

Death of a Golden Lady – Swarna Sugunasiri (1937 to 2017)

Swarna, in Sanskrit, means ‘gold’. And so this is about the death of a ‘golden lady’, Swarna Sugunasiri, nee Bellana, my beloved wife of 53 plus years. She bid adieu to this life in the early hours of April 20, 2017, at Mt Sinai hospital, Toronto, following a couple of critical falls. She passed away peacefully in her sleep, surrounded by family, me holding her hand almost to the end. It was undoubtedly in serene peace that she received the personal Paritta blessings of Bhantes Udupihille Wimalabuddhi and Ahangama Ratanasiri of the Toronto Mahavihara.

If her last hours, too, were filled with Paritta chanting on tape, it was with a sense of enjoyment she would have listened in between to the mellifluous voices of her favourite Visharadas - Amaradeva and Victor Ratnayaka, not to mention the Indian classical Sitar music to the accompaniment of the Tabla. When on occasion she opened her eyes, she was to have the benefit of a glimpse of the pictures of herself and family. In our private moments, she heard all about my confident prediction of being born in Tusita Heaven where Queen Mahamaya ended up, too, and the pious hope that she would win her liberation.

If the name means golden, was she golden in her life? You bet! Yes, in her achievements. A graduate of Peradeniya University, she tells us, “I was the only one from our school who had earned a direct pass, ... passing all four subjects – Economics, History, PoliSci and Sinhala. [and] said to be the first student ever to earn the honour ... “ (Girl Among Boys: Childhood Memories of Growing up in Ceylon, 2012, p. 267) (see below).

Upon graduation, she came to teach, first in her home town Panadura itself, and then at the Malabe High School. She was a girl “who soaked up everything she read. Concentration had never been a problem for me.” (236).

Earning a second degree in Canada, combined with a Teacher Training Certificate (1971), she had retired, after nearly three decades of teaching, as Head of English as a Second Language, the only non-white Head of Department in the subject at the York Board of Education. In her final days, she was certainly happy to meet a nurse in the hospital ward who had learned her first English from Swarna. If then there were numerous new immigrants whose initial and continuing communication

needs were met by her personally or her staff, another way of servicing the new immigrant was in her capacity as Counselor. It was to the great satisfaction of her Principal that she, unlike her mainstream colleagues, brought an insider perspective, in dealing with student needs.

Another golden feature of hers was her fearlessness in meeting challenges. During our courtship, I had cautioned her that she was marrying into poverty. She had no qualms! Having been in government service for nearly a decade, I had ended up as an Assistant Assessor at Inland Revenue. But not wanting to be glued to files in a closed office for the rest of my life, I decided to leave the lucrative and prestigious position, just shy of the ten year minimum to qualify for a government pension. If giving up a salary almost double that of a teacher dragged us to the trenches of poverty, there were no protestations or wailings. My Column in the Sinhala daily *Dawasa*, on art and culture, following my resignation, may not have alleviated our economic marginalization, but she possibly found compensation in the larger picture of what I sought to draw out of the cultural life, under the pseudonym *Madhupa* 'honey-sucker'!

When in 1964 I got word that I had been selected for a Fulbright Scholarship, our son had just been born. When, at short notice, I left our shores, he was barely three weeks old. But Swarna was not one to complain about the burden of having to look after a baby all by herself even as she continued to teach in those days of no maternity leave. And so it was that I could go on my scholarship with every confidence and assurance. When in 1973, we returned to Canada after a short sojourn of two years in Lanka, my immediate goal was to get my PhD. Swarna, who had already taught in Toronto, found no difficulty getting back to the classroom. And so it was that she now had to be the breadwinner again – for a full five years! Happily, once I had my degree, it was a grateful husband that conferred upon her the degree, PHT – Put Hubby Through!

Yet another gold in Swarna was how she kept our family of four – now with a daughter, on a nourishment cruise. She had hardly ever stepped into the kitchen growing up among seven boys. Pet of the family, mom Mary Nona, dad James, and brothers were only too happy to keep her well-fed. So it was without cooking ability that she entered betrothal. Back in Lanka, of course, she had help in the kitchen. With

no such luck overseas, joining me in Michigan in the second year of my scholarship, it was at square one that she had to begin. But soon, we were on a food cruise, benefiting from her three navigational guidelines – nourishing, tasty and pleasing to the eye. And what she put on the table was the result of culinary adventure - neither Sri Lankan, Sinhala nor Canadian/Western, but not Sri Lankan nor Canadian / Western either. It was with delight that the members of her Book Club looked forward to her turn to host them. Never mind the book they were reading, there was the delicious treat for the palate waiting! And it is all these ingredients, East and West, in her own creative admixture, then, that found their way to her book, *Cooking from the Heart - Loving Spoonfuls from a Sri Lankan Family Kitchen* (2006), Authorhouse Publishing (available on Amazon).

