

A Short Autobiography of Brian Graham Tidmarsh (1934-)

NOTE:- This should be read in conjunction with my memoir, 'Now and Then' which was completed in 2000. I have given a little more space to the years after that.

I was born on the 7th of October 1934 somewhere in Remuera, Auckland but I have little memory of anything much before the age of five when I started school at Remuera Primary School. My sister Mary was born in 1942 and the nearly eight year gap in our ages meant we weren't especially close as siblings particularly after I was sent to boarding school at the age of thirteen.

Best memories from my childhood were the times I spent at Takapuna with my cousins, Graham ('Sam'), James and Alfred, fishing from the dingy, building sand forts, swimming in the surf.

My father had been to King's College and was determined that I should also and so I left Remuera Primary School after standard 4 and transferred to King's Preparatory School where I won a scholarship to the College which paid for about one third of the fees. In retrospect I think it was my mother who must have financed this private education.

In the late 1940's, King's College was very much modelled on the English 'public school' system, entirely male (except for Matron in the sick bay and some unseen kitchen hands), bad food, coarse itchy serge shorts and shirts, cold showers, rigid discipline and lots of beatings. Sports took the place of any real social interaction. The teaching however was first class. We were allowed out on 'probation' once or twice a term for 'Leave Sunday' to be spent with one's parents. My parents did not always avail themselves of this opportunity to spend time with their son.

In my final year at King's College I decided that Dentistry was an appealing career and during the next two years completed the science units that were a prerequisite for entry to the health sciences. By working during most vacations to supplement the Health Department bursary I financed my own way through four years at Otago University. My generation was fortunate in that university fees were low and jobs easy to get. During vacations I drove trucks, worked in wool stores and shearing sheds, and worked a night-shift at stock-food factory but my favourite long summer vacation job was working in the Government Tourist hotels at The Chateau Tongariro, Wairakei and Milford Sound. On my days off I could indulge in my love of the outdoors. hiking, climbing and even summer skiing on the upper slopes of Mount Ruapehu. Staff turnover at these hotels was very high so that by my second summer I was an 'old-hand' and in subsequent summers have acted as Head Steward at both The Chateau and Milford Sound. With lots of overtime and nothing much to spend it on in these remote locations I started each academic year with a reasonably healthy bank balance.

My first year in Dunedin I lived in Selwyn College but this was much too much like boarding school and I, like many others went 'flatting'. For the first time I was living independently and forging some life-long bonds with my flat mates who of course were all male. Mixed flatting was many years in the future. Three years, two flats, eleven flatmates.

As I write only one of my flatmates is still alive which does give me pause for thought. We studied sporadically, more intensively before exams and drank far too much beer.

Our class was almost entirely male, just two 'girls'. Today, females outnumber males by quite a margin and the profession is the better for it. Looking back I am astonished at how ignorant and naive many of us young men were. A King's College education did not include any mention of sex apart from the reproductive activities of frogs and dogfish in biology class. Neither did my parents enlighten me. Consequently by age 20 or so I had never had a girl friend, never 'been on a date' and was actually quite scared of 'girls'; mysterious, alien creatures I knew little about.

Helen and I met at a University Allen Hall 'Hop', a weekly dance where young men lined one wall and young women the opposite wall all trying to decide whom to approach. In spite of my clumsy attempts at dancing we got on fine and subsequently we 'dated' for the next year, which mostly meant going to the movies. After her graduation Helen moved back to Christchurch and we only saw each other sporadically but on one weekend visit she made to Dunedin I rather impulsively asked her to marry me which we did some 10 months later in 1958 but again we didn't see much of each other during the intervening period as I was working in Auckland.

The first years of our marriage were busy with Helen teaching physical education, in itself rather odd as she never had much interest in sport, and me setting up in private dental practice. Angela was born in 1961 and Stephanie two years later. Quite early on in our marriage strains appeared which were only to get worse as the years rolled by. We spent three years in England where I commenced post-graduate studies. We returned to New Zealand in 1970 where I had been appointed to a lectureship at the Faculty of Dentistry at the University of Otago in Dunedin. I completed my Fellowship of the Royal Australasian College and over the ensuing years progressed through the ranks of senior lectureship and then became an Associate Professor.

Eventually, Helen and I separated and I initiated our divorce which was in 1983. Angela and Stephanie are of course by far and away the best things to have come from our marriage and I am very proud of what they continue to achieve in their lives.

Four years after Helen and I separated, whilst on study leave in the USA, I met Nancy Ragland who was to become my second wife. She, like me had divorced some years before and had adult children. Several months after I had returned to New Zealand Nancy visited me and she bravely decided to make her future life with me here in Dunedin. The next 24 years were the happiest in my life.

