

The Funeral Ceremony
for
Sue Elizabeth Light
on Thursday 28th July 2016



Celebrant – Simon Smith, The British Humanist Association.



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Music:

Someone Like You – Adele

Opening Words

Good Afternoon everyone and Welcome

This is ceremony to mark the death and celebrate the life of Sue Light who died too young on the 15th July.

My name is Simon Smith and I am from The British Humanist Association.

Our ceremony here is a non-religious, Humanist one. In case a Humanist funeral is a new experience for you we do not include religious prayers or hymns but of course we welcome all. If you have a religious faith and wish to say a prayer there will be an opportunity later in the ceremony.

So, here we are, to remember and look back on Sue's life. A life that was dedicated to nursing, to healing, to maintaining life. This afternoon is an opportunity to mark together the end of the life of a woman you have loved. It is a celebration of her life and a chance to reflect on the contribution she has made to your own and others' lives.

Funerals are strange for many reasons, here you all, some no doubt are relative strangers to one another. The one person who ties you all together is the one person who cannot be here. It's often only in death that the remarkable and various strands of a woman's life come together. So before we go any further I'd like to greet and acknowledge the people around you. Shake the hand of the person next to you. Funerals are a collective experience, you are here to witness a farewell.

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The afternoon ahead of you will be full of love for Sue, for Hannah her daughter, for her sister Janice and her brother Raymond, for her nephews and niece Tony, Dan and Fleur and for each of you, her wider family of friends. We shall celebrate her life and listen to music and readings that will suggest aspects of this kind, courageous, conscientious and deeply loving Lady.

Regrettably didn't meet Sue personally, I say regrettably because I am sure I'd have liked her immensely. But I have spent time talking with Hannah about her Mum and I learned about a remarkable woman who is going to be sorely missed. I asked Hannah at one point when she thought her Mum was happiest, after a moment or two she replied that her Mum was happiest in the last 15 years of her life, when she had discovered her passion for researching and investigating the history of Military Nursing, particularly the work of the nurses of the Great war. So it's appropriate that we should start the ceremony with a short poem by the war poet Rupert Brooke.

The Dead

BY RUPERT BROOKE

These hearts were woven of human joys and cares,
Washed marvellously with sorrow, swift to mirth.
The years had given them kindness. Dawn was theirs,
And sunset, and the colours of the earth.
These had seen movement, and heard music; known
Slumber and waking; loved; gone proudly friended;
Felt the quick stir of wonder; sat alone;
Touched flowers and furs and cheeks. All this is ended.

There are waters blown by changing winds to laughter

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And lit by the rich skies, all day. And after,
Frost, with a gesture, stays the waves that dance
And wandering loveliness. He leaves a white
Unbroken glory, a gathered radiance,
A width, a shining peace, under the night.

Thoughts on Life and Death

Brooke's poem reminds us that we should acknowledge and celebrate life, whilst we can, 'feel the stir of wonder, touch flowers and furs and cheeks' because all too soon our own frost will come 'to stay the waves that dance'.

When someone dies swiftly as Sue did, it's inevitable that we should feel shocked and sad. The space they occupied in our lives is vacant. We feel a loss. Emotions at this time are high, and often mixed. Life is complex and often unkind, and the death of someone close to us brings us face to face with our own mortality and thoughts on life and death. These feelings are natural and the strength of the feelings we have are a reflection on the connection we feel to the person we have lost.

In grief you'll be supported by kindly words from friends who will tell you that 'time will heal your pain'. They are right, these things are true. But now is not the time for that. Now, right now, is the time to lament your loss and say your farewells. Funerals are sad, so be with your feelings for a moment. Embrace your sadness, be with your emotions. For it is only through facing our lament that we can begin to see beyond it.

Funerals are rites of passage, they are not for the dead, but for the living. A rite of passage, a ritual such as this, is for you to understand and accept your loss, it's a moment in time for you to stop and consider the meaning of your lives and to take strength from the one you have lost.

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Over the next few minutes we'll hear from her daughter Hannah and from colleagues who admired her. I'd like you to think more about Sue's qualities and values and as you do, think what you might learn from her that will help you live a better, kinder, fuller life. In this way, she will live on. She will live in your thoughts and memories and in your deeds and actions.

