

## MELISSA

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Paul G. Sittenfeld

Some of you here tonight may not be aware that a tap dancing academy existed on Grandin Road in the early 1990's. Convenor, hostess, cheerleader and active participant was Melissa Emery Lanier. As a child, she had had limited but occasional opportunity to try her hand, or her feet, at tap dancing. When, in her fifties, she met a young woman who turned out to be a local tap dance teacher, the yearning returned. With her foyer as the setting, and characteristically figuring if it was worth doing it was worth sharing, she assembled her group: then daughter-in-law, Elizabeth, along with grandsons, Taylor, Asher and Addison; a neighbor, Henry Trounstine, who had a life-long infatuation with song and dance; former University of Cincinnati Medical School Dean and Literarian Stanley Troup; her African-American housekeeper Doris Wilkins; her friends Betsy Sittenfeld and ten-year-old Josephine Sittenfeld; and, as a ringer, the recently retired President of the College of Mount Saint Joseph, Sister Jean Patrice Harrington, who had a far more extensive background in tap than was initially disclosed. The group met regularly, arguably faithfully, for scheduled lessons until her husband's justifiable concern about damage to the wooden floor in the large entryway of their home put an end to a two-year adventure.

I am especially fond of this story because I think it exemplifies much of what made Melissa Lanier remarkable: a mix of humor, whimsy, energy, detail and inclusiveness. I was prompted to choose her as a topic tonight because I would warrant that hers is a life of some historic consequence during the second half of the 20th century in Cincinnati and I fear what she represented might be lost. She believed in this community and in the diverse groups of people that comprise it. Her deeds even more than her words and her spirit even more than her deeds exemplify the attitude which will be required if this community is to regain its sense of soul and its sense of self.

She was as interested and as engaged as anyone I have ever met. She served as a trustee on more than three-dozen area boards . . . ranging from little known neighborhood activities to major institutions. Unusual as the quantity of her involvement may seem, what was significant was the substantive commitment which she offered to each organization. She invested herself deeply not only in the goals of the organizations but also in her fellow volunteers and, in a direct and extraordinarily personalized manner, in the people served by each group. She believed every person had a story to tell and her quick mind and kind heart encouraged people to believe in themselves and to share the best of what there was about them. There was nothing Melissa would not do: no task too insignificant and no worthy objective outside her willingness to lend a hand. She extended herself not only to institutions but also to their constituencies and she did so in a consistently hands on way... with a smile, a call or a visit. She was analytical enough to see the big picture and admirably qualified at the level of strategic planning. However, as a consequence of her sympathetic perspective, she understood the critical importance of personal interaction. She connected well with people of all ages.

It is said of some that they are born on second base and think they have hit a double. Melissa was born on third base, at least, and was well aware of it. She spoke occasionally and ambivalently about what she referred to as "the Emery Mystique" and would describe a phenomenon which she found perplexing. After acquaintances learned about her social and financial background, they were often surprised or impressed that she was spontaneously kind to or interested in them. "Can you imagine," she would ask, "that I'd get credit simply for being civilized because I was born to privilege?" Yet it would be impossible to describe her background and her upbringing as anything other than privileged.

Melissa was the granddaughter of Charles Dana Gibson, the noted illustrator and Gibson Girl creator, who married into the Langhorn family of Virginia. That branch of the Langhorns ginned up a good deal of money through the reconstruction of the railroads after the Civil War. Her maternal great-grandfather subsequently purchased Mirador, a suitable home, he thought, from which his five daughters could be introduced to appropriate husbands. Each of the girls was blessed with some blend of good looks, good brains, and good equestrian skills. Melissa's grandmother, Ollie, married Gibson and another sister, her great-aunt Nancy, the most famous, married Waldorf Astor and became the first woman to be elected to Parliament. It was she who participated in the fabled exchange with Sir Winston Churchill. Apparently Lady Astor and Churchill irritated one another and on one occasion, she said to him: "If you were my husband, I should poison your tea." To which Churchill is said to have responded, "If I were your husband, I should drink it!"

