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# Eulogy

Greg Massingham

## INTRODUCTION

It is my great honour to speak on behalf of Richard's parents Philip and Patricia, on behalf of my wife, Michele and our four children - who grew up with Richard and were such close childhood friends - and on behalf of his many, many friends, mentors, colleagues, so many present here today, and so many countless others from around the world who have sent their tributes voicing their sorrow at the loss of this splendid young man. As the grief is incalculable so is our admiration of the brief but illuminated life he shared with us all.

In sharing the following thoughts with you I have drawn upon the loving memories and reflections provided by Philip and Patricia and mingled them with those of our own family and with those many friends and acquaintances who have offered their condolences following this tragedy.

As I set out to write this I wondered where one begins to celebrate such a life? Seeing your presence here today does that in more bountiful ways than any words can do – for in some way he has made a special and particular connection with all of us. This may seem strange to the casual observer, who could be forgiven in thinking Richard to be a solitary lad, eschewing as he did the social bustle that is common among many of his peers. But your presence here today, as well as the numerous messages received from around

the world, indicate that Richard's life was one replete with friends and valued relationships. He was a young man who valued the quality over quantity.

However, there is no doubt, that from the start Richard was someone who was happy in his own company.

Patricia notes that as a child, he stayed in his room and played until they got up, contentedly occupying himself. He was not asked to do this. When he was at childcare, his carers noted how Richard didn't really play with the others; that he seemed content to sit in the corner on his own – 'a reflective child', they noted. He was already displaying his preference for the more intimate form of human interaction that was to characterise him in later years. Observing this, his parents entertained the idea that engaging a nanny might provide a more appropriate stimulus to his unique personality.

Patricia:

*“Ann Gale was his first nanny and she was the perfect carer and companion – like a member of the family. She enabled him to develop his exceptional personal qualities in a secure and loving environment. Already the one-to-one nature in his life was apparent. As he grew up he didn't go out much - which worried me - and only ever had few friends, but they were close and meaningful friendships. Because of his sensitive and gentle nature and the fact that he was so different from the others, I was worried he might be bullied at school. But many of his teachers commented that Richard would never be bullied because he possessed a strength of character that earned him the respect of his peers.”*

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Reviewing the countless messages that have poured in from all over the world, it has been these attributes, along with his resolve and solicitude that have been the recurring themes.

Here are just a few samples from his fellow students in Lugano:

*It was always nice to talk with him, because he was a great listener and always open and interested in anyone's thoughts and opinion.*

*I remember the fun we had in the octet, and the passion and enthusiasm Richard put into it. He was truly an honest and wonderful person.*

*He gave a piece of his goodness to every single person he met.*

*Richard was our still water that ran deep.*

*I will never forget him, the tall guy with the strong accent - difficult to understand but so patient that he repeated the same phrase as much as I needed in order for me to understand what he said.*

*I will always remember when you would spontaneously break into Italian with your thick Aussie accent trying to roll your Rs with such enthusiasm "Vino Rrrrrrosso!"*

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Such characteristics informed all areas of his life. His parents noted that jobs around the house were always done without asking and he never had to be asked to attend to his homework. At birthday parties, other parents often noted his restraint - he didn't overindulge like most children - they thought this was strange!

It became clear that this special boy needed special nurturing and his parents took pains to seek out mentors who could respond to this challenge.

Patricia goes on:

*"We were lucky to have been recommended the Montessori School by a friend Deborah Fox – Richard started there when he was three years old. This was the perfect school for Richard and his teacher for the first three years there was Heather Last, a remarkably gifted early childhood teacher.*

*After Montessori we thought carefully about where to send our sensitive young boy. We decided on Brisbane Boys College principally because we thought the music teacher, Theo Kotzas, would look after him; and he did this beautifully."*

## INTERESTS

Those of us who knew Richard well were aware of the many and diverse areas in which he immersed himself. A casual observer might see such eclecticism as flash-in-the-pan fads, the flitting of a dilettante. But nothing could be further from the truth. While such interests were indeed transitory they were incandescent in their intensity and profound in their thoroughness. It was as if he

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was selecting aspects of life that took his interest and rather than nibble at the surface, sucked the very marrow from their bones. Once satisfied, he packed it into his life experience and moved on to the next subject that stimulated his interest. No doubt, in his brief life, he extracted more from such excursions than most of us acquire in our extended lifetimes.

