

D.R.S

Kris King – July 16th 2011

<http://www.rantinaminor.co.uk/2011/07/d-r-s/>

I was a little more than a quarter of the way into writing this week's post this morning when I received a somewhat confused call from my sister, Tam. Apparently, my mum was in a panic over having missed a couple of calls from my nan and, since the calls had come immediately after one another to both her mobile and landline, and because she was having trouble getting hold of my nan to find out what was going on, my mum was now desperately ringing round to find out if anyone else had heard from her and, if so, what it was about. Moments later my phone rang again and, with the caller ID telling me that it was my mum, I instinctively knew what she was going to tell me ... my grandad had passed away in his sleep early this morning. Given the enormous influence he'd had on me growing up, I'd like, if you don't mind, to dispense with my usual weekly bitch-fest and instead talk about my grandfather, Derek Raymond Sankey.

Born on December 14th 1929, my grandad was faced with the far from trivial inconvenience that World War II had broken out just two months before his tenth birthday. Even though England's need was at its greatest, the small matter of him still being able to count his age without taking his socks off meant that he was considered a less than ideal candidate for helping to fight the Nazis. When he was of a more suitable age, however, he joined the Royal Navy, and it was this that cemented, in my mind, a lifelong association with the sea. For as far back as I can remember, my grandad had a passion for things nautical; knick-knacks around the home would have had a naval theme; many of the paintings that adorned the walls were of ships, often frigates or destroyers engaged in battle; even his clothes sometimes reflected this love for the ocean (although obviously we're talking "respectable blazer" here, not "North Sea Trawlerman").

While I was never struck with the same desire to lead any sort of life on the ocean wave, my grandad's passion did rub-off on me to an extent. I share his love for Devon, the Westcountry in general, and, despite its many, many faults, Plymouth in particular. I always enjoyed the childhood holidays I spent with my grandparents, my mum, and my sister, Sam, in the log cabins of Church Wood, near Wembury, despite the daily panic attack I would suffer from seeing that a spider had crept into my bedroom. I always loved the walks we took along HMS Cambridge, and hearing the cracking sound of guns firing as naval trainees took pot-shots at The Mewstone. I remember with fondness the boat trips he would take us on around the dockyards of Devonport to see the massive warships towering over the tiny tour boat we occupied. To this day, I have an acrylic painting on canvas of a cliff edge overlooking the ocean that we did together when I was barely 5 years old. It may have been my hand holding the brushes, but it was his hand on mine that was doing all the work ... and it was my name he insisted on putting in the bottom right corner.

It's probably fair to say that my grandad must share some of the credit with my parents for helping to inspire and feed the deep creative streak in me. While I may have inherited my dad's propensity for writing endless quantities of gibberish, it was my grandad's habit of never being completely satisfied with indulging in just *one* constructive endeavour at any given time that has probably had the greatest influence on me in terms of the little projects that I like to give myself. He was always making things; he built a doll house for my sister that had proper lighting, powered by a battery in the attic; he made a garage for me that had a car wash, petrol pumps, and a second-level car park for all my Dinky metal toy cars; he loved photography, and once built a dark-room in his house so that he could not only fully indulge in his hobby without limitation, but also so he could run it as a small business for a while. In later years he created wooden toys to sell at craft fairs (one such toy, a train, still sits in the surgery of my GP, for whose son it was made) and, when his hands were no longer nimble enough for woodwork, he took to creating hand-made greeting cards instead.

It's impossible for me to look at my own interests – making websites, composing music, creating videos, and writing all manner of nonsense – and not see the effect that he has had on me. When I was around 10 or so, my grandparents bought a grocer's shop in Malvern, Worcestershire (it was actually probably more akin to a general convenience store given that there was all manner of

tinned, packet, chilled, fresh, and frozen goods in addition to the usual fruit and veg). Since there was always plenty to do, my mum would haul my sisters and I on a 14-mile train journey every Saturday so that she could help out in the shop. We never minded, of course, as we got to see our grandparents (who we loved dearly), and the fact that they owned a video-recorder (at a time when they were still quite expensive), and that my grandad taped practically every movie ever shown on TV, was more than enough persuasion to keep us coming back every week. It's also what probably fuelled my love for film, and is almost certainly the reason that I would spend nearly every penny I earned delivering newspapers as a teenager buying movies to watch on the Ferguson Videostar we were eventually able to afford.

When we weren't watching our way through my grandad's own personal branch of Blockbuster, we were thumbing our way through his own private Waterstone's. My grandad had so many books that held our attention time and time again (ones about Egyptology and the Titanic being particular favourites). On the occasions when we didn't fancy reading, we would always play in the garden at the back of the house/shop, or the cool cellar underneath it (anywhere that has a large quantity of sweets and crisps was bound to be of great interest to us). With the variety of food-stuffs available in the shop, my grandad was able to introduce us to things which remain firm favourites to this day; ham off-the-bone, mature cheddar and, in the case of my sister, 12-year old port (introducing us to alcohol at a young, although not inappropriately young, age was my grandad's way of helping us to see it as normal and develop a sensible attitude towards it – it worked very well).

My grandad's influence on my life wasn't just limited to my childhood. When I sat my A-levels prior to going to university, I had already decided where I wanted to go; Plymouth might not have been the best place in the world to study computing, but it was a place I loved and knew well, they had a course I could do and, more importantly, they were happy to offer me a place despite my grades being not terribly brilliant. But, best of all, since they'd moved there some years before, I would get to live with my grandparents for a while ... instead of being shot head first from my comfortable home into the terrifying independence of living on my own, I was able to take this half-way step that made the transition between dependent child and responsible adult so much easier. And, since they'd already done the whole "raising kids" thing with my mum and her siblings, there was nothing I could do that they wouldn't have dealt with before.

