

Address for Dad

Thanksgiving Service for the life of Bill Stallybrass

Wednesday 29th January 2003, All Saints, West Dulwich

I warn you at the start that I may need some help to get to the end of what I want to say – but we're prepared.

Gratitude was for me the shining hallmark of Dad's last years. Almost every day, he would start by reading his Bible, and then writing down in his notebook, 'Grateful for all God's goodness.' I used to think that it was a rather meaningless formula. I came to learn that it was a deeper disposition of the soul. In my still imperfect knowledge of the Bible, that spirit of gratitude is nowhere better expressed than in Psalm 103 that I read earlier.

So Many Good Friends – that's the title of the book that Dad has just finished, it's at the printers in Massachusetts, and many of you here will shortly be receiving your copies as a final gift from him – along with a farewell letter he dictated to me just after the New Year, apologising for not having been a better friend and correspondent over recent months, due to the fact that he could no longer write or even manage a telephone without help.

In my turn, I want to express gratitude for so many good friends, present and absent. How many of you were here in this church with us in May 1999 when we celebrated Mum's life? Don't be shy. Several of you, at that time, told us that you'd keep an eye on Dad, slipped us your phone numbers, asked for ours. You've become our friends too. So we want to express gratitude for the Carson Road community – the network of neighbours and friends, the ordinary, everyday angels who gave Dad ordinary everyday care, support and friendship. One of those who has done most for Dad over these many months was almost insulted when I thanked her some time back for all that she had done. She said 'What are neighbours for?' What indeed! If only we could all be part of creating such caring communities of real neighbours.

We want to express immense gratitude for the National Health Service and Social Services system – and more particularly for the people working in them, for their humanity and gentleness.

What an attractive quality gratitude is, at any age, but it is especially precious in someone Dad's age. So many of the carers have remarked on how easy it was to care for Dad, to grow attached to him. With the easy familiarity of these days, it was straight to 'Bill, darling' or 'Bill, dear'. Dad's needs – and perhaps something of his own goodness – drew out the goodness of others. One of the senior carers told Peter that caring for Dad had renewed her sense of vocation at a time she was thinking of quitting. May we all learn such gratitude.

Ancient and Modern – there was both in Dad. A proto-type Daily Telegraph reader – and yet so much more. The son of a pioneering feminist, a suffragette, yet he'd threatened to leave the Anglican Church over the issue of women priests. He was a man of paradoxes and passions. Inside every Englishman, there's an Italian trying to get out... though in Dad that wasn't always obvious. He looked, and in many ways was, an English gentleman of the old school. I recall as a child learning the code of the tone of voice. When his voice dropped half an octave, you knew he was speaking from deep feelings. After three years

without seeing each other, we shook hands meeting at the airport, and he said, 'Hello Andrew. Good to have you back.'

Ron Steadman and Joan Grundy, the upstairs neighbours touched us very deeply, writing, 'A little bit of England died today with his passing, as to us he was everything that humanity and civilization stood for. In as much as decency and education would and should shape the future, he did his part so well. We, like you, are proud that he was in our lives and we will miss him so much.'

His book – the Stallybrass answer to Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, weighing in at 437 pages – is full of names, places, dates and anecdote. The inner life, the feelings, the emotions are mostly hidden between the lines. He lost his own father when he was very young, and only learned to mourn him for the first time when he was in his seventies – thanks to the help of a German play director, Hannelore Krieg, who came to see him last week, and was one of the last to have a real talk with him. Germany, where he studied before the war, was one of the passions of his life. The pacifist with a temper – who seriously envisaged suicide, rather than fight against the country and the people that he loved the most.

