

A Tribute to Dad

As I begin (in 2017) to write this, on the eve of my Dad's 80th birthday, he is snug in bed while Howard the cat and I sit by the fireplace at my brother Richard's house in Oromocto. It is -20 degrees outside, and later this morning we will all drive down to SJ for a surprise 80th birthday party for Dad...he has no idea what is coming. He just thinks he is returning home after a week's convalescence at Richards following his surgery. He wants to spend his 80th birthday with my Mom. That speaks so much to me. His commitment to his marriage vows to love, honor and cherish, in sickness and in health. My mom won't remember that it is his birthday. She won't send him a card or bake a cake, or even wish him "Happy Birthday". But he wants to be with her.

You might think it a little strange to begin writing a tribute while the person is still alive. Perhaps I can convince you otherwise. You see, last year, I attended the funeral of a more distant family member. At that occasion, I remember vividly how odd it seemed that so many people had such nice things to say about the dearly departed...but I wondered if those words were ever shared in life. So I undertook after that day to begin writing tributes for my Mom and Dad. What I share with you now has already been read by him. He has given his stamp of approval and testifies to the veracity of every story, reflection and anecdote.

Where to begin with my Dad? I considered him to be a great man, though perhaps not by society's current standards and measures. His great life centered around commitment to family, and reliance on family. Ours was never a close knit, touchy feely sort of family where complements were plentiful and love was freely expressed. But love, pride and worthiness were implied, and at least for me, it was felt and known. Rarely expressed verbally, but fully known. That's what you get in a house full of guys - keep the emotions in check and under wraps. I have always known that my Dad loved me and was immensely proud of all 3 of us boys, and now also proud of his little herd of 5 Grandchildren and 4 Great Grandchildren. I was named after his father, John Hooper. And my second son was named after my Dad...Scott Robert Hooper, and my first son after me...Nathan Gregory. Family togetherness and commitment mattered to Dad, I think because of his early years and upbringing.

He was born in 1937 in a small fishing village on Campobello Island in the Bay of Fundy, growing up in the era of WWII. His family was materially poor but they never knew it, for everyone around them was just the same. But he was immensely wealthy with family, surrounded by aunts and uncles and cousins and grandparents. So when his Father died in 1949 of a heart attack while pulling in the fishing nets, my Dad became the man of the house at age 12, surrounded by relatives to guide him. He learned to rely upon them, and I think that engrained upon him that families stick together through tough times. They assist and support each other in hardship, while sharing in the joys and doing life together.

I remember him telling a few tales of his childhood:

- His generally stern Dad being a big kid on special occasions, especially at Christmas, and how one Christmas dad was hauled out of bed and given a pair of skates that his Dad just couldn't wait until daybreak to give him. The only new skates he ever owned.

- In later years, my dad raffled off those same skates so he had enough money to buy his Mom a Christmas present.
- Having to eat lobster for breakfast, because that was a junk fish that only poor people ate. What they couldn't eat was ground up and sprinkled on the garden as fertilizer. Oh, if only they knew how good they had it. Lobster for breakfast. Perhaps that is why he struggled his whole life with high cholesterol 😊.

While hard to understand at the time, the untimely death of his father was life changing. You see, my Dad freely admits that he would not have made much of a fisherman – he got sea sick too easily. His father's passing, and his mom's eventual remarrying took Dad off the Island, and away from the fishing lifestyle. They moved to tiny Meductic, NB, up above Fredericton, where he completed his high schooling, and began working in a Woodstock grocery store. By further good fortune, his boss recognized my Dad's potential for more, and encouraged him to abandon his 'stock boy dreams' and apply to NB Tel. The phone company promptly scooped him up and sent him off to Montreal for some basic electrical training. He soon found himself dropped in northern Manitoba, doing maintenance on the Trans-Canada Northern radar line. He recounts that period at the radar camp, with just him, the cook and a dog...he learned quickly how to do basic equipment repair and to survive on little. Somewhere in the midst of that, he met my Mom who was doing secretarial work in the region. They dated for a bit, he saved some money, completed his work assignment, and bought his first car, a '58 Chevrolet. They got married in '59, promptly left Manitoba and drove the Chevy back across the country, through some big cities with more than just one lane of traffic, scared to death, and ironically settled right back in Woodstock, NB. That phone company posting lasted a few years, until an opportunity came up for an entry level NBTel management job in Saint John. That was a tough decision for them, moving to a bigger city and away from his Mom and Step-Father, but he again recognized the opportunity.

