

Eulogy for my father, John David Kilmartin (1937-2009)

How can you distill a life of 72 years into a ten minute eulogy?

I'm not going to lay on the facts – though Dad loved facts – his hand-written story of his life runs for hundreds of pages of dry facts – during his final weeks he was still trying to catch up to the present day.

But I haven't looked too carefully at his notes and scrapbooks, not yet. I invite you all to do so back at the family home today or whenever you drop by for a visit. No one can be reconstructed from a list of facts. What he was is not in those 300 pages of fine, copper-plate minutiae.

So how do we measure a life? By adding up the achievements? The accumulations of worldly possessions? If so, then Dad didn't do too well. He often told me of the only trophy he ever won – for his stamp collection back in the 70's. And a well-deserved award one year for Unley Citizen of the Year, though that might've had something to do with his good friend (and Unley Council Manager at the time) Ron Green, who is here today.

Let me try to summarise what I think Dad stood for, his personal philosophy, and what we can learn from his life.

In the beginning

He was born from Irish stock into the back blocks of a tiny South Australian country town called Minnipa, on the Eyre Peninsula. An only child, he had dreams typical of many boys – he threw a ball against a wall to play imaginary cricket against the champions of the day. On the occasions when his father mowed a pitch in their backyard alongside the Bundaleer Reservoir, and they played till the stars came out, that was even better.

Somewhere along the way he developed a penchant for detail, for dotting every “i” and crossing every “t”. People may have thought of him as pedantic, we often did. But Pat Edwards, one of our church's newest Deacons, who is also here today, remembers joining Dad at the Commercial Bank. He describes Dad as “meticulous” – Pat tried with the other younger clerks to rise to Dad's level of patience and attention to detail.

With Dad's patience came a dislike of being rushed. It took scheming from both my grandmothers to push him and my mother Helene together. My grandmothers met near here at the Church of the Resurrection (North Unley), at the southern door. They became friends. Eventually after Mass one Sunday Helene and her Mum were invited back to 65 Mills Street, and my shy Dad opened the door.

Not much progress happened on that front. Dad continued to move up the ranks in various Commercial Bank rural branches – third teller, second teller, first teller. Some considerable time later, at a country dance, his future mother-in-law, my Granny Patterson, whispered in his ear “When are you going to ask my daughter to marry you?”

Three children and five grandchildren later - the rest is history.

It's all about the journey

Dad somehow realized, long before Deepak Chopra and other self-help gurus, that joy and contemplation happened along the journey not at the destination. How many times did I tell him that near enough was good enough? Each time he replied, "A job worth doing is worth doing well." While my mind was rushing on to the next task, trying to complete the tedious chores to get on to the fun or important things, he would be enjoying adding a third coat of paint.

Dad demonstrated to me how to live in the moment, to just be. He was not one for the quick handyman fix – not for rolling paint on, for nail guns, for spraying weed killer. He loved the smaller paint brush. Up and down, up and down. Hypnotically. He waited the recommended time between coats. He measured 3 times and cut once. He measured and marked the location for each nail, and hammered each one in with seven or eight taps.

Dad preferred serving others. You'd find him in the kitchen at party time washing dishes by hand so he could bang and shake and get the soap suds out of those darned Tupperware lids.

He would spend twilight on his knees moving across his lawn extracting weeds one at a time with the help of his screwdriver. He laid paving stones one at a time, lovingly checking them with his spirit level in three directions, adding a sprinkle of sand, tapping it with his mallet and then checking again till it was perfect. Why hurry?

Often, particularly in the last decade, he found his children rushing in and out of his house with barely time for a hello – picking up children, or borrowing things. His common question was "Why are you always rushing?", and also "Why are you always rushing me?" as he polished his grandchildren's shoes at the very last minute.

If I can be allowed one indulgence – allow me to quote from one entry in Dad's life notes. It relates to early 1989 as I was leaving to live in Sydney. "David asked if Johanna could board with us and use his room. We agreed to this arrangement as we knew that David was fond of Johanna." It was a good decision. I still love her dearly and I want to pay tribute to Johanna's role in caring for Dad as a daughter-in-law – she was incredibly patient and caring in Dad's last months and days. On Dad's final night it was Johanna who was taking her shift in his bedroom. She woke at 4am to hear his final breaths.

