SUE MILLS 28 OCTOBER 1946 – 15 OCTOBER 2024

Family tribute from Roger, Rachel and Judith

Roger: You may be familiar with the What Three Words app – it's a very useful tool for defining a location very precisely. I wonder what three words we might choose to define Sue's location in our lives – in our hearts? I'd choose these three: Love. Truth. Connected. Let's begin with love – because love is the beginning, and the middle, and the end of everything…

I first met Sue in 1976 when I was interviewed for her job at Manchester Business School, which she was leaving to take up the post of British Council Librarian in Vienna, and she showed me round the library. I didn't get the job – she thought I was wet – but I was interested to hear she had got the Vienna job as my colleague at the Open University Library where I was then working had also applied for it, having a degree in German – he was not amused at hearing it had gone to someone with a degree in French… So there was some disgruntlement in Milton Keynes at this upstart Sue Pedley who had done us both out of new jobs… Love was definitely not on my mind.

But a year later I too got a job in Vienna, as Librarian at OPEC, the Organisation for Petroleum Exporting Countries. The British Council had late opening on a Monday so on my first day I trotted round after work, sought out Sue and said 'you won't remember me but…' Turns out she did remember me – my wetness had made an impression – but I found myself in competition with a small coterie of Austrian admirers in what she came to call her 'Monday evening club'. We were just professional colleagues – but both found it helpful to be able to let off steam in our own language about the vagaries of our employers and the joys and sometimes frustrations of working in a foreign country. Before long we had established a common interest in music and in train travel (what more do you need in life?) and found ourselves meeting more and more often at concerts and eating together afterwards and spending long hours in Viennese coffee houses (if you go to Vienna check out the Café Hawelka off the Graben, that's where it all began…)

But on the way I had to learn to ski. Sue had fallen in love with skiing on a Sunday Times package holiday to the Tyrol and decided that the best way to pursue this rather expensive hobby was to up sticks and move to Austria so she could spend every weekend on the slopes, and no wet librarian was going to get in the way of that. So through slightly gritted teeth I put myself through endless ski lessons until I got to the stage of being able to follow her elegant parallel turns down the mountain with my exhausting snowploughs so we could sit in cosy mountain cafes and continue our exploration of our pasts and all the times we had nearly met before – at library school in Sheffield where we lived in the same flat but a year apart – in Catford where I had my first job and had friends and colleagues we both knew but who never connected us – and the feeling began to creep over us that somehow forces were at work that were propelling us together… until one day over lunch she came up with the immortal words 'so when are we going to get married then?'

Once she made up her mind to do something Sue never liked to hang around and a few months later we were married in the lovely medieval wool church at Long Melford in Suffolk, where her mother Jean was then living. Organising a wedding at 1000 miles distance is more complicated than we realised but thanks to Jean's sterling efforts everything came together and we made our commitments to each other and then, as just the two of us took communion together, to God, in what we both felt, then and now, was the most profound and important moment of our lives.

Some 20 months later our first child was on the way and we had to decide whether to bring up a family abroad or return home so they would grow up with roots, unlike many ex-pat families we knew whose children never really knew where they belonged. We decided to come home – a decision our kids have

never forgiven us for – and I got a job in Oxford at the then Commonwealth Forestry Institute and we settled in Kidlington, just north of the city, where we were to remain for 31 years, and where our firstborn hurtled prematurely into the world while we were surrounded by plumbers and lifted floorboards as central heating was being put in in the house we had moved in to just a month before. We all survived that trauma and on this very day, All Saints Day, in that first year our Rector at the parish church of St Mary's baptised Rachel and began his address with the dramatic words *Rachel Elisabeth Mills is a saint! (though her parents may not always think so).* So at this point I'll hand over to the Saint as we explore the second of our three words: Truth.

Rachel: Well I couldn't possibly comment on the truth of that statement. But Truth was always central to Mum's dealings with everyone and everything. She was very bad at lying, even when it might have been expedient. She was always highly reluctant to click the 'I accept the terms and conditions' box without first reading through all the small print, despite our protestations that literally no-one does that. She would follow all instructions to the letter and would often chide the rest of us for our more laissez-faire attitude – though we begrudgingly had to admit her approach *sometimes* worked out for the best.

But children notoriously don't come with instruction manuals so her parenting method was to share what she loved and believed in. It started with mountains – my first ski trip was at the age of 16 months to Fieberbrunn in Austria, enjoying the slopes on my dad's back and establishing a love of snowy mountains that has lasted ever since. That was our first and last family ski holiday by air, we always subsequently travelled by train – next just to Scotland when Jude was just 6 months old – and we were both hooked.

European rail travel also exposed us at an early age to Mum's love of languages – fluent in French and German, she also had a basic knowledge of Russian and in retirement set herself to learning Spanish and Italian – still joining in her Italian zoom class from her hospital bed a few weeks ago! And in her love of good grammar, still correcting us all, from childhood to now. That desire for precision and accuracy in pursuit of beauty and truth also underlay her love of music and pleasure in performance. A lifelong piano player, she encouraged us children to learn instruments – cello for me and violin for Jude – alongside piano and of course recorders.

Choral singing, too, was always part of her life wherever she lived, and early on in our lives she became an active member of KAOS – Kidlington Amateur Operatic Society – taking part in most of their annual light opera performances on the stage in our school, and springtime choral concerts, not to mention the much-loved Christmas concerts in church – and since retiring to Cornwall, has loved singing with Truro Choral Society – we are so pleased that some of its members are able to be with us today. In a moment they will join in with a recorded version (from Vienna) of the Agnus Dei from Verdi's Requiem, which she was so looking forward to singing with the choir next term.

