

O Nobly Born

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IN A FEW SHORT PAGES I shall attempt a summation of a hundred years; a life led with grace and charm, and the power to encourage in others—and to discover in her self—the “possible human.” Were I Laura or Aldous Huxley, I would be able to do this with elegance and style, but I am not so clever or skilled. I am, however, Laura’s devoted friend and humble accomplice, and—with all my heart—I long to share her insights, in some of which I was able to participate. What I have come to know of Laura during these last years deepened our relationship. It could fill a tome. In many ways the measure of our friendship is what is revealed to me about myself. As our bond became more interdependent, so much of my own nature was reflected, not all aspects particularly becoming. Yet, the dying process can engage us in an indescribable dance as we are invited to participate in that profoundly intimate relationship with another human being. If every moment is life’s most important, then there is none that compares to this practice. There may not be any better way to fall in love.

Laura Archera was born in Turin, Italy on November 2, 1911. She possessed a commanding sense of self. Laura was a child prodigy and she practiced her violin six hours each day. She played before the Queen of Italy at fourteen, shortly before she came to America, spurred by the war. Suspicions grew with Fascist rule and her father, Felice Archera, whose mother was Jewish, was put under investigation during Italy's odious racial decrees of 1938. He wired her from Italy not to return. Laura stayed in America and made her debut performing Mozart's violin concerto n.5 at Carnegie Hall. She then moved to California and, as a virtuoso, performed with the Los Angeles Philharmonic. Mozart and Beethoven were her constant companions; their work filled her house daily playing on the stereo box in her living room. When her beloved and longtime friend, Virginia "Ginny" Pfeiffer became ill, Laura put her musical studies aside to become a therapist and donated her Guarneri violin to Yehudi Menuhin. She began to pursue a lifelong interest in health, nutrition, psychotherapy, and the advance of the human potential. Laura became accomplished in her undertakings and professions, among the many, as author and visionary.

Laura was hired on as a film editor at RKO Studio. In 1948 she set out to meet Aldous Huxley and his wife Maria. She had an idea for a film. After thumbing through *Brave New World*—and at the suggestion of Director John Houston—she schemed to persuade Aldous to pen a screenplay about Palio, the horse races in Siena. Nothing ever came of this; but their meeting fostered a legendary relationship. The three of them became good friends. In 1955 Maria died of breast cancer. The following year Laura and Aldous were married when he obliquely proposed to her, soliciting, "Have you ever been tempted by marriage?" Then, "Do you think it might be amusing to travel to Yuma and get married at a drive in?" She agreed and they went to Arizona and were married at a drive through chapel.

In 1953 Aldous sought out Humphry Osmond who had gained some notoriety for his observation of the chemical similarity between adrenaline and mescaline. Aldous wanted to be the subject for a mescaline study. Humphry was reluctant to administer the drug, stating that he did not "relish the possibility, however remote, of finding a small but discreditable niche in literary history as the man who drove Aldous Huxley mad." In correspondence between Aldous and Humphry Osmond, they

entertained a discourse on the appropriate terminology for drugs used in the intentional evolution of consciousness. In 1957 Humphry reported to the New York Academy of Sciences, "I have tried to find an appropriate name for the agents under discussion: a name that will include the concepts of enriching the mind and enlarging the vision... My choice, because it is clear, euphonious and uncontaminated by other associations, is *psychedelic*, mind-manifesting." Humphry regarded psychedelics as "mysterious, dangerous substances, and must be treated respectfully." By 1959 Al Hubbard introduced Aldous to LSD. Both Humphrey and Aldous regretted the trend that

would eventually lead to the loss of scientific research and medical application caused by the ban in the late 1960s.

The Huxleys became pioneers of the psychedelic movement forging a scholarly approach "to the development of the human potential." Laura was Aldous' muse, constant companion and his partner in its unfolding. During their marriage they worked separately on novels—Aldous on *Island* and Laura on *You Are Not the Target*, a condensation of her ongoing fascination with the growth of emotional health. Aldous tempted Laura with LSD. They took it while they listened to Bach's fourth Brandenburg concerto. Of that experience they reflected on having "aesthetic revelations."