I am sure that many of you were aware of these passions.

For example, he gained complete knowledge and mastery of the art of roasting, grinding and drawing the best shot of coffee. The same applied to other culinary applications such as the art of making sushi or crème brûlée. He studied the stock market in great depth and was a busker par excellence. This particular venture provides a good example of Richard's typical thoroughness in such matters. Before exhibiting his own wares in the Queen St Mall, he carefully observed those buskers who did well – what site provided the best geographical advantage, what was the best time of day, what sort of music elicited the best returns? Empowered by this research, he set up his stall and, needless to say, made more in an hour than most made in a day. Mind you, he could play the fiddle!

There were so many things in life that he loved and soaked them up with inquisitive intensity. He was a gifted bridge player, an interest he shared with Philip, and was a member of the Queensland Youth Team at the Australian National Championships. He adored good food especially gelati and pizza. Patricia told us that just last week Richard suddenly announced to her "... Mum I don't think I could ever live in Brisbane!" In horror, she replied "Why not?" "Because", he said, "there aren't any decent pizza places here. I

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mean it..!" While a student in Lugano, it seems he went to every pizza restaurant in town in order to find the best one. He loved Art House films, particularly foreign films. And good literature of course – he was half way through reading Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. And of course, he adored his bicycle.

Philip and Patricia both comment on this enthusiasm: *"Unlike most children of my generation"* says Philip, *"he did not cycle much as a child, but, since moving to Melbourne from Lugano, he developed a passion for cycling. He continued this to his next home in Tel Aviv. On his recent return to Brisbane - here to play as soloist with the Queensland Symphony Orchestra - he was so excited to see his new bicycle waiting for him. He felt so happy on the bike, spoke so enthusiastically about cycling and how free he felt while riding. In Melbourne he cycled every day from South Melbourne along the coastal path all the way past St Kilda and sometimes all the way on to the end of the coast."*

Patricia continues:

*"We took the tram down to St Kilda on our last weekend together, as he wanted to show me how beautiful it was – and we had a lovely gelati there of course."*

*Richard loved nature and the sea in particular; we always went on holidays by the sea and he was so happy there. He even came with us well past the time when children go on holidays with their parents! Only last year, he was with us at our favourite house at Currimundi, right on the oceanfront. He would go for long walks and runs, sit by the ocean and contemplate or read a book. At home he would always go outside in the garden for breaks and to eat daytime meals – he just loved it."*

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## MUSIC

Along with his family, his sustaining love, of course, was music. Here was something that held infinite layers of meaning; such that even if granted multiple lifetimes, he would no doubt still find fertile ground for discovery. His genetic endowment ensured his talent but more importantly, the nurture provided by his gifted and devoted parents confirmed the central position that music was to hold in his life.

Of course, it was hard to escape music in the Pollett household and from the word go it became an integral part of his life. From the beginning he attended many concerts, especially those given by the Perihelion ensemble, where he would sit quietly with Philip watching his mum play.

Again I quote Patricia:

*“It was inevitable for him to learn music in our household. He started violin at five years of age, studying with Diane Palmer, an ex-student of mine. She made it fun; her youth and enthusiasm helped to instil a genuine love for music. Her materials were exceptional - she made colourful books with stickers and imaginative games and activities. We wanted only that he love music and did not push it too much. At 8, he wanted to stop playing because he didn't want to practice. I let him know that the pieces were perhaps not that exciting at this level and could he continue for one more year - if after that time he still didn't want to go on, he could stop. He continued and we never heard another word about it.”*

*“Richard's second mum, Shelly, became his violin teacher in high school and with this love, nourishment, support and expert tuition came a real understanding of playing the violin. She encouraged him to enter the National Youth Concerto Competition when he was really not that advanced and it was the perfect challenge for him. He worked harder than he had ever done before and in year 12, it changed his view of his future. Also gifted at mathematics like his father, there was also some possibility he might go down this track, but after playing with the QYS he was hooked. He was at St Peter's Lutheran College at this time and we were amazed by their incredible support. I never forget one day picking him up from school at 3pm. He got in the car and said: “Mum, I went straight to the music block when you dropped me off at 8 o'clock and stayed there all day, never left – just practiced and came back here to the car park!” He had waggged all lessons! There were some repercussions of course but they did everything to nurture his talent.”*

