



A Letter to My Father

Writer Sarah Lang's tribute to an "average dad... who isn't average at all".

Who needs a treehouse when you've got a box to play in? Sarah Lang (left), with her father David and sister Marta.

+ Essay

It was the best of weekends; it was the worst of weekends. On the Saturday, my mother married her partner of 10 years and university flame of 40 years ago, politician Lockwood Smith, at Parliament in Wellington. On the Sunday night, my father died of a heart attack in his sleep at his home in Motuoapa, near Taupo. At 69, he'd had a bad dose of flu but was otherwise fit and strong. No one saw it coming. That evening, he'd finished years of research for his first novel – research that filled a four-drawer filing cabinet – and told his wife he'd start writing the next day.

In the small hours of Monday morning, July 6, 2009, I didn't hear the phone ring. My sister couldn't get through so it'd be my mother who'd tell me the news. My darling mum, who'd had 22 years and four children with this man, was shaken but holding it together for us kids.

Awful as it sounds, I'd once wondered how distressed I'd be when Dad died, but I knew in that instant how much I loved my father. I couldn't take it in. "He was too young," I sobbed, over and over. You'd only just buried your mother, Dad. You had a book to write, cities to explore, golf to play, plants to water, a wife to love, children to talk with, grandchildren to meet.

You might ask why, out of billions of fathers, is my dad's story worth telling? Well, we're familiar with celebrity dads in their various guises: freak-show fathers exploiting their children's fame (Joe Jackson); fantasy fathers like Martin Sheen and feckless fathers like his son Charlie. We read of great,

flawed men like Kingsley Amis in son Martin's magisterial memoir *Experience*. But there are few stories about the everyman – your average dad who, if you care to look more closely, isn't average at all. And by any objective measure, my father was a very unusual man.

Since leaving home at 17 – my parents split a year later – I'd visit Dad a couple of times a year when passing through town (first Wanganui, then Motuoapa). We spoke every three or four months. Not much. I was caught up in my own life and it was usually he who called me. Never one for small-talk, especially on the phone, Dad would often speak in monosyllables then abruptly stop talking. These were silences I felt compelled to fill at first but later left silent. Silences, after he died, that were too late to fill.

There are things I wish I'd said, asked, understood. So this is, in a way, a letter to my father. Perhaps it's something such a private man wouldn't want, but it was he who taught me you can't let anyone else tell you what to do. And I can hear him say, in his contrary way, "I'm dead, why would I care if you write about me now?" But there's another reason I feel uneasy. Like an expatriate writing about home, I'm wary of appropriating his wife's story. Dad's death happened to her far more than it did to me. His death devastated her life and her grief was far greater. But I don't speak for anyone else; not my mother nor my siblings. I don't pretend to know all of Dad – just gaps in the silence – and I don't pretend to tell the whole story of David Lang. Just the story of a father and daughter.

I'm a second child, born a week after Dad turned 40. He wanted six kids, but settled for three girls then a boy. I've often joked (well, half-joked) that he needed a tribe to provide indentured labour on our five-acre property, known as "Fox Road", on the fringes of Wanganui. It was designed to withstand Armageddon. Teaching physics in England in the 1960s, Dad feared the world would erupt into nuclear war and spawn a nuclear winter – not such a crazy idea during the Cold War. So, as a new decade dawned, he moved to New Zealand and created a self-sufficient oasis out of a sand-dune – complete with orchard, vege garden, septic tank, forests for firewood, cows and ducks for meat, and chickens for eggs. These provisions – fresh, frozen, pickled and preserved – would keep the supermarket bills down and us alive should the worst happen.

Not until I was six or so, playing at friends' houses, did I realise how peculiar our little socialist bubble was. Others found it odd too. A rumour swirled around Dad's workplace, Wanganui High School (WHS), that David Lang had built an atomic-bomb-proof bunker underground. Dad enjoyed neither confirming nor denying it, so neither will I.

My father is near impossible to explain to someone who didn't know him, but here goes. Cross Basil Fawlty with Einstein and Old McDonald and you're part-way there. He was a teacher, a husband, a father, a friend, a colleague, a neighbour, a builder, a farmer, a gardener, an electrician, a carpenter, a plumber, a mechanic, a sailor, a traveller, an inventor, a mentor, a reader, a writer. He was a devoted son to a demanding widow.

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A motorcycle made for three: Sarah, bringing up the rear, looks back at her mother, who's taking the picture.

