

TAKING THE LAST RIDE

My dad died this morning. The call came through at 9.30 from a woman who had found him lying at the side of the road. He had had a heart attack and fallen from his bicycle, probably dead before he hit the ground. He was 78, healthy and fit as a fiddle and in everyone's mind still had a good ten years of his time on earth to complete. Put another way, dad's death certainly wasn't in my diary and I don't believe anyone else had written it into theirs either.

I drove out to where he had been found. The paramedics were busy, as he lay prone and spread-eagled on the wet pavement. He had a surprised, wide-eyed look on his pale face and was almost unrecognizable as the man I have known for the last 50 years.

I have always known (or believed) that I would need to say goodbye to my parents one day. In the last ten years I have been wondering how that would be for me. Well, now I know. I stood at the side of the road in the light drizzle, bawling uncontrollably. My body was shaking so hard from shock that the cool spring breeze felt like an arctic wind cutting through me, freezing me to my core and prompting uncontrollable tremors. I never dreamt it might be this way. The unfathomable bond of father and son doesn't easily get severed without making a serious statement. I had always somehow thought that I might philosophically and with dignity accept what was. It's not that dignity especially matters at times like this, and certainly death doesn't offer dignity on its menu of benefits, but there is always a part of me that thinks I can be in control. Today I wasn't in control. I just let whatever grief there was come to the surface and express itself. The funny thing is that, as I sit here now, feeling sad, drained and contemplative, I can't recognize my outpouring as a grief of loss. Somehow, it was rather a grief or statement of gratitude and completion. Gratitude that I had known this man, gratitude for all that he had given and sacrificed for Richard and me, gratitude for the service he had rendered to his fellow man during his time, gratitude for his thorough decentness as a human being and gratitude for all that he had passed on to me. I also found myself grieving over not having had a last handshake and a hug, but also feeling grateful for the dinner we had had two weeks earlier and the phone call we had shared two days ago. Although we lived close to each other, both of our lives were very full and we often didn't make contact more often than every few weeks. I think that if I hadn't been in contact two days ago, there would have been a real sense of incompleteness with each other.

An old rowing friend of mine committed suicide last year. I remember the puzzlement and anger that I sensed in one of our fellow crew members when he voiced what we all thought: *"He never even said goodbye."* There was something about us all feeling incomplete with our friend and comrade. We had

unfinished business with him and he had checked out long before his time (at least in our reality) without completing with us.

So what is the gift in all of this? I think the gift lies in creating an awareness in all of us not to have unfinished business. When I think about all the things in my life that have been incomplete from time to time, I realise how important it is not to have unfinished business. I don't want to die one day not having said "*I love you*" to someone who mattered, or not having travelled to Peru, or some other destination that fascinates me. I don't want to die owing money to anyone or being owed money or any other obligation by anyone. I want everything that needs to be said between me and anyone else to have been said and for it to have been said in the cleanest, most truthful possible way. I don't want incompleteness with promises not kept by or to me. I don't want to lie on my death bed regretting not having lived some dream, written some book which I had conceived, not having mastered the guitar or anything else which was planned but never came to pass. In short, when I complete my life, I want to be complete with everyone and everything, leave behind no bad tastes, leave nothing unsaid that ought to be said, but leave just a memory of a man who lived a full and complete life.

As far as Dad was concerned, 15 years ago, after dealing with my own crap, I took him to lunch and confessed the part that I had played in the sometimes tempestuous times of my teenage years. Dad had always always very proper, but I had been unwilling to tow the "proper" line as a teenager. We frequently locked horns in those years and I carried much resentment around with me long after the dust had settled. I took Dad to lunch because I thought I owed it to him to own and acknowledge my part, and help him to understand that I was just trying to spread my wings right then. When I asked him to forgive me for the hard time I had given him and Mom, he simply and graciously said: "I was just trying to do the best I could for you." And so we closed that Chapter, much closer in that hour than we had been for the previous 18 years.

So this is a way of being for all of us: clearing away unfinished business and living our lives as cleanly as we know how. It is such a clean way to live: no regrets, but affairs of the heart, head and real world all in order.

As you read this, I invite you to think about any unfinished business you might have in your relationships, your office or family. Do you have any promises un-kept, debts not paid or anything else you can think about? Once you have your

list, see if you can figure out what it is that has got in your way of completing that unfinished business. Clear away that obstacle and finish what you started.

As I sit here feeling battered and bruised, the one thing I do know is that I feel completely at peace that all business between Dad and me is complete and my grief needn't be contaminated with what I wished might be different.

So, Dad, as you take this final ride, go peacefully and know that you were much loved.

Andrew Pike

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