

Eulogy for my Mother

*delivered at Penelope Eckersley's funeral, St
Mark's Church, Hadlow Down on 30 January 2010
by Timothy Eckersley*

We are here to bury her *and* to give thanks for a long life lived well. Over the last few months, partly as a way to stay connected to her from afar, I have been thinking a lot about my mother's life.

Through my eyes, the eyes of her fifth child, I see two ways of looking at her life –

- one about being in place
- one about moving
- one about her home
- the other about her journeys

So, first: *Home*. For me, and her always expanding family, 72 Westbourne Park Road, W2 is really the center of the universe. And for many many more it was a place of shelter and of calm – with both Dad and Mum and then, for a longer period, with Mum alone. Growing up at 72 was an adventure. You never quite knew what the combination at the dinner table might be, or where the discussion or argument might lead. There was *always* someone extra in the house, and a constant flow of colourful visitors, all embraced by Mum's generous acceptance.

I'm now going to rattle off some names because all of these people were important to Mum. I'll start with my playmate Dale Zincke and his mother Liz; Shaheen and Rifat and Clarence; Brothers John and Bernard; Sister Joan; Nourea; Elena; Roger Smeeth; Sinbanjo; Leon; *The Lodgers*: Hannah Wright, Richard Walton; Hannah and Jennifer. *Our friends*: Blake Ashburner, Tina and Louisa, Pete Cloudsley, Charlie Sidgwick. The neighbours: the Charltons, the Leamans, Joan and Jack Hill and many members of the cousinhood and Daniel Shadbolt.

It was an open house for all. 72 was a constant, but I also think of her *journeys*. For example, in 1937 - 38 she spent a formative few months in Vienna. Then came the great journey of the War; the central experience of her history which shaped so much of her outlook on life – including re-cycling milk bottle tops well into the 70s – I never knew what she did with them.

And then in happier times the wonderful camping trips – Brancaster, Loch Hourne – into which she plunged much to the consternation of my father. The annual spring canal trips – often in the foulest weather. And the glorious journeys down to Cadaques. These are good memories.

I remember short journeys – such as her all night badger watching expeditions at Renby, from which more often than not she returned frustrated and always cold.

I think too of a short journey that she took with Dad, because it is typical of their shared adventures. I christened it the Little Gidding Rally because it involved a mad dash across in England and back in one day (I declined to go) to the spot immortalised by T S Eliot.

After she lost Dad she became an intrepid world traveler. There was hardly a town anywhere where she didn't have some urgent business with some or other member of the Christian underground – it was not for nothing that she was known as the Bishop of Westbourne Park. She went to Australia, to Greece, to Zimbabwe, to Nouvelle Calédonie, to the USSR, to China, to Bardsey Island, and of course, her amazing trek up the Himalayas which she did at the age of 69, which was made possible by and that she did with Alison Murdoch.

And that brings us to the journeys *of her mind*. And what ambitious journeys these were – a long striving towards nothing less than the reconciliation of different philosophies and religions. And coupled with that internal search, was a determination to live and experience those ideas. She did this in many ways:

- with prayer vigils at Westminster Abbey
- with all the energy she poured into running APR, the Association for Promoting Retreats (which incidentally was wonderfully paired with my father's organization IASA, the International Association of Sound Archivists – and which produced great pairings of dinner guests)
- with the retreats that she herself led – what amazing little journeys those must have been
- with all her activities with the Franciscans and at St James' Piccadilly
- and with the counseling that she gave to many people.

I'm on thin ice here, but I'm not sure she ever found an end to her search. There's a magazine cutting that she stuck on her kitchen cabinets and that is still there. It's a picture a quizzical looking baby and it says: "If there is a God, what does she look like?"

But Mum touched many many, especially women, with her graceful blend of fortitude, understanding and stillness.

After all that, I think of her coming back *to this place*: this church, this graveyard, a place that has been central to her life. On my visits back home from America, one of the things I liked to do with Mum was to drive over from Renby to Hadlow Down. The last time we were here, this past summer, with Tom, and Benjamin and Beatrix, Mum walked slowly with her sticks all the way from the car to the little cluster of graves. After she'd caught her breath, she looked into the ground and a quiet smile came over her face, knowing that soon she would be there with her mother and father, her husband and her daughter.

In the spirit of my mother, let's now reflect on her life in silence.