Mom and Dad settled in an apartment up near the Loyalist House, worked in the downtown core, and began their family, first with Kevin in 1963 and then with me a year later. His apartment superintendent was a miser and kept shutting the heat off once April arrived. A cold apartment and sick kids eventually pushed them to vacate, and they moved to the far outskirts of town, to the then barren but developing land of Forest Hills. He recounts the house they really liked was \$13,500...far too much for their budget. They found a place to their liking for \$12000 just in advance of the Irving enhanced real estate boom, and lived there until 2020... 56 years. Soon after that in 1966, son # 3 came along...Richard. Like all young couples, they would occasionally go to weekend open houses and dream of more, but always came home and realized their Forest Hills dwelling, though modest, offered everything they needed as the malls and amenities gradually built up around them. Eventually, he and my Grandpa Wikjord (Mom's father) finished the basement so each boy had his own room, and a place to hang out with friends.

It seems to me that if Mom and Dad had a unifying mission, it was to keep their boys active and expose us to opportunities. And maybe get us outdoors so we didn't wreck the house with our energy. While we lived modestly, and any vacation involved a car ride or a tent, we always had a ball glove, pair of skates or sneakers, a bike to ride, a big field to play in behind the house. Oh sure, there were days when I dreaded Dad coming home, because Mom had already threatened that I'd be getting a whoopin' when

he arrived...and I usually did...and I usually deserved it, we all did. But almost without exception, my childhood was filled with happy memories and foundational lessons.

In their Braemar Drive living room I am surrounded by little memories of my childhood...the vacant back hill for sliding and forts, gun fights and grass fires. The driveway we'd shovel and build into snow forts. The neighbourhood and all the kids...intentionally selected by Mom and Dad so we'd have room to run and play and grow. I think that neighbourhood was perhaps their greatest gift to us. What a great start to life. Friends to play with, a short walk to school, a corner store for treats on rare occasions, a ball field (now the new sports fieldhouse), and the exhibition that came to town at the end of every summer, full of rides and lights, adventure and wonder. Simonds Minor Hockey league filled our winters, and local baseball our summers. As we grew, the scope of our activities grew, as did the distance to compete. But Mom and Dad were always there to drive, and usually in the bleachers cheering us on...hockey, volleyball, football, running, rugby, tennis, all over the province. But unlike today's parenting model, they were not helicopter parents who hovered over us and ensured our safety. No, no! They let us grow and learn and experience, and fail and succeed. Be it play, or sports or academics or summer jobs...they just provided the opportunity and encouragement, and let us figure it out on our own. It was a safer world then..."get outside... and close the door, we're not heating the neighbourhood", Dad would often say. Maybe I live in denial, or need to see a therapist – but for me, our childhood was idyllic, and absolutely foundational to our later life success.

As I said, life was pretty simple and uncomplicated. Every summer found us picking strawberries to stock the freezer, and trips to Green Acres campground to swim, climb trees, play pinball, and sleep outdoors. We'd travel to Campobello to reacquaint with relatives, but mostly to fish and gain an appreciation for the quiet and simple Island lifestyle. We'd go to Meductic for Thanksgiving and Christmas to celebrate with Dad's folks, and walk in the woods while learning to hunt...not much danger of ever killing anything with 3 rambunctious boys making noise, but the thrill of the hunt was ingrained, and retained by Richard. Every 5 years we'd load up the car, hook on the camper trailer and head for northern Manitoba to visit Mom's family. We would fish, but again never catch anything. Grandpa Tollef always said "you should have been here last week when they were really biting". One summer, we and all the neighbourhood kids were enlisted as carpenters to build the garage, which probably had more steel nails than it did lumbe. Raising boys and developing life skills was more important to Dad than a perfect garage.

