

Tribute to My Dad

Read at Garth Lawrence's Service of Thanksgiving

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My Dad was born in 1943, while his Dad was training as a Royal Engineer in Fulwood near Preston. This is what my Dad's Dad wrote about returning to his wife Nona and their daughter Cynthia who were at their house in Red Lane, Kenilworth, on the birth of his son.

On the morning of February 8, the section was standing in a circle round the explosives instructor receiving lecture and demonstration on an anti-tank mine. We were joined by the company sergeant major. He fished out a telegram from his pocket and making sure everyone could hear he read out: 'Sapper Lawrence's wife gave birth to a son early this morning. Both doing well'. There was a loud cheer, many congratulations and handshaking as I stood there unable to speak for the lump in my throat.

I caught a bus outside the barracks gate to take me to the station and boarded a train to take me to Nuneaton where I changed to one traveling to Rugby via Wolston. I got off at Coventry and asked the ticket collector when the next train would leave for Kenilworth. He pointed to the red light of the train I had just left and said 'That is the last one tonight. The next is the milk train at 05:00 hours.'. Swearing to myself about my stupidity in not checking the train, I watched the red light disappearing round the curve of the Kenilworth, Leamington, Rugby line. It was too late to think about catching a bus so I set off to walk home. When I reached Crackley Bridge I thought I might be able to shorten the walk by walking along the Berkswell Loop line, the line that ran in front of the houses in Red Lane. This turned out to be an unwise decision.

It was a dark, moonless night and I found many obstacles along the narrow path beside the railway lines, which I stumbled over and sometimes slipped down the embankment. I tried to walk on the sleepers but found their spacing too short for a normal walking step. Arriving at a point where I reckoned I should leave the railway and cross the fields I had difficulty in finding a suitable gap in the thorn hedge, these gaps were also hard to find in the hedgerows that divided the fields.

It was very late when I reached home. I had my own latch key so I gently opened the door and called out. Nona wasn't scared when she heard me opening the door; she was more than half expecting me. It was wonderful to see Nona again and to peep at the little scrap in the cot; our son. Cynthia was most surprised to see her daddy when she woke up that morning and was delighted with the bars of chocolate she found in my pack. With so much activity in the house which accompanies a new-born baby, those few hours soon slipped away.

Maybe we are sometimes born in the circumstances in which we later live. This description of Dad's birth reflects my father's life. Deep, understated, emotion on receipt of the good news. The good wishes of friends, a long walk, an amusing story, and the quiet comfort and security of family. Even more appropriately, after ending the story of his brief leave for my Dad's birth, my Granddad's memoirs go on to describe the next period of his section's training, which focussed on construction of Bailey Bridges. The section focuses on the both the detail and the overall design of the Bailey Bridge. Quality engineering design and implementation: something that my Dad also admired greatly.

My Dad loved his family deeply, and instilled in us his strong sense of humour and his love for engineering design. I remember him describing to me how a car differential worked when I must have been as young as six or seven. Not the precise lay out of the gears, you'll understand, but just the general engineering principles. As a family we were regular visitors to the Brighton Engineerium and I have vivid memories of him describing the parts and operations of the beam engine there, with a particular focus on the engine governor and the elegance of its speed control.

My Dad was a natural leader, not the sort of thrust yourself forward leader that's always bustling to get to the front, but the sort of person that people turned to in time of crisis to provide guidance. There are many here that will have appreciated his judgement, tact and diplomacy whilst chairing committees. He never pushed himself forward for such roles, but time and again groups would turn to him to lead them forward. He also lead us as a family. On long walks through the Lake District he would point out the geology of the landscape and gather us around his Ordnance Survey map, indicating how the symbols mapped to the features around us. He loved the Wainwright books on walking the fells. And our holidays were always planned from an armchair, or round a table, across evenings with regular consultation of maps and Wainwright to plan the perfect holiday. I remember him drawing Mark and I close in to show us his plans, and indicating the route on the map. "And then, to finish the walk we'll drop back in to Buttermere down here ..." he had this sort of chugger-chugger-chugger noise he would make as his finger traced the line on the map. My Dad liked to make plans, but whilst some planners formulate their ideas in isolation from people's desires, my Dad's plans always incorporated what everyone else would be wanting to do, and were always flexible enough to accommodate an unforeseen side trip or break.

He was lucky to work in a job he loved, and he dedicated himself to it. He worked a long day, but always had time for family when he returned. The click-click of him opening his brief case on his lap, whilst sitting on the sofa, to spend a careful evening working on performance appraisals with his family around, perhaps with a choral anthem playing in the background was a common way to spend an evening.

My Mum and Dad both followed their parents in their love for gardening. Growing flowers, vegetables and fruit. Their gardening together was a partnership that neatly mirrored their married life together. My father did the planning and the heavy lifting work: the digging and the vision. My mum did the supporting, and the day to day picking and weeding. Heading out into wet nights to deal with all the slugs that would have emerged before they ate the lettuces. When she moved in with us in Billingshurst towards the end of her life, my Gran would contribute too. Throwing banana skins under the rose bushes for the Pottasium. All these contributions were welcomed by my Dad, but whilst others were hustling and bustling about with their contributions: I think even my wife, Marta, cut the grass once, much to my father and the neighbours' enjoyment (I think she did it in fairly short shorts) the main structure and layout of the garden was his.

