

Gillian Lasker

In the days when people still had ashtrays in their homes, I remember that Auntie Gillian once gave my mother an ashtray as a gift. It was a hand painted ashtray. It was painted with pink flowers on a pastel green background and signed in the corner, "Gillian". Gillian painted those gentle flower petals. They were subtle and seemed so soft to me as a child. I remember my fascination with the way that she had achieved this illusion of softness on a hard, brittle surface. She had turned a mundane piece of porcelain into a thing of beauty – a small thing – but a thing of beauty for all of that. In her ability to create such things, she was, I remember, among the most gifted in my family. It was – for her – not a particularly significant piece, I am sure. And, indeed, I remember being impressed by her ability with a range of different media. So this might not even have been particularly representative of her work in those days, but for me it embodied what she was capable of.

I have dwelt on the artwork, but should turn to the artist whose life has ended, and whom we have come here to remember today.

We are here to mark a death, but I begin with a birth.

We are told in the First Book of Samuel that Samuel's mother, Hannah, was childless and went to the Temple in Jerusalem to pray for the son she so desperately desired. Eli the priest was on duty at the Temple. We are told:

As she kept on praying before the Lord, Eli watched her mouth. Now Hannah was praying in her heart; only her lips moved, but her voice could not be heard. So Eli thought she was drunk. Eli said to her, "How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Sober up!" And Hannah replied, "Oh no, my lord! I am a very unhappy woman. I have drunk no wine or other strong drink, but I have been pouring out my heart to the Lord. Do not take your maidservant for a

worthless woman; I have only been speaking all this time out of my great anguish and distress.”

“Then go in peace,” said Eli, “and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of Him. (I Sam. 1.12-17)

We are told that God heard Hannah’s prayer and in time she conceived and gave birth to a son, Samuel. Scripture does not provide a description of how Hannah felt when she had been safely delivered of a son. However, we can be sure that the delight and relief that replaced her anguish and distress could not have exceeded that which Gillian felt when her premature son, Brendan, was given the all clear. Visiting them in hospital is one of my earliest memories.

Gillian could not have been prouder of Brendan had he, like Samuel, been a prophet of the Lord. Every small advance that he made seemed like a monumental achievement to her. Every sound he uttered was as precious as prophesy. Every swimming certificate was framed and mounted on the wall. Every cartoon he drew deserved to be published. I shall confess that when we were children, this seemed to us like boastfulness and bragging; of playing up modest achievements. But I acknowledge now how childish such an interpretation was. Just as Eli the priest misread Hannah’s anguish and distress as drunkenness, so did we misread Gillian’s all consuming love for her son as boastfulness and bragging. But God heard Hannah’s prayers for what they were, even if Eli the priest did not; and in time, I hope, we all came to realize the true nature of Gillian’s love for her son.

Hannah had to be content with the blessing of a son, but Gillian had the further blessing of a daughter. This was to be a small family, but a close one. Brendan and Jessica forged a close bond in their mother’s home, one which was to continue to enable them to support one another whilst she was living in Melbourne, and now, we hope, in

their grief. In these last years, distance proved a challenge to this bond between mother and children. However, on both sides efforts were made as each judged best. There were visits to Melbourne and Sydney, and holidays together beyond those cities. Through making such efforts and sharing time, the bond of love was preserved in a tangible way, and there are now happy memories of these last years that will resurface again after the surge of grief has subsided.

That she should have loved her children so devotedly, is hardly surprising given the role model that she had in her own parents, Fay and Ted Harris. One could not conceive of more genial, more sincere, more authentic people than Fay and Ted. Nor could one conceive of more loving parents of their only daughter. So it is hardly surprising to find that such abiding love ran in the family. Sadly, it seems that this was not the only thing that ran in the family. Just as Gillian's last years were to be plagued by the spectre of cancer, so were those of her parents. Both Fay and Ted battled with cancer for many years, and during this time Gillian provided all the support that they could have hoped for. She provided it alone, for she had no siblings to share that burden. I say alone, but in another sense she was not alone. Her husband, Stephen, loved her parents as though a son, and they in turn loved him as a son. There was mutual devotion in their small family.

