

Address for the Funeral of
SUSANNE DAVIDSON

1924 – 2011

given by The Rt Hon. Oliver Letwin MP

Saturday 14 May 2011

Susanne did not accumulate great wealth; she did not acquire high office; she did not crack the atom, or write a great poem, or win an Olympic medal.

Indeed – though she would have regarded any such description as utterly ludicrous – she was by ordinary standards somewhat ‘disadvantaged’.

Orphaned early in life, she lost her closest relatives in the holocaust; narrowly escaped the same fate herself by using the kinder transport to flee her country of origin; and arrived penniless at Liverpool Street Station.

From middle age, she was very hard of hearing, noticeably unsteady on her feet and inclined to malapropism.

This poses the interesting question: why is it that so many of us loved her so dearly and feel so privileged to have known her?

The answer lies in related aspects of her character of which she had a super-abundance.

In the first place, there was the exceptional transparency and integrity of her feelings. You immediately and entirely knew where you were with her. She was simply incapable of the usual dissimulations and politesses. If you gave her a gift she didn’t like, or took her to a café she didn’t enjoy, she would try to be grateful – but it didn’t work.

This, of course, made it doubly or triply rewarding when she evidently and wholly did enjoy what you had provided – as she so enormously often did.

Her capacity for enjoyment, and for drawing you into her enjoyment, was in fact the second of her exceptional characteristics.

The folklore of Judaism is filled with accounts of the covertly poisonous relationships between mothers-in-law and children-in-law but my memories of Susanne are a haze of gratitude and joy. I see her sitting by Alpine lakes, descending giddily into Venetian gondolas, perching precariously on the steps of an ottoman gulet into the azure Aegean. These scenes are filled with sunshine. Wherever she went – Moscow, Beijing, New Delhi, Singapore, Australia and America – she brought with her an almost childlike purity of enjoyment.

It was this, in part, that enabled her to say to a nurse in the last days of her time on earth, that she had had a lovely life. It was, as always a statement made with the complete simplicity of truth – a revelation of her feelings about her time with us, wholly untainted by the challenges and afflictions which might have led others to feel resentment or at least nostalgia.

But, as so often with her, the reason for her remark was also a desire to cheer her interlocutor. Sitting with her, shopping with her, travelling with her, you noticed over and over again how very much she noticed, how much she attended to the emotional register of those with whom she found herself, and how much she preoccupied herself with the need to minister to their feelings. I think it was this third characteristic – her generosity of spirit – that made so many not merely see into her soul and share her delight but also love her.

During last winter's snow and ice, she was sitting next to me when I drove her car into a bank of earth. Wholly characteristically, her first thought was not for the condition of her beloved Saab but for whether I might be, as I in fact was, rather chagrined to be the author of such mechanical misfortune.

And this brings me to the last of the interconnected traits that marked out her character – the integrity of her judgements. Susanne was not, by any standards, an ascetic personality. On the contrary, she was, if anyone has ever been, full-blooded. She loved the passing show. She was proud of the many distinctions of her husband and her children; she entered with huge gusto into the task of entertaining Trinity when John was Vice-Master, as she had for many generations of chemical engineering students; she adored fine restaurants and could not resist taking her family to tea at the great hotels of Europe. But she never for one moment thought that the standards of the world were the standards by which to judge.

I think it was this that, quite unconsciously made her one of nature's egalitarians. She recognised, indeed delighted in grandeur, but she was not even remotely impressed by it. Despite, or perhaps because of her simplicity she saw through to what George Elliot calls the 'equivalent centre of self'.

However high or low the rank of the person with whom she was conversing, it was the person and not the rank with which her emotional intelligence engaged. So she quite naturally loved and was loved by people of all kinds.

She saw them for what they were. And they in turn saw and delighted in the transparency of her feeling, the vibrancy of her enjoyment and the generosity of her spirit. She opened herself to them, and they saw her for what she was.

We mourn her death. But we celebrate the proof her life affords that the human spirit can do more than triumph over adversity. She proved that it is possible to create out of many vicissitudes and out of the ordinary fabric of ordinary life a triumph of vigour and sensitivity and joy and generosity and love.