

To Susan - Rod Hunt

For this tribute, I wanted to wrap Susan in words! To write a eulogy extolling her humanity and her many consummate qualities. But this felt to me like shining a torch at the sun to show it up more clearly; because the brightness that was Susan – a light that has touched so many lives, shone across so many friendships, and illuminated so many endeavours – is already well known to us all here today.

So Howard and his family have wisely suggested that we to pay tribute Susan through the gentle, abiding affirmation of memories, and the comfortable cradle of stories. We all have a rich abundance of both, that speak of Susan; and these stories and memories are affirmations both of *who* she was, and what she was to us.

My stories begin in 1966 and I picture her as a slight, attractive, almost elfin-like, person (presaging the beautiful adult she was to become) – neat, compact, eager-eyed and with a palpable air of quiet determination. Miss Smith (who was reckless enough become Mrs Hunt) was Susan's form teacher at John Mason High School in Abingdon. Susan was one of an Eleven Plus year of extra-ordinarily bright and talented children.

But about two or three years before this, Susan (with siblings John and Clare) had been catapulted into Abingdon primary schools when their parents, Jim and Honora Valentine had moved down from Scotland. Susan quickly learned to drop her Scottish accent and fit in. She impressed the headmaster of the school by scoring – in a battery of aptitude tests - almost a clean sweep out of a total of 300 possible marks, what's more, 120 marks *above* the child with the *second* highest score. This prompted the head to write in his report to her parents, these prescient words: "*This child is very intelligent and should be given every opportunity to go to a university.*" Gosh! . . . If only he knew if only he knew!

Susan's class at John Mason moved through Years Seven, Eight and Nine with Miss Smith as their form teacher. In year Eight, Brenda called Susan to her desk and, with her tongue firmly in her cheek, she tapped Susan's school report with her finger. "Hmm! You have an A+ in *every* academic subject but *this* one, where you've *only* got an A. What *on earth* went wrong?" Brenda was mortified to discover Susan had taken her seriously and thought she was being censured for not having royal flush of A-plusses.

After school, groups of Brenda's pupils would often cycle to our house for tea and cake, or just a chat. And even after Brenda had left John Mason to become a full-time mother, several of her ex-pupils continued to visit us, and the teacher-pupil relationships developed into deep and lasting friendships – friendships I was privileged to share, and none more special than with Susan and, ultimately with her loving family.

Keith Dawson, the head of John Mason School during Susan's Sixth-Form years wrote last week in his letter of condolence to Honora: "Susan was the star of a stellar group of young people." That was certainly the case, but for all the brilliance with which that star shone, Susan remained totally unaffected by her abilities and her talent. Her modesty sprang from a unique quality - her extraordinary empathy with, and concern for, others. Her ability to be easy with people herself, and put them at their ease, was remarkable. Never pushy, over-bearing or intellectually aggressive, she was formidable only when playing Scrabble, utterly determined when playing Animal Vegetable and Mineral, and quite terrifying at Racing Demon.

Actually I did once see her become angry. We took Susan and her friend Jill (who will speak after me) on a post-A-level camping trip to Weston-super Mare. On Weston beach, the four of us

waded far, far out into the mud to rescue a child who was stuck up to her waist. We formed a chain, Susan, the lightest in front, to pull the child free and returned the muddy urchin to her parents who growled, "Well, that'll teach 'er not to do it again." Susan, incensed at their casual attitude, hissed at them, "Well, I'm *extremely* glad you're not *my* parents!"

These early stories serve to show how rounded and grounded Susan was. Among many other accomplishments, she was a Queen's Guide, a competent French-speaker, played the flute, sang in a folk-song group, wrote beautiful poems and read . . . and read . . . and read.

Throughout her life reading was Susan's intellectual oxygen. Our family joke (maybe for some of you, too, perhaps?) was this: Susan Manning - the only person in the world to own a library of three thousand books and to have read every one.

The brightness with which Susan shone illuminated, but did not dazzle, she had a radiance that glowed but did not glare, a gentle lustre that was lambent but not garish. It was an impressive stellar magnitude of brightness, which continued to shine throughout her illnesses. How apposite, then, that her principal interest of study was the Scottish Enlightenment. Susan lit up our lives. She was our enlightenment. She was loved simply for being who she was.

The child in Susan never left her. As a lecturer at Nuneham College, one cold January she was making her way to her room when she saw a huge frozen puddle. It was irresistible. Putting down her briefcase, she took a run and slid . . . swisssssssssssssshhhhhhh!
"Oi!" shouted the voice of a porter, "None of that! You freshers are all the . . . Oh! Sorry Dr Manning! Carry on!"

948 words