He built computers and engines from scratch; made titanium pistons for his motorbike and his own wine (red from plums, white from carrots and grapefruit). He was an intellectual who didn't suffer fools gladly and didn't care for social graces. He had a keen sense of fair play, strong ideals and loyalty, a stubborn streak, and a touch of the contrarian.

His philosophy? You don't do things half-arsed. You give it your all. And so must his kids. From the time we could pick things up and understand commands, it was a childhood of shoulds – and guilt-trips if you were slacking. Weeding the garden. Picking fruit. Planting trees. Picking up sticks in the gum forest for fear of fire. Chiselling out cape daisies. Fetching wood. Gathering pine cones. Filling the cow trough. Mowing lawns. Watering the plants. Pulling out barley grass, which made my eyes itch. And those were just the outdoors chores.

The kindest description of our house was a work in progress: one which took 30 years. Mum, who also toiled away on Fox Road, had no kitchen for five years, even as three babies arrived. I remember wondering why other kids had doors on their bedrooms, and as for dwangs (noggings), they were just built-in shelves, right?

A natural-born pioneer, Dad insisted on doing everything on the house himself to the highest possible standard: the carpentry,

wiring, plumbing, and so on. We grew up to the background music of hammers, saws, lathes. Organised chaos, minus the dirt. We vacuumed nightly and if we'd been somewhere dirty, like the beach, we had to take off and shake out our clothes before coming inside in case a speck of sand infected Dad's computer equipment.

His protection for home and family was extreme. Friends had to be vetted. When we went on a rare family outing, we had to crouch down and "hide" in the car in case robbers were watching, so they'd think someone was still home.

I always had issues with Dad's parenting. He was best with us as babies and toddlers; later he'd often treat us like transgressing adults rather than fallible children. Easily angered, he used to switch on and off us. He could be scary, arrogant, vindictive, cold, cruel. Once he refused to pull over when I was carsick and I threw up on myself, to his disgust. Once he ignored me for days after I accidentally pulled out a plant leaf rather than a weed. Once he ignored me for weeks after I finished a pot of tea which I hadn't heard him ask for. I didn't mind the odd smack, but the silent treatment cut deep. The approval I sought was often withheld. My father's love felt conditional, based on grades at school and help at home. This instilled a sense of anxiety and a craving for praise I still find hard to shake.

In my teens, when parents become decidedly uncool, I told myself Dad's approval didn't matter. We didn't get each other. We clashed so badly I once fled to a friend's house for a fortnight. The bookworm had become the one who'd speak up when something was unfair, who pushed boundaries, who insisted on partying and binge-drinking at 15, who lost her temper and often bore the brunt of his. But I think, in time, he respected me for being my own person, which is ironic because there's much of Dad in me. The contrariness, the black holes, the temper, the worrywartdom, the workaholism (I'm in remission), the stubbornness, the restlessness, the impatience, the borderline OCD, the sticky-out ears. But I'd like to think there's some of the good, too.

Too often I dwell on the bad and gloss over the good – and there were lots of good things with Dad. Huts made out of boxes or branches. Motorbike rides. Treasure hunts. Handwritten notes from the tooth fairy Tinkerbell, in handwriting and envelopes so teeny they *had* to be from a fairy (turns out he used a magnifying glass and ultra-sharp pencil). Ice creams brought home on Fridays after school.

A doer not a talker, Dad's actions spoke for him. He helped me with homework. He spent weeks with me on elaborate science-fair experiments. He took me to netball on the motorbike and cheered me on, though I was in-

variably in the bottom team. During high school, I cleaned an office building nightly and, if it rained, Dad would put the bike carrier on the car and drive my route to find me.

Dad was at his best when relaxed and having a laugh, or when creating, fixing, or protecting things: a computer, a science project, wrapping up the young fruit trees against the frost. Despite or perhaps because he felt humans were hurting the world, he enjoyed being a conduit to nature. I think the tangible achievements of physical work gave him a satisfaction and control he didn't get from the outside world or the world of the mind. He had a tenderness for the vulnerable. A chicken with a broken leg was splinted, stroked, resurrected. As productive commune members, the hens escaped the axe. Not so the other animals.

Seeing our cows chopped into chunks for the freezer turned me into a vegetarian for life at 11. Dad, though miffed because my nickname "Sausage" (Soss for short) was now patently inappropriate, accepted my decision. I was henceforth bombarded with home-grown rhubarb, which he'd send in jars to my university hostel, and his celebrated spinach filo pie. When I visited, he'd wrap the leftover slices for me to take away. He too had a hard crust with a soft centre.