But it was a different publication that brought out her gold in writing skills. Here, then, is a glimpse - the opening lines in her publication, *Girl Among Boys: Childhood Memories* “I started my tree climbing career when I was seven. I loved climbing the kaju trees and the guava trees. I could climb up about two branches, and even crawl along the strong branches to reach for the fruit I was eyeing. And sometimes I would hang from the branches and jump into a pile of dead kaju leaves. With practice, I was able to jump a good distance. As a scrawny kid with a big appetite for mischief, I was proud of my achievements”! (p. 7). In later home life, her “cherished allies” were “my concentration, study skills, love of learning and a sense of responsibility for my younger brothers..” (p. 237).

It was amidst all this mischief of early years that she kept up a steady study regimen. It may be another gold for her that while it is English that brought out the Teacher and the Author in her, it is only after passing the SSC – Senior School Certificate at Grade 10 in the Sinhala medium, that she had her first taste of English. That is to say that it was only with two years of English that she made it to the English-medium University, passing in all subjects! It was the same daring she brought to learning her driving, shh!, on the Highways of the US! Both of us were selected for an International Student Camp at the very end of my scholarship years (1967). We had been given \$ 250.00 each for return train fare, from Ann Arbor, Michigan to San Francisco, California. Pooling these funds, we purchased our first car, a second-

hand Rambler. I had got my international driving License before I had left on my scholarship, having owned a Peugeot 203 at the time I served as a Labour Officer. Driving miles and miles on relatively empty US State Highways, as contrasted by the busy city roads, the temptation was too much to let go of the golden opportunity. And so it was that sitting tightly close to me, in the bench-type front seat of the days of yore, she eased her way into driving. And it was only at the end of our first lap, of a thousand miles or so, on the side roads, that she must have sat in the driver's seat for the first time, surreptitiously, of course! Given the innovative but extensive introduction to driving, getting her Driver's License in Canada was a piece of cake.

Needless to say, another outstanding gold was the extraordinary support and encouragement I always received from her in my own studies, professional work, writing, public service and maintaining my good health, but most importantly, my spiritual practice. But she was no mere proverbial wife behind the successful husband, but a success in her own right. If that seems innocent enough, predicted in her horoscope is that she would live overseas. So, for all my brag bag, it was my lovable wife's stellar positioning at the point of her birth that can be said to be behind it all! And it was in our travels, across the US, Canada, Sri Lanka and around the world, that her *joie de vivre* gold shone in no small measure. Getting further training in driving skills, we were now driving south from San Francisco to Los Angeles, and then back through Salt Lake City and Colorado, covering about 3,000 miles. With the Canadian visa still not received, the Rambler was now heading East, to Philadelphia, New York, Washington DC, ending up in Florida. Coming back, we would cover another 3,000 miles. It was in the same Rambler that we crossed the border to Canada on September 1, 1967, as landed immigrants, crossing the border over the Detroit River.

Visiting China in 1972, at the height of the Cultural Revolution, we were to be welcomed at a school, by a huge banner 'Welcome to Our Friends from Ceylon'. Joining an hour long Tea Ceremony in Japan, Swarna was now a Japanese beauty in Kimono. But, no it was not in a Kimono that we went to watch a Kabuki play. In the backwaters of New Zealand we were to see the Maori Dances. Another highlight of our travels over time was our visit to Cuba, one of them in on the 50th Anniversary of the Revolution. If it was Buddhism that took us

to Thailand, it was Christian art and architecture that took us to Italy and other European countries in a rented Benz, with our friends Namel and Malini Weeramuni. If it was sarees that took her to Madras, it was literary memory that took us to Martin Wickremasinghe's Madolduwa and the Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa and Sigiriya historic treasures. It was a cruise that took us to the Bahamas and the West Indies. The gold shine in Swarna in all this, of course, was her huge presence and the traveling companionship through her interest in places, scenery, people, history, legend, art and architecture, etc.

A final gold was a gift of a blanket for a just-born. The memory of knitting a blanket for our first grandchild, a baby girl, (the first in the extended family) was inspiration enough for her to knit the blanket. If this was for the third generation, the wider blanket has been the sponsorship of the Bellana clan - now into the hundreds, counting three generations.

For all such excitement and fullness of life, the Eightfold Wheel of Reality (*atthaloka dhamma cakka*) - Gain and Loss, Infamy and Fame, Blame and Praise, Happiness and Dukkha suffering (*laabho alaabho ayaso yasoca nindaa pasamsaa sukhamca dukkham*), was beginning to turn. Now nearly 20 years into retirement beginning about five years ago, the gold came to receive some tarnish of a series of health challenges. And it was with class, in business class, headed to Lanka, in fact, that it all began, when she had her first fall (in the flight), but happily with no injury. The more serious business came to be at outpatient Rehab treatments, Chiropractor treatment, you name it, she had it all, restricted to bed with arthritis on both knees from October to December of 2015. Then it was knee surgery, the first in January 2016, followed with the second in June.