Tributes to Sue

To help you with this I am going to tell a little more about this remarkable woman because Sue was never a woman to blow her own trumpet, she was modest beyond belief, always self deprecating.

She was born in 1947 into post war austerity. For those born into these years times were tough. There was still rationing and people were forced to make ends meet, to mend and make do. Values that Sue carried with her all her life.

Daughter to Joe and Florence, and sister to Janice and Raymond, father Joe was himself was a soldier. Her early life was sometimes hard, growing up in south-west London. It was a difficult childhood in some ways as her family experienced the consequences of the prejudices of the day. But it wasn't all bad, as the family lived above their sweet shop on Teddington High Street. She was close to her sister Janice, and she also had a much-cherished friend in the form of the family lodger, Eddie.

Even then this was a determined young woman. As soon as she could she left home to train to become a nurse and midwife, and went on to join the army as a military nurse in her mid twenties. It was the start of her lifetime's work. She was devoted to her work, yes, but actually she was devoted to her patients. Hannah described to me how her Mum would work every day, even Christmas Day and most weekends. She cared, deeply. If a patient hadn't

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eaten properly Sue would return to their home outside of working hours to deliver a home made casserole.

Sir Wilfred Grenfell was an English Doctor who worked in Newfoundland at the turn of the last century. He said:

"The service we render to others is really the rent we pay for our room on this earth. It is obvious that man is himself a traveler; that the purpose of this world is not 'to have and to hold' but 'to give and to serve'".

That could have been written for Sue.

When she moved to the South Coast she joined the district nursing team. Visiting and caring for the elderly of Worthing. She was practical, organised, matter of fact, pragmatic, a fixer and a carer. She was great Mum to Hannah and a wonderful, kindly but forthright aunt to Tony, Dan and Fleur. Hardworking yes, but always there for her family. Always there, more often than not in the kitchen up to her elbows in flour and pastry, chuckling to radio two as she baked yet another cake for another celebration.

Sue was a woman who embraced life, not grandly or extravagantly by any means, but in its simplest pleasures. A brisk walk on a blustery day, she'd often walk 5 miles a day.

She was an accomplished knitter too, forever turning out hats, and gloves for anyone who needed them. It was said she could make an entire outfit for anyone, as long as it was knitted.

It's often tempting to measure the mark of human life in the grand gesture, but Sue was a modest woman, and whilst her life should surely have been recognised more formally for the long service she gave, the true mark of a life well lived is in the detail. The cakes made and the cards sent, the gloves knitted, the loved bestowed, and the casseroles delivered.

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Hannah is now going to say a few words about her Mum, and read an extract from *The Fallen* by Robert Binyon.

Memories of My Mum

Hannah McEwen

Simon is absolutely right in saying that my mum was at her happiest over the past 15 years. She really was. She'd found her niche in life doing something she absolutely loved, met lots of good and interesting people along the way, and she'd become respected for her expertise in military nursing history. In fact someone on one of the forums told me that they had nicknamed her 'The Oracle'.

She appeared on women's hour, filmed a BBC1 documentary with Jo Brand, was asked to give talks all over the country, as well as assisting in countless other research requests. And I'd like to make a special mention of the blue plaque that was erected in honour of Maude McCarthy, the matron-in-chief of the army during the first world war, and for which mum was the driving force. I am so very proud of all these things.

But I was even more proud of her as my mum – she worked so very hard when I was growing up, and she was such a good mum, and I will miss her very, very much. And I'll miss her chocolate brownies even more (which she sometimes used to post to me).

I have some very happy memories of the two trips I took with her to the Somme a few years back when she was doing some research. An incredibly

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sombre and moving place, but we also had some laughs along the way, especially when we found the woods and some remaining trench lines where her uncle Wally had his leg blown off. Wally survived due to some pioneering medical techniques. We, however, almost weren't as lucky. We got ourselves hopelessly lost that day (on land we really shouldn't have been trespassing on in the first place), and ended up in fits of giggles about not being able to navigate ourselves away from enemy lines.

So now I would like to read an extract from 'For the Fallen', by Laurence Binyon. My mum liked it, and I think some of the sentiment fits.