Teaching was and is in the family genes. Dad started teaching in a boys' prep school, where he taught Mum's youngest brother, Tony, and so came in touch with the *Oxford Group* (which became *Moral Re-Armament* and now *Initiatives of Change*). He taught classes of the unemployed in Liverpool. The war, which he spent in military intelligence, cemented friendships that have lasted a lifetime, and gave him a love of France. He was one of the first MRA people to link up with French friends after the liberation. Then it was back to teaching miner's sons in Durham, before 25 years training officers for the armies of Britain and many Commonwealth countries at the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst. During that time there were two years on detachment, setting up the Ghana Military Academy. After taking early retirement, he taught on, as private tutor to a grandson of Emperor Hailie Selassie of Ethiopia, then in a prep school, and in a high school in Germany, where he was form-master to an all-girls class – quite a change for him, but he rose to the challenge.

He had in his youth a reputation for hard drinking and wild living, and a terrible temper. A memory that came back to me only a few years ago was of a quarrel between Mum and Dad; he got so angry that he put both fists through a glass door. A further paradox: the father who believed in corporal punishment, but who never laid a hand in anger on his wife or sons. But it's hard to square, isn't it, with the sweet and gentle old man that many of you knew.

Although he was a teacher, he was always learning, always going forward. And he shared deeply with others, not so much from his 'experience' as from his own learning. One of the many messages reminded us of a conference he attended at Caux in Switzerland, where participants were asked to draw a picture of where they felt they were at in life. This had brought back to him a childhood experience, at the age of six or so, when the teacher had made fun of his 'rainbow.' He had no idea what a rainbow was, and drew a reindeer instead. The teacher's mockery meant that he'd never again in his life tried to draw anything – until that day. He would never have made such a pedagogic mistake

himself. But he was ready to recall the past, learn something fresh, and find a new freedom in sharing with others.

One of the many friends who was regularly calling for news in recent weeks was Jim Lynn, an Irish Republican from the Falls Road in Belfast. Jim had a Mass said for Dad and for us in the Clonnard Monastery this morning. As I answered the doorbell at Carson Road, I thought 'The Empire Strikes Back' – the old sons of Empire like Dad are being cared for by the 'children of the Empire' – West Indians, Ghanaians, Zimbabweans, South Africans, Nigerians. They sensed or understood that he really wasn't an imperialist; that he loved their countries, and had done his best to serve. And how happy he was to relate to them, to tell them about his love for and friendships in their countries – always through a host of personal friendships.

There was an unexpected, quirky humour. At Christmas dinner, a few weeks ago, he came out with a great chunk of comic verse from a satire of the 1930s, how to make a Martini, in the style of Shakespeare; and there were also many comic songs. Peter recalls a quiet drive in London when Dad suddenly started singing: 'In my little garden subub/Far away from the noise and the hubbub/There we will grow stewed rubub/In a tubub.'

I remember a family holiday at the much-loved 'hut' on the River Dee, when Dad first went water-skiing. He'd seen all the previous contestants fall flat on their faces when the speedboat started off. So he lent back too far, and instead of rising up, we just saw the points of his skis, and a tremendous under-water turbulence taking off at high speed. We believe that he broke the world under-water skiing record. We were all yelling at him to let go, but he just hung on, until he was nearly drowned. That tells us something deep about his character, his will. Over these last years, he has been learning when to let go. The military planning and precision timing became perhaps a little more relaxed, but above all, he learned to be peaceful, at rest.

He passed on to both his sons another of his passions: his love of mountains, and we have many happy memories of days spent together walking. His engagement present to Mum was a hand-made pair of climbing boots. But it's only been relatively recently that we discovered through the researches and then books of some modern climbing writers Dad's full reputation as a 'tiger climber', about which he'd been really rather annoyingly modest. Of course the writers were greatly helped by his almost total recall, and his detailed diaries going back to the 1930s. In him, we lose a large chunk of our family's history – but at least we have quite a lot of it in his book. His phenomenal memory lasted right to the end.

