

Goodbye, Mr. Fish

Kris King – October 13th 2011

<http://www.rantinaminor.co.uk/2011/10/goodbye-mr-fish/>

A while ago, purely for the purposes of my own private amusement, I wrote a song about the company I work for, and some of the eclectic folk I share an office with. I say "song", it was more a selection of English words, arranged badly into sentences, and desperately in need of a better author who could put them to good use. The song itself was pretty lame, and the idea as a whole was even lamer, so for that reason alone it will probably never see the light of day. That said, however, there are a few lines from it that I would like to share (albeit reluctantly) with you, along with some far more appropriate and better arranged words, in memory of Mr. Nicholas Fish; a colleague we were shocked to learn on Monday morning had passed away over the weekend at the terribly young age of 45.

Mr. Fish, a man in glasses,
Has a love for styles and classes,
But his passion sometimes can go overboard.
He has the funniest of sneezes,
Which have never failed to please us,
And, to show our gratitude, we all applaud.

I don't think that it would be an exaggeration for me to say that I consider myself rather fortunate to have worked with someone like Nic for the last eight and a half years. Admittedly we didn't exactly hang out together much outside of work (to be fair, I never really do that much with anyone), but we did share the same bit of carpet and some airspace with one another for 7.5 hours a day, 5 days a week, for the best part of a decade. While many people came and went over the years, some more memorable than others, Nic endured with boundless patience and fidelity; a stalwart of the company since before I started, he hardly ever missed a day to illness, he was dedicated and loyal, the closest thing the company had to a much-adored family dog. Granted there would be the occasional, accidental poo on the floor, but we're none of us perfect.

There were times, for example, when Nic's grasp of Coldfusion or Javascript would desert him, in one instance to the point where I jokingly suggested the instigation of a "Code Offender's Register" for people who committed egregious crimes against computer programming. There, too, were times when his desire to keep things organised would result in him tidying a website's code into malfunction, breaking it completely whilst ensuring that at least the rest of us could easily find our way around the neatly arranged piles of smouldering rubble that used to be a working "Contact Us" form. All of this is perfectly understandable, however, because none of these things were really Nic's area of special expertise and, while he didn't always pull a 5-star result out of every such task, he was never afraid to have a bloody good go and, for that, you had to give him 5 stars for effort.

Where Nic's mad skills truly lay were in HTML and CSS; with a quiet determination, a little bit of time, and a suitable quantity of coffee in his black "Mac User" mug, he could make a site look spot-on perfect in every browser – even the ones that only four people in the whole world are still using. If there was a quirk, oddity, glitch, or bug in a modern web browser that Nic hadn't seen before, he would generally find a way around it; if he couldn't, it was likely that no-one else had managed to find a way around it either because there wasn't one. Although I would often tease Nic that, as a programmer, I would "do all the words" and he would "draw the pretty pictures", it was always delivered with an appreciative fondness for someone who regularly solved, with tremendous ease, annoying little problems that would have me tearing my hair out and contemplating extreme criminal damage against my keyboard for the better half of a day.

Perhaps it was the frequently finicky nature of this aspect of web development that so appealed to Nic, possessing, as he did, a pedantic streak that was as wide as the M5 and equally as likely to cause interminable frustration. Nic had a talent for winding people up, myself included, in the most endearing of ways with his insistence on getting things *right*. There was never any malice, nor intent to annoy, just a fervent belief that one should pay attention to the tiny details that others might

consider trivial because, in the end, the small things *do* matter. Many's the time when I, and others (especially support diva Aerynne and, before her, John Leal), would find ourselves flirting dangerously with the possibility of an all-out pitched battle with Nic over HTML standards, accessibility, and whether or not a specific browser's implementation of some minor CSS attribute warranted our hating it as much as we did.

A similar need for the possible intervention of the United Nations could be achieved by decorating Nic's monitor with tinsel in the run-up to christmas. It wasn't so much that he hated christmas, not at all, although he did take to wearing his near-legendary "Bah Humbug!" hat at the office party every year with possibly a bit too much enthusiasm. It seemed more that he objected to the feeling of enforced jollity (whether real or imagined) and the sense that if he wasn't conforming to someone else's idea of fun then whatever he was having couldn't legitimately be called "fun". It didn't matter that whatever everyone else was doing wasn't entirely up his street, Nic could still take a certain amount of joy in sitting back with a beer and watching the festivities. He didn't feel like he had to join in to enjoy himself – in some ways it seemed as if that would make it much harder – instead he was often content to simply soak up the atmosphere with a pint and a gentle smile.

This is not to say that Nic couldn't be the centre of attention every once in a while; in what I can only describe as a perversely joyous quirk of fate, this ordinarily quiet man was blessed with the most wonderfully gregarious and fabulously entertaining sneezes I think any of us have ever heard. Every so often, the relative quiet of the office would be completely demolished by a noise that sounded as if the actor playing the villain in a martial arts movie had come in unannounced to practice his "Hai-ya!" fight yelps. Bordering on the surreal, and beautifully juxtaposed against Nic's understated and whisper-soft nature, the office would frequently burst into a round of applause, the volume and enthusiasm of which was always commensurate with how impressive the sneeze was. At first this response seemed to wind him up a little, but he quickly warmed to the idea that something that was so intrinsically him, and over which he had no control, regularly brought joy to an entire room full of people.