Mum took me to my first ballet lesson at the age of 3 – for her, I think, appreciating dance was an extension of her love of music. From that day until this, movement is probably the thing which gives me the most unadulterated joy and keeps me vaguely sane – what a gift to have been given as a child.

It goes without saying that Mum and Dad are bookworms – and if you've seen their house… well, you can't see much of the house because it's completely covered in books. The magic and importance of reading was instilled in us as naturally as breathing from before I can remember. Both Jude and I studied English at university, we still avidly read and talk (and argue!) about books all the time, and I have even made a whole career in publishing out of it!

With all her passions, Mum's attitude was that you'll never learn what you love unless you try – her mantra 'you'll enjoy it once you get there' is embedded in my psyche for life. Usually no matter what tantrums I had about having to get up on Saturdays for ballet, I came out of it grinning. And we were only allowed to quit when that wasn't true

– like with my hapless and frustrating attempts at the piano; one of her talents which has definitely skipped a generation; Jude and I never took to it with any aptitude whatsoever, but Mum was beyond thrilled that her granddaughter Beth has begun to love it.

Work-wise, she kept her hand in while we were small with running occasional training courses for Dialog, one of the online search services that predated Google, with dial-up computer services that cost a bomb and meant your search had to be carefully and accurately planned in advance to keep connection time to a minimum. She had begun this work with the British Council in Vienna, getting to demonstrate the service on Austrian television – and, as she often delighted in telling us, teaching our dad everything he knew about computers at that stage. Once we were in school she began work for Regent's Park College in Oxford, in its Angus Library and Archive, the leading collection of Baptist history and heritage worldwide - becoming over the years an expert in Baptist historical records, and helping many researchers from across the globe – one of whom, president of a Chinese university in Wuhan, invited her to lecture there after she retired and threw in an all-expenses paid tour of China with Dad. Making those connections with others, and helping them connect with each other, grew out of her concern for truth and accuracy. So now I'll hand over to Jude to explore our third word – connected.

Judith: I'm Jude to the rest of the world but to my parents always Judith. I remember when I was at university back in the era of landlines, when Mum would ask my housemates to speak to 'Jude' they would be totally confused, knowing that she called me Judith. Names, and language, are relevant in connections!

Back in Vienna our parents – Mum as a Methodist and Dad an Anglican - attended the Vienna Community Church, an international group with leaders from various denominations – a Scottish Presbyterian when Mum first went there, succeeded by an American Episcopalian by the time Dad came on the scene. The church served an international English-speaking group drawn from many nations and many traditions, including Austrians who wanted to improve their English. This was the beginning of a life-long commitment to ecumenism, which was a central part of Mum's life both in Kidlington and Falmouth – and Geoff will say more about that later.

For us as children, that meant various cross-over experiences with children's groups from different churches, including Tearaways at the Baptist church, where I first met my future husband at the age of 9 – a connection Mum certainly had no idea then she was making!

Rachel and I both stepped away from the church in our teens, but I was drawn back to Christianity in my 20s while living in South Africa for a few months, working in HIV and Aids education and support. On returning to the UK, I remember talking to mum about the fact I knew God existed in South Africa, but I wasn't convinced he was in the UK! Realising that moving back to our old church was probably not the way to convince me that He did, Mum connected me with the more charismatic community at St Aldates in Oxford, and then with Kidlington Baptist Church - where in due course I reconnected with Tim!

Tim and I went on to marry and have two children. Thinking about Granny, our children Beth and Josh listed the things they wanted to thank her for: skiing, yummy food, moving to Cornwall, living by the

sea, music lessons – and Christmas pudding and clotted cream! In fact, all the things we thank her for too. This time of year was always devoted to making four home-made Christmas puddings (served at Christmas, New Year, Easter and Dad's birthday), along with Christmas cake and mincemeat, used in at least four dozen mince pies consumed during December, at home and in various church and community gatherings. Needless to say, all wholemeal.

Having grandchildren also gave Granny two more people to knit for! Never happy to sit still without occupying her hands, she was an enthusiastic and skilled knitter, and requests for knitwear, the more challenging the better, came regularly and our wardrobes boast many example of her skill.

Along with an interest in knitting and music, Granny also passed on her desire to look after the planet to my daughter Beth. Although not by nature an activist, Mum was a committed eco-warrior from the early days of that movement, and a passionate recycler, encouraging us to connect with the living world and always seek to reduce our impact on it.

Our parents came home from Austria missing the sea and (in Dad's case) warm beer. The latter need was well satisfied in Oxford but getting to live by the sea had to wait thirty years. A systematic review of the entire coast of the British Isles eventually convinced them that there is nowhere like Cornwall, and in 2011 we all shared a holiday in Falmouth, in a holiday home rented from Geoff and Judie Davis – not known to us at the time, but the first of many more connections that have revealed themselves in the succeeding years.

Roger: So 45½ years ago we made our commitment to each other 'till death us do part' – but looking back, how unambitious was that! Because, as many of you well know yourselves, and as I am beginning to learn, death does not part : and the truth is, we remain connected, in love, for ever.

Love, truth, connected – those are our three words to define Sue. We are so pleased you have been able to join us here today – do please join us afterwards as well at St Michael's and tell us what three words you would choose – we'd really love to know! Thank you all so much.