

## Hesped for Laura Wiley

Rabbi Brant Rosen

June 20, 2007

Laura's mother Janice tells a wonderful story about when Laura was in the third grade. Her teacher was arranging the seating and asked the class to list the three people they'd most like to sit next to. Inevitably, Laura, was the overwhelming number one choice. This is not too surprising, of course: anyone who knew Laura knows she had this natural inner radiance, this *something* that simply drew people to her. *We all* wanted to sit next to Laura.

It was more than simple charisma: Laura seemed to just be born with an innate gift of empathy, a natural spirit of what we call in Hebrew *hachnasat orchim* - openness to the other. There was just something about Laura that made people want to speak to her, to talk with her, to tell her their stories, to share their lives with her, to talk openly of their trials and their triumphs. This was largely so because Laura was such a naturally brilliant listener. She was genuinely interested in hearing your story. When you spoke with Laura, she would inevitably fix you with that direct gaze of hers and she would be totally present. She invariably knew all the right questions to ask, and when you answered, she *really, truly* listened.

David mentioned to me that this would become something of a running joke during Laura's hospital and hospice stays: even when Laura was in bed and far from feeling her best, everyone, the doctors, the nurses, the orderlies, the technicians would inevitably open up to her about their lives. This was Laura's gift: a deep and abiding empathy, and a profound appreciation for the sanctity of other people's stories. This gift was perhaps the most sacral aspect of the work she and David created together at APTP: their abiding love for the stories of the young people they worked with, the stories they elicited during the process of creating their productions, the stories they shared with the world through their plays. Being open to the essence of others people's journeys and respecting their inner power, this was truly the secret to Laura Wiley's soul and her life's work.

For many of us, we find our work somewhat arbitrarily - there often is something of a separation between who we are and what we happen to do. This was most certainly not the case with Laura: her work and her life were one and the same, they were intimately intertwined and she never took either lightly. In truth, Laura didn't do *anything* lightly. One of Laura's inner gifts was her abiding seriousness - the intensity and purpose with which she lived her life. Anyone who knew Laura easily knew this - that she had very high standards for herself and for those around her. David puts it very well: "Laura expected everything to be full of meaning."

There were some things in life that Laura just couldn't tolerate: number one was injustice, but close behind was anything that was hollow, or not as filled with meaning as it could be. Laura couldn't abide by falseness or even worse, an unearned sense of community. APTP participants know this attribute of Laura's all too well. She didn't let you get away with anything easily. Laura had a variety of familiar catch phrases whenever she sought the core, the essence from you: "Be specific!" "But, why?"

I know this quality of hers from personal experience as well. To be honest, I rarely had a congregant or student at JRC with such gratifyingly high standards as Laura. Especially when she was studying for her adult Bat Mitzvah here at JRC, she sought and fought endlessly to discover for herself the inner meaning of this process, of her Torah portion, of the Jewish rituals she was learning. And she didn't let me get away with a trick. "What does this prayer mean?" "How can I understand this?" "But, why?" Her prayer book was absolutely crammed

full of notes and scribbles and Post Its. In the end, we diagrammed her service much the way she would block out one of her productions - with this incredible inner sense of purpose and intention. And in the end, of course, Laura was absolutely right: her Bat Mitzvah truly was a wonderful and joyous event, not least of which was that everyone present experienced it as a moment of *sacred meaning*.

These high standards were certainly the secret to the brilliant work that Laura and David did at APTP. As David put it, especially in recent years, she "performed without a net" in her work. She often operated with nothing but the faith that others would come along, inspired by her vision and her passion. And invariably, she was never disappointed. Because along with her high standards, Laura was able to instill an innate sense of trust in those around her. Truly, Laura held nothing back - and if you were a member of her immediate family, her APTP family, her community, her circle, in the end, you were almost always lifted up by her example. This was another one of Laura's true gifts to us all: her insistence upon honesty; her constant, passionate quest for meaning in the world.

You may have noticed that up until now I've been referring to "Laura" and "Laura and David" almost interchangeably. This is unavoidable, really. Though I'm trying here to honor Laura, the individual, in the end, it really is impossible to speak of Laura without David. I don't think any of us have ever seen soul mates with the kind of inner synchronicity, with the shared sense of passion and purpose as David and Laura. I asked David just yesterday, how would he describe their complementary traits - their yin and their yang? Very tellingly, he thought for just a moment, then he smiled and sort of threw up his hands, and said, "You know there really wasn't any."