Working her way through Rehab exercises, including simple walking, she was just getting to walk without a walker or a stick when she had the critical falls. The first was when she just rolled over from bed, hitting her head against a metal handle of the bedside table. Rushed to Emergency by Ambulance, she came home with sutures on her head. A week later was another head on fall. Rushed to emergency, a CT scan showed two medical conditions. The topmost disks (C1, C2) of the spine put her in a neck brace. Invisible to the naked eye, there was a bleeding in the brain. Recovering at a Rehab Centre, she was to have

another fall. Rushed to Emergency, a CT scan showed a widening of the bleeding, said to be irreversible with surgery ruled out. Now the medical team was in a quandary, literally between a rock and a hard place. If her open heart surgery 25 years ago had rendered her a bionic woman, with both the aortic and the mitral replaced with metal valves, it also called for a continuing dose of a blood thinner. Continuing with it would widen the bleeding. But, if pulled out, then there would be coagulation of the blood. Faced with the dilemma, the doctors decided to pull out the blood thinner. It was then the inevitable blood clotting that put her to her final sleep followed.

Now there came to be the standard question from the doctor: Do you want her to be resuscitated in the event of heart failure, and sustained on machines? The answer was a clear No! Swarna and I had discussed the matter, and I was only delivering her words. But then there were other related issues. Deciding that palliative care would serve the patient best meant the least amount of intervention. And this meant that, with Swarna's constant tugging at the intravenous, supplying food through a tube through the nose was ruled out. However, it brought us to the issue of saline, which she was receiving at the time. Medical research evidence is said to show that giving saline made not much of a difference at this final stage, and at most, would add a few more days to the patient's life. But then that would be to extend the suffering. As if agreeing with this psychically, Swarna was to literally pull out the saline intravenous, on the very morning of the day that we were sitting down with the doctors to discuss, among others, the matter of saline! It had all the signs of a symbolic support of the medical argument. So the inclination of her doctors was to withdraw saline.

Although she was no more by the time of our next meeting to decide on the issue, happily, saline solution continued, with the Palliative Doctor seeming to agree with my position* (see below), likely because of her Japanese, and perhaps, Buddhist background.

Swarna pulling out the saline intravenous tube was not the only symbolism. If she died around 4 am, her most recent, and critical, fall was also around 4 am! Now, what would you say? Is it unsymbolic that her Canadian Driver's License expired on April 14, 2017, just a day after her condition of bleeding in the brain was declared to be irreversible, with her life license terminating a week later? But, what is the symbolism of her final critical fall being the same night returning

home after making a baby girl warm with the blanket knit by her? Any symbolism that my current academic research happens to be on the very topic of Death and Rebecoming (punabbhava) in Buddhianscience?

For all the symbolisms, it was not an unhappy Golden One that faced her death. First, as she was going from one agony to another, she began to say that she was now ready to go. Second, after the pronouncement by the medical team that the time had come, she lasted only a week in that semi-conscious state, attributable to her good kamma. Third, the pronouncement was followed by the Easter weekend – Good Friday and Easter Monday. So for a full four days, she was surrounded by family and relatives, who might not have been able to make it on working days. Shown photos and videos, of herself and family, and listening to tapes – Paritta and music, she was clearly happy, when on occasion, she would even grip a hand, force a word or two, and give a smile! Finally making her happy, though present only from above, would undoubtedly have been the blessings, at the pansukula ceremony, by four Sangha members - Bhantes Kulugammana Dhammavasa and Dr. Saranapala of the West End Buddhist Temple, in addition to the two Bhantes from Toronto Mahavihara who had chanted Paritta (see above) while she was alive.

Surely why not be happy? There was not anything more to cry for, I mean to live for. Mischievous brat, school netball player, brilliant student throughout, loving wife, caring mom, professional educator, writer, music lover, world traveler, creative cook, the better half of the ‘model couple’ (a friend’s view), et cetera, et cetera, et cetera! Children well established into family life and professions, what more was there to live for? Kata kicco, kata karaniyo, ohita bhaaro – done this, done that, burden delivered! And to bid adieu, happily, within a weak of bleeding irreversibility, speaks amply to her golden kamma. And it was in a final deep social and spiritual responsibility that she had signed papers to donate her body for medical research.

I also know that Swarna was with me to the very last mind-moment. Having spent the penultimate night at her bedside, and going home to catch up a bit on sleep leaving her with her caregiver, I had said to myself that she should not, would not, die without me around. And so it is exactly how it happened. Told by the doctors that she may not last the night, I had also hoped that she would die in the early hours, to

allow enough time to arrange the *pansukula* ceremony, under the tight schedule of 24 hours. Again, that is how it happened! So Swarna seems to have received my thoughts on both my wishes! Thank you, love, for bringing me solace.

Love as I do with all my heart, my samsaric spiritual companion, and love me as you did with all your heart, may I respectfully, kindly and spiritually, beseech of you, with a bow of my head, to now turn the page, and jettison your love of me, please, and love of any other, jettisoning all other Thirsts (*tanha*) and Clingings (*upaadaana*) as well, unfolding the spiritual in you, through the powers of concentration (*samaadhi*) you already possess. *Bhava avamam yaava nibbana pattiya!* May you have a minimum of Rebecomings until Nibbana comes. May you, in your next human life, come by the experience of the grand liberation of Nibbana! *Saadhu saadhu saadhu!*

(excerpted from *An Ode to a Golden One* by Family)