



The Perse 48 Years on: A Lifetime of Experiences

The following article was kindly contributed by Paul Staniforth, OP.

Most of us when we look back on our lives 'measure' our successes by achievements such as our career, raising a family, success in a passion like music, sport, adventure or maybe charitable work. How many of us, I ask reflect on how we have enriched our lives and hopefully others' by experiential learning? How many of us can say, 'well the most daunting challenges I have faced such as the bereavement of a child, severe personal illness - emotional or physical, immense deprivation or abuse, have actually enriched my life and enabled me to grow both emotionally and spiritually'? These are events which we would instinctively balk at but which can lead us to find great inner resources and strengths that would otherwise never see the light of day. Well you might say "that's a conversation stopper", - or is it?

With a successful career behind me and all the trappings of our materialistic society to hand, it would be so easy to sit back, dine out with friends, play the odd round of golf and regularly take a Caribbean cruise to escape the winter blues. After all I've earned my pile, so I deserve it. Or do I? Is that what life is really about? I hope not.

Forty eight years on since leaving the portals of the Perse, I have reached a time in life to reflect on what I have learned, what 'really' matters in life and how hard the road has been to get to where I am now. One thing is for sure. I am now leading the most fulfilling years of my life, but to get here, I have had to un-learn most of what I have been taught and learn new ways of being. That in turn has lead to some immensely painful experiences, each of which has presented me with great challenges but ultimately immense riches.

Whilst still a student in college aged 21, I decided to retire at 55 instead of the then customary age of 65. In reality I elected 50, the most outstandingly good decision I have made in my life. Acquaintances in a bid to dissuade me were heard to say, "What are you going to do with yourself?" In reality the last 15 years have been immensely rich in

experiences, some mighty un-comfortable ones, all well beyond my imagination at that time.

For a start retirement was fraught with problems for I soon discovered I had been a workaholic and without my daily fix, I was craving things 'to do'. The phone stopped ringing, the mail box was dry and the harsh reality gradually sank in, that my identity had been largely woven around my work. What was I going to do with the rest of my life, for the many, many hobbies I pursued did not fill the void. My old work colleagues were not really friends, since we were all too busy to chat and the dog eat dog mentality had simply estranged potential friendships.

A few years down the line my wife Janet, a bibliographer at Hull University and Buddhist Mitra, died. Living alongside her as she slowly passed away was a big learning curve. This was especially so as I found it necessary to repeatedly challenge, successfully, her consultants and the medical care being offered and effectively took responsibility for her welfare in her last few days of life. I slept on the floor of her NHS hospital room. Although emotionally exhausting at the time, I later realised this immense challenge drew out of me strengths that I didn't know existed. After Janet's death I suddenly found myself rootless. I felt I did not belong and yet lived in a world teeming with people. Sadly we had no children and both came from very small families. Only my elderly mother survived.

Quiet early on in retirement I painfully realised I was not the world's best communicator. Oh yes I could do the matter of fact getting on with people, as we all can, the formal dinner party, the polite conversation, the effusive smile and yet I would always come away un-nourished. I was later to learn that I was a past master at veils and disguises to protect the hurting soul inside. Why had others such good communication skills, (or so it seemed) and not me. Well let's put it this way. I was for most of my formative years scared of my father who I saw as 'The Manager'. Meanwhile my Mum's pre-occupation was trying to ensure I went to Oxford or Cambridge and maintain her image, so I received a very academically biased childhood bereft of the emotional nourishment which any healthy child and adolescent requires. Not a very good start. I needed to un-learn the verbally abusive and subtly emotionally manipulative environment I had been brought up in and start again virtually from scratch... a task which has taken 15 years and is still ongoing.

My first spouse was very much like me; quiet, retiring, un-sporty and very academic and this made for a quiet, relatively easy going relationship. However, later I married Esmé, a retired deputy head teacher from Chalfont St. Peter. A confident, outgoing, sporty, non academic woman, the exact opposite of Janet, she proved an immense challenge and repeatedly 'rattled my cage'. It provoked a volatile relationship but we stuck at it, and from it we both learned a huge amount about life and one another. I started to grow, as did she and I now appreciate what an immense gift and blessing she has been to me. The more different we were from one another the more we had to share and learn, something that goes for all relationships.

Three years ago whilst on a grand tour of the Far East, I suddenly became aware of a swelling on my neck which grew with amazing speed. Medical consultations suggested an infection but a GP in our party thought otherwise and on return to the UK, I was quickly hospitalised with cancer of the lower tongue, with an outbreak of secondary cancer on my neck, a life threatening illness with a problematic survival rate, certainly in the first 12 months (an illness usually ascribed to smokers and heavy drinkers of which I was neither). Going through the treatment was Hell and I fully expected to die. Fortunately neither my tongue nor vocal cords were removed in surgery like some sufferers and three years on, whilst technically in remission, I am still here. This challenge proved my greatest yet. The period of sickness proved only too clearly, who were my true friends as distinct from those who paid lip service to my sorry state. Some of those friends travelled great distances to support me in some cases staying to look after me, whilst others, living closer to hand were able to visit me more frequently. People who I believed to be acquaintances turned into very supportive friends whilst two 'friends' fled, never to be seen again. From the whole experience I have drawn on my courage and tenacity but most memorable and deeply moving were the experiences on the hospital ward. More able than my neighbours, I was able to shuffle from bed to bed of those who wanted to talk, all terminally ill cancer sufferers in the last few weeks or days of their lives – a privilege that I will never forget.