Part of his community

Dad taught us the importance of being part of a community – to love thy neighbor, not just thy self and thy family. For that he made good use of his forte - for twenty years from 1962-82 he counted the collections down to the exact cent at this Church of the Holy Cross. One of my enduring memories is helping Dad after many Sunday Masses in the presbytery, making lines of copper and silver coins of equal height. For ten of those years he was Treasurer and he said one of his proudest reports to the Church Council was in June 1972 when he announced that the Goodwood Parish was debt-free.

I imagined that the life of a bank clerk is not that exciting, but Dad loved the bank and would have been more than happy seeing out retirement. It is nice to see some of his colleagues from the retired bankers

group in attendance today. Dad was proud of his employment record of almost 40 years with the same company (the Commercial Bank was taken over by Westpac). But in the end he was left in a corner of a warehouse when Westpac no longer required his skills, and eventually accepted a hurtful retrenchment. After giving so much to the bank it was a blow to his ego and I felt angry for him.

But he didn't become bitter – he sprung into a new life as handyman for his children, and a new interest in genealogy and his family tree. He said he regretted that he never learnt much about his father, and perhaps he thought that uncovering the family tree would help him understand his place in life. Perhaps this was also his gift to future generations, that we could get to know him. He spent many happy hours trawling through records, scouring microfiche (and if there is anyone in need of a microfiche reader we have several at home) and cemeteries – not only for his own family tree but for his friends and his fellow members of the Irish Group in the SA Genealogical Society. It is nice to see members of the Irish Group here today. In genealogy he found a kindred spirit in our family on the McEvoy side in cousin Louise Nordestgaard.

John gave unselfishly and didn't count the cost, all that he asked was that he be allowed to take his time to do a good job. He spent the time and gave generously, because he believed in the importance of helping one another. He tended to his section of the Neighbourhood Watch area like a good shepherd, meticulously noting the location of graffiti and other things that weren't right in his neighbourhood. When he heard a car speeding down the street he would sometimes rush out and try to take down a number plate. He was treasurer of his NHW group for many years and a dedicated member, and it is an honour that we have a police representative of that NHW group present today.

It was often tempting, when he was telling a story at an event, to short circuit things and get him to the end point. But, as in life – he loved to build the story slowly, laying down each fact and piece of scenery, exploring byways off the main topic of discussion. Because his joy wasn't in the punch line, it was in the sharing of the story, the time spent chatting with others.

Somewhere along the way in his meticulous attention to detail, John continued to revel in living in the present, in the daily tasks that we often tried to finish as quickly as possible while thinking about what's on TV. In doing this, he exchanged his dreams for the service of others, in love for one another, for his extended family, his friends, his community.

Lessons from Dad

It is a wasted opportunity if we fail to learn from someone's life. So in summary, this is what I think were five key principles that Dad taught us through the way he lived his life:

1. Don't rush, be in the moment whether doing the dishes or talking with a neighbor.
2. Your actions speak louder than words.
3. A job worth doing is worth doing meticulously.

4. Real value lies in your relationships with your fellows and the world, not what possessions you accumulate – being an active and generous member of your community will enrich your life.
5. Maintain your principles – if something is the wrong thing to do, it is wrong even if everyone else is doing the wrong thing, and even if no one will ever catch you out.

I'm working on these principles – though I've not yet mastered the art of "Don't rush". In preparing for today's wake Tristan and I were rushing to erect Dad's pop-top gazebo in the back yard. Who has time for instructions? We were working it out fine as we went along, the structure up and the roof on. It came down to the final square for the pop-top, and we realized we hadn't fed the arms through correctly. We had to go back and unclip the entire roof. I knew Dad was standing there with us, smiling and shaking his head in mock disbelief.

Dad was an ordinary man, who lived an ordinary life. But I'm proud of the way he lived it, and I've learnt an extraordinary amount from his example, and I loved him dearly and in the end that's all any father and son can hope for.

David Kilmartin

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