About their years together Laura wrote, "As for the rest of our lives, we would speak of everything under the sun. I was very active in psychotherapy. We discussed that; we listened to music, experimented with cooking... One evening Aldous played a recording of *Time Must Have a Stop*. 'It is my favorite book of Aldous', Maria had told me the previous summer. It was a passage that has an extraordinary transporting quality. Now we would call it a psychedelic quality, but at the time the word had not yet been coined. The most amazing fact is that Aldous had written *Time Must Have a Stop* some ten years before he had taken mescaline, yet in the passage describing the transit between two states of consciousness the same preternatural qualities of certain aspects of the psychedelic experience is conveyed. The door which later opened wide was already ajar. As mystics and poets had done for centuries before him, Aldous had written of psychedelics long before he had partaken of the psychedelic plant."

The words that Laura used to describe Aldous, speak of the conscious lover who witnesses the presence of the highest form within the beloved, the divine. Laura

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understood the importance of Aldous' work and its potential to influence our world. She dedicated herself to the certainty that as a luminous scholar and author he would be widely published. In fact, one of her last and most challenging efforts was to bring *Brave New World* to film. Dan Hirsch—Huxley archivist and Laura's longtime friend and confidant—assisted the project. She said she hoped instead to make the film of *Island*; that especially during this dark time, of the two, *Island* was the more important book. However strong her attempts to persuade, this did not come to fruition. Perhaps it will be the next film, she hoped, although she did not think it likely that she would live to see that happen.

Laura and Aldous were married for seven years before his death from cancer in 1963, the same day of John F. Kennedy's assassination and the death of C.S. Lewis. The manner in which Aldous greeted death is noble. Laura read to him from the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* as he opened to the possibilities and set forth on his adventure. Of this she said, "Doing his best to develop fully in himself one of the essentials he recommended to others: Awareness." He requested that Laura give him LSD. She complied by providing him with two injections, each a few hours apart. Following the second dose, Aldous died, while Laura softly urged him to let go, to move toward the light. Peacefully, his breathing stopped, "as a piece of music just finishing so gently in a *sempre più piano, dolcemente*."

I often arrived at Laura's late in the night, entering past the open iron gates of the driveway that led into a flurry of grasses; mutiny in the garden, still always something blossomed. The door was never locked; inside her house a continuous spray of orchid flowers bloomed a salutation to every visitor. I recall Laura saying that orchids possessed a quality that could rouse even the dullest caller.

On one late night arrival Laura left me a note at the top of the stairs, "Goodnight, Dearest Valerie. Maybe I am awake." I went to her room and knocked lightly on her door. "Tonight we will speak of everything," she said. We spent hours discussing the past, her present situation and how her health was declining. She said that she had told her most trusted companion, her nephew, Piero Ferrucci, that she must make a choice between life and death and that she had chosen life. But as these options became fewer, discussion turned to sitting, to waiting and to observing. 'Idleness is the greatest sin. But then one is

forced to idleness. When you cannot use your body you think and think of this good thing and that bad thing. So many thoughts. But I can do nothing by myself. Before thoughts would come and I would act. But now I must ask for everything." She couldn't tolerate chemo, even the very small amount that she and her oncologist had bargained she would take. The side effects were daunting and she wanted to feel vital again. Chemotherapy left her exhausted, her gums burning, her lips scorched and

cracked, a fire raged in her mouth. The rest of that night I half slept. But in the morning Laura was up and moving through the house with a note of her usual vigor regained.

Aldous and Laura moved into Ginny's Hollywood Hills home after theirs was destroyed by fire. Those flames consumed many manuscripts and letters, making ashes of literary history. I slept in what Laura, as a favor to me, I suspect, referred to as "my room," but really it was Ginny's bedroom. Ginny adopted two children, the first single-woman adoption to occur. Ten years after Aldous' death, Ginny died of cancer. Laura then took legal guardianship of Ginny's granddaughter, Karen Pfeiffer. Ginny's room was located across the hall from Aldous' and looked out onto a grand old

swimming pool. That pool, an invitation to bathe in an enduring record of cracked tile and gnarled trees, whispered tales of a collection of guests, including Gerald Heard, Krisnamurti, T.S. Elliot, D.H. Lawrence, Humphry Osmond, Ram Dass, Buckminster Fuller, Bertrand Russell, Alan Watts, Timothy Leary, Allen Ginsberg, and Christopher Isherwood—just a few of the illustrious personalities to call on the Huxley's. Many of Hollywood's extraordinary intellectuals and most noted characters joined Laura, Aldous and Ginny for conversation. Laura reportedly excused herself on more than one occasion. She told me that she never considered herself an intellectual and often she would find these talks too esoteric. I found her to be fathomless about so many things.

