

A Eulogy for Walter Dempsey (17/5/1910- 30/7/2010)

Departed this life on Friday July 30th just after 8pm

Written by Liz Morrigan with input from family

(The “us” here refers to we, Wal’s children; we, his large extended family and we, all who are honouring him today.)

Pictures of Dad:

Track 2: Dad’s response

Introduction

The impact of these words from Wal Dempsey’s 100th birthday party shows something of him as a person and also something of what he means to us.

He was a man of few words, well until recently; a man of quiet dignity and humility; he expressed gratitude to those who cared for him and always treated them with respect. Over the last few years, he has expressed love for us all openly. He has always had a dry sense of humour and was strong in himself to the end.

Last few days and hours

How he lived his last days and hours also showed who he was:

In the emergency department last week, when asked as part of assessing his level of orientation: “where are you?”, he paused for some time before answering: “I’m in a lovely comfortable place, with some very lovely people”. I think he passed the test!

On the way up to the ward the next day, he told the nurse: “I like to get to know the staff in these places, then they look after you well.”

A couple of days later, he was well enough to have thickened fluids. After a few spoonfuls of the stuff, he pursed his lips firmly, lifted his finger decisively and said: “No more”. (Yes Dad)

Not long before he died, two of his grandchildren, who are nurses, were turning him to make him more comfortable. They explained to him what they were going to do and although he was in pain and close to death he assisted as they rolled him onto his side. His active co-operation and consideration of them was impressive.

Over the last couple of years, he has warmly accepted us looking after him. Us getting together to do that, especially over the last days of his life, has in turn changed us in very positive ways. We, his children and grandchildren are a very different team of kids than we were a few years ago. Significantly thanks to Dad.

Last 2 years

After Mum died, Dad grieved openly. He sang his Mary song: oh Mary I love you... Some might think he had always sung but this was a new skill!

He reached out and we hovered, seeking out ways to comfort him. He started telling his stories. We started to get to know him. The stories fleshed out this man who was our father.

The stories

Ones he told over and over

Some stories he told over and over; stories of his beginnings and boyhood, of meeting Mary and his initial appointments in aeradio.

PAUSE

Beginnings

Dad was born at home in North Geelong on 17th May 1910. He was the first child of Walter McInnes Davis Dempsey¹ and Mary Theresa Kelly². A neighbour, Mrs Toyne, assisted his mother at the birth. He was a happy healthy child and his first memory is of running down the road from the house towards the sea and his mother running after him to catch him before he got to the water.

Continuing in Dad's words:

"When I was about 6 years old, we moved to Melbourne. The reason for the move was this: my father worked on the Geelong harbour trust and they had gone on strike so he was without income for the duration. My mother's brother said come up to Melbourne, there's plenty of work here! (They didn't say it was for 10/- a week on the market gardens!)

We lived on Moorabbin Rd (now called Warrigal Rd) about half way between Cheltenham and Mentone. This road was a sand track that only horse drawn vehicles could traverse. The track was bordered with tea tree that almost closed over the top!"

"When we moved to Melbourne, my father earned a pound a week if that.... they were terrible days... You had to live on the barest amount of money. BUT bread was 2d a loaf. The baker would come round. He had French loaves, just a lump of dough thrown on the tray and baked: they were brown all the way round with a beautiful crust."

In his stories, the images of the "nun's strap", cousins coming down with diphtheria, extended school holidays because of the flu epidemic of 1918/19 give a picture of the world he was born into.

Dad attended school at St Patrick's Mentone from where he went to work in the Post Office.

PAUSE

Meeting Mary

Another story he told regularly was of meeting Mary:

"One day while I was working at the Cheltenham Post Office, I noticed a little girl come into the exchange. She was only about 15. She looked very nervous. I wanted to reassure her that there was no need to worry. But I was too shy; it took me a few days to get up the courage..."

When Mary went back to Ballarat, Dad decided he couldn't stay in Cheltenham any longer. He applied for positions at several different post offices including Ballarat and he got Ballarat. But he wasn't the only one after Mary...

In the meantime he had applied for a position with the newly created Civil Aviation Board. Soon after starting in Ballarat, he received notification of his selection to one of 14 newly created aeradio operator positions across Australia. He moved back to Melbourne to take up the new position. In his words:

"I walked into the head Office in St Kilda Rd and said: "send me anywhere, send me where no-one else wants to go!"

He was posted to Oodnadatta and arrived there July 1939. He was moved around between Oodnadatta, Daly Waters and Karumba throughout the war years often being called back from leave at short notice. He often worked in quite primitive conditions including sleeping in an aircraft hanger and having dust blown in whenever an aircraft took off or landed.

With the support of Mary's mother, a bunch of Sturt Desert Peas and his persistence, Wal won Mary's hand and they became engaged while he was on leave from Karumba in 1941 and married on 19th September 1942. Wal considered that he had done his time in remote Australia and got a posting back in Melbourne. He said:

"Mary was a wonderful girl, there's no doubt about it. I didn't think I would be that fortunate to win the heart of such a lovely girl. The girl who wasn't going to live long, lived until she was 90!"