Like the plants in his garden, my Dad would look out for us all, his direct family, his wider family, his friends and colleagues. But just as he always accommodated others in his garden, so he did in his life. And of course the main partnership was always with my Mum. She would do the day to day worrying, and my Dad took in the big picture and provided all the long term reassurance. After his sister, Cynthia, died he made sure he was there for any extra support, in particular for his nieces Sarah and Joanna. Any trip that could take in a side visit to Red Lane to see his family was always accommodated. All this was always done in partnership with my Mum, both of them telling me often of all the news from Nuneaton, Joanna's business successes, Nicola's school achievements, Geraint's cricket umpiring.

One of the pleasures of gardening is that you are, quite literally, able to enjoy the fruits of your labours. Plants don't always say thank you, but they respond to your love with vigorous growth, flowers and occasional fruits. I'm sure I'm not alone in realising that I didn't thank my father enough for what he provided for all of us. But I'm very grateful for the short time we were able to spend with him, in the knowledge of his impending death, reminding him of just how grateful we all were.

He was so proud of his family and their achievements. His grand-niece Nicola, heading to University to do Chemistry. He was very grateful for all the work my wife, Marta did, to try and improve the quality of his care, both for his heart problems and then later his mesothelioma. Just as in his gardening, his longer term plans were totally reliant on the constant support of my Mum for delivery.

He spoke often of his pride in seeing my brother perform in court, Mark has a habit of supporting the

underdog, and my Dad loved the time he saw him in action in front of a jury. He loved visiting Mark's family in the states and he was particularly thrilled to get across this June. When he returned, he spoke of how well both his granddaughters were doing. Chloe shares the deep, and quiet, concern for others that was so obvious in my Dad and Granddad. She shares the strong sense of right and wrong that also shines through in both Mark and my father. He talked of Sophie's creativity and love of people around her. He spoke of both girls' achievements in school and with their swimming. He spoke of his admiration for my sister-in-law, Stacey's, ability to keep everything on the rails with camps, swimming, plays and teaching.

It feels wrong to remember too much of someone's death, when they contributed so much to the people around them in their life. But my Dad also led his family and friends through his death. In the brief time he had after his diagnosis, his main concerns were always for the people around him. People aren't always comfortable being around a terminally ill person. But my Dad used all his skills to put them at their ease. A well placed witticism, making small talk, letting them know he was getting along fine. Even at his first (and last) appointment with his palliative care consultant, through a fog of morphine that made him tremble and cold sweat, when the consultant tentatively broached the difficult subject of resuscitation, and asked whether he'd given it any thought. He said very seriously that he had given it a *lot* of thought, and that he'd decided that in the event of anything happening: at this precise moment he looked at my Mum, and said that he would like her to be resuscitated.

On the day of his diagnosis, after we returned to the house and sat down for a cup of tea my father said "I suppose at this point I'm supposed to make a list of all the things I'd like to do before I die, but to be honest I can't think of anything to put on it. I've had a wonderful life, I'd just have liked it to have been a bit longer." He wasn't afraid of death, although he was afraid of being alone while dieing and the pain of death. With his family by his side throughout he was able to avoid the first of these, but not the second. Although at his bedside there were still happy moments: he was the one that ensured that was the case. I have an image of the joy on his face when Mark had just arrived seared on my mind. Near the end, he had a short period of coherence and recognised that Chloe, Sophie and Frederick were all by his bedside with Mark, Stacey and me. He was ecstatic. He talked with each of the grandchildren in turn. Stacey told him of how everyone, referring I'm sure to many of you here, looked up to him. To which my Dad immediately replied that's because everyone's so short. He was then describing the terrible pain and hallucinations he'd been having just as my Uncle Michael arrived. As Michael, a lifelong Arsenal fan who was very distressed by seeing my Dad (who had been such a strong man) in his weakened state, stepped forward to give my Dad a hug, my Dad, realizing Michael was there, broke off from his description of the terrible hallucinations and said 'but none of it was as bad as watching the Arsenal'.

I made some notes of his final days, and although I can't bring myself to read through them just yet, I think I know what his final words were. When affected by the morphine, he was constantly trying to escape the hospital and take us with him. Worrying that we were trapped there and being held against our will. He did have a last moment of understanding where he told my Mum he wanted a cuddle and said 'So we've had it then'. He said 'eclipse' which I didn't quite understand so I asked him what he meant and he said 'dead'. While I was digesting that, he felt something in his back and asked if it was a shoe. I asked if he was afraid and he said 'I'm not afraid of a shoe.'

My father made extremely modest demands of life, and he was completely fulfilled by what he received. If he was here today, he would have been thrilled to see everyone. He would also have known just how to behave. He would have had the right few words of comfort for my Mum, the concerned face, but he would have quickly flipped to relating a treasured memory, a happy story from his life. Many of you have already done the same with your phone conversations, cards and emails. Although I can't help but think, that none of you would have done it quite as well as my father.