Another night Laura explained her first encounter with earphones. Aldous had come across a pair and brought them for her to try. He placed them on her head and put Mozart on the phonograph. She lay on her bed listening, after some time she felt herself being shaken from her reverie, hearing Ginny's voice asking why she was yelling. Laura said she had no idea she had made any sound and that for the first time she truly heard the music of Mozart. She had been transported from this earthly

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Laura Archera Huxley

Photo courtesy of the Laura Huxley Trust

realm and she was transformed. Many nights Mozart's spell would wander from Laura's bedside CD player into my room to lull me into sleep.

The phone seldom stopped ringing. Beginning early each morning and unceasingly throughout the day, someone called to ask Laura for an interview, her counsel, and always to feast hungry eyes on her profound beauty. A constant throng of visitors, laden with chocolates or bouquets, kept the days busy when she wasn't setting out to accomplish any number of other projects. She was pursued for her perspicuous viewpoint, with an editor's keen eye she would rip through the clutter of language, her writings or that of anyone else. Laura could be brutally honest. A quality that was both charming and harsh. She would say between the two of them, Ginny possessed the true talent of editing; but all I ever knew of Ginny was what Laura told me.

Laura often conducted interviews while she strolled on her walking machine, or while balanced atop one of the many huge exercise balls scattered throughout the house. Her home was all light, perfectly accented with white furniture, arching windows cast sunlight across the length of her living room. "Light is everything," she remarked. Many academics had been enticed to explore the yoga of inner balance while visiting her, sometimes being compelled to accept a ball in place of a chair at her dining room table. She moved constantly and knew more about her body than anyone I have ever met. She would inform her practitioners and her doctors, who were also her most trusted friends, of any ailment and they listened intently, making house calls, providing care and any treatment at home. Everyone came to call on Laura.

Besides developing her own narratives, on which she worked judiciously with Pierro; two other of Laura's passions were: to maintain the legacy of Aldous and the development of environments for children. The latter was spurred by the arrival of Ginny's granddaughter into her life. Laura said that when Karen first visited she "threw me into a state of expanded consciousness. I wandered around the house feeling great love and compassion." This process of self-discovery offered a revealing insight, for when asked why she had never had children of her own, Laura responded, "I never thought I was old enough."

In 1977 Laura founded Our Ultimate Investment (OUI), a nonprofit organization dedicated to the nurturing of the possible human. Two of the programs set in motion are mentioned here: The first is the Caressing Room Project, where seniors are encouraged to simply

hold tiny babies. Several rooms were successfully established. The second program is Teens and Toddlers. Today this program continues to foster success in Los Angeles high schools and pairs young people with toddlers. The idea, as Laura once said, "If you want to teach teenagers about pregnancy and parenting, put them in the same room with toddlers." In England in just a few years Laura's long time friend, Diana Whitmore, propelled this work into brilliantly successful government supported curriculum in schools.

In April 1994, marking the centenary of the birth of Aldous Huxley, Laura's Foundation sponsored the highly successful four day Conference entitled, CHILDREN: OUR ULTIMATE INVESTMENT, addressing the issues of children's conditions in our present society. "The predicament of the human situation," she says, "begins not only in infancy, not only before birth, but also in the physical, psychological and spiritual preparation of the parents before conception." The name of the organization has since been changed to Children: Our Ultimate Investment ([\[www.children-investment.org/Laura.htm\]\(http://www.children-investment.org/Laura.htm\)\). Karen Pfeiffer oversees this project.](http://www.children-</p>
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Laura's work with her foundation led her to success and widespread recognition in humanistic achievement. She is an Honoree of the United Nations, a Fellow of the International Academy of Medical Preventics, she possesses an Honorary Doctorate of Human Services from Sierra University, and in 1990 she received the Peace Prize as an Honoree of the World Health Foundation for Development and Peace. Laura became the 2003 recipient of the Thomas R. Verny award presented by the Association of Prenatal and Perinatal Psychology and Health for her outstanding contributions to the field of prenatal and perinatal psychology.