Dad was not one to chase a buck. Oh, there was the time when Mom and Dad launched a brief foray into AMWAY, and schlepped around the area for conventions and drumming up sales. But that was too time consuming with a growing family...the money could wait. In later years, Dad had an opportunity to help establish a phone system in Saudi Arabia. It was an opportunity for bigger money and travel, and we boys would attend private schools in Switzerland. He sacrificed that chance, because the proper raising of his boys was more important, and that meant staying in Canada. Thanks Dad.

My Dad loved his music. Real music by storytellers like Jim Reeves, John Denver, Charlie Pride, Neil Diamond, Nana Miskouri, Roger Whittaker and Kenny Rogers. I still find myself turning to those old

standards when in need of comfort. And he liked to buy books, though I am not sure he ever sat still long enough to finish one!

I think my Dad was happiest when doing the simple things. Perhaps nowhere was that more evident than our times at the modest cottage he purchased on the Bellisle, across the Gondola Point ferry. Just a dirt road in, no electricity or running water. But a good stream for fishing, the Kennebecasis River to canoe, boat and swim, docks to be built, brush to be cleared, trees felled and burned. Basic yard work, cottage siding to be hammered and stained. I know a part of him died when he finally sold the old place once all us boys were gone. But in some ways he has carried that lifestyle on. He came to Ontario one year and he and I and my 7 year old son Nathan loaded up my canoe and headed to Ontario's near north for some camping and to witness Nathan catch his first fish. And now he comes to my cottage, and since I have no jobs for him there, we paddle and fish a bit, or golf, or just walk down the lane for ice cream. Just recently Richard had the old Peterborough canoe restored and beautifully painted, and the lady who caned the original seat did them again 40 years later. Dad proudly approved.

Life wasn't all fun and games. Work needed to happen, and bills needed to be paid. Back in the day, the phone system was not so automated as now, and being that Christmas was a popular time for families to make those expensive once a year long distance calls, Dad often had to work Christmas Eve. In the early years, that left Mom on her own with us boys. He'd arrive home from work around 2am, and they'd often stay up to assemble or wrap presents. Us boys were out of bed at 5am, and we could never understand why Dad wasn't as excited and energetic as we were! In the later years, Kevin and I would go to work with him at NBTel. Strange as that sounds, working at Christmas is one of my fondest childhood memories – doing phone company math to help maximize call volume...and the faster you worked the more doughnuts you got...great incentive for this introduction to corporate work. Dad built many lasting friendships at NBTel and with curling, and later with the Telephone Pioneers. That gave Mom and Dad a great social outlet and chance to travel much of North America. Once retired, they also travelled with us – once on a Caribbean cruise, and a 2012 European Christmas River cruise, which would ultimately be Mom's last trip as her Alzheimers progressed afterwards.

As Elvis sang, "Regrets, there have been a few, but then again too few to mention". If I were to guess at one, I would say having never paddled the Mackenzie River in the Yukon. I am not sure what the allure of that was, but Dad mentioned it a few times over the years, and when I finally felt in a position to go, his age and the passage of time seemed to have diminished the desire to go. They regretted being far from most of the grandkids..."who would introduce them to the art of eating ice cream?" I know he sorely missed Nathan's graduation when he was unable to travel due to a back injury, but he rebounded and attended Scott's 5 years later. Having Christian in nearby Fredericton helped fill the void.

Dad was always optimistic and looking forward. Which brings me to his loves - Ice cream and cheese have to top the list. Even when living alone, he had an entire fridge crisper devoted to cheese, in its many forms. They loved to travel, and saw much of the world, with highlights being Australia/New Zealand, an Alaska cruise twice, Switzerland, Norway, and Russia...not bad for a boy from Campobello. Our 2019 Alaska cruise was rather surreal for me, knowing the transitioning from the seasick fishing kid on the Bay of Fundy, to now hosting his sons and grandsons on a Pacific cruise...what a journey, what a legacy. More simply, I think he loved building stuff, be it the basement with my Grandpa, the garage and

cottage, and ice rinks. He loved to chat and socialize with his regular morning Tim's crowd, the Telephone Pioneers and church group. He had over 200 Red Cross blood donations. In later years he loved to volunteer his time with the Finance Committee at church, and the countless hours he and Mom spent making Heart Pillows to give to patients following cardiac surgery....maybe he thought one day he would need one of those pillows.