His book has a description of a 'first' that he made with his brother Robin (no. 3 in the coming quote, and to the left of Dad in the portrait you can see at the back of the church), with Menlove Edward's leading. Edwards writes: 'No.3, before setting out from Helyg for the climb in question, discovered that it was cold, and put an extra coat in his sack. It started hailing during the first pitch, and No. 3, finding that his several waist coats, coats, and cut-down mackintoshes afforded insufficient protection, took the coat out from the sack and by a skilled acrobatic manoeuvre added this garment deftly to the pile upon his shoulders. It was a black tailcoat, and would probably have fitted him

very well if it had not been made on far too small a scale, and unhappily the sleeves, for their part, did not extend far beyond the elbows. It got on much better when the pressure of circumstances discovered extensive outlets down the seams. The route was called 'Sexton's Route.'

Another passion, which lasted to the end was music – blessed BBC Radio 3, when he could no longer handle a CD player. Again in his book he quotes his friend Michael Longson's description of his piano concert debut at school, where he was known as Pickwick: 'Poor Pickwick. If anyone thinks the keyboard works of Haydn and Scarlatti dangerously simple, let him try *The Old Gardener*. *The Old Gardener* is what Bach might have called a two-part invention, in that each hand had only one note to play at a time; but the two parts were so many octaves away from each other that if anything untoward happened at either end it was only too easily apparent. Even as the earnest red head bent over the right hand to ensure its good behaviour something would go wrong in the bass, when it transferred its attention to the left hand something else would go wrong in the treble, and so with gathering momentum it proceeded: the more things went wrong the wronger they continued to go, and the red head turned incessantly this way and that like the head of a spectator at Wimbledon. An encore was ecstatically demanded, and the demoralized pianist obliged us by starting again where he had left off and going on from there. We even tried for a second encore, but authority decided that the Roman holiday had lasted long enough.'

Dad's gift for friendship was helped a little by technology, but his 'system' largely rested on his address book, and on writing down the name of just about every person that he met, and names written down were memorized. The tragedy that we feared and dreaded the most was the death of his Amstrad, a primitive, pre-PC, pre-Windows computer that Peter had left him when he moved to the States. Through it he kept up a simply massive correspondence with friends all over the world. But he survived that loss, and converted to a new computer, on which he continued his correspondence, and his book. Hundreds will now miss a letter on a birthday or an anniversary. His daily prayer list would shame some contemplative monks.

Besides fluent French and German, he later learnt Russian, and then in his seventies, turned his hand to Dutch, and Italian, reading Dante's *Divine Comedy* in the original. He used to always have in his pocket a collection of little slips of paper, to memorize words and phrases. Years ago, he and Mum came over to Paris where I was working, for a visit, and after they'd gone back, the family they'd been staying with rang me and asked me to pick up something he'd forgotten. It was rather suspicious. It was a little slip of paper, with Russian Cyrillic script on one side, and on the other, in English, 'High speed lifts do not operate in the main bloc after midnight'. In the final months, he was working seriously on his Russian again, an hour a day, he told me.

Dad fell for the first time around Easter last year, while he was mowing the lawn. How silly can you get? Mowing the lawn at 91. It's another of the turns of the cycle – old parents going against the wise laws laid down by their children! He was getting increasingly wobbly, and he already had bad arthritis in both hands, but he was still at home, looking after himself alone. Then in May he

fell again and broke his leg. It was all put down to a trapped nerve. But he was soon back home again and learning to walk with a Zimmer frame. In September he decided that he needed a break from looking after himself. He was exhausted, and he told us he was going in to Westwood House, an old people's home, for a week, then two weeks' rest. Then he decided to stay.

Towards the end of the year, he went in to King's Hospital for some tests, and a malignant brain tumour was diagnosed. We understood that though the care was fine in the home, he hadn't been really happy there. He vastly preferred being ill in hospital, to being old among the old. A biopsy turned in to an operation, with 18 holes being drilled in his skull, but he was up and walking again within 24 hours, to the amazement of the surgeon. They gave him six months at the outside, and he peacefully accepted that verdict. He set his heart on an offered palliative course of radiotherapy, and on coming back to his beloved Carson Road home for Christmas, and staying on there.

