

A REMARKABLE FATHER

It was 21 years ago when I began student life at this University.

We had a terrific time. No-one had heard of global warming.

The big issue on campus was Voluntary Student Unionism ... but that wasn't enough to get in the way of an endless round of parties, coffees, and drinks at Manning Bar.

My father used to refer to it as 'Simon's hedonistic lifestyle'.

He didn't seem to mind – although he would say to me ...

'look no pressure, but you have the perfect physique to be a rower. Why don't you give it a go – you only have to get up at 0430.'

I'm not sure if he realized, but that was about the time I was getting home.

As many of you here tonight would know, Dad loved his rowing.

He enjoyed the exercise, the beauty of the Lane Cove River – he would delight in doing a few vigorous strokes within sight of our house in Hunters Hill so Mum and we boys could be suitably impressed.

Rowing for Dad also meant the camaraderie of rowing friends new and old.

We Santow children came to realize that rowing friends were forever and they turned up in the most unlikely of places.

On the way to the snow each year, we would stop off at Ian McDonald's pharmacy at Jindabyne to say g'day.

It didn't hurt too that that delayed my Father's engagement with the ski slopes – a treacherous fraught relationship if ever there was one.

While I disappointed my father in not taking up rowing ... the family made up for it on the tennis court.

Matches were always hard fought and a study in psychology.

My mother Lee had the most talent and she also regularly out thought Dad.

The pressure applied ... there could only be one result. Dad's forehead and serve wilted amid cries of frustration such as 'not again, and oh Lee.'

It wasn't all sport.

My father was always incredibly busy.

It won't surprise many people here tonight to know that he would get up very early in the morning to work on some of this country's biggest, richest and most complicated corporate takeover deals.

He would continue working sometimes in the car, often as he was chauffeured into the city by an L or a P plater.

Occasionally he would look up ... and instruct ... 'don't change lanes' or 'give way to that bus'.

There would always be time for breakfast together though.

Dad would revel in going back to the same place, ordering the same thing – never on the menu, and bending his diet with just a little bit of cappuccino froth or fried eggs.

Long before the GST, he would call that his 'tax'.

There would be time to talk about what I was studying, or, more correctly, what I was meant to be studying.

I recall my father telling me stories of his father, Geza, a General surgeon and Obstetrician who emigrated from Hungary for a better life in Australia.

His mother Vivian was Scottish and his stepmother Marjorie of Irish Australian stock.

Dad was proud of his mixed ancestry ... even when it added a punchline to someone else's jokes.

One friend began a funny story by saying it involved a Hungarian.

Dad thought he better come clean .. 'you know I'm half Hungarian', he told him.

Quick as a flash his friend responded, 'that's why I half like you'.

Dad told tales too of Mum's family – a mixture of his own observations and what he'd been told of their upbringing in Africa.

He didn't discriminate between the branches of his family .. they were all FAMILY and his affection for them all was transparent and absolutely genuine.

18 months ago my father, as Chancellor of this university, spoke to final year law students.

He advised them to balance their 'intellectual ability with humanity and commonsense', to 'stay grounded', and to 'seek a place in the sun but not to be driven by money'.

It was a message he had for his boys too.

He constantly challenged me to think.

In the most gentle of ways he would wonder 'What about doing a Masters at Columbia?' or had I thought about arranging a course or a stint at the BBC?

My children Olivia and Jeremy have had that tap of original thought cruelly turned off.

They'll be denied the pleasure of listening to their Grandfather's imaginative storytelling.

And for my wife Bec, Dad's wisdom and insights will be sorely missed. No more 'outside the square' advice and no more invitations for another game of painfully slow scrabble.

Dad was a one-off.

He wasn't flawless but he was remarkable.

Friendly, companionable and always stimulating.

A true humanist.

Among the hundreds and hundreds of tributes we've received in the last couple of weeks was a letter from the mother of one of the speakers tonight.

Pearl Chipkin enclosed a poem written by the African –American poet and civil rights activist, Maya Angelou.

“When great trees fall,
rocks on distant hills shudder,
lions hunker down in tall grasses,
and even elephants
lumber after safety.

When great trees fall
In forests,
Small things recoil in silence,

Their senses

Eroded beyond fear

When great souls die, the air around us becomes

Light, rare, sterile.

We breathe, briefly,

Our eyes, briefly,

See with

A hurtful clarity.

Our memory, suddenly sharpened,

Examines,

Gnaws on kind words

Unsaid,

Promised walks

Never taken.

Great souls die and

Our reality, bound to

Them, takes leave of us.

Our souls

Dependent upon their

Nurture,

Now shrink, wizened.

Our minds, formed

And informed by their radiance, fall away.

We are not so maddened

As reduced to the unutterable ignorance

Of dark, cold

Caves.

And when great souls die,

After a period peace blooms,

Slowly and always

Irregularly. Spaces fill

With a kind of

Soothing electric vibration.

Our senses, restored, never

To be the same, whisper to us,

They existed. They existed.

We can be. Be and be

Better. For they existed.”

("Ailey, Baldwin, Floyd, Killens, and Mayfield"

From "I Shall not be Moved" by **Maya Angelou)**

Simon Santow, April 23, 2008