

Weekend Word Friday 16th April 2021

Dr Heather Payne Consultant Paediatrician

I read the British Medical Journal every week, and for a number of years now I've started from the back with the obituaries, as the most interesting and stimulating items. I'm often left with the feeling that I'd have liked these strangers if I'd had the chance to meet them. My sense of regret, at a missed opportunity to appreciate a life of impressive achievements often conducted quietly and effectively with little fanfare, reminds me to seek out these gems amongst the living.

I've had this same feeling this past week, discovering much I didn't know about Prince Philip – particularly about his artistic skills, his difficult childhood experiences, and also his personal faith journey – baptised into Orthodox Christianity, finding a home in the Anglican Church... I've wondered if these may have underpinned his commitment to conservation of animals and the planet, and also his support for interfaith and spiritual development, as well as his many other achievements. He's also recognised to have sacrificed personal ambitions to support the Queen as her consort – her 'strength and stay' as she put it, and maybe an early feminist in his support for her.

I know we've all made sacrifices over the past year – everyone has had to give up things. We've missed out on each other's company, missed birthdays, school, socialising and live music, missed smiles, because of having to wear face coverings – also missed great festivals including Easter, Christmas, Eid and other faith and public events. But it's been necessary, as a way to care for other people in the face of this virus. These actions have all made demands on our time, resources, emotions and relationships – but as the word sacrifice literally means 'making sacred' – maybe we can interpret all these experiences as 'giving forward' rather than 'giving up'.

These daily sacrifices that so many have made during the pandemic are crystallised in bereavement. Not being able to gather for a funeral and lean on the support of friends and family to remember and celebrate the loved one, has been additionally painful for so many, and these limits will continue at Windsor Castle for Prince Philip's funeral. That separation reminds me of the desolation of his followers at the death of Jesus, his mother's grief at the foot of his cross, but also that the sacrifice of those earthly relationships were followed by hope in the risen Christ – hope in a new way of life coming out of sacrifice and suffering, in a renewed relationship with the world, that is open to us to accept.

My prayers are already with the Queen and her family. And in an obituary for Prince Philip's life, I can't help but feel this is a moment to pause and remember for a while – but then I'll be trying not to miss an opportunity to be neighbourly and do something to improve the world for those living – perhaps that's the truest tribute to an extraordinary life.