Nancy was intelligent and beautiful, had a great sense of adventure and a very quirky sense of humour. She wrote poetry, some published and one award winning. She worked as a microbiologist at the university, enrolled in different courses and started a Master's degree in English. After several years living together she proposed to me and we were married in her brother John's home in Portland, Oregon in 1990. Earlier, I had proposed a number of times but quite understandably Nancy wanted to take her time...so I said, "OK next time you have to ask me"...and so she did, in a restaurant that had just won 'Restaurant of the Year' and was featured TV news that evening. Her proposal was captured 'live' on National Television! Nancy was always open, friendly and loving and made many friends. We travelled the world together, cooked and gardened together and hiked the back country. She introduced me to the joys of having a dog, our first a golden retriever. Her children Scott and Greg, her three siblings, mother and aunt all visited us in

New Zealand and we went back to the USA to visit them regularly. I had a whole new lovely, extended family.

In the summer of 2008 it all fell apart. One morning as we were getting up Nancy had a seizure in her left arm. Later that morning at her GP's surgery she had a major seizure and was taken to the hospital. Eight hours later we knew that she had a brain tumour and that it would be fatal. Nancy's courage during the next 14 months still amazes me. Surgery to remove some of the mass, radiotherapy and chemotherapy she endured with fortitude. For some months we were able to cope at home for which we were very grateful. It was during this period that we organised for her eldest son Scott, his wife Suwen and Nancy's 6 month old grandson Evan to visit us. as travelling back to the States was not possible. To hold him on her lap and read him a story was a major wish fulfilled. In 2016 Scott, Suwen and Evan visited me again, Evan now a lively 8 year old.

During the first few months of her illness we even managed to extract some humour from our clumsy attempts at the daily round of cooking and dressing and showering et cetera but eventually she had to go into full hospital care at Ross Home. Our second golden retriever, 'Phineas', came with me almost daily to visit Nancy.

Nancy died peacefully after some days being unconscious. During all these months she had wonderful support from her wide circle of friends and I shall always be grateful to them, especially Sam and Rosalie, who in the last few months spent time with her frequently, giving me a little respite and time to catch up on the chores of daily living.

Nancy's funeral was a very small and private one, just a few friends and family. At her request I hosted a springtime garden party in her memory. More than 40 close friends and neighbours enjoyed a beautiful spring afternoon tinged with sadness that she could not share it with us. Greg, Scott, Mary Lee and John all flew over from the States for the afternoon. Jim, her elder brother had visited just a couple of months before she died. Our garden looked wonderful with all the early rhododendrons in flower.

It is now nearly nine years since Nancy died and life is very different. I have had to learn that living alone is not the same as being lonely. Of course there are times when loneliness creeps in and I must content myself with the memories of a wonderful 25 years with Nancy. With the exception of Sam and Rosalie my family are scattered widely a long way from Dunedin.

The garden that Nancy and I developed has matured during the last 35 years and continues to give me pleasure. This pleasure I share as a member of the Open Garden Association, the garden being open to the public during the spring. Rhododendrons, azaleas, cherry trees and maples are blended with the native bush with wonderful views over the valley. It is a very peaceful place. The most beautiful cherry tree, Nancy and I planted together after she became ill. It is her living memorial and a daily reminder to me of our loving life together. Thanks to 'Skype' my American family remain close. Last Christmas Day I was able to join their large extended-family gathering and join in the fun and games. I was delighted that my 'mystery gift', one of Nancy's weirdest doll creations called 'WitchyPoo', was won by her niece, Katie.

My interest in gardening and photography has, over the years resulted in me being asked to give lectures to various garden groups. I continue to play golf but my handicap is now embarrassingly large due in part to arthritis.

To round off this short autobiography a few words about the others in my family.

My sister Mary you will recall, was nearly 8 years younger than I and the time we spent together over the years has unfortunately been limited. A trip to Europe when she was a young woman led to her meeting Rob Wilson and much to my father's disapproval she married him and moved to South Africa. Sadly, over the years we have met up only a few times. A few visits to South Africa, one with Nancy and a few visits from her to NZ, memorably a lovely time with Mary a year before Nancy's death when we visited Stewart Island together. Mary's three children have all married and have lots of children. We are still in regular contact by email and phone.

Angela and Stephanie both married. Angela has a senior management position in the Australian Federal Government. Her two sons, Miles and Griffin, now young adults, are making their own way in the world. Stephanie, a radiologist and talented musician and teacher of music has two sons, both married. In November 2017, Stephanie and Simon's eldest son Timothy and his wife Toni, have given me my first great-grand-daughter, Emily. Second son James and his wife Amanda have just bought their first house. Maybe one day they will write their own biographies, I certainly hope so, although sadly I won't be around to read them.

A Final Note:-

In August 2017 I attended the 60th reunion of my graduating class of 1957 in Auckland. I stayed in a small private hotel in Remuera right across the road from King's Preparatory School and just around the corner from Remuera Primary School and close by the Victoria Avenue shopping centre. I walked around for awhile. Full circle from my childhood; it was the suburb I was born in, grew up in, lived in and practiced my profession in, but much of it had changed beyond recognition. No tram cars, just coffee shops and boutiques and real estate agents and travel agents. I was glad to return to Dunedin, my home and garden and memories.

Which seems a good place to finish.

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