

# Eulogy for Professor Pamela Sue Anderson

*Given in the Chapel of Mansfield College, Oxford*

*by The Revd Dr Susan Durber*

*on Saturday 18 March 2017*

Pamela once said, in a sermon preached before this University: 'Let a unity of virtues, connected by love, shape the stories we read and write about our lives.' It's a phrase characteristic of her; beautiful, poignant, drawing connections, not quite transparent, inviting thought. 'Let a unity of virtues, connected by love, shape the stories we read and write about our lives.'

Today we are reading and writing Pamela's life and our own lives that we shared with her. We are drawing on the best of what we know, even while we are in grief, to tell the story truthfully and from love. We are making a unity of her virtues, and lovingly connecting them in the work of making sense. One of the things that so marked Pamela's later life was her bringing together of the different parts of life; her longing to be honest about life and truth, about beauty and love and sorrow and loss. Her own reflections in the work to which she was so committed are eminent among the things that can sustain us today and in the time to come. She blesses us at the very point when we gather to praise her.

Pamela had, as she herself described it, a secure and happy childhood. She was warmly loved by her parents, Vonne and Doug, for whom we must all feel deeply today. And her brother and her sisters accompanied her in these years at the beginning of her life, as well as through her dying and her death, with such devoted and constant affection. Pamela's father, reflecting on her distinctive characteristics, says that she always had, in this order; ability, understanding, and drive. We can all recognize the truth of those words. She was bright and brave and determined enough to move away even from such a secure home to find and play a part in a wider world, to learn new patterns of thinking, to question and to search for herself.

After some time in France she came to Oxford and to this College, a place that shaped her in so many ways, and the place where she wanted this service to be held. She and I first met then when she arrived in 1979. I remember how impressive and attractive she was, and yet also how vulnerable too. She lived at that stage, and for many years, in a small room in a house in Holywell Street where she also cared for the landlady, Tony, who was living with disability. That relationship said much about Pamela's willingness and need to care for others and to love them, while she was also working hard at forging a life of her own and seeking independence. Pamela had her own insecurities and anxieties then and it was far from easy to be a young woman in Oxford, doing Continental Philosophy, defined a great deal still by the American mid-west, longing for love, vulnerable to

suffering. I think there were some who could never have imagined that this small woman would one day achieve her ambitions, break through Oxford's ceilings, and become an inspiration to so many of us, a respected and ground-breaking philosopher. But what Pamela did was to make what many saw as her weaknesses shine as the strengths they truly are. Over time, as she became more herself, she stormed into the future crafting her work from the very texture of the realities of her life. She was one of the most brave, honest and faithful women I have known. She made the connections between her child-like trust and her loving, drew the cares that might have destroyed her into conversation with the disciplines of thoughtful philosophy and showed that they were not opposites at all, but profoundly connected. And she took the bliss and the joy of which women have learned sometimes to be ashamed and made it brave and true, worthy of reflection.

Pamela was also one of the most hard-working people I know. I can still picture her in the middle of a noisy, busy Middle Common Room, completely absorbed in a book by Paul Ricoeur. Her labours, to forge a career, were hard and she drew on such wells of strength – with some highlights to cheer her on. I remember that one day Paul drove all the way to Durham just to give her a bunch of flowers...She had a year working in the University of Delaware, before working at the University of Sunderland and finally, returning to her beloved Oxford. She said, 'My heart never really left Oxford.' I remember what a joy it was for her, and for her friends here, when she got a post at Regents Park College. And Regents was a place where she found a congenial place to work, colleagues with whom she could develop shared projects and passions, and a community in which she could care for others and in which others could care so deeply and wonderfully for her.

Pamela was such a remarkably kind person (aside from the Olympic quality bitching that Adrian has referred to of course...!). She loved her students and cared about the details of their lives. She nurtured and treasured relationships and friendships. Her arms were swift to embrace. And she knew the cost of love too. The deaths of her landlady, Tony, of her student and friend Hanneke, and of course of Paul, were huge moments in her life, from which she emerged with fresh understanding of the cost and demands of life, but also of how we grow and develop our capabilities as human beings. She learned and wrote and spoke so movingly about love. She pleaded with us, and showed us, that love is about emotion becoming intelligent, that we don't have to choose between passion and reason, but that each can make more beautiful the other. She refused the idea that love is simply a mysterious 'gift' that comes from somewhere outside ourselves, or that it's something we just 'fall' into. It is something we can give and make and improve. She taught us to believe that we can be intelligent about love, that it can be a form of knowledge. She knew, from her own life, that our loving is imperfect, but she believed that love can be perfected. I heard in her an echo of the Christ who commands us to love, who says we can choose to love by doing and enduring, by disciplining duty with delight. While I might be tempted to say that Pamela was saying something about the love of *God*, I can hear her rebuking me, and saying that it was *her* love, and that I must claim and

take responsibility for the love *I* feel and think and act upon too. She called us all to cultivate love as a virtue; habitual, reliable, consistent. It was this love that was in her heart.

There are so many ways in which to remember her. She was amused when, shall we say, an Oxford philosopher, once remarked about her that ‘She may be a feminist philosopher, but she is a very *nice* person.’ And in the end, she really wanted her students and her friends to see that she was loving more than she wanted them to see that she was clever, though of course she *was* clever. She was nice, but she could deconstruct nice for you if you needed it...

Above all, she said, ‘I feel that philosophy must be bound up with living, with other lives and my life...’ And she cared especially deeply that women’s lives should be better, enhanced in every sense, that every Eve should be credited with the search for the knowledge of good and evil and not shamed, but valued and loved and encouraged. She gave her energy to the task of raising a feminist voice within philosophy of religion, so that every Eve could be given at last, the fruit of the tree of knowledge – in justice and in hope. She had an uneasy relationship with the Church, as any feminist must, but her influence, her work, her voice will go on sounding in the Church with the power of a prophet for years to come, through her writing, her students, her readers... as her story writes the stories of others.

And now Pamela has come to the end of the day. I imagine that we might want to rage at the sadness of it, grieve at the tragedy of this loss, and also to make some meaning of it. We can do little better than turn to Pamela’s own words about vulnerability, loss and love. She believed that vulnerability does not destroy life, but is its material and its strength. We may be undone by her loss, but we are also becoming something more. We may lose confidence, but we shall be enhanced. We will all die, but we shall all be transformed. We may be hit by waves of sorrow, but we are facing the reality that there is something bigger than us shaping the world of our desires. We are undone by the other, but we may find that the ‘other’ is also a force for love and that our lives can be turned again to joy. Life is precarious, but it is also beautiful. Hasn’t Pamela shown us this?

Pamela herself has said, ‘Grieving...makes possible the opening up new worlds; but this requires accepting the loss of the world as it has been known..’ Today we are facing loss. And it is real. The world we knew with her is lost to us. But we are also promised, even by Christ himself, the gift of new and risen life, enhanced life, joyful, hopeful, life – life ringing with the laughter of friends and the delights and passions of love. May it be so. Amen.