lack of education and low social status ensured she would remain in low paid employment, but she

always felt that she was a good, righteous and intelligent person whose views were always worthy of consideration.

Whilst she always respected educated and wealthy people that respect quickly disappeared if they used their privileged position only for their own advantage without recognizing their responsibility to help those less fortunate than themselves. Or if they thought that they were a better person solely because of their education or wealth than those less advantaged.

- Secondly women are just as capable as men in work, financial organization and leadership positions. For mum's generation women were not expected to have thoughts of a career except that of an obedient wife and mother. An independent career was not considered an option. Remember in her time it was legally enshrined in the law of the land of Australia, that you could pay women less for doing exactly the same work as men. The law was designed to discourage women from challenging the right of men to be the head of the family. This legal situation was not finally changed in Australia until Mum was nearly 50 years old. In rural Australia, where mum grew up, a woman's worth was largely judged on how well they cooked. Mum was the best cook I ever came across, but she always felt that she had more to offer than just that. Mum always dreamed of having her own career and financial independence. No matter how many setbacks she endured she never lost sight of that dream and always maintained her belief in the capability and worth of women.
- Thirdly all people should be treated with respect no matter what their social, financial, sexual or ethnic status is. This viewpoint has only now in her grandchildren's generation started to gain some traction.

Like all of us mum had her fair share of prejudices but importantly she never allowed those prejudices to affect her judgement on a person's worth. If they were a good person, they were a good person irrespective of what they looked like or where they came from.

In an age when social outlook was determined more by what separates us rather than what we have in common, this was a rare viewpoint.

Whilst it is a normal and natural characteristic of humans to be prejudiced towards each other for a variety of reasons tribal, geographic, economic etc. Surely a mark of individual human achievement is how well we overcome our

prejudices to embrace other people as they are not how we think they are. Mum was clearly living at a higher level of achievement in this regard than anybody I ever met.

- Last but probably the most important in her mind was the mantra of Kids come first. Mums golden rule. Providing a safe loving environment where there was always food on the table was paramount. If that meant putting all her dreams on hold then that is what she did. Her life was one of always being prepared to make sacrifices for her mother's children, her own children, her grandchildren. Even to her last days her thoughts were often about concern for all those children for whom she had sacrificed so much over her life. In mum's time children were expected to be seen and not heard and were ruled by a harsh discipline of obedience to their parents' wishes and commands.

Mum was different she believed in treating children with respect and was always trying to accommodate their viewpoint when making decisions about their lives. Her version of discipline was to set a high standard of her own personal behavior as a guide for her children to follow. Hypocrisy was not in her makeup; she never asked her children or indeed anyone else to do anything that she was not prepared to do herself. For mum, it was incomprehensible for a parent to not put the well-being of their children before their own.

For an uneducated woman living in the isolation of mid-20th century rural Australia to hold such viewpoints so strongly leaves one in awe of her strength of character and in awe of her as a person of outstanding intellectual ability. As a role model, she has been without equal.

For me mum has always been the benchmark in everything I do. For every difficult situation I find myself in life my first thought is always to think what would mum do in this situation? This has always provided me with a reference point on which to move forward.

But I have to say that I have mostly fallen below the standards she has set. This is not a statement of self-denigration but more an expression of the fact that mums' sense of moral standards and behavior was set at such an incredibly high level that for most of us mere mortals it would be almost impossible to achieve. The discipline and sacrifices required would be too great.

On one occasion though, I did find myself in a position where I felt that yes, I had her measure, but it was not an easy task and took many years of effort. This was the time when I first realized that I could make a better loaf of bread than mum. I basked in that achievement for many years as it was the only edge I ever had over her and gave me some hope that I could still catch up to her. Alas I am still trying for a second victory. But I would say watch this space as I believe I am close to nailing her stuffed onions recipe.

History books are full of stories about extraordinary people who are held to be responsible for momentum changes in the progression of human society. People like Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, to name a few, all contemporaries by the way of mum's generation.

But history also shows us that the successes of these extraordinary people are built on the back of what I call the unsung heroes of history. These are seemingly ordinary people who share many of the characteristics of these extraordinary people. Strength of character, a determination to overcome obstacles, an enduring vision of a better world to come and a belief in the unity of the human race.

The extraordinary people who enter the history books as great historical figures do so mostly because of accident of birth and or circumstance. The unsung heroes, also extraordinary people, live amongst us all, sharing their sense of goodness and humanity and making possible the achievements of the recorded historical figures.