Every weekend Laura's home teemed with laughter, dance, mountains of wholesome fruit and vegetables, and a bounty of love when Karen's young daughter, Kaya, came to stay. To compliment the long evening meals of delectable conversation, Laura and Kaya would adjourn to the living room to share in a pas de deux, always encouraging guests to join. Abandon ensued. Laura was indefatigably nurtured by this relationship, and it is this special bond that contributed to the pure, youthful joy that she embraced since the day of Kaya's birth.

In July Laura took a fall in her bedroom and broke her hip. She still lived alone and lay for hours unattended. She had much time to think. She asked me to come when the

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procedure was done. I arrived in LA the night of her surgery. The following day I went to fetch her from the hospital. Everything was ready for her arrival home. When I walked into her room she was stretching, pulling her knee to her chest. Surprised, I commented, Laura, I thought that you had surgery on your right hip. She quickly answered, "Oh, Darling it is lovely to see you. Thank you for coming. Yes, I did, but I mustn't forget my yoga. Now take me home." Laura was always her best healer. She never neglected her health. Following surgery she declined taking pain medication. Her physical therapist observed her determination and commented that regardless of age, he had never encountered a patient so driven to quickly recover. He had never met Laura Huxley.

I sometimes stayed with Laura for extended periods. I had been gone only few days when, on December 6th, Laura left me a message; her voice was strained and quiet. She asked me to "come home". I caught the 5:40 flight and arrived at her house shortly after 7:30. I rubbed her feet, gave her water, read some of the letters that Aldous had written to Humphrey. The night wore on and we briefly discussed a possible bit of inner work with the Moksha medicine on Saturday. I offered more water; I asked if she would like a smoke. I blew a few puffs across her lips and under her nose. She coughed, asked for more water, then another fluff of smoke. We said good night, and I asked if there was anything she needed before retiring, she smiled deeply, but remained quiet. Is there something? "Yes," she spoke strongly with a certainty of force, "I need," she began, "to live well or to die," she softly smiled again. Hmmm, I thought for a moment. Yes, my friend, I promise you that either one or the other will happen. Laura laughed heartily.

We often teased Laura about being the "conductor." It was the one thing, she said, that she regretted not having accomplished. Her full participation in every aspect of her life was an extension of the practice she had engaged daily. She absolutely became the conductor. A few days before she died we were talking about the process and the way that she wanted me to attend to her needs. She said, "Valerie, you will ask me everything before you do it, and I will tell you yes or I will tell you no." So—at her instruction, and under her tutelage—I ask everything, every intention to move her body, to touch her, to bathe her, to dress her, to give water. Water, water, water, always more water...one drop at a time. I ask even if I think she may not hear; even if I know she will not respond. But when listening in silence, the subtle energy presents a powerful

message. And she informs me of what to do and whom she would see.

She had planned to take LSD, as Aldous did, prior to, or as she was, dying. But each time I inquired, she responded with a faint shake of her head. On the days leading up to her death she would say, "Well, maybe tonight." As the evenings passed, she made no request. Her state of consciousness was changing swiftly. She entered into a realm of exploration of her body's function and its discomfort, of her loss of sight, of the advance of the cancer, of her thoughts, of allowing and of letting go. She asked me to post her door with several messages to those who might approach. One message read, "However my body may appear, remember that I am soul, just like you." Once Laura told me to ponder and to speak these words often, "The sensuality of the spirit and the spirituality of the senses." Then they took on an even deeper meaning, "I will have a difficult time dying, I think. I love my body so much, the sensuality, all the senses, the magnificence; I think I will not let go easily." In the end she did, with a quiet, peaceful breath, she opened to the possibilities and she did a master's work. She died perfectly.