The Fallen by Laurence Binyon

They went with songs to the battle, they were young,
Straight of limb, true of eye, steady and aglow.
They were staunch to the end against odds uncounted,
They fell with their faces to the foe.

They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning
We will remember them.

They mingle not with their laughing comrades again;

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They sit no more at familiar tables of home;
They have no lot in our labour of the day-time;
They sleep beyond England's foam.

But where our desires are and our hopes profound,
Felt as a well-spring that is hidden from sight,
To the innermost heart of their own land they are known
As the stars are known to the Night;

As the stars that shall be bright when we are dust,
Moving in marches upon the heavenly plain,
As the stars that are starry in the time of our darkness,
To the end, to the end, they remain.

On one of her local walks Sue stopped a while and noticed the names on the war memorial in Lancing. She began to look up some of the names, recognising that some of her patients shared these family names. And so began a new passion. At first it was a local history and then combining her own knowledge of nursing she began to research the history of Military Nursing. She became an expert, it's said that it takes 10,000 hours to become an expert in anything, Sue exceed that by far. It was not the science or the history that inspired her passion though, it was the people. It was the stories of the men and particularly the women who served, and nursed in impossibly difficult and often profoundly tragic circumstances. She studied

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and researched, transcribing millions of words of personal diaries and in doing so she became a leading expert in her subject. She became a resource not only for others all over the world seeking out information about their own family history, but for television and radio too.

We'll now hear from Professor Christine Hallett and Dick Robinson, two people who worked with and benefitted from Sue's work.

Eulogies to Sue's Historical research.

Professor Christine Hallett

I first met Sue Light when I was working on my first book. Like so many of her friends, I encountered her website, 'Scarlet Finders' before I met Sue herself. Her work was incredibly impressive, and I can only guess at the numbers of hours/days/weeks/months/years she spent meticulously transcribing Dame Maud McCarthy's official war diary. I mention the war diary because, as far as I know, that was Sue's first great web-project. But her work grew and grew – way beyond this first piece until it became THE authoritative resource on the nursing services of the First World War.

As more and more people discovered Scarlet Finders – and as the Centenary of the First World War drew near – people came to her for advice, in increasing numbers. She must have been inundated with emails. Yet my experience was that she always responded within 48 hours, and always with a hugely helpful and meticulously-researched piece of advice.

This was one of Sue's primary qualities: her integrity. She never fudged a response; nor did she ever just say: 'Sorry, don't know'. She always responded to a request for assistance by putting all her energy and care into doing her best for the enquirer – and, of course, for the early-twentieth-century nurses themselves. Respecting their memories mattered as much as helping her colleagues in the present day. She was, without doubt, one of

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the kindest, and most generous people I have ever met – generous with her time, and with her energy.

Although her spirit could be fierce and implacable, her attitude to the people around her was always courteous, gentle and thoughtful. I always liked to think that she was not only researching and writing about the nurses of the First World War – those indomitable women who endured so much and who did such significant, yet largely hidden, work – she was also, somehow channelling all of their best qualities. Her work made an enormous contribution to our understanding of them; and her life – its purpose, its honesty, its intrinsic value – helped make the sacrifices of that earlier generation seem worthwhile. She was a very special person, and I shall never forget her.

Mr. Dick Robinson

I first met Sue almost 10 years ago on a First World War Forum – a website where people swap information on a whole range of topics. (You earn a rank depending on how many comments you have published. When I last looked, Sue, with over four and a half thousand posts, was billed as a Major-General, no less.)

We then began to exchange emails as I was looking for information about the context in which my great aunt Edith Appleton had served as a professional nurse in France throughout the First World War. Edie wrote an amazing daily journal mentioning over 200 names – patients and colleagues. With Sue's expert, detailed and generous help I was able to access information and make many, many contacts, leading to a website and later a book version of the diaries.

I've been looking back through our emails. I thought there would be a few dozen. There were hundreds! And I know I am just one of many indebted to

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Sue for her tireless sharing of her wide knowledge. Not just that. If she wasn't sure she would go digging at the National Archives at Kew where she was a frequent visitor.