I consider my mother to be one of these unsung heroes of history who by accident of birth and circumstance will not appear in any history book but nonetheless has had a profound effect for the good on those around her and has consequently made a significant contribution towards changing Australian and human society for the better.

A look at her life story shows the strength of her character which she displayed in the face of the many obstacles placed before her and her enduring faith that the future will be better than the past.

Mum often said to me that her life was not easy. This was not said to elicit sympathy or to complain. For her it was just a statement of fact.

Through this she always maintained her sense of humour and her unwavering commitment to what she believed to be right and proper and just as importantly always prepared to forgive. She never once that I saw ever give in to hate and revenge. Even though many of us, in the same circumstances, would perhaps not have been so

restrained. This ability to rise above hatred and revenge is one of the things that sets ordinary and extraordinary people apart.

At the royal wedding in England of Prince Harry and Meagan Markle much was made about one of the preachers espousing the power of love and forgiveness. Mum was no preacher, there was no need she practiced in her daily life the power of love and forgiveness day in day out for her whole long life. Setting an example for all those around her. Her living life was more powerful than any words could elicit.

She was born in 1920 to relatively poor parents, Ellen and James Beasley, and raised in the small country town of Birchip about mid-way between Melbourne and Mildura. Her father was one of the many who fought in World War 1 and the human impact of that gruesome war, particularly in rural Australia, would form a backdrop to her early life.

Her first act of sacrifice was when she was only 13 years old barely into her teens and looking forward to the joys of a high school education. But mum had the misfortune of growing up in the worst economic depression in Australia's history.

Hunger and homelessness were a real experience for many Australian families at this time. To help her parents and her several younger siblings survive this dreadful experience she, not for the only time in her life, put her dreams on hold. As the oldest child, she left school and went to work as a domestic servant on one of the nearby large farms with her earnings sent to her mother to help her family survive.

Her work regime was severe compared to today's world 12-hour days six days per week were the norm with half a day off on Sunday. This was an effective 78 hour working week double that of the 38 hours that is standard today. She had to live on the farm, isolated from her family, regular contact just written letters, no telephones, no Social Media. Remember she was just 13! But her personal qualities that served her so well in life came to the fore. These were an ability to work hard, be quick on the uptake and always looking to the future.

At 16 she encountered her first direct experience of the effects of discrimination and prejudice. She went to a Bush dance looking forward to the joys of dancing. She discovered that despite living and working with the farmers family on a daily basis, when it came to a social occasion, they refused to acknowledge her existence and ignored her. Servants were not, it seems, the social equals of their employers. At that period of time in Australia this was a normal experience.

But rather than succumb to this humiliating act of discrimination and prejudice this 16-year-old uneducated country girl with no real experience of the outside world simply refused to accept that her employers attitude was a proper way for people to act and that their actions reflected poorly on their own human worth.

In the 1940's during WW11 she found herself in Melbourne. Still working as a domestic servant.

And here, in Melbourne, she did something quite remarkable. She met and married my father, an ethnic Greek although born and raised in Australia. Today multi culturalism is largely viewed as a normal and indeed positive part of the Australian way of life. This was not the case for mum's generation. Discrimination and prejudice were the order of the day and the reaction to my mother and father coming together was fierce from all quarters.

Many Greeks of the time viewed Australian Anglo Saxon women as gold diggers, women without modesty or integrity. For context, my father's two sisters, my aunties, both raised in Australia were not allowed to choose their own husbands but were married off in their teens to husbands of their parents choosing. In one case, the first sight of her husband was at the Church marriage ceremony. This was considered both normal and proper in the Greek community at the time. In such an environment, a woman living independently, like my mother, unchaperoned by male family and choosing her own partners was seen as living beyond the boundaries of acceptable behavior.

The Greek Orthodox church horrified, like my father's parents, that a Greek boy would want to marry not only outside his community but to an Anglo-Saxon girl refused to marry them. Let's not forget that in Greece for nearly 2 thousand years it was not possible to be legally married unless it was in a Greek Orthodox Church ceremony. The law recognizing civil marriage was not passed in Greece itself until 1982 some forty years after mum and dad were married in a civil ceremony. So, for many religious Greeks my parents' civil marriage was not a marriage at all and both were for all practical purposes living in a sinful relationship with all the connotations that went with that stigma.