In time, Gillian was to suffer in a way that her parents had not. These were hard – and no doubt confusing – times for her. In a short space of time, her parents died; her marriage broke down; and there was also the threat of cancer to be faced. She was not, however, alone. To their great credit, Stephen and Gillian were able to remain on cordial terms. In difficult circumstances, something of the bonds that had mattered most

remained. Gillian was able to offer Stephen and Cathy her sincere best wishes for their future happiness. This enabled all of them to work together in supporting Brendan and Jessica at a tender age, and ensured that Brendan and Jessica, in turn, were able to offer Gillian what support they could in coping with her illness.

But there were also new bonds. In her hour of need, Benny was there for her as a tower of strength. That a man should offer such support to the woman he loved might not seem remarkable. But misadventure struck so early in their relationship that we should all stand in awe and admiration of how strong the bond had become in such a short time. We all feel moved to give thanks for this blessing, and the thought that Gillian was able to create for herself a new life with Benny; a life that afforded new challenges and sources of excitement; a life that sustained her and gave her hope in what might otherwise have been her darkest hours.

The end came much sooner than anyone could have expected. It was sudden. It was untimely. Gillian had made choices about how she lived her life in these final years and how she coped with illness in ways which were difficult for those closest to her to comprehend. Such decisions are open to misinterpretation. If she chose not to disclose the severity of her illness to those closest to her, they are left wondering why she did so. But let us remember that even though the nature of Hannah's behaviour was lost on Eli the Priest, it was clear in the eyes of God. If Eli could mistake as a drunken spectacle Hannah's anguish, so might we mistake as evasiveness, aloofness, or indifference in Gillian's decisions about her illness what was really a desire to protect those whom she loved most.

There are many other aspects of Gillian's life that I could dwell on, and no doubt there are people here today who have many other happy memories which they would like to share. I have chosen to speak of these few relationships, however, because in each of these Gillian proved herself to be Real. Perhaps, there are other contexts in which she was also Real. But it is enough for us to recollect these relationships in order for us to remember that she was, and remains, Real. And, as a toy rabbit was to discover, in Margery Williams's story, *The Velveteen Rabbit*, it is great good fortune to be Real.

"WHAT IS REAL?" asked the Rabbit one day, when they were lying side by side near the nursery fender.

"Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When someone loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real."

"Does it hurt?" asked the Rabbit.

"Sometimes," said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. "When you are Real you don't mind being hurt."

"Does it happen all at once, like being wound up," he asked, "or bit by bit?"

"It doesn't happen all at once," said the Skin Horse. "You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't often happen to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in your joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand."

"I suppose you are Real?" said the Rabbit. And then he wished he had not said it, for he thought the Skin Horse might be sensitive. But the Skin Horse only smiled.

"Someone made me Real," he said. "That was a great many years ago; but once you are Real you can't become unreal again. It lasts for always."

Today, the pain of the hurt that can come from love is all too clear to many people in this room, in particular, Brendan and Jessica. They must be feeling such tremendous agony from their loss that perhaps they have temporarily lost sight of the fact that, although love might cause pain, it also makes you Real.

*

When I heard that Gillian lay dying in hospital, I remembered the ashtray she painted some thirty years ago and went to look for it, but it was lost. That little work of art was gone. That is the end of the story: it is gone; there is a vague memory of it, but that is all. Nothing else remains.

The artist who painted it is also gone now. But there is something more that we can say. As the Velveteen Rabbit was to discover, when someone loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real. Gillian is gone. But she remains Real for those who loved her. And her love for them during her sadly brief lifetime will ensure that they continue to feel Real for a great many years. Once you are Real you can't become unreal again. It lasts for always.

Shortly, we shall depart this place for the burial ground in which we shall inter her mortal remains in the same earth in which those of her dear parents rest. And with the *el malei rachamim* prayer, we shall commend to Almighty God that part of her which our Faith teaches us transcends the mystery of death; that part which the Velveteen Rabbit learnt becomes Real through love. In doing so, let us give thanks to God for a life that knew beauty and pleasure, excitement and new challenges, love and commitment; a life that remains Real.

May her memory be for a blessing.