Melissa's paternal great-grandfather, Thomas Emery, was a riverfront broker here in Cincinnati who started with nothing and ended with much. At the landing, he brokered materials coming up and down the river. One of his sons, also named Thomas, and his wife Mary lost both of their children to illnesses and, subsequent to Thomas's death, Mary Emery along with Anna Sinton Taft became a defining patron of the arts in early 20th century Cincinnati. Among other things, she planned and paid for Mariemont. John, Melissa's grandfather, married late in life and sired five children one of whom, Audrey, married Grand Duke Dmitri, cousin of Russian Czar Nicholas II. John Josiah, Melissa's father, known as Jack, was another child. A graduate of Groton and Harvard, he added to the substantial wealth into which he'd been born. In 1929 and 1930, the Emerys built Peterloon: a handsome estate, surrounded by 1300 acres in what now is a combination of Montgomery and Indian Hill. Summers were spent at the family island in Maine and, both in Cincinnati and Maine, servants, literally liveried, were everywhere and governesses provided onsite education. Melissa had two sisters and a brother, as well as a half sister and a half brother from her mother's first marriage.

Near the end of her life, Melissa wrote an essay for her literary group in which she noted: "Our generation of children listened a lot; watched a lot. That was what was expected of us. We were supposed to spend many years of absorbing before we would be ready to discern. I do not remember any time as a child where anyone asked my opinion. We were supposed to know that opinions developed slowly from experiences filtered through eyes, ears and mind . . . stored, aged, and ripened to become full-blown convictions in grown-ups."

After years of home tutoring, she had a stint at Hillsdale and then went to boarding school at Foxcroft. She entered Bryn Mawr College but dropped out for both romantic and realistic reasons. She had found a guy she liked and she was pregnant.

Her marriage to Addison, a young lawyer from Danville, Kentucky, and a Washington and Lee graduate, appeared to reward her as fully as it mystified others. He was bright; intermittently haughty and pompous; religious and, having lost his father early and with a mother who suffered from chronic depression, enormously interested in their three sons and daughter. Melissa admired Addison's mother tremendously: Mamu's direct and forthright manner.

Clearly, all the pieces were in place to offer promise of a good adult life to Melissa: deep pockets; far ranging and well-placed connections; a commitment to culture; and access to the best in educational opportunities. If Cincinnati had an aristocracy, Melissa was born into it. Enough generations of enough money had passed that the taste and refinement matched the financial resources.

When I first met Melissa in the early '70's, I was struck by her intelligence. She was intelligent. Indeed, she was very intelligent. However, what distinguished her mind was the breadth and the depth and the unquenchable nature of her curiosity. As one of her sons, Addison, has said, she felt that, in having been so sheltered and insulated, she had grown up somewhat culturally disadvantaged and she spent all of her adult life compensating: wanting to see and feel and understand how the other person, the other age, the other gender, the other race, the other religion, the other ethnicity, the other political perspective put the pieces together.

What energized her to enjoy unconflictedly all the benefits which randomly came her way while resonating heartily to any and every imaginable setting? She was so thoroughly at home with everyone, that everyone felt immediately comfortable with her. Physically, she had a commanding presence. Taller than average, with dark blonde hair and pale blue eyes: always animated, taking it all in. Not heavy, not slight but substantial. Her Hermes blouses fit her neither better nor worse than her well-worn jeans. London and St. Moritz were favorite destinations, but no more so than Over-the-Rhine or Danville, Kentucky.

Although a lifelong registered Republican, she considered every candidate and every issue individually. Political correctness didn't much interest her and didn't even capture her attention. She read voraciously, retained much and wrote well.

Arguably, as many people knew and liked her as any private citizen in this community. They knew her as a customer at Kroger and at small kosher grocery stores; as a member at the Cincinnati Country Club and also as a member at Camargo Club. They knew her at Catholic retreat centers where she prayed and renewed her spirit; at Hebrew Union College where she was more actively engaged as a volunteer than any non Jewish person in the community; and at several Episcopal churches - Church of the Redeemer, Indian Hill Church, the Church of Our Savior, and Christ Church Cathedral all of which she belonged to at one time or another. She was a regular at the May Festival and at gospel sings as well. She was a long time subscriber to The Cincinnati Herald and The American Israelite because she wanted to know what was timely and relevant in the African-American and Jewish communities. They knew her at St. Margaret Hall and

Marjorie P. Lee and Wesley Hall and an endless range of other geriatric facilities where she delighted in sharing one-on-one time with the elderly. That interest stimulated our annual series of egg salad sandwich luncheons at Peterloon which allowed people cooped up in institutional settings to go for a walk in the country sunshine.