We met a few times. Perhaps most memorably at the unveiling two years ago of the blue plaque at the home of Dame Maud McCarthy, the Matron in Chief of the British Army. It was – mostly – a gorgeous sunny day and I have a lovely photo of Sue and Hannah in front of the plaque. It was Sue who had proposed the plaque to English Heritage. It took them six years from proposal to unveiling! Further testimony to Sue's persistence.

Sue didn't suffer fools gladly. She could get furious when she felt that the role, uniforms, behaviour of nurses was misrepresented. When the BBC broadcast *The Crimson Field* Sue took them to task for the many inaccuracies. There was no second series! She also had a lovely pop at *Downton Abbey* when that series made lots of blunders in the episodes covering *Downton* being used as a convalescence home for officers.

There was a time when Sue felt so exasperated about all the misinformation she was picking up about nurses that she announced she was taking down her websites. I know I was just one of many who pleaded with her not to. She didn't, thank goodness, and they are still all accessible.

(In 2018 we are producing a play, loosely based on Edie's diaries. The team are keen to dedicate it to Sue who has been so instrumental in offering her advice and support.)

I know I speak for many when I say that your wisdom, generosity, support, persistence, all tempered with a sense of humour and warmth of spirit are not forgotten Sue. Thank you. You are so much missed.

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Reflection

Sue died suddenly and too young. She didn't want to die, she wasn't ready, she had so much more to do. Books to write, more stories to tell. In her life she left no stone unturned, was curious and always asking questions. "If you don't ask you'll never know" was a motto. If nothing else take this away with you. There is no better response to death than to live life. We honour the dead when we live our own lives to the full.

We are almost at the part of the ceremony where we must commit Sue's body to its natural end and say our final and formal farewells. But let's take a moment to listen to some Music and watch a photographic slideshow, pictures from a life well lived, with a song from a show that was much loved by Sue.

If you have a faith, please use this time for prayer please do. Hannah will lay on her Mum's coffin a fitting tribute, one of the poppies from the extraordinary Fields of Blood art work and if you wish to approach her coffin to say a private farewell please do.

Music

Bring him Home – Original Les Miserable recording

The Committal

Please Stand

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Death is a natural part of the cycle of human existence but no one is ever completely dead, not while they live on in the thoughts and memories and actions of the living.

In this Final act Sue's body will be transformed into the everlasting force of energy and enduring elemental particles of the universe. She will journey on, the atoms that made her will be free to be transformed into other living things. Her energy, beliefs and love will live on, manifest in the lives, thoughts and actions of you her friends and family gathered here.

Susan Elizabeth Light, mother, sister, nurse, friend, baker, knitter and walker, bringer of life and laughter, we bid you farewell, we thank you for the gifts you gave and the legacy you leave. With love and respect, and sadness we commit your body to its natural end.

After the clouds, the sunshine,
after the winter, the spring,
after the shower, the rainbow,
for life is a changeable thing.
After the night, the morning,
bidding all darkness cease,
after life's cares and sorrows,
the comfort and sweetness of peace.

Curtains to close

In a little while we'll leave this chapel. I hope you have derived some comfort from gathering here today, and sharing your thoughts, memories and

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sadness. Sue was a practical and pragmatic person who wouldn't wish for you to be drowning in grief. If you are able please leave some of the sadness that her loss has caused here, in this room, and in time the sadness of her loss will diminish.

But, you can carry your memories of Sue with you and so she will remain in your thoughts and in your hearts for the dead don't reside in an urn, or a grave, but in the hearts and minds and actions of the living. As you return to your homes, or to work leave your sadness here, but take with you something of Sue's kindness, her wit and wisdom.

If you wish to make a donation in Sue's memory to the St Barnabas Hospice details are on the Order of service and there is a collection plate at the door. You are all invited to the Gunn Inn to remember Sue and share some more thoughts and memories, perhaps less formally, with drinks and sandwiches, as she would have liked.

Now, look around you, find a friend or a familiar face. Or if you'd like take the arm of the person next to you. Listen to a song that Sue loved, a song that celebrates living life, even though we are sometimes beset by sadness. When you are ready, go out into the world glad that you have loved, free to weep for the one whom you have lost, free to hold each other in our human frailty, empowered to love to the full and to affirm the hopes of human existence

Music

Mike and The Mechanics

The Living Years.

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