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MEMOIRS

AN EXERCISE WE SHARE

By Mark Cornell



(Great Granddad)



Not so long ago my Mum gave me Great Grandad's ancient exercise book. What it contained was always a mystery. There were a hundred and sixty pages

(he numbered all of them) full of his writing. All the pages were yellow, the ink was fading and it has that dusty smell like an old book from a library. He had a beautiful old fashioned writing style, words flowed like a river across the page. No one had studied his book before, it was tucked away in some special place. I think my family assumed it was just full of quotes from his favourite writers like Shakespeare, Rudyard Kipling and Mark Twain. So I was the first relative to sit down and take a good look.

At a first glance it did look like he was just quoting the great writers. “Amazing,” I thought to myself, “ here’s another member of my family who has a deep love for the classics, especially Shakespeare. ” To me, Shakespeare is God. I remember when my Granddad, Alan, died thirty years ago, I was desperate for solace. I had no desire to look in The Bible but instead found what I was looking for in The Sonnets. Shakespeare had gone through a few traumas in his own lifetime (the death of his son Hamnet, to name just one) and he reflected four hundred years ago that there were ways to overcome death; namely poetry, love and children. Great Granddad, Leonard had undergone a nightmare of his own. His wife Lilley died giving birth to their daughter of the same name, and because of the march of time, we know virtually nothing of

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how Leonard coped. He, like all Australian males kept his feelings to himself. But you can get an inkling of what was important to him when you read his exercise book. Shakespeare was obviously a companion throughout Leonard’s years on the planet. There was a real joy of life too in Leonard’s words, which were playful. There was also a generosity of spirit and empathy, where he put himself in the shoes of the underdog. I asked my Mum if he was a loving soul and she said he adored his daughter, Lilley, my grandmother. Mum noticed Leonard and Lilley’s loving warmth whenever they were together.

As a result I only know the bare bones of Great Granddad’s life. His name was Leonard Taylor. He was eighty nine when he died in 1964, fifty years ago this year. He was born in Kangaroo Ground, a bush town on the outskirts of Melbourne, Victoria. He lived in what used to be known as an outer suburb, Box Hill. He caught the tram five days a week from Box Hill to the Carlton and United Breweries in Melbourne, where he worked for

donkey's years as a clerk. He always smoked a pipe. He never owned a car and walked everywhere, always reading in his spare time from his own sizeable library.

Alas, I only have two personal memories of Great Grandad. The first is of him growling at me when I was about four, which was fair enough, as he was in

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his late eighties, and I was running around inside his home like a little savage. I remember he had a big silver moustache like a broom, and a thick mop of grey hair. Mum put me out in the backyard where I explored his large fernery. To a little bloke like me, it was magical place with its paths and many exotic plants.

The other memory I had of him was when he died. I remember my Mum crying her heart out after getting the news. It was the first time I'd seen her like that. I vaguely recall learning the word cremation and I was pretty horrified when it was explained to me. Great Grandad wanted his ashes scattered to the wind. To this day we don't know where. This was my first direct experience of death, and I was too young to take it all in. But I remember roughly about two years later (when I was staying with my Grandparents) I cried all night when it occurred to me that the people I adored would be taken away forever one day.

As I made my way through Great Grandad's exercise book, I came across writings I'm convinced he composed. I resurrected ten poems. He called most of his poems parodies because they were send ups of popular songs or poems. He loved irreverently mucking around with words and was on the side of the ordinary bloke, sinking the boot into middle-class snobbery. Just like his Great Grandson.

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I've got about six exercise books tucked away in my wardrobe, full of my poetry. At the beginning they were meant as lyrics for songs. Growing up in Melbourne in the sixties and seventies I was surrounded by great songwriters The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, The Doors, Bob Dylan and Neil Young, just to name a few. There was always music in my family

house (and I suspect in Great Grandad's house too, as one of his poems is a send up of the Mikado's *Tit Willow*.) I'd often drift off to sleep with a transistor radio on my pillow listening to words that lifted me out of my youthful world. I remember one particular night, after having a serious stoush with my Dad, I went into my bedroom to weep. The Rolling Stones song, '*You can't always get what you want*', came on the radio. Magic lyrics registered with my teenage heart: "*You can't always get what you want, but if try sometimes you get what you need*". I stopped crying.

In my teenage way, I thought of lyrics as sacred and uplifting, though most of my early efforts were pretty lame. Poetry came to me after studying at university and the death of my grandparents. I was the first member of my family to go to University and study the classics of literature. One day I experienced a revelation with Shakespeare. We were studying *Othello*, and the tutor asked if we knew of anyone who loved the sound of his own voice. I'd just broken off with my girlfriend who was hanging around a guy who loved

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talking about his psychological ailments. My tutor said *Othello*'s prone to banging on like the guy I knew. This simple comparison opened my door to Shakespeare's universe. Every thought known to mankind, every feeling too, is found in Shakespeare. He showed me that I'm not alone. When I took my teenage son, Tom, to a twilight production of *Romeo and Juliet* in the Botanical Gardens recently, he loved it. The play was full of bravado, romance, challenges and silliness- just what a teenage boy needs.

I also recall my Mum inherited one of the few items Great Grandad possessed, a tiny wooden footstool. As a kid, leaning back on my chair, and balancing my feet on this footstool, I was in my own world. I used to listen to the footy every Saturday afternoon when I was a kid, and wrote down in my own exercise book every score that was kicked by my footy team, Collingwood. I also used to make up my own Top 40 music hits. Like Great Grandad, I found that my exercise book gave me a freedom to write down anything I liked. I wasn't restricted by teachers or parents.

I've always been a bookworm and have tended to devour a book each week, which was also like Great Grandad. Mum said that when she visited him he was always happy to sit in his chair and read. I've found it to be my meditation as well, especially if you have a creative mind which is active all the

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time and needs moments to focus on other things. It's also comforting and good to know there are other people on this planet who think and feel the same way as you.

Unfortunately, what I don't share with my Great Grandad is his physique. Studying the two photos I have of him I realised I bore no physical resemblance to him whatsoever. Great Grandad had a long and lean build like a gum tree. I inherited my head and body from the stumpy, Celtic, 'bog-treading' side of the family. If you look at my picture you know what I'm talking about!

I was also close to my, Great Grandad's daughter Lilley, and her husband, Alan (my grandparents). My writing increased as they suffered through their own old age illnesses. My grief for them swept away the superficiality of life, my words came straight from the heart. I was with Grandad Alan when he died, and swear I felt a chemical reaction when a part of him entered into me. Words can do the same thing. They can move you and for a fleeting moment you're at one with the writer. Words written a long time ago can make you smile or cry, make you angry and cause your heart to skip a beat. They connect you to something greater than yourself and to a larger human experience.

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Bio:

Mark is of Irish ancestry. As a child he grew up listening to stories; either in the form of tall tales told by his extended family or the lyrics of his favourite songs on the radio. He started writing poetry when he was seventeen. He has traveled to Ireland twice and during one of these visits was married to Kimberly in a Registry Office in Dublin. Mark has been writing Short Stories and Novels for a number of years. He took family leave for three years to look after his son Thomas. He now works as a Conciliator with Consumer Affairs.