

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I should like to welcome you today on behalf of the girls to celebrate Mum's sixtieth birthday. As many of you will know, my cousin, Bruce, referred to my sisters – the twins – as the 'giblets', and the giblets and I were collectively known as the girls.

I am told that Wal was once discovered in bed, humming the tune of the Brady Bunch theme song. As you know, the Brady Bunch is about a man who has three sons and who meets a lady who has three girls. The first verse of the song is:

*Here's the story of a lovely lady
Who was bringing up three very lovely girls.
All of them had hair of gold, like their mother,
The youngest one in curls.*

If Bruce is to be believed, we must substitute only one word:

*All of them had hair of gold, like their mother,
The **eldest** one in curls.*

A number of you joined our family, ten years ago, in another park, to celebrate Mum's fiftieth birthday. How much has changed in the intervening decade. We had, as a family, passed through the valley of the dark shadow, and, in some ways, that party heralded our entry into the green pastures and still waters where we find ourselves now. For this last decade has been one of tremendous flourishing for our family, and not least for Mum.

As I say, this has been a happy decade for our family, and my sisters and I are pleased that so many of you have been able to share it with Mum. In saying this, however, we are mindful that not all who were with us ten years ago are here today. Our family feels a lot smaller for the loss of our dear cousin, Bruce. And we have also sustained losses in the way of very devoted friends of our family, especially Noga Wermut. They are irreplaceable.

But our family has also expanded, and it has been a source of the greatest delight for us to embrace Cathy, who married Mum's brother, Stephen, last year. Indeed, it continues to expand, most recently when we welcomed Liliam, when she married Mum's nephew, Elliott, earlier this year. And our family has also found new friends, not least in Wal's three sons, Michael, Rick, and Paul, his sister-in-law, Frieda, and all their families. We are a Brady Bunch of sorts that converges from time to time of a Sunday morning when Wal organises a Brady Brunch.

Ladies and gentlemen, the last chapter of the book of Proverbs warns us:

אִשָּׁת-חַיִל, מִי יִמָּצֵא
וְרַחֵק מִפְּגִינִים מִכָּרָה

“A woman of valour, who can find? Her worth is far above rubies.” Perhaps, my current marital status owes something to an adolescence mis-spent with the holy tongue. How lucky, then, that both Marxists and Buddhists know better than to waste their youth reading Scripture. And how lucky for our family that both Damien and Dylan seem to have realized that my sisters' worth, if not above rubies, is at least far above cricket and fishing.

But for my part, I do not despair that there is a woman whose worth is far above rubies, for my mother has often seemed to me an אִשָּׁת-הַיָּל:

She seeketh wool, and flax, and worketh willingly with her hands.

She is like the merchants' ships; she bringeth her food from afar.

She riseth also while it is yet night, and giveth meat to her household, and a portion to her maidens.

She considereth a field, and buyeth it: with the fruit of her hands she planteth a vineyard.

And on she goes... Amongst the many other accolades of the woman of valour, we are told, "Her children rise up and call her blessed." I'm not sure that we ever called Mum, 'blessed'. But perhaps somewhat more prosaically, we often said that, like Mary Poppins, she is "practically perfect in every way."

Now, I am not going to burden you with an account of every facet of our mother's practical perfection. I shall content myself to mention only two enduring ones. All Mum's life, she has been exceptionally sensitive to the needs of the vulnerable; be they autistic children, children with learning difficulties, women and children in Israel, or indigenous Australians. She has tirelessly devoted herself to helping to afford them some measure of relief, and she has done so without ever seeking any benefit for herself. If she has acted selflessly, she has not acted disinterestedly. Her motivation in all these endeavours has had a deep emotional, rather than intellectual, foundation. Her capacity for extreme empathy is known to us all.

The second facet of her practical perfection that I should like to draw to your attention is her devotion to family. She will say herself that the single most important experience of her life has been motherhood. My sisters and I have special reason to be grateful for her tireless devotion to nurturing our physical and personal development. Perhaps we are entitled to take for granted the actions themselves. But I think that what has left the deepest mark on us is that she devoted herself to our needs אָרְךָ אַפִּים, נְרַב-הַסֵּד – long-suffering, with abundant loving-kindness and faithfulness.

So it is no surprise to find that, in their mother's spirit, her daughters have devoted themselves to ministering to the emotional, medical, and financial needs of the vulnerable and the marginalised. I was once entertaining to dinner in Hall at my College a rather serious undergraduate member of another College. He asked about my family and was particularly interested in hearing about my sisters' professions. After I had explained what genetic counsellors and consumer advocates do, he remarked, "Those sound like very socially responsible things to do. They must find your life rather frivolous." I pointed out that they are inclined to explain, as E. M. Forster does in *A Room with a View*, that "some chaps are good for nothing but books" and I plead guilty to being such a chap.

Whether we are socially responsible or good for nothing but books, we have a strong sense of being part of a family. The importance of family is something that Mum witnessed in the value that Granny attached to being part of a family, and which we in turn witnessed in Mum. It is all good and well to be socially responsible or to be good for nothing but books. However, in either case there is a need also to keep body and soul together. We are lucky to have been part of a family that has supported us in pursuing our endeavours, however eccentric they might have seemed. I know that in different ways, my sisters, my mother and I have all benefited from the generosity of our family.

In particular, the financial assistance that Papa has often afforded us has greatly affected the way we have been able to live our lives. (And, as one who has just returned from time spent in Cambridge – thanks to such benefaction – I am particularly relieved to recall that, as Ecclesiastes reminds us, “wisdom is good with an inheritance”.)

As I mentioned earlier, our family currently enjoys a particularly fertile period – albeit a fertility that has not yet culminated in grandchildren. Today, this fertility is expressed in the creative outburst that is the tea cosies around us: She seeketh wool, and gum leaves, and worketh willingly with her hands. These tea cosies lead me back to Forster. Ronald Duncan once remarked:

E. M. Forster was like a tea cosy, but I quite liked him. I was at a wedding party with him once, sitting opposite Queen Mary. I asked if he would like to be presented. “Good Lord,” he said, “I thought it was the wedding cake.”

No one could mistake Mum for a wedding cake. But judging by the tea cosies around us today, perhaps she might be mistaken for a tea cosy. Does that mean that she bears a stronger resemblance to E. M. Forster than to Queen Mary? The answer would rather depend upon the particular tea cosy that Forster was like: All tea cosies are likable, but some tea cosies are more likable than others. It is rather hard to imagine Forster resembling one of Mum’s tea cosies. But one thing we can be sure of is that even a boring old tea cosy like Forster would feel cherished by Mum, even if he felt somewhat disconcerted by her adorning him with a tassel, or a pompom, or a few gum leaves.

And after many years, she has now found what she so richly deserves: someone who cherishes her for who she is – tassels, pompoms, gum leaves and all. And so three very lovely girls could not be more pleased with the love that a fellow might shower upon their mother. And none of us has looked back since

*... the one day when the lady met this fellow
And they knew it was much more than a hunch,
That this group would somehow form a family.
That’s the way we all became the Brady Bunch.*

And so it is with much pleasure that I now invite our birthday girl to speak to us about

*... the one day when the lady made some tea cosies
And she knew it was much more than a hunch,
That these teaching aids would somehow tell a story
About life at sixty with her Brady Bunch.*

Ladies and Gentlemen, the lovely lady of our story – the birthday girl – Louella.