

CRAIG POWELL



It's not possible in a few short minutes to sum up the life of any person, and particularly not one as complex and multi-faceted and frankly big — literally and figuratively — as my father. So I'm not going to try.


How, for example, can I possibly encompass a man who taught me about Bach and what counterpoint is, and who also played me my first Beatles record? Who would get excitedly animated about a beautiful performance of classical music, and just as vocal about a rugby match? Scratch that — terrifyingly vocal about a rugby match.

He had an extraordinary capacity for remembering poetry, as I'm sure many here have experienced, and could recite volumes at the drop of a hat. And not just reciting them. He would get emotional about them, the words catching in his throat, as if he were experiencing them for the first time. He felt them.

And he was equally adept at describing highlights of cricket or boxing matches from decades ago. He also knew an extraordinary number of obscene limericks. But let's move on.

He was into opera and the Goon Show. He liked Sophie's Choice and Blazing Saddles. There was so very much to him. More, even, than I knew.

My father told me not long ago that back in the mid-1960s, newly married, newly qualified as a doctor, and having just published his first book of poetry, he wondered whether he might win the Nobel Prize for Medicine or for Literature. Indeed, why not both? He was never unduly burdened by modesty.



I looked this up, and it turns out that of the 224 people who have won the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine, only two won it for work related to mental illness — and one of those was the guy who invented frontal lobotomies. I guess what I'm saying is, if you're specialising in psychiatry, it's hard to win a Nobel. And even if you do, it doesn't necessarily mean you did good.

As for the Literature prize, Bob Dylan has one of them. How prestigious can it be, really?

He did win some poetry prizes over the years, but of far greater importance to him was the relationships he forged with other poets. I'm not going to say much of anything about that aspect of my father because I've asked his best friend, David Brooks, to handle that better than I could.

I will mention a party he told me about, at which a number of literary figures were present. When he arrived he was told Alan Ginsberg was there and keen to meet him. Very flattering. He was escorted to the room where Ginsberg was holding court, and Ginsberg said "I hear you're a psychiatrist. Do you know where I can get some magic mushrooms?"

In 1972 he took his young family to Canada so that he could receive training in psychoanalysis. Our ten years there started me on my lifelong pastime of explaining to people that I am not American. My father spent a lot of time away from home in those years, traveling to Chicago and Toronto for training and analysis.


On one such visit to his analyst Howard Bacal in Toronto in the early '70s, he "cured" the Bacals' young son, Benji, age 4, of a strange, paralytic malady. As Howard tells it: Ben had fallen down a flight of carpeted stairs in our home, and was so traumatised by the experience that he could not walk. He had attended pre-school the previous day, crawling on all fours. Craig put each of Ben's feet on each of his shoes and walked around with him in this way; and then, gradually, Benji was able to walk on his own. It felt to me like a typically kind, brilliantly creative act of my dear friend.

Howard remained friends with my father after his analysis was complete, and they kept in touch for the rest of his life.

When we returned to Australia, he immediately became an active participant in both the literary and psychiatric communities here. He was a founding member of the Sydney Institute for Psychoanalysis and served as President of both the NSW Institute of Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy and the Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy Association of Australasia. He brought the insights he had gained from his training in North America back here, and passed on that training to another generation of analysts in Australia.

He contributed papers to numerous conferences and was also instrumental in starting up the Literature and Psychiatry conferences, along with John McClean and others, from the late 1980s. The conference ran initially at ADFA in Canberra and then in Sydney for about ten years or so, and as you can imagine he was right in his element — bringing his piercing intellect and insights to bear on the two fields about which he was so passionate.

But of course these achievements and leadership positions don't speak to the greatest value that he saw in his work, which was this: he helped people. In a very real sense he saved lives, and made more lives immeasurably better by helping deeply damaged people to heal.



After his head injury forced him to retire ten years ago (much earlier than he would have liked), he still wanted to help people. He initially volunteered for Lifeline, but found the approach unsatisfying after a career spent getting to know and understand patients. Then he volunteered for the local community group, visiting elderly and disabled people. That gave him great satisfaction and he kept doing it until his own health declined to the point where he couldn't anymore.

These last few years of his failing health have been incredibly hard, but I also value the time that I had — for the chance to get close to my father, to see the enormous love he had for his grandchildren, and to perhaps understand him better than I had been able to when I was younger. We didn't always have the easiest of relationships — butting heads as fathers and sons sometimes do — but in recent years we found each other. I will treasure that.

In his final days and weeks, as we knew the end was approaching, he still somehow retained that ability to recall entire poems verbatim. I told him at one point that losing him would be like the burning of the library of Alexandria, and I think that was only a slight exaggeration — at least to me. One night in hospital I asked him to recite something and despite his tiredness he began intoning *Sunlight On The Garden* by Louis Macneice, which he regarded as one of the great poems. Amazingly, he seemed to grow more alert as the poem progressed, as if drawing on some inner well of strength that sustained him. By the time he finished, his eyes were bright and he was fully awake, and we talked for a while about poetry before he went back to sleep.

On his last day, I visited him in aged care, and we made plans to watch *Casablanca* on my next visit (he had a lifelong infatuation with Ingrid Bergman). We were both looking forward to it, and peppered our conversation with references to the movie. Our problems don't amount to a hill of beans, round up the usual suspects, and so on. Then for some reason he recited the first line of his own poem, *1949*. Oddly for him, he couldn't bring the rest of it to mind, but I grabbed a nearby copy of *Rehearsal for Dancers* and read it to him. Then I had to leave, so we said our goodbyes. A few hours later he was gone.

I thought of reading *1949* for you today, but my accent (I'm not American) doesn't do it justice. I'll leave it to him.

Matthew Powell