Aged 65 I've pretty well made it, but I continue to grow in intuition, insight and wisdom. I find my experiences have stood me in good stead to support others facing life's challenges. There is nothing I find more rewarding now than facilitating others to explore their deeper selves and lead more meaningful and rewarding lives. Additionally in retirement I have attended 4 years of professionally run Fine Cabinet Making courses, (I just love sawdust and wood shavings), researched, written and published a book, *Can you Smell Gas? A local history of the Ely Gas Company* which my father managed, and travelled the world. I have many memories - partaking in a ritual with a local Sharman, deep in the Peruvian Amazon rainforest bereft of roads and cars, to visiting the daub and wattle homes of natives in the swamps of Namibia. From sailing at dawn in a flimsy Balinese fishing canoe miles off shore in the Indian Ocean to watch dolphins, to tramping an extinct volcano crater on the island of Maui (Hawaii). From witnessing the horrendous hereditary effects of 'Agent Orange' on human life in North Vietnam to the opulence of the Romanoff dynasty in St Petersburg.

Membership of the U3A movement in Norwich has resulted in my joining many groups including a walking group in which we have walked the perimeter of Norfolk and many other places. I lead a small group of professional and business men known as 'THE SHED' on educational visits around the county, sailed with a friend off-shore from Norwich to Harwich and now mix very comfortably in many social settings. I am much more willing to go outside my comfort zone and recently joined my second professionally run Clowning course. There is nothing so challenging as being a clown and re-learning how to 'play'. Unlike competitive sports, it's not about winning. It is great fun but also scary and far more subtle than most people realise, penetrating deep inside the inner psyche, and poles apart from acting and mime, in the school mummery. Finally I became very attached to my 'wife's dog 'Mimi', who taught me so much. Whilst

I was ill, she refused to leave my side. Now we wait in anticipation of re-homing a young labrador 'Lila' who should be joining our family in a few weeks to replace our long lost friend.

My education in the wider sense was not derived from The Perse but born of my own experiential learning, the University of Life, helped by my drive, graft and tenacity. My schooling, whilst getting me university entrance and in time my profession and income, fell a long way short in giving me 'life skills' to face the challenges ahead. Things have I'm told changed enormously since my days when cold baths and bullying at boarding school together with thrashings by 'slipper' wielding staff of boys, some aged no more than eight, outside the dormitory door were the weekly norm (behind the closed door of the junior housemaster's bedroom to be precise). It may have toughened us up, but did we need that, and would that regime be tolerated today? However, I acknowledge that I, like all of my school pals, was immensely privileged to attend the Perse as compared with the alternative schools in the neighbourhood. My parents, whilst so busy following their respective professional and business careers, leaving my care to paid nannies, always ensured I never lacked for material comforts. Were I to relive my childhood, nothing would delight me more than being a pupil in a very different Perse with its huge range of facilities and so many diverse fields of study not available in my time.

With a lifetime's experience behind me I now ask myself "What are the things that 'really' matter in life, things I treasure in others to which I aspire"? Well - love, compassion, wisdom, integrity, honesty, openness, a love of nature, intuition, empathy, spontaneity, energy (I don't mean the athletic sort), a zest for life, a free spirit, perception, emotional intelligence, a spiritual connection (not a religious dogma), creativity, modesty and people who live in the 'Now' and make deep personal connections. I don't recall many of these fundamental human qualities appearing on the school curriculum. By contrast I am least drawn by those who try and impress be it through their job, academic attainment, their lifestyle or their politics, who use words to mislead and deceive, who hide behind words, who lead emotionally barren lives, who live their lives through others, or lack any personal depth, aspects which are all too common in society. It has taken me a lifetime to find my guides, teachers with great wisdom and insight and I value them like gold dust for they are so few.

I dreaded my school reports; 'could do better', 'must try harder', poor, or 'D'. Oh what shame, and what a memory to carry. "Grief", I was doing my best. (In reality my reports said more about their authors, than of me. How little they understood). Last month I perchance fell into conversation with a woman of my age for about 20 minutes. As we parted she said "What a privilege it has been to meet you". I nearly fell off my stool. What me?..... I've had similar comments from others. For a boy who struggled to attain 5 'O' levels and 2 'A's, I've come a long way.

Paul Staniforth followed a career as a Consultant Soil and Water Engineer in the Agricultural Development and Advisory service part of the Ministry of Agriculture now Defra, a chapter now closed. Paul writes this to inspire other retired Old Perseans to

share their story, most poignantly of who they are, as well as what they have achieved, rather than read their obituary, written by others, in a few years time.