Last year, my siblings and I set up an award in Dad's memory, the David Lang Physics Flame, for the stand-out/most-improved student at Wanganui High. An old chum of Dad's from England, now Major John Atherton, MBE, saw a story about it online and sent a letter to the *Wanganui Chronicle*. I emailed John. Turns out, as a lad, John was Dad's "shadow". He'd tried to track him down for decades, Googling and searching phone-books with no luck. Once he nearly hitched a ride to New Zealand on an RAF plane to look for Dad, but the flight fell through. So his plan was to stop here on a round-the-world cruise. "I was sure I'd find him, knowing there can't be that many Langs with three degrees teaching physics. And I have found him, alas too late."

Why was finding Dad so important to John Atherton? Why did I know so little about Dad's life pre-New Zealand? I vaguely knew about the motorbike racing, the NASA job offer, the shadowy first wife, but not a lot more. Just scraps. Who was he before he was my father? What made him who he was and how he was? The memories of John and others plugged some gaps.

Born to ill-suited, quarrelsome parents in



Sarah (front) and her sister helped choose, chop down and decorate the pine that became their Christmas tree.

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1940, baby David was rushed to bomb shelters when the sirens sounded. He and his sister grew up in Ashton-in-Makerfield, an industrial town near Wigan, Lancashire. It's grim up north, they say. It does things to you. At his grammar school, the boys were beaten and couldn't leave the room during exams, causing Dad once to wet his pants. His factory-manager father and stay-at-home mother had great expectations of their son. Originally he wanted to be a fighter pilot, but failed the hearing test. Earning economics and physics degrees, and a masters in electrical engineering, he decided against working in a field (physics) which could harm and possibly end the world. He turned down a job as a NASA physicist, instead resolving to teach, mentor young talent, and race his 250cc Villiers-engine motorbike after hours.

Equally obsessed with motorbikes, a 13-year-old John Atherton "hovered around" my father, a family friend. "He took this impressionable adolescent under his wing, like a big brother, and for three years I saw him daily. In retrospect, he must have been fed up with me hanging around at times, but never showed it. He invested so much time and friendship in me."

The duo drove a Bedford van around northwest England to swap parts with fellow bikers. In time, Dad taught John everything about engines, how to ride, and how to fall off by "sliding the bike away". Out riding with Dad one morning, John did just that. It saved his life. "Those lessons have kept me in one piece after 50 years daily motorcycling on busy roads."

I had no idea Dad spent five years racing the UK circuits to qualify for the Manx Grand Prix. One half of the Mecca of Motorcycling, it's the (non-professional) sister race of the International Isle of Man Tourist Trophy. Over its 100-year history, the mountain circuit that hosts both races has killed 230 riders. In 1964, riding his beloved Norton, Dad crossed the line 26th of 83. John was in his friend's pit that day. "He could have pushed himself harder and faster but he didn't want to smash up the bike, or himself, before the wedding."

Her name was Emina. A pixie-like, chain-smoking Yugoslavian Muslim in her late teens, her family knew my father's and she came from Sarajevo for a holiday. She spoke no English, but somehow romance ensued. "Not easy," says John, "because, along with the language barrier, she was from a communist country and the hassle that caused was unbelievable."



David Lang racing in the Manx Grand Prix, 1964.

Getting special permission from a British ambassador, they married quickly, quietly, in Sarajevo. Back in England, Dad taught his bride English, and she went to university. But when John returned from army training, the marriage had soured. "I'm guessing as the couple could actually communicate they realised they didn't get on as well."

When the Soviets invaded Czechoslovakia in 1968, highly-political Emina feared the former Yugoslavia was next. One day she vanished. Guessing her whereabouts, Dad drove a Mini through Europe via the Alps in winter for 24 hours nonstop, loaded with visas and documents. Turned back at the Yugoslav border, he realised at that moment their four-year marriage was over. He was heartbroken. The last time he saw Emina, she was back in England in a TB clinic (she subsequently recovered and did well as an academic).

Apparently, Dad thought she'd used him for a British passport and English lessons. Who knows? Divorced, disillusioned, wanting to start over, he left for New Zealand early in 1972. When John returned on army leave, his friend had gone, with no forwarding address. Once he closed a chapter, Dad didn't look back.

His sister had already emigrated here – and it was far away from wars and bombs – but there was another reason Dad made New Zealand his home. Back in his racing days, he met Kiwis who'd fix their motorbikes in a flash when no one else knew how. As a man who could do just about anything with his hands, that practicality impressed him. Still, over-prepared as always, he brought leather to make shoes and tucked spare engine parts into his jacket, startling the staff at airport

security. And so to Wanganui, where for 32 years he'd teach physics and electronics by day, and electronics classes by night.