I had a wonderful time living with my grandparents for the first couple of years of my student-life; I remember how, every day, I would be back from university just in time for "Countdown". I remember how I'd sit down with my grandparents and a cuppa, and my grandad and I would try to see what words we could come up with for each round. I remember how my grandad started liking the movies of Arnold Schwarzenegger, and how he lovingly referred to him as Arnold Sweaty Knickers. I remember how, with my nan's established history of getting restless and feeling the urge to up-sticks and move every 7 or 8 years, my grandad came to me one day and asked that, if my nan raised the subject of how she was thinking about moving away from Plymouth, could I try and talk her out of it? I remember how, if my grandparents ever went away for the weekend, usually to visit relatives up-country, my grandad would always first ask if I could look after his cat, Arthur, then he would jokingly ask I not have *too many* orgies while they away 😊

I remember so many things about my grandad because he was such important part of my life. In terms of religious beliefs, my grandparents are spiritualists – I never confessed my atheism to them, just as I never did for anyone, because I didn't really need to – my family always knew me to be a deeply sceptical and curious child, always asking questions and "thinking" about things. I could never bring myself to criticise my grandparents beliefs, partly because they never made any big deal out of it (it's just what they were), but mostly because I knew that, in their case, they were almost entirely benign. Their beliefs never really informed their decisions that much – everything they chose to do they would have done anyway simply because they were both practical people. But, as an atheist, I can't share their faith that there is a life beyond this one because I know it to be completely irrational; for me immortality is achieved through the persistence of memory, and that's why, despite having lost someone I truly loved and consider myself privileged to have known, this sad day has still been able to bring a smile to my face – every time I remember *anything* to do with my grandad.

If there were ever a purpose to our lives, I think it is simply to be someone worth remembering. To live a life, and to have had enjoyed and created experiences, that people would want to recount with fondness to others. I hope that my grandad, who was never afraid to express his pride for me in the things I've done, would himself take great pride in knowing that, in my eyes, he has more than fulfilled this immensely noble purpose. I will always remember my grandad, and I will take great joy in recounting my time with him to others, as I do now, because to leave behind a good story, and a

smile on the faces of the people that knew us, is the true measure of whether our lives were well spent. I will remember everything, for better or worse, because, in the end, the one thing we all want is the knowledge that we mattered to someone.

I will remember the "naughty box" – the storage compartment in a sofa they had when I was about 3 that he would always jokingly pretend was for putting naughty children in. I will remember the three different jars of hundreds-and-thousands (sprinkles) that they kept in their kitchen for when we had ice cream – one multi-coloured, one strawberry and chocolate, and one chocolate – we knew them as "These, Those, and Thems". I will remember how my sister, Sam, got the scar she now has on her forehead when she ran out of the garden, into the alley way, and head first into the wheelbarrow my grandad was pushing back to the garden. I will remember how, when we had christmas one year at my grandparents house, my grandad had bought a couple of extra little presents to give us on Boxing Day because, "Santa comes to our house *twice*" 😊 I remember my grandad's dark room and the time he let me develop pictures with him.

I will remember his 8mm cine camera and the films he made, films I now possess and am desperate to get converted to DVD, featuring my sister and I playing in their garden at about the age of 4, my auntie Marie's fifth birthday party, and time spent in and around Plymouth while the Theatre Royal was under construction. I will remember the shop, D & M Grocers, and the church opposite where my auntie Marie married. I will remember my grandad's wine cellar and how, without pretension, he had a genuine appreciation for the grape; I remember the day, a few years back, when my grandad discovered I had a similar affinity for a good scotch – he gave me a couple of miniatures that he'd had for some time, one of which was approaching 30 years old and got me dizzy from the vapour of it alone – I made sure to thank him for it after it had finished plunging me into a beautifully smooth-tasting coma.

I will remember the green Austin Princess he drove us down to Church Wood in. I will remember being in the back seat of the Fiat 125 he had bought for my nan while giving her driving lessons (she was in her 40s at the time). I will remember with immense fondness the cream coloured Jaguar XJ6 he owned for a time, how it was the nicest car I'd ever been in, and how my sister would unfailingly get horrendously car-sick every time we went out in it. I will remember when my grandad was a company accountant for Nathan's Furniture, who made fairly high-end dining tables, chairs etc., and how we got to go to the big company christmas party one year – somewhere there's a picture of a mildly-bemused, four year old me and the Santa who was giving out presents to the children of all the employees. I will remember the photographs he would take; my sister and I feeding birds at the Slimbridge Wildfowl Trust; the one of me as a baby, grinning like a lunatic and clutching a tube of Smarties, that he had blown up on canvas and framed.

I will remember my grandad as someone who never wanted to be any bother or fuss to anyone; as long as he could indulge in his passions, live a comfortable existence, and not put anyone out while doing so, he was happy. I will remember him as someone who was as capable as anyone of profound emotional depth – the poetry that he has written, about love, life, and even individual members of his family, and has been sending to my sister, Sam, since she married in 2005. I will remember him as someone I was always glad to see and spend time with because I knew that I would always learn something new, whether it was some interesting fact or a useful skill (what limited DIY ability I have I entirely credit to him). He was a teacher, and a friend, and I will always be glad to have known him

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And, more importantly, I will **always** remember my grandad ...