One June afternoon in 1994, Melissa was passing chocolate chip cookies to a large group of elderly people assembled in the massive drawing room of Peterloon. One of the guests, a recent Russian émigré with a distinct accent said to the waitress: "This house. It is huge. Where did these people get all of this money?" Melissa smiled at the tiny lady and pointed to me; my own tray was filled with glasses of iced tea. She said: "It's a good question. Why don't you ask him?" Over Melissa's shoulder, as she retreated to the kitchen to get another batch of cookies, hung her life-size portrait as a child, done by grandfather Charles Dana Gibson.

While Melissa didn't relish controversy, she didn't shy from it. When AIDS surfaced as a critical concern in this city as it had everywhere, civic leaders agreed that a Hospice for AIDS patients was necessary and appropriate. Consensus was easily reached that the Hospice should exist: the only other absolute agreement was that it should be in someone else's neighborhood and certainly not in one's own. When Roselawn was determined to be the most appropriate locus, Melissa took it upon herself to walk day after day, week after week, to and from homes, commercial establishments, and small synagogues to explain to residents and business people alike what an AIDS Hospice would be; why it was coming; why it would not be threatening either to real estate values or health conditions and why it would make a positive difference. In this instance as in so many, she relied neither on her lineage nor her resources for leverage: often, neither would have helped and her successes were a consequence of her spontaneous and genuine ability to connect comfortably with others.

Her activities ran the broadest possible gamut: from her abiding interests such as music, religion and gardening to new people and new situations about which she had previously known absolutely nothing. She loved life. Eclectic doesn't begin to do her justice.

When a collection of un-catalogued Native American material from the Cincinnati Art Museum was brought to her attention, she paid for the cataloguing. When there was mention of a theater trip for a group of Country Day students to New York, she found the funding. I recently spoke with Betti Hinton, head of Children's Protective Services about her first encounter with Melissa. At that time, Mrs. Hinton, wife of the long time chair of the local NAACP, was directing the Central Community Health Board and looking for money to redecorate the waiting room. As she explained, "Just because my clients were poor was no reason my waiting room had to look as bad as their homes." She found little response from traditional funding sources for painting the walls and stocking the room with games and books, so she scared up names of wealthy people and called them cold. She looked up Melissa's name in the telephone book, called her and said: "I hear you have money. If this idea doesn't sound right to you, go ahead and hang up. We've never met anyway and let's not waste my time or yours." Melissa apparently said that it did sound interesting and she proposed lunch with Betti Hinton. They met and Melissa raised every dollar necessary. This was reflective of Melissa's customary wish to involve herself in a specific and time-defined limited project, meet an objective, interest

and involve others, and then withdraw and move on to the next adventure. She believed strongly in term limits for Board members. . . and the fewer terms the better.

It has been noted that one can accomplish more if one doesn't care who gets credit. One day, in the mid 1970's, Melissa called to report that, by chance, she had been seated next to a young woman on a plane coming from New York to Cincinnati. The young woman had terminated a pregnancy the previous day which was the consequence of a relationship with a young man who no longer had any interest in her. Her decision had caused her parents to distance themselves from her as well. Intuitive by nature and trusting of her intuition, Melissa sensed promise in the young woman and wanted to facilitate her future without humbling her. She had secured the young woman's name, but had not given her own and asked, as I did, that I call the woman and offer financial support for her to go on to college and the career in nursing she had hoped to pursue. I contacted the young woman, explained that resources for her education were anonymously available, and watched from a distance over the next four years as a career in nursing was launched. I have to admit I felt myself to be a modest version of Michael Anthony, the courier in the 1950's television series "The Millionaire" in which unsuspecting people are the recipients of unexpected and sometimes life-changing generosity.

Melissa was at her best meeting people. She had the capacity, to make each person feel he brought something interesting to the table and she relished bringing together people she felt would enjoy or at least should enjoy each other. A Club member, Gibby Carey, once noted that, as he expressed it, "being scooped up" by Melissa as a newcomer to the City was about the best thing that could possibly happen to anyone. She introduced people whose interests were similar or complementary and launched them on their way. She wanted compatriots to share each journey and entertained, seemingly effortlessly and unendingly, in groups ranging from two for lunch to a hundred and two for dinner. The gatherings were more interesting than cozy, more challenging than comfortable. She cooked most everything herself and exemplified Martha Stewart's imaginative creativity without the attitude. I met more people through Melissa than through anyone else I've known in my life. When I encountered Katherine Murray, wife of dance class baron Arthur Murray, in the Lanier's dining room a decade ago, it was the first time I had seen Mrs. Murray since she appeared inside my family's nine-inch television set in our Kansas City, Missouri, library in 1957.