One of the simplest and most powerful images and symbols of service that Jesus left us was the washing of each other's feet. For three weeks over Christmas and New Year, we daily knelt and washed our father's feet – and all the rest! We were so glad to be able to say something beyond words to him of what we owe him.

After Christmas, there was absolutely nothing holding him back. He'd always lived for deadlines, next events to look forward to, and now what he was looking forward to was being with Mum again – he told us. Very few arrive at the pearly gates – if indeed there are pearly gates – with so little unfinished business. His book was finished. There were no grudges, no grumbles even. He was ready to go. He was really ready to go.

Dad had entrusted his life into God's hands. He believed that God has a plan for each one of us, and for his creation. And as I look back on these weeks, I can see that loving, guiding, merciful provision. Every step of the way, right to the end. A Swiss church minister friend who knew Dad likened him to the prophet Abraham, who 'breathed his last, dying at a ripe old age, an old man who had lived his full span of years' (Gn.25.8).

Even his going was like a military operation (here's the sheet that I've been working from, prepared by Dad, starting with the minister, the organist, and going on with the undertaker and the florist) – he left us these two pages of names addresses and phone numbers. It has brought to my mind the story of 'Operation Lovebird' – Dad's plan to propose to Mum in 1946. Dad had gone to ask Grandpa's permission in his home in Cheshire, and then had to travel down to London overnight, where Mum was working, without knowing that Grandpa had already given the game away. 'Bill Stallybrass has just been to see me,' he said on the phone to Mum. 'What about?' Mum asked. 'You, you bloody fool,' he replied. Perhaps we should give today the code word 'Operation Gratitude'.

These have been such rich years, since that other Thanksgiving Service here for Mum, not just waiting, or filling in time. We have all felt that we got to know him in a new way, now that he was freed from his constant worries of looking after Mum. He kept on saying, 'This has been the best year of my life' – and he

meant it – even though he missed her every day. Peter and I joked about our family Christmas last year in America, that Dad’s first letter to us both of the new year would start by saying that it had been the best Christmas ever – and of course it did. He’d have said it about this last family Christmas, back from hospital in his own home, with so many friends, so many of you calling by. But he was already taking his leave, preparing for his last move, for his next summit.

When the minister, Robert Titley, called by on Christmas Eve and asked him if there was any unfinished business, Dad was still thinking of another appendix to his book, on all that he was learning. I’m glad that this idea just dropped away. These lessons, we each have to learn for ourselves when the time comes. But his life, and his going, may help each one of us in preparing for the end of *our* journeys. It’s only through learning to live, perhaps, that we can learn to die.

The last book that he read was Ellen MacArthur’s *Taking on the World* – the young woman sailor who has just been in the headlines again, winning a solo transatlantic race. Until recently, he had gone in to London every other month for a day’s proofreading for the magazine *For a Change*, and the editorial team, who could have been his children and grandchildren had given him this book. To my knowledge, he’d never sailed, nor even shown any interest in it, but with failing eyesight, and greatly handicapped hands, he devoured it. I couldn’t help sensing that he himself was setting sail into a new dimension, an adventure like none he’d ever had before.

When I got the call from the Hospice that Dad had died, it came on my mobile phone as I was walking to the railway station where I take the train in to work. I walk through vines and woods in all seasons, and there’s a patch where at this time of year I’m looking out for the first wild cyclamens in flower. So last Wednesday morning, as the nurse was speaking to me, I was seeing this first flash of colour, with the promise of another year starting. I’d been awake earlier thinking of Dad. I was thinking of a traditional Southern African farewell, where the person staying says ‘Go well’, and the person leaving replies, ‘Stay well.’ In my heart I said those words, and longed to hear his words in echo. As the nurse spoke to me, I realised that this had been within minutes the exact time of his parting. He has indeed ‘gone well’. May we all ‘stay well’.

Andrew Stallybrass, 28.1.2003