Most of us only ever really knew of Nic that which we saw day-to-day in the office; he was a devoted fan of neo-prog rock outfit Marillion, a lover of everything Apple (he tolerated Microsoft in the same way one puts up with Jeremy Clarkson; for the most part, you try to ignore them and hope they go away), and his ability to always be the first person in the kitchen whenever a large quantity of cakes, doughnuts, or other variety of chocolate treat, had been brought in for someone's birthday never failed to amaze (nor too did his habit of always returning for seconds). Some of us, on the other hand, knew Nic as a great listener; whether it was making a cuppa first thing after getting in to the office, or drunkenly trying to make oneself heard above the din at the christmas party, he always seemed to have time to offer a friendly ear while you rant and rave about any of life's piffling little annoyances.

On a number of occasions, when weather permitted, Nic and I would find ourselves choosing to walk the 3+ miles from the office into town instead of catching the bus, each chatting away about anything and everything. One such leisurely stroll homeward was on the last Friday of the month – pay day – a fact that occurred to us both almost simultaneously as we approached the Golden Hind pub, just off the Manadon Roundabout. With no pressing need to be anywhere else we decided to stop in for a quick pint which, as is so often the case, ended up being three pints and a relaxed, enjoyable natter between friends over the varying shades of fun and madness that coloured our respective lives. I remember how, in another similar conversation, Nic confided to me in a "don't tell anyone – okay, you can tell [star of support, training, and company phone system] Marie" sort of way that he had become a father – and I remember feeling both honoured, and a little surprised, that he trusted *me* enough to make me the first person at work to know.

In the few years since then, we've had countless other conversations, including those where we learned how we both have people close to us with Aspergers Syndrome (a conversation sparked by Nic proudly showing off the mug that had been made for him), AND we both have loved ones for whom gluten is an Achilles heel (Nic recommended "The Cake Hole" for gluten-free fair, and I put him on to the work of Mrs Crimble in return). There is, however, one conversation that I shall never forget ... not because it was especially funny, or sad; profound, or trivial; revealing, or guarded. It was something that, in retrospect, might ordinarily cause one to feel a slight foreshadowing chill down the spine, but I don't really see it that way. Given my reasonably limited knowledge of Nic as a person it's possible that I'm completely wrong but, to me, it always seemed more like he was saying, "here is something about me that I can't change, so I'm not going to worry about it – instead, I'm going to live and enjoy my life, and just carry on being me".

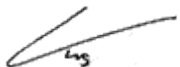
It was about 5 years ago, give or take, and a few of us from work were on a night out (the occasion of which, if there was one, escapes me). We were, by this point, in the James Street Vaults; a decent, quirky little pub at the back of Plymouth University and, whilst I have no recollection of how the conversation got there, I do remember that Marie and myself were sat listening with wide-eyed interest as Nic told us about his heart. I remember how, warily, but with an irrepressible curiosity, Marie took Nic up on the offer to put her hand to the side of his rib-cage to feel his heartbeat. I found it quite endearing that Nic, with a somewhat perverse pleasure and a knowing smile, was able to legitimately say that his "heart was in the wrong place". I also loved the contrast of how, while this was *literally* true, figuratively speaking nothing could have been further from the truth.

When everyone was requested to gather for a "company briefing" on Monday morning, my mind start reeling at the possibilities as to what an early morning, unscheduled impromptu meeting could be about. None of the thoughts that had occurred to me came within a million miles of the truth of why we were all assembled ... over the years I've found that I'm becoming increasingly more difficult to shock, but this well and truly hit me for six. I couldn't process it – I still can't, to an extent – and it almost didn't make any difference to know for a fact that I wasn't alone. I am still half-expecting an eccentric-looking man in a 1960's police box to turn up at reception and tell us all that some alien race had been royally bugging with reality and that he was trying to get everything back the way it should be as soon as possible.

It didn't matter that Nic could be, as Aerynne described in her Facebook update on Monday, "occasionally infuriating, curmudgeonly, pedantic" because he was also, she continued, "one of the kindest gentlest people I've ever met". I don't think there's a single person here, among those with whom he worked, or anywhere else in the world, who could possibly disagree ... for Clair and everyone in Nic's family, as well as his closest friends, they have, this week, lost a friend, a brother, a son, a husband, and a father – I know that I speak on behalf of everyone when I say that our love and deepest sympathies are with you all because, for the rest of us, we've lost a genuine, decent, honest, kind, and thoroughly lovely guy – the sort that the world could do with a lot more of, and is a poorer place for having lost.

The title of this post is, as you may already be aware, a mildly clumsy allusion to the 1939 Robert Donat film, "Goodbye, Mr. Chips" (as well as being a rather obvious and silly joke built on the substituting of "fish" for "chips"). There were two reasons why I thought it an appropriate title for a post about Nic; firstly, I think he would have quite liked it and, secondly, in writing this I realised that Nic had much in common with those classic era films for which he held a great love (chief among them being the Ealing comedies of the forties and fifties, and those of Alistair Sim in particular). They were quiet, gentle, warm-hearted, and impossible to imagine that they could ever cause offence to anyone ... and for those lucky enough to have known them, and will always care to remember, they do so with a great sense of appreciation and fondness, and an indelible smile.

Goodbye, Mr. Fish ... it was a pleasure to have met you ...

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to be 'Ang', written in a cursive style.