

My Father Noel: It is wonderful to read the tributes to my father Noel, thank you Zoe and Gabe, once again for having the sense and the technical know how to set up the website. It is good to have such witness to the joy and stiffening of sinew he brought. Like all of us he had times when he could be a right B***** and a mischievous gossip. But as the Spartan Chilon said τὸν τεθνηκότα μὴ κακολογῆν (speak no evil of the dead) and this is neither the time nor the place..... so my contribution is just a few funnies to go with the more serious stuff..

One evening when I was 11 or 12, while camping beside the Thames near Oxford, my parents decided to go midnight skinny dipping in that venerable river. I went along and blithely dived in making quite a splash and thrashing around to get warm. The crew of a river cruiser moored on the other bank, thinking that someone was drowning switched on a million volt searchlight, picking up my very naked parents on the other bank. Noel was not a man given to swearing but, his army training came in handy and he released a stream of vulgarities, most unbecoming from a man of the cloth and the searchlight went off with muttered apologies. As the untouched source of this embarrassment, I giggled about it for days.

My NZ wife Catherine opened the door the other evening to a wild haired gent in sandals with a beard to his waist asking for me in a thick foreign accent. Assuming it was just another of Noel's waifs and strays ("Oh when you are in Oxford do look up my son" he would say airily)

She said, "And whom should I say is calling?"

"Oh I'm the Archbishop of Georgia" he said

She came within an inch of saying, "Oh yes and I'm the **** tooth fairy".

Well, it turned out to be true! He'd lost the key to his apartment. Oxford is just one of those places – so like California! Anyone who has known Noel will have been trained to look behind the beard and find the man.

Noel loved puns, the more convoluted and cryptic the better. Rice Pudding the Mad Monk and Lover of the Russian Queen was a favourite. Who was the smallest man in the Bible? Bildad, the Shuhite! was another. He loved the cartoons of Peter Arno of the New Yorker of the 50s...One waitress in a NY topless bar, with only a small Mexican sombrero to cover her rear modesty to another, "Hey Merle, Here's a secret, keep it under your hat". Punch Magazine was another source of inspiration. One cartoon he repeated endlessly was of a poor broken down horse brought to the vet who opined.."It ain't the 'ackin' on the 'eath wot 'urts the 'orse's 'ooves, it's the 'ammer, 'ammer 'ammer on the 'ard 'igh road". He often felt that way himself. A C19th cartoon showed a lady in a crinoline trying to get into a horse drawn omnibus in London. "Try sideways Missus", shouts the driver, "Lor Bless 'ee John" she replies, "I ain't got no sideways".

He ignored Mr Punch's advice on those contemplating matrimony which was "Don't" by marrying successively two very good women, who with some legerdemain, mostly got pots of tea down in front of him before he opened the Riesling.

There are many things I regret in his passing, but perhaps the greatest is his refusal, with all his world experience, to put it together and form a world view. Despite everything, he was a very modest man. Had he done so, I suspect it would not have been far from the view of the great pagan philosopher Symmachus (340 – 402), arguing against the establishment of Christianity as the sole religion of the Roman Empire "To so great a mystery, there must be more than one way." He often quoted Symmachus with deep approval.

He loved his eyrie in Central California where the humming birds and jays flew round and the redwoods shaded and I feel very grateful that I had a week with him, just before the end, while at least some of his mind was still there. He likened death to slipping off the bench in the African village on which the elders sat of an evening beneath a great branching, shady tree. He had been slowly falling off the end of the bench for many months and is now sitting in the lower branches of the tree, smiling at the eccentricities of us who are left. Those who loved him and cared for him – and what a privilege to be numbered amongst them - will see him more clearly, but he will slowly pass onto the upper branches and then, well, who knows?

Francis Number 1 Son.
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