But more than anything else, he loved Mom and kept an engagement portrait of her, looking radiant, by his chair right up to the end. He loved his family and sacrificed everything for us. If you have spent any time in his living room at home, you would see photos of all the kids and grandkids, and distant Islanders keeping the memories and relationships alive...even a few championship baseballs that Scott gave him held a place of honour. Dad was physically distant from many, but he did all that he could to remain connected and involved in our lives.

That, in my mind, will be his legacy....family. He and Mom raised 3 boys and sacrificed to fund a combined 16 years of University and an additional year of pilot training, even remortgaging the house to ensure we fulfilled our dreams. We paid them back with a few grandkids, which they then funded, giving each of the Grandkids an investment account to give them a head start on life. Knowing his life expectancy was short, he and I made a journey in late 2019 to some of his nieces, distributing the funds that were earmarked in his Will, making a difference in their lives now and enjoying a hug, smile and thank you in return. Dad's continued dedication and commitment to care for Mom was a daily affirmation of his marriage vows from nearly 63 years ago, and his pledge to care for her. I think that is why he fought the cancer so long and hard - he wanted to outlive her so she'd never be alone. Even in his final 5 years while his health declined, he never seemed to worry or focus on himself, but rather made the effort almost every day to visit and care for her. While not overtly religious, his commitment to God seemed to have grown stronger as the years passed. Both Mom and Dad were active members of the United Church, serving on various boards and fundraising ventures.

Dad was conscientious not to be a burden either in his old age or in his passing. They long ago selected a burial plot and had funeral pre-arrangements in order. Two years ago he sold the house and moved to an apartment across the street from Mom, so he could continue to care for her even as he declined. Dad kept the Will up to date and his financial affairs in order with a myriad of filing cabinets and binders that poor Richard and Tracey had to keep moving. I would encourage you to do the same for your family. In this difficult time, that gift has freed us to grieve and yet remember him fondly, not having to wonder about the details and his wishes.

At his recent 85th Birthday celebration, his niece Crystal described Uncle Robert as "the toughest and bravest person she ever met". Perhaps because of his challenging childhood, or perhaps the following milestones had something to do with that comment.

- When Mom began having dementia signs 10 years ago, he kept her at home as long as possible and we went on a final river cruise while she still could.
- At age 80, he got the colon cancer diagnosis, and we had a surprise party in the McAllister Mall
- At age 82 he got the liver cancer diagnosis, and we took an Alaska cruise.

- At age 84, he got the lung cancer diagnosis, and we took a bus tour of Newfoundland, and he began making donations to the cancer unit of the hospital that kept him alive.
- At age 85, he got a brain cancer diagnosis, and maybe an invitation to the ultimate vacation, and we had a party with all his grandsons.

Tough, brave and optimistic until the end. One of his last acts when he could no longer safely drive was to move into Loch Lomond Village, downstairs from Mom so he could continue to go visit with her daily and live out his vows. On his last afternoon, she came and sat with him instead. With Richard's heartfelt permission that it was OK and time to stop fighting, he quietly and contentedly passed in his sleep early the next morning, closing the book on a life story overflowing.

On behalf of the entire Hooper family, we thank all of you for making the effort to come and support us and say your goodbye to Dad. He would have been humbled by the attention. As C.S. Lewis once wrote, "grief is the burden of love". Without love there would be no grief. I hope your presence here today has helped you in your own grieving process, and it is my hope that this Tribute made you smile and further appreciate our great Dad.

Most of you know him as Bob, and his Island relatives called him Robert. Only a few of us were lucky enough to call him Grandpa or Dad.

Love,

Greg