¹ Born 11th May 1876, died 23rd May 1956

² Born 20th May 1886, died 1st July 1960

Stories others tell

Child rearing/being a father

Mum and Dad had 8 children together. For many of us, our father seemed very private and even aloof. He didn't talk much and was often sleeping after a night shift. He would sometimes creep out to the garage, without us kids knowing he was up. One of us would be given the job by Mum to take Dad his cuppa either out to the shed or handed out through the window if feeling lazy. He was not like other fathers... he was older, he worked shifts, he wore overalls when at home and he was either in the shed, in the garden or in bed. He washed dishes but never dried, he cooked meals especially soup and he made biscuits as big as his hand.

Recently we collected stories for his 100th birthday celebration. Some of these showed him in yet another light:

When my sister Margaret had a problem with handwriting, Dad helped her. He sat with her at the dining room table and slowly and gently moved the book around for her and supported her to learn again. He rescued the situation for her.

When Con was very little, Dad would try to teach him to stand by showing him how. He would get down on the ground and stand with groans of effort over and over.

When Carmel was little and Mum was busy, Dad was there. He would stand her on the couch (not allowed) and help her get into her overalls (just like Dad had) and then they could go outside together and do outside stuff. Carmel just loved it and her overalls!

The arrival of the grand kids gave Dad another excuse to talk more and to teach another generation about how things work, about the weather and the history of things. They would watch him feeding the magpies at Marong where Mum and Dad retired to in 1975. Dad talked to the magpies and they would follow him around and even come up the back door looking for food. Dad invented a cage to put food in so only the magpies could get it.

The Shack or shed

Dad always had a radio shack. The shack housed his radio gear, his technical books and papers, a wooden box at the door step for sitting in the sun...

When we were growing up and even when the grandkids were growing up, we were not allowed in the shack except maybe on very special occasions. As the years went by, dad allowed more entry into this inner sanctum of his life. Many stories circulated about Dad's shack because he spent so much time out there.

Trips

Trips together were an important part of Mum and Dad's life together. Their way of having a holiday was to pack the current car (no four wheel drive for them!) with maps, a mattress, a box of clothes each, a box of food, a kerosene tin for a stove and head off. At the back of one of Dad's notebooks is a list of trips covering the 1980's and 1990's. The list reads: 1980, around Australia, 1981 Eucharistic Congress in Lourdes (clothes packed in a suitcase rather than cardboard box this time), 1982, Kalbarri, 1983 Flinders Ranges and Raunsley Park, 1984 Port Douglas and return. In 1985, there's another overseas trip to Rome and then back on the road in 1986 for Coorow – Kalbarri and return via the Nullarbor. 1987: Cape York via Bourke TC- AS- PTA, 1988 Alice Springs and return, 1989: Karumba via Bourke and return via Hughenden and 1991: Carnarvon Gorge via Armidale Emerald Roma.

In the 90's they went on trips to Tasmania, Geelong and /Warrnambool and then to the Nth East of Vic following up family history. Many of these trips were retracing dad's earlier journeys to remote aeradio posts.

The stories of these trips would fill volumes.

Wal Dempsey was a man of many skills, interests and commitments.

1. He was an early adopter of technology
Wal set up a radio studio on Centre Dandenong Rd transmitting on VK3WD. He had his own radio show in the 1930s. On Sunday mornings he rode home from Mass to broadcast...
He knew the shop in Melbourne that sold the serious stuff and he had their latest catalogue. He frequented the bookshops and regularly added to his technical library. Later he inducted his children, including the girls, into technology via crystal sets. These days he would be called a GEEK.
2. He was the original recycler: he abhorred waste and lived frugally. In some of his notebooks, the writing is not only on the unused pages but also in between the lines on the used pages. There was always paper recycled from DCA, a rag for a hanky, composting etc
3. He was largely self educated. He reaped a fine harvest from his years at school and went to great lengths to get official recognition of his skills and knowledge. He sought out what he could do and went ahead and did it! He was proud that these were “all me own qualifications”.
4. He was a man of strong faith. He went to Mass often: he went every Sunday except 3/4 times while at Templestowe and even went to the Good Friday service the day after Mum died. He said the rosary even when it clashed with Perry Mason on the TV; he was open with his work mates about his faith and his religion. He never swore. He physically and financially contributed to the building of churches and parishes wherever he lived.
5. He was a builder and a maker of things. Wherever he lived, he built. He built a shack at least and he built on to accommodate his growing family. He made toys and an altar for the school chapel. He took pride in his work and exercised self discipline. When he was building the veranda at Pascoe Vale, he would build a wall and have it all ready for when the baker was expected and together they would raise it into position and then Wal could continue the job on his own. If there was no-one about, he would set up some sort of pulley system and slowly but surely get the job done. He made his mother a Coolgardie safe when he was only 12 years old. That was her first “fridge”.
6. He was reliable and constant: If Dad’s home everything will be OK, Dad will know; if anyone can, Dad can fix it. Need a pencil? Ask Dad and he’ll reliably produce from his overalls pocket a very, very tiny pencil!
7. He was not shrewd in business dealings but an extraordinary money manager and honest in all transactions.
8. He had his own ways of being in life: he didn’t need to fit in with fashion, norms, popular expectations... and he had his dry sense of humour.

Enduring contribution to our lives

These attributes represent enduring contributions to our lives. The stories remembered and shared will bring a tear and then a smile as another Wal Dempsey story comes to mind...

He was a good man, a dignified gentleman and a man of faith to the end. He lived justly, he loved tenderly and he walked humbly with his God.

Track 2: Dad’s response