But prejudice was also encountered from my mother's community with her mother regaled about all the horrible practices that would befall her daughter if she went ahead and married a foreigner and Greeks were then considered only one step away from the seemingly uncivilized tribes of the near East.

Remember when mum was growing up there were sharp divisions between Catholic and Protestant Christians in Australian society and prejudice and discrimination was rife between the two groups. Marriage between the two sects was a rare and inevitably painful experience for all concerned. Thus, for a woman to think about marrying a man from an exotic ethnic background with an exotic religion would have been seen as someone who has lost all their senses.

But my mother and father would be not deterred hoping that in time their determination would overcome the prejudice and their union would be recognized with approval.

Eventually patience was exhausted with my father's family and the Greek Church and they were married in a civil ceremony. But alas the discrimination and prejudice continued even after this marriage.

But mum was determined to overcome these prejudices and prove her worth to my father's family and his community. Through all these emotional hardships and humiliations my mother's response was not hatred and revenge but always one of love and forgiveness. Mum's strength in the power of love and forgiveness eventually wore down all except the most hard hearted.

Her belief that no matter how prejudiced or misguided a person might be that they can be won over with the power of love and forgiveness was awesome. This is a belief that truly the world today cannot afford to be without.

But of course, it should come as no surprise for such an extraordinary woman to appear in the Beasley family. For those who knew mum's mother, my grandmother, would see many similarities. Although she lived in a very different world to us today she exhibited many of the same qualities as mum – a kindness and concern for others, a belief that we are all worthy human beings, kids come first. All qualities that form the bedrock for a decent human being. From an early age, I was aware of this link between mother and daughter and some of my happiest memories of childhood were the times I spent with Granny in Birchip.

Mum's younger brother Gordon is a legend in his community for his selfless commitment to help others. No one needed to ask Gordon for help. He had that rare ability to see that someone was in need and he would offer assistance as a matter of course. It was simply not possible for him to walk away from someone wanting help. Like mum

everyone who has come into contact with Gordon are taken by the spirit of generosity and kindness that he emanates.

Closer to home there is my sister Sandra. Always concerned for others and always looking for ways to help those who need help. Her door is never closed. Her interest and concern for people around her is legendary. There is no doubt that all our lives would be the poorer without Sandra's presence and interest in our welfare.

At this time thanks must be made to all those who gave their time over the past few years to ensure Mums last days were as comfortable and as peaceful as possible. These include her Doctors, the home helpers and all the family members and friends who helped in various ways. A special mention must be made to the staff of the Cabrini Hospital Palliative Care Team. The support and care that they provided to mum and my sisters was outstanding.

But for all of us who loved and had affection for mum we owe an eternal Debt of gratitude to my two sisters Marilyn and Sandra. When mum first became too unwell to live at home independently, they immediately and without being asked took it upon themselves to provide 24/7 care to ensure mum could live her last years in the peaceful and comfortable atmosphere of her own home.

This was a job of absolutely heroic proportions. For anyone who has witnessed the work involved in caring for elderly people, the work my two sisters did for our mother was awe inspiring and deserving of the highest commendation. No words could praise them enough.

Mum always put her kids first but in this case her kids, Marilyn and Sandra, put mum first. This is despite the fact that both sisters had their own health concerns and the health concerns of their partners.

And so, even though we will always remember mum with love and admiration I would commend to you all to also use her memory as a source of inspiration and comfort, as I have, in your travels through life's adventure.

If you encounter prejudice, discrimination or unfair criticism stand tall like mum did and refuse to accept that you are in any way inferior to anyone else. That the state of your wealth, education, ethnic background or sex does not determine your worth as a human being or indeed the level of your intelligence. Always look to make a positive contribution to help those around you as she did. Refuse to go down the path of hate,

revenge and retribution always remember mums love, where the things that we have in common are far more important than the things that separate us. And mums' forgiveness where the door is always open to a genuine change of heart.

Here in Australia we celebrate with great pride our Anzac tradition. Whilst the Anzac tradition came about from war and the sacrifices of male soldiers. The spirit of Anzac is essentially about choosing to make a personal sacrifice for other people's well-being without thought of reward. In this sense, the spirit of Anzac is open to all of us regardless of gender or ethnic background. My mother who spent a lifetime choosing to make personal sacrifices for other people's well-being from the tender young age of 13 until well into her nineties surely deserves the accolade of an Anzac legend. And so even though she will always be my loving and caring mother she will also always be my own Anzac hero.