If Melissa cooked without recipes, similarly she entertained without design. She put together the damndest mix of people figuring if they didn't know each other, they'd be better off if they did; if they didn't enjoy each other, they should figure out why; and if they didn't learn from each other, they were missing a fine opportunity. She loved putting it together and shaking it up toward no real end other than the pleasure and the horizon-expanding possibilities that getting beyond what is today referred to as one's comfort zone might afford.

In 1973, my wife and I were invited to a Passover Seder and, as Passover began to draw closer the following year, our invitation was not repeated. I mentioned this to Melissa and she suggested that her family and ours undertake our own Seder. Never one to do things halfway, in subsequent years, she took courses in the intricacies of Seder desserts which, among other details, must be confections without flour. She began

freezing chicken and turkey bones months in advance so she might prepare her own fresh soup stock and perfected floating Matzo balls. Our guest list, largely clergy of many flavors, changed annually and came to be so ecumenically varied that it made the tap dance class seem homogeneous.

Passover, or at least our celebration of it which continues to this day, represents one of Melissa's most enduring gifts. I, born of Jewish parents, grandparents and great grandparents, had never had a Seder in my own home. Encouraged by my Catholic wife and Melissa who was an Episcopalian, I was made to feel that those aspects of me that were distinct were what made me more rather than less valued. And thus it was with many others.

Melissa so appreciated what made each of us different that we came to be more at ease with ourselves and, consequently, with others. Melissa was reluctant, indeed unwilling to live vicariously. It was a lesson I learned early on when I complimented her on recognition one of her children had received and said that she must feel very proud. She corrected me saying: "I feel pleased but I feel no pride whatsoever . . . it has nothing to do with me and it isn't about me." The same thinking precluded her feeling pride in her forbearers' wealth or position; feeling apologetic or implicated when her husband was petulant or arbitrary; or defensive when her Cincinnati community didn't act as she would have wished. She seemed to figure that all she could be accountable for was herself and, for that one person, she took total responsibility. This included when she messed up. Despite our very regular communication, which covered many more days than not for nearly thirty years, I was stunned when her four children told me she was struggling with alcoholism. I told them I was quite certain they were mistaken, only to learn she indeed did suffer a serious drinking problem and, subsequently, went to assorted inpatient and outpatient programs, with varying degrees of success, to deal with the issue.

In 1992, our then eleven-year-old daughter Jo was alone in the Lanier kitchen helping Melissa prepare for that year's Seder which was several hours away. Melissa passed out and gashed her head, causing Jo to call 911. Melissa entered a rehab program the next day. Poignantly, on Easter, several days later, she wrote Josephine: "I've never missed a Seder before. That really hurt me to miss such an important celebration." She wasn't a perfect person.

I must acknowledge that, as I reflected on possible topics for my first Literary Club paper, my apprehension was and perhaps still is breaching the privacy and the bounds of a relationship I valued and continue to value enormously. I decided that the risk was worth taking. Simply said, I am persuaded that much of what Cincinnati wants to be and is not is encapsulated in the life and the lessons of Melissa Emery Lanier. There is a greater danger in forgetting her significant legacy than in revealing some of the flaws which made her so real and so complete.

Melissa waged a battle with ovarian cancer for several years before she died at age 66. She insisted that, although certainly she never wanted such an ailment, she gained from it and grew from it. She lost her hair three different times and amused herself at her evolving stylishness in wearing wigs and baseball caps. Indeed, the wife of a member of this Club knitted a cap for her which she cherished. She especially valued, in any and all settings, the gift of one's self.