Shelly recalls a pivotal point in Richard's musical development. They were preparing for the YPA competition. She knew that his growing maturity as a musician meant that he needed a particular challenge. Richard had been listening to the Shostakovich String Quartets and inspired by this, Shelly took a gamble and suggested the Shostakovich 1st Violin Concerto. This towering work might have been seen as inappropriate to a lesser intellect but it was perfect timing for Richard. He devoured it, revelling in its sophistication and intensity. This work revealed in him an understanding that is rare particularly in one so young.

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Philip remarks upon this quality:

*“Richard really does “get it” in a way that many well-known musicians do not. Moments in his performances have touched people in a way that will remain with them forever. I have heard his colleagues and teachers say that his performances are their favourites. He understood the essence of things: colour in music, depth in literature, poetry and visual art, texture in food, the wind in his hair, the sea, silence, reflection.”*

Of course those who heard him play could not help but share Philip’s observation. But as well as a wonderful musician, his resourcefulness provided ingenious solutions to problems that may have daunted others. A wonderful example arose last year when he returned to Australia to compete in Symphony Australia’s YPA competition. Following a scooter accident, he was left with his left hand pinky finger in a splint. A less creative violinist would have withdrawn from the event. Not Richard! He re-fingered the entire first round program in order to accommodate his injury and then, when selected for the second stage, repeated the process for the entire Samuel Barber concerto, his unusually long fingers enabling him to span the testing 10ths with just his 1st and 3rd digits. How he managed to play the furious finale with such a handicap is anyone’s guess. It justifiably earned him a standing ovation from the adjudication panel.

Richard didn’t fuss over trivial things – for him, time was precious and was meant for the important things in life - he taught Patricia how to save time with hanging out and folding the washing. He was frugal (he always bought ‘Home Brand’) but valued fine things. For example it was important to always drink from the

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right glass or use the correct utensil. Except for movies, Seinfeld and the cricket, he didn’t watch much TV and he didn’t like Facebook.

Philip puts it succinctly:

*“He epitomised the qualities that I most admire in others: his generosity of spirit, his dedication and hard work, a deep understanding of man’s creations, his love of simple pleasures, the balance in his life, and the need and ability to make the lives of others richer.”*

## MAKING SENSE

In coming to terms with this tragedy, I know that all of us, at some time over the past week, have entertained the thought that at the heart of this tragedy is the loss of extraordinary promise, unfulfilled. There is no doubt that Richard was destined for great things. That his talent would have enriched the cultural and spiritual life of this country is certain. His life had so much momentum that it dragged others in its tow and now graces those of us who are left behind.

It will also continue in a practical way through the establishment of The Richard Pollett Memorial Award, which has been set up in conjunction with the Australian Youth Orchestra. I draw your attention to the flyer inside your booklet and encourage you to give generously. I mentioned at the beginning that Patricia and Philip provided me with anecdotes and loving memories in helping me weave this garland for Richard. Especially touching were their earliest recollections of Richard - in particular their

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reference to the eyes of their newborn child. They were drawn to the intensity of his gaze, noting that from the very beginning, he seemed to manifest deliberateness, a seriousness that was to be a feature of his maturity.

This drew to my mind a poem by the German poet Friedrich Rückert written following the pre-mature deaths of his own children - he wrote 425 poems of grief in the 6 months following his own tragedy - and later set by Mahler in his *Kindertotenlieder*.

In Rückert's verse, he too focuses upon the gaze of the child - a token that ensnares the heart.

*Now I see well why with such dark flames  
your eyes sparkled so often.*

*O your eyes, it was as if in one full glance  
you could concentrate your entire power.*

*Yet because blind fate wove mists about me,  
I did not realize that this beam of light was  
ready to be sent home to that place whence  
all beams come.*

*You would have told me with your brilliance:  
And we would gladly have stayed near you!  
But it is refused by Fate.*

*Set your gaze upon us, for soon we will be far away!  
What to you are only eyes in these days -  
in future nights shall be stars to us.*

