Dad’s eulogy

Delivered by Zac Teichmann at his father Max Teichmann’s funeral at St Peter’s Eastern Hill Anglican Church, East Melbourne, on December 5, 2008.

Today I am paying tribute to Dad on behalf of his family, but especially on behalf of his three sons — Erik, who is here today, Roger, who could not be here, and myself.

Roger asked me to read out the following message:

“Dad was an extremely fond and affectionate father. This was something you could feel even at the distance of a couple of thousand miles. I have letters from him dating back decades; and there are many vivid memories, both from when he visited England and, in later years, from when I made it out to Australia.

“Childhood treats included trips to see My Fair Lady and The Fiddler on the Roof, from both of which Dad could sing chunks, or chunklets, as he could from many other musicals or music-hall routines. One of his most typical renderings, one I’m sure many people have heard, was of Benjamin Hapgood Burt’s 1933 classic, The Pig Got Up and Slowly Walked Away. Dad managed to convey a real existential message in that song, a real bit of Weltanschauung.

“And this was typical of his tragicomic approach to human affairs. As well as being a serious and informed commentator and writer, he was a very funny man, often joking around; and that’s especially how I think I’ll remember him.

“But also, of course, I shall remember a very loving father.”

Roger and his daughter, Emma, had organised to visit Dad early in the New Year, and it was a visit he and they were very much looking forward to.

Dad loved being a father. He made me feel like fatherhood was more important to him than anything else. Spending time with his sons was not something that he fitted in around the rest of his life. It was his principal joy. He gave of his love and knowledge, his support and honesty, his strength and vulnerability, his humour and warmth... in short, all of himself. No son could possibly ask for more from a father.

When I was a child, Dad was very well known indeed, something I was aware of but couldn’t really understand. I remember a family friend trying to convey to me his status beyond Dadness. I got quite upset when this person seemed to be saying that my Dad was a celery-tree. In fact, they said he was a celebrity.
Although unsure of the implications, I was certain that claiming that my Dad was so closely associated with any vegetable could not be a compliment.

His presence was constant and comforting — the pervasive aroma of cigars, his favourite dressing-gown worn over a business shirt and slacks, the endless cups of diabolically strong coffee (which I am sure many of you were subjected to over the years), and a gravity-defying pile of musty tomes.

While he was prepared to forego any other luxury, his library was always accommodated, often at great inconvenience to himself. Even after giving away and selling literally thousands of books, he kept acquiring them, and anyone who visited found him, like the sorcerer’s apprentice, relocating furniture and himself around ever-growing piles of books, journals and papers.

He saw books not as a record of his conquests of knowledge, but as souvenirs of past intellectual journeys, as old friends, and as a constant reminder of that yet unlearnt.

One day, he had been reading a particularly demanding book for three or four hours, and said to my Mum that it was “ quite heavy”. She suggested that he take a break. “That’s a good idea,” he said. He put the book down, walked over to the shelf, plucked out another book and started reading.

His intellect, truly a marvel to behold, was generous and ever curious. He much preferred to learn what he could from any source than take the opportunity to demonstrate his erudition. He did not suffer fools, no matter their education, but sought the company of smart people from any walk of life.

The breadth and depth of his learning was astounding, and it barely eroded as he aged. It was formidable until his death.

When I was in second year uni, he rang the student house I was staying in for our daily chat. Apart from when I was overseas, we spoke every day and dined together every week. I recounted a ridiculous question that had just been asked in the game of Trivial Pursuit we were playing, thinking he would find it amusing. “Who was the last monarch of Albania?”, I asked, rhetorically, I thought. “King Zog”, he replied, without a note of self-satisfaction. “But it could well have been C.B. Fry”, he explained. “A marvellous cricketer, for Sussex, I think, and England — a real polymath. He almost got a seat in the House of Commons...”. He continued. At length. This story has become legend amongst my friends. For Dad, the answer was not enough — understanding was the goal. And despite occasional bouts of self-proclaimed omniscience, I don’t think he ever comprehended how much he knew and how exceptional he was.

His charm was magnetic, giving his company great intensity, and rendering futile any anger at him. You could not stay angry with Dad. He would frustrate your attempts with sheer charm.
People were transfixed by his company — by his mind, but equally by his charisma. As an adolescent, I was perplexed that despite his apparently diminishing prospects, women continued to find him incredibly appealing! His company was its own magnificent reward. His charm was genuine, humane, impish and powerful. He was complex, but always engaging and interesting. Never ever dull.

He made me laugh. He made everyone laugh. Whether it was witty, bawdy or absurd, his humour found the resonances and dissonances of life and created images of great pathos, fantasy and truth. He laughed at himself, he laughed at others, and he laughed at the world. He pulled funny faces, put on silly voices, he sang ridiculous songs, and concocted the most vile insults and brilliant images. He lived and felt keenly a tragic and beautiful life and in it found knowledge and great humour.

His eyes were my favourite of his features. They were in turns deep with melancholy, flashing inspiration, twinkling mischievous or kind. They did not age. Even as his body struggled under the burden of time and neglect, his deep blue eyes sparkled to the end. They told the truth. Inside an old and uncomfortable man lay a vigorous and vibrant consciousness. I asked him what it was like to be old. He said, “I look in the mirror and I can’t believe it. I ask myself, ‘Who is this old bastard?’ I don’t feel old.”

His story is a fantastic and lengthy narrative to which I could not do justice here and now, if anywhere or anytime. All the pieces of his story are here today — his friends and family, who knew and treasured him, as much for his frailties and idiosyncrasies as his immense powers, and his many charms and gifts. Today we share his story with each other and honour his part in each of our own.

More than anything, I will always treasure his benevolence and love. The last thing he said to me was, “I love you, Sonny.” “I love you too, Dad,” I replied. He loved deeply and was deeply loved. And to me, that is the greatest measure of a great father and a great man.