Friends who took physics told me he'd saunter in five minutes late with a cup of coffee and launch into a yarn that unexpectedly tied into physics, or just made them think. He never used notes. When the French were exploding nuclear weapons in the Pacific, the class made a Geiger-counter to test radiation in the air, and detected a sizeable amount over Wanganui. Apparently, Dad was disappointed no one took any notice. But I liked the fart story best. Sometimes he'd let one rip in class and fix a stern gaze on an unsuspecting student, looking aghast and wafting the air away from his face. Some of these "culprits" were the shy, spotty boys he'd rope in to help him on Fox Road. When I was of age, he'd try to get me "talking" to them at the lunch table. I wasn't amused but liked that he was.

Dad was no ordinary teacher. He taught extra sessions during study leave, led student tramps, and took field trips to New Plymouth to share his delight in Len Lye's kinetic sculptures, which capture physical forces in motion.

Imparting his knowledge and inspiring the kids to dream big kept his world from being small. He'd tell them being a scientist didn't mean you had to wear a white coat and look through microscopes all day. He'd remind them science could take them outside the lab and around the world, though he hoped some jobs would be in New Zealand. While the country was never going to live up to Dad's self-reliant frontiersman fantasy, he saw great potential for inventiveness and

initiative here. His kids, at home and at school, were his contribution.

Dad lit fires in us – and let them burn as they would. He taught us we could do whatever we wanted to, and should pursue whatever we loved. For me, that was books, words and writing. To me, this is my father's legacy. The encouragement to chase your dreams, to chart your own course, to be bold, to be brave, to question, to do things differently, to be true to yourself.

A few years before he died, I decided to accept Dad as he was, not wish him otherwise. To stop dwelling on his flaws and mistakes. I now see him as a remarkable, fallible person: like us all, a product of our genes, environment and upbringing with all our complexities and quirks. I'm not a parent myself, but I know it's a hard gig, and you can't expect parents to be perfect. Dad meant well – and that's what matters to me. What he did, in creating our sustainable safe-haven, he did for us. There was a flipside, though. Self-sufficiency should be about freedom, but I sometimes wondered if it was more like jail for Dad. He worked nonstop. He was often too focused on the future to enjoy the now. But, at some point, how you spend your day is how you spend your life.

After that first hour when I cried for him, I felt numb, like I was play-acting, until I made myself go to the funeral parlour. He was in a small room in an open coffin. I cried. I talked. I told him not to worry about me, that I was taking care of myself and had a good man in my corner. There was so much left unsaid, and I'd run out of time.

The funeral was the next day. We played his favourite Eric Clapton anthems; "Layla" more than once. His friends, old salts who held him dear, shared stories, and his daughters spoke. We read from a flood of messages from former pupils. "Your father was by far the best teacher I ever had." "In all things science and electronic, he's been a mentor to me. I looked up to him, quoted him often and continue to do so to this day." "Your father continues to be a huge inspiration even now – somehow he made seventh-form physics a great lesson in life." We learned that Heather Lazrus has two tattoos based on physics principles he taught her. That Dominic Taylor reckons he wouldn't be a special-effects engineer on films like *The Lord of the Rings* were it not for his teacher. That Dad mentored Stephen Henderson, a student/friend/NASA rocket scientist: "We blink and David is gone... David invested his



Sarah steals a moment with her mother, Alexandra, on the day she married Speaker of the House Lockwood Smith. Brother John is at rear left.

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life into my life, and that's made it all the richer for me."

The family now living at Fox Road slipped unseen into the funeral and listened to all this.

Later that day they decided, yes, his children could scatter his ashes at Fox Road. Not only that, they welcomed us into their home, baked us a cake, and pulled out something that made me choke up: a treasure-hunt manifesto complete with map and clues pitched to the age of each of his four children (some a bit too abstract for littlies). He'd passed it on in case they wanted to use it.

The family also dug out a handwritten manual with every imaginable detail about managing the property. That was so Dad.

The following day, the family disappeared as we returned to dust Dad's ashes around

the trunks of the trees he'd planted. It was a strangely happy moment, something to do with that circle-of-life cliché.

There's much that's sad. That we didn't truly get to know each other. That he didn't write his novel about a young man crossing Renaissance Europe (also a history of the development of money). That the major didn't find him. That he martyred himself to Fox Road. But there's sadness in all our lives, and there was much happiness in his too.

Latterly he'd mellowed a little, started to loosen up and enjoy life. I think that was accepting the world wasn't going to change and