Two days before, she called for Diana and me to sit with her. By then I rarely left her side. She was trying to find a comfortable position. I sponged her; we dressed her in cut velvet and silk. We smoked a small amount of marijuana. She closed her eyes. We sat in that vast silence. Suddenly Laura spoke. "Emptiness, emptiness, emptiness. It is emptiness." Laura laughed with weakened enthusiasm. With that smile still on her face she looked at me, "Tell Ram Dass, it's all brand new. It Is All Brand New," in a soft, rich laugh. She began to speak about the things we all must face, uncertainty, longing, pain. But there was no remorse or sorrow, only peace and luminosity. She was stunningly beautiful.

Laura cried out from her sleep raising her right hand skyward, "Help I'm falling, I thought I was falling."

You are perfectly safe, perfectly safe.

Stay nearby.

I am right here. You are perfectly safe.

She lay quietly. The she called Michael Frederick to her bedside. Michael is an Alexander master. She told him he had a short time, less than an hour to instruct me in the Alexander technique. He was surprised, but he did as she said, coaching me to properly hold and lengthen her. Then Laura thanked Michael, he left and she took over instructing me. I understood from that lesson that I am the tool,

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the only work I was to do, was with myself. From her deathbed I received this teaching. I held Laura, feeling my hands, feeling her head.

She asked, "Whose hands are these?"

Mine.

"Right hands, right hands, right hands," she kept repeating. "Right hands, right hands. Massage my heart." I did as she instructed.

A few years ago Laura showed me the shroud that she had adorned Ginny's body with when she died. She showed me the photographs she had taken. Ginny was stunning. She asked me to be certain that when I lay out her body to use this same fabric. She wanted to be cremated in it. No make up she told Piero and me. That same night she said that both Aldous and Ginny had commented on love. Aldous spoke to her, "We can never love enough." Then later in a letter written by Ginny, "We must love more than we can love." This amused her. She told me that while Aldous died peacefully, Ginny's pain was great. When Maria was dying of cancer in 1955, Aldous used hypnotic techniques to talk her through the memory of ecstatic experiences she had earlier in life. It was 1973. Laura did not know what she could do to help Ginny. Finally, Ginny was quietly released.

Aun Aprendo - "I am still learning," I read aloud from a commencement speech by Aldous, "The process goes on from the cradle to the grave and doubtless, beyond." Then Laura responded, "This is a unique line - it shows he believes in the survival of life, because we learn after we are dead. Very, very extraordinary."

The interdependent relationship between the dying person and caregiver is revealed when we sit with awareness and observe the becoming of the master. We were honored guests, participants really. In the hush of that night a nocturne drifted from the hearts of each who love her, up the stairs from the living room, across the distance, through this timeless moment. Our promise was to repeat the message of her life's work, to recall attention to alert passivity and awareness, to read what Aldous had spoken to Maria and what Laura had spoken to Aldous, to prompt with language that which continues beyond words.

In Los Angeles when a person dies at home the police must come to make a report. When they arrived I was preparing Laura's body for honoring; washing, anointing and dressing her. I was grateful for many things. Laura, cloaked in Ginny's shroud, looked exquisite, beautiful really. Two officers arrived at the house. They were young, a woman and a man. Under the man's turtleneck, sneaking above his collar and only slightly visible were tattoos. He was handsome and kind. Laura would have appreciated him. He asked me what I was doing when she died. I told him that she was an author and that I was reading

from her book, *This Timeless Moment* and from *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. I said that we had been reading the same passages that she had read to her husband when he died in 1963. I also said that I needed to get back to tending to Laura. He looked me squarely in the eyes, "My grandmother is dying. I am going back to see her in a few days and I don't know what to say." Ah, let me send you with a copy of Laura's book. I will mark the passages for you to look at. Perhaps you will find them helpful. She would like that. He eagerly took the book in hand and then asked if I wouldn't

mind if he peeked in on Laura again. "Oh, she looks so beautiful," he said. Yes, eternally beautiful.

That era of women who possess such grace and style is concluding. We have surrendered our *i più nobili e donne eleganti del nostro tempo*. What remains is a courtship with death; it is All Brand New, built from the wisdom of the aged, of the timeless masters. "Emptiness, emptiness, emptiness. It's all brand new."

(sempre più piano, dolcemente

- more and more plainly, softly, sweetly)

(i più nobili e donne eleganti del nostro tempo

- the most noble and elegant women of our time)

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