

## **On human horror, human nobility and Rosemary Taylor**

**Brian McGowran**

*"Governments & politicians will never save this world with bombs & missiles but maybe the small daily efforts of little people, working everywhere without fanfare, may shed a little light & love & promote the creation of a more harmonious world before we reach everywhere the point of no return."*

Thus spake Rosemary Taylor. Those privileged to know her will not be surprised to learn that this was Rosemary speaking and writing, with principles and moral clarity and a marvellous way with words, as she did for more than half a century. One still reads that she was a nurse and/or a nun. The reality was that with a BA degree in English, Latin, Mathematics and Physics and fluent in French, she taught maths and science in Alaska and Canada before plunging into the chaos of 1960s Vietnam. Frustrated by the Australian Council of Churches, rejected by Catholic Relief Services, working out of the big Phu My Orphanage in Saigon, she set about rescuing abandoned and dying babies, saving their lives in four nurseries, restoring their health and placing them in adoption, thousands of them, between 1968 and 1975.

And five of them with us. It was one of those telephone calls that you make quaking at the knees, so much was hanging on it. Susi and I had made enquiries in America about adopting an abandoned baby and the VN Embassy in Washington, experienced and prepared about such matters, had promptly sent us "How to adopt a Vietnamese orphan". That was in 1968 and this was 1971 back in Australia, where the war was big in the media but the abandoned children were not, and there was no helpful leaflet. But we saw in the newspaper that one Miss Rosemary Taylor was briefly back in town to raise funds for her work in Vietnam, we made the phone call, we got the meeting and we got lucky.

Rosemary could deal pleasantly and successfully with Vietnamese and Americans, diplomatic, military, media, civilian. It was not like that in Australia, and she was reluctant to get involved in her homeland. What with the White Australia policy and a vague policy which amounted to "keep them in their culture", Rosemary and we were in unfamiliar territory, and it took nine long months from being given Fiona at two weeks to collecting her. The Head of Adoptions was the redoubtable Miss Louise Johnstone, and she and I (Brian) had form. Government offices on Rundle St housed the Mines Department, in which I ran the Palaeontology laboratories. Occasionally our extremely corrosive acids would eat their way out and down to Social Welfare on the floor below. Precisely where Miss Johnstone was interviewing nervous would-be adopters, this awful brown sludge rolled down the wall; up the stairs and into my office she stormed, truce was negotiated; but in due course we were the couple in that room. Louise had a simple formula for sorting adoption enquiries: "get a kitten, then get back to me". Mostly they didn't. We were different: we already "had" Fiona. Quickly

converted to Rosemary's cause, Louise became a tower of strength and Fiona became her last, proud adoption. But on the very day of Fiona's adoption our beautiful Vanessa succumbed to pneumonia, due probably to an epidemic of the dreaded lung fungus *Pneumocystis carinii*. Precedent established though, Heidi, Lisi and Rosi were processed quickly.

Rosemary attracted funds brilliantly and distributed moneys carefully with utterly minimal managerial costs, focusing on children and their multitudinous needs—survival, health and hygiene and nutrition, education and development, all best done growing in a family which was simply unavailable in Vietnam. She attracted dedicated and competent and brilliant people to her Friends for All Children. We mention but two. Ilse Ewald, Chief Nurse and Medical Administrator, was identified by US pediatricians as the most competent person of her kind in all of SE Asia. If you want numbers, the sickest babies from orphanages with mortality rates in the forties percent were restored in nurseries where Ilse reduced mortality to four or five percent. The friendship and loyalty of Margaret Moses, gifted educator and writer and the ultimate people person, sustained Rosemary through many morale-shattering events. It was our immense privilege and great good fortune to count Ilse and Margaret as our personal friends. Together with four other staff members and 78 of their 228 children, Margaret died in the crash of the Galaxy on April 4th, 1975.

Well, South Vietnam collapsed then, and the incoming communists immediately appealed for help with the thousands of prostitutes and babies whose very existence they had been denying so strenuously whilst placing Rosemary on their vengeance list, but Rosemary had left. She had a couple of years' sabbatical, writing books\* and learning Hebrew, as you do, and returned to SE Asia in 1979. Herself based in Bangkok for 35 years, her efforts running Friends for All Children are felt in Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam and Burma. Opposition is endemic and ranges from governmental sloth, via corruption and simple greed to instances of quite evil malice. Disappointment, discouragement, despair: she plodded on (her standard words!), she never gave up. She kept on supporting such titans of their communities as Sister Elizabeth in Vietnam and Sister Cecile in Cambodia, and we must mention Irene Duarte, fitting successor to Ilse and Margaret, who cops the brunt of the appalling civic culture in Vietnam and who, if she can stand it, is the face of the future FFAC. In 2015 Rosemary closed her office and residence in Bangkok and worked from Adelaide with quick trips to the field for a year or two more. And work was what Rosemary Taylor AM (1938-2019) did, right to the end.

Observant and faithful lifelong, she left us with the typically pithy comment: "The true miracle of Christianity is that it has survived the Church".

Saigon nights. Given to hold a baby in To Am nursery, a dehydrated apathetic scrap of a very few kilos, not really expected to survive the night. But you hold her through the dark hours, and you dare to think she is moving, and then you think she might live, and as the dawn breaks you know that she will live. (And she did.) Another monsoonal night, this time

holding another scrap of humanity in Ilse's trusty Beetle, from deep in the Mekong Delta up to Saigon through all the military traffic, by when you are in love with her and leave her. But spend an hour or two in an impossibly crowded room of infants in an orphanage in Bien Hoa. They are skeletal, they are attempting at six months or less to suck from their bottle by themselves, choking or pneumonia threatening, they are very dirty, they are getting no human physical contact, they are too weak to protest as a baby must. There were orphanage Directors who thanked God for the balance between the output of deaths and the input of new arrivals. For others, death in their homeland was spiritually superior to life in some foreign land. (Show that to the dogooders across the sea wittering about culture and extended family and non-orphan status.) Even so, some survive, and grow, and a dozen of them mob you when you visit them in an orphanage in the Delta. They cling, they beg, they want a family. God, how desperately they want a family. And this five year old clinging beseechingly to my leg has haunted me down the decades.

*\*Turn my eyes away: our children in Vietnam 1967-1975.* Edited by Robert Strobridge with an introduction and comments by Rosemary Taylor, 1976. Friends For All Children, Boulder, Colorado. A brilliant work of catharsis, as powerful now as it was at the time.

*Orphans of war: work with the abandoned children of Vietnam 1967-1975.* Rosemary Taylor in collaboration with Wende Grant, 1988. Collins, London. Intercountry adoption and the crash of the Galaxy still attract those in search of a cause and a scandal. These books are still the definitive rebuttal.

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The photograph is of Rosemary holding Moira, subsequently Rosemary Thi Hoa McGowran, To Am nursery, Saigon, late 1974.

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Brian McGowran was Vice-President of Friends For All Children Australia for several decades. Susi McGowran and Brian McGowran ran the Vietnam Orphans Fund, 1973-1975, including "Sponsor a Cot" in the FFAC nurseries.

Brian wrote the following to get a few things out in the open (and a bit of his own catharsis): McGowran, Brian. The Case for Intercountry Adoption, in Gerry Mullins (ed.), Intercountry Adoption: Papers given at a public seminar held at the University of Adelaide, 9th and 10th July 1977, Adelaide: Department of Adult Education, University of Adelaide, 1977, 3-19.