Her funeral took place on the last Saturday of October in 1999, a crisp, clear and sunny morning. Christ Church Cathedral in Cincinnati was filled and then some, as friend and family gathered to acknowledge a death and to celebrate a life. The crowd was both conspicuous in its size and remarkable in its diversity. By age, by gender, by race, by religion, by educational accomplishments and professional successes, by sexual orientation and geographic derivation, it was the kind of representative coming together which communities seek and seldom attain. Few were present out of a sense of obligation and the vast majority were there to deal with their own sense of personal loss. Later that day, the immediate family accompanied Melissa to Danville, Kentucky, where she was buried. I found myself: quite coincidentally, that same late afternoon at a regular Mass at the Church of the Good Shepherd in suburban Symmes Township. The Mass, borderline Evangelical, attracted more than 1000 parishioners. The priest, Michael Graham, now serving as the President of Xavier University, after a thoughtful homily and in a setting in which few if any of those present had ever met or even heard of Melissa Lanier, concluded by saying:

"I lost a friend this week and not just me, but many people lost a friend this week. Indeed I think humanity as a whole lost a very great friend this week. I came to know her because I was her history teacher, although eventually she became my teacher in matters far subtler and more important than mere history. I doubt that I will ever know someone more gifted and graceful than she in elevating and enlivening everyone with whom she came in contact, and investing herself so completely in everyone she met that you became a better person somehow because of the warmth of her smile, the sparkle of her wit and in her eyes. Given the circumstances of her birth and breeding, she might have grown up unimpressed by almost anybody but she was deeply impressed with nearly everybody. She might have always lorded her position and her place over people in general, but nothing could have been further from her mind and from her heart. She never felt the need to prove a thing to anyone -- except that the world was a wonderful place, although full of need, and wouldn't you, wonderful person that you are, like to help her put a little bit more of it to rights? Other than that, she had nothing whatsoever that she needed to prove to anybody."

Father Graham was right. Melissa didn't feel the need to impress people, and yet in spite of herself: she had created an impressive resume. She played a founding role in three organizations: Stepping Stones Center for the Handicapped; The Hyde Park Center for Older Adults; and Caracole, the hospice for AIDS patients. In addition to being recognized by The Cincinnati Enquirer as a Woman of the Year, she was honored with the highest awards from the Greater Cincinnati Foundation and the National Conference for Community and Justice, and with an honorary degree from Xavier University.

Indeed, after raising her own four children, and then past the age of 50, Melissa had enrolled at Xavier University while a Trustee of the School and completed both an undergraduate degree and then a master's degree in history. As a continuing education student, she was a friend and confidante to fellow students, who were younger than her own children. A number of her female classmates named an annually awarded prize for her.

In general, she avoided recognition, often turning down these honors the first time they were offered to her and, later accepting, when persuaded that role modeling might

perpetuate some of her own values and priorities. Melissa once said of herself, "I hesitate to say that I can build bridges, but I think I can touch hands." In preparing this paper, I spoke to a retired faculty member from Cincinnati Country Day School who taught Mark, Melissa's youngest son. The teacher characterized her as having a "huge sense of fun. The corners of her mouth would go up. She was never malicious but she took delight in the gentle comedy all of humanity was playing out together." Meanwhile, Sister Mary Stanton, a Sister of Mercy and longtime leader of Bethany House, remembers her as "genuine and substantial. When she took your hand, you knew she meant it! Her hands were rough. She could have afforded a yard full of lotion but she didn't care." I didn't imagine how profoundly Melissa's death, four years ago this week, would continue to affect me. It was, I suppose, a sort of sibling relationship. I knew I loved her and I knew I liked her. It's the unexpected thoughts or events which trigger the sense of loss. When I read an article she would like. When I'm not sure if cumin or turmeric would better enhance the recipe. When somebody new moves to Cincinnati. When I find a fun place in a different part of town to try breakfast. Not when I send appreciated securities as a gift to Princeton University nor when I order flowers for a friend's birthday. Rather, when I extend myself to someone I scarcely know for no good reason, with no particular wish to see the person again, and with no wish or hope that there's anything in it for me simply because it's the best lesson she taught me, it's when I miss her most, it's when I feel most in touch with her and because it's what she would have done.

Although I hope I have given you some sense of what Melissa meant to me and what I believe she meant to our community, I have not mentioned a particular detail about her. She was often running late, which was perhaps an unsurprising result of trying to cram too much into most days. On a cold February day, in 1972, I stood in a lunch line prior to my first board meeting of the Babies Milk Fund. The woman in front of me, noteworthy at that point only because I couldn't imagine how someone would come out with just-washed sopping-wet hair in the middle of a wintery day, turned around with a wide smile, extended her hand and said, "Hi. I'm Melissa Lanier and I don't think we've met." She would have done the exact same thing regardless of who was in line in back of her. I'm glad it was I.

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