
IN MEMORY OF MY MOTHER

Rohini Hensman

My mother Pauline Hensman, born Pauline Swan on 1 December 1922 in Ceylon (now known as Sri Lanka), died peacefully on 21 May 2010 in London. She was the daughter of Erin Swan and James Swan, who worked his way up from the lowest grade to become a foreman in the railway workshop at Maradana. She had childhood memories of creeping through the fence with her elder sister Rosine and younger brother Edward to get to the office of the workshop, in order to dance and sing to the amused clerical staff in return for paper and pencils. She also had memories of the tramway strike of 1929, which was supported by the railway workers. According to her, when the employers attempted to break the strike using British management staff to drive the trams, the workers retaliated by throwing buckets of nightsoil at them. I have no idea whether this is an accurate recollection or not, given that she would have been just six years old at the time, but what was undeniable was her glee at the discomfiture of the colonial bosses at this unusual form of industrial action! On another occasion, when her mother was attacked with a knife by a drunk and violent man whose wife she had befriended, Pauline bit him so hard that he was forced to back off. My grandmother lost a couple of teeth in that encounter, so one can imagine what might have happened if her daughter had not come to the rescue!

These stories from my mother's childhood in many ways foreshadow the adult she was to become. The courage and resourcefulness that impelled her to tackle a violent man who was threatening to kill her mother stayed with her all her life. It was evident, for example, when she asked one of her nephews to drive her around war-ravaged Jaffna in the mid-1980s on the back of his motorbike, so that she could see the situation for herself and report back to the South and to the rest of the world. And the liberation theology that later guided her ethical and political engagement with the world was surely influenced by her spontaneous identification with the oppressed: women, racial/ethnic and religious minorities, colonised peoples, exploited workers, and above all, children.

This is what brought her and Dick Hensman together. When they fell in love with each other, some of his Tamil relations as well as some of her Burgher relations objected to their engagement, but the young people refused to budge, and got married on 10 April 1947. I was born in 1948, my brother Jim in 1950, while Savi, the youngest, was born in 1962.

Their long and eventful life together included moving to Britain after the 1958 riots, back to Sri Lanka in 1961, back to Britain in 1964, and back to Sri Lanka in 1981. In the 1950s and 1960s, she worked with him to bring out *Community* magazine, write *The Better Way to English*, and run the Community Institute. Together they were part of the Jubilee Group in London, and went on speaking tours of the US. Her love for him survived his death in 2008: her last wish was to die at home in the room she had shared with him for so many years.

Another interest that emerged in Pauline's childhood interactions with younger cousins and developed into a lifelong passion was teaching. Her long career as an English teacher, which started straight after she received her degree in Colombo and went on after she retired, spanned two countries (Sri Lanka and Britain), children whose mother-tongue was English and those who hardly knew any English to begin with, and paid as well as unpaid work. Most strikingly, it spanned the entire spectrum from highly intelligent and articulate A-level students at Bishops College, Colombo, who went on to become brilliant women, to primary school children with special needs from deprived backgrounds in London. She taught all of them with the same dedication, and was rewarded with the love and gratitude of her pupils. The frequent moves between different countries and schools could easily have thrown her chosen profession off course, but she always found her feet and continued with her work, even under the most difficult circumstances. And she managed to combine this work with spending time with her children and running a household: other members of the family did their part, but she was undoubtedly the manager!

She did not call herself a feminist until much later in life, but she always believed in the equality of women with men, girls with boys. In her own practice she demonstrated the possibility of combining employment with a family, and of being a strong, independent woman while being loving and caring at the same time.

After her retirement, my parents returned to the same neighbourhood from which they had been displaced by the 1958 riots, much to the joy of neighbours who had missed them during their long absence. Foremost among these was Menike, who was like a sister to Pauline, and her son Nimal. After his mother's death in 1988, Nimal regarded them as his adopted parents. Pauline resumed her role as a healer and teacher in the neighbourhood, meticulously innovating materials and methods to teach English to both young adults and schoolchildren. She participated in the Writers' Workshop (also known as the Wadiya Group) in Colombo as a 'supervisor', providing advice and encouragement to its members.

Much of her writing dates from this period when she had more leisure. Most of her papers are theological, but her theology was anything but 'pie in the sky', engaging with issues of malnutrition, poverty, exploitation and dispossession, militarism, patriarchy, violence against women and women's liberation, struggles for justice and equality, and resistance to growing state repression and violence in Sri Lanka. Nor did her faith prevent her from appreciating emancipatory interpretations of other faiths and non-religious philosophies. In 1987 she wrote words that have a resonance even today: 'If we love our neighbours as ourselves, can we forsake them when they are arrested and become political prisoners without access to a just trial, and subjected to torture? Or can we ignore them when they are

hungry and thirsty, malnourished and sick in body, mind and spirit, in refugee camps here and abroad, or in army camps anywhere in the island?'

She called for civil disobedience against an authoritarian and homicidal state. Yet in September 1989, when the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam killed Rajani Thiranagama, a Tamil doctor, lecturer, feminist and founding member of University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna), she was equally passionate in her denunciation of 'those who meticulously planned and executed her murder,' calling on people in Sri Lanka to attend the Peace March planned for the 60th day after her death, and on the diaspora to 'organise and work for the kind of society for which Rajani gave her life'. And she continued to support the work of the surviving members of UTHR(J).

My mother wrote everything out by hand: she never typed. So we are indebted to my father for collecting her writings together, typing them out, and getting them published in a book, *To Mercy, Peace and Love: Reflections and Notes on Social Transformation and Theology*, as a present for her 61st birthday.

During a visit to London in 2006, she contracted a life-threatening illness which left her housebound and unable to travel. Yet she, and my father until his death in 2008, continued to provide a centre drawing together their extended family and close friends. The large number of people who remember her with love and respect are living testimony to the ways in which she influenced so many lives in a positive way. She wrote in the Preface to her book, 'I passionately believe in the causes I have been espousing, and perhaps this book will be at work when I no longer am.' It is up to us to preserve that legacy. ■

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