And it's true - Laura and David, while certainly amazing and accomplished individuals in their own right, were that rare couple that *as a couple* really became one. It sounds almost sacrilegious to suggest it, but there were times that the two of them worked together with such commonness of purpose, that they almost seemed to meld together and become one single, living organism. In truth, it's just impossible to imagine of Laura without David, her *bashert*, her fated, life partner in every way.

David, I think I can safely speak for those of us who did not know you and Laura during the years when you first met at Yale School of Drama: boy, would so many of us have loved to have witnessed *that!* What we all wouldn't give to be a fly on the wall and see the two of you actually meet and feel that powerful, immediate mutual connection - to see that instant synchronicity blossom into life. To see you discover each other's *bashert*, to overhear your first conversations about art and drama and social justice, about the sorry state of non-profit theater in the United States, about all that needed changing and upheaval and transformation in our country and the world. To witness the beginnings of this remarkable life that you built together and the birth of APTP, which was, in its way, as much an expression of your love for each other as it was an expression of your love for theater and your love for community.

As Laura commented in "Beauty Rises," that wonderful WTTW documentary that featured her work, Laura and David's life together and their work together really were one and the same - and at the end of the day, it would have been fruitless to try and tease out those two strands from one another. Of course not every couple can or should work professionally together - the fact is that most of us probably shouldn't - but together, Laura and David embodied for us what it means for two life partners to truly share their passion and purpose together. To inspire each other by their common convictions, and in so doing, to create something precious and truly lasting.

The presence of so many APTP students and alumni here today is a profound testimony to the extended family that the two of you have created together. In the end, your inspiration of one another has, in turn, been an inspiration to your community. You are a patriarch and matriarch *par excellence* for so many. Together, your presence, your guidance, your passion - and most crucially, love for the children of Albany Park - have had a transformative effect in this community - and I know your APTP family would fervently agree with

this. David, in Laura you discovered someone who shared your abiding belief in the intersection of theater and community and social justice – your love for each other *and* your love for your purpose in life has inspired all.

Of particular inspiration to me was Laura's love and appreciation of her Judaism, something I think that was instilled in her from very early on in her upbringing. Laura had what we call a *neshama* – a burning Jewish soul. She identified proudly and unabashedly as a Jew, and I think her attraction to her religion was a natural outgrowth of some of the things I've already mentioned: her love of ritual, her desire to live a life with meaning, her passion for creating community and for what we call *Tikkun Olam*: healing the world. David reports that just before they got married, she insisted that they join a congregation and, to JRC's eternal good fortune, we became that community for them. Laura was the kind of congregant every rabbi dreams of: someone who seeks a serious Jewish attachment, who looks to their inherited tradition to help inform their spiritual journey. In a very short time, Laura and David have become important and beloved members of our congregational community: in our Shabbat minyan, in our learning community, and in our social justice community.

It often occurred to *me* that Laura's respect of her Jewishness sprang from the same place that served her so well in her role at APTP. Albany Park is a rich and diverse ethnic and religious community – and an integral part of Laura's work was her deep and natural respect for the various cultures around her: be they Latinos or Asians, Palestinians, or Eastern Europeans. Laura understood, I think, that one's cultural heritage was a deeply profound aspect of our respective stories and journeys. In the end, I think, Laura's love for diverse cultures and her love for her own inherited culture, sprang from the very same source.

Of course, Laura has been a teacher to us in other ways as well, though it is not a role she ever would have chosen willingly. But since her diagnosis of ovarian cancer in 2003, she modeled for us how to face the truth of a devastating illness with grace, strength, smarts, and humor. In so many ways, Laura lived with her cancer the way she lived her life: with an uncompromising realism and honesty – with a respect for the truth of this particular and unique journey. At times, Laura modeled a spiritual openness to her illness that was often breathtaking to behold. In "Beauty Rises," this is what Laura has to say about her diagnosis:

*"A lot of people asked me when I first got sick, 'God aren't you angry? Are you questioning why, you know, why did this happen, why did this happen to you? Are you questioning God?' But if I have to ask the question, 'Why me? Why did I get cancer?' then I also have to ask 'Why me, why did I get to meet David and fall in love with him? Why do I get to do work that is so enjoyable? I'd have to ask, 'Why me? Why do I have the financial means to have health insurance when 45 million Americans don't have health insurance, and for whom a diagnosis like cancer would be catastrophic beyond belief?'"*

This quote is classic Laura: cutting to the core of the issue. And she is right, of course. It's OK to ask why. There's no shame in asking why. In fact, we *should* ask why. It was, after all, one of Laura's favorite questions. But if we choose to do so, we *cannot* do so selectively. If we ask why the world is often filled with so much sorrow, then we will also have to ask ourselves why is it also filled with so much joy? Because if we are really going to be intellectually honest – and you know Laura would want us to – then we will have to admit that our sorrow and our joy really are two sides of the same coin. At the end of the day, one is meaningless without the other.

It must also be said that if Laura was our role model for facing illness with grace and meaning, then David and Janice were truly our teachers in the art of support and abundant, unconditional love. In truth, Laura would not have been able to face down her cancer in this fashion if not for you. David and Janice: again, though this was never a role you ever, ever would have wanted for yourselves, please know that your support has inspired so many, many people – of course not least of which was Laura herself. And whatever comfort there is to be found in this terribly painful time must certainly be found in the knowledge that Laura's last years and months and days you were her fellow travelers on her journey – one that was made infinitely more bearable and yes, filled with meaning, because it was filled with your ever-presence, your warmth, and your abiding love.

It is so painfully difficult to imagine a world without Laura Wiley - difficult because she was such a powerful and ready presence in our lives. Laura was one of those rare people who lived life with such purpose, such honesty, such intention - and she was so very willing and open with all of these attributes. One way or another we have all been touched and transformed by Laura's presence. It is so very hard not to feel robbed that we did not get more of Laura - and to feel a deep sadness that her inner light did not have opportunity to blaze on for many, many more years.

Truly, this is a sadness that I share with all of you. In truth, I was not just Laura's rabbi - Laura was one of those JRC members whom I also considered to be a very dear friend. Those of us who love Laura are experiencing an enormous loss at this moment - but even in the midst of our loss, I can't help but hear Laura's reminder to us all: to seek out meaning, to honor the *all* of life - not only the pain but also the joy that is so intimately imbedded within it. To affirm that no matter what, there is purpose in this world and it is our task to seek it out, to reveal it, to celebrate it, and ultimately, to perpetuate it.

Laura lives in all of us even now - and it is now our sacred duty to make her memory to remain a transforming blessing in our world. To allow all that was good and real and right and true about her life and to embody this in the way we live our own lives. If we can truly find the wherewithal to do this, then in the end there is no loss - there is only meaning. And anyone who knows Laura knows that she would have wanted it this way.

We offer our blessings of healing and condolence to Laura's family. Janice: the first thing we must say to you is thank you. We thank you for giving us Laura. Those of us who know you know all too well that much of what we love about Laura were bequeathed to her by you. Laura clearly came by her gifts honestly. And we would be remiss if we did not note that she had a wonderful and very special relationship with her father Sylvan, whose blessed memory we honor at this time as well.

Janice, as much as Laura was an inspiration for so many of us, it must be said that you were also hers. We cannot underestimate the daunting challenge of parenting one such as Laura - and we can only imagine what it must have been like especially during her rebellious teenage years. But your ever-present love and support for Laura was so clearly precious to her, during her entire life. To you and to Dana, please know that you have our pledge of love and support during the coming days and years as well.

And to David, this is our blessing for you: no matter where this new journey may lead, please know that there are so many who are ready and proud to take this journey with you. We know that Laura will continue to inspire you, to guide you, to help point the way. One way or another, on a very important level it will *always* be David and Laura. How could it be otherwise? To paraphrase the quote from Einstein that we heard read earlier in our service: may you always realize how much your own inner and outer life is built upon Laura's - and may your life's work continue to return as much as you have received and are still receiving.

*Adonai oz le'amo yiten, adonai yivarech et amo ba'shalom.* May the blessing of Laura's life give us strength, may beauty of her memory bring us peace.

May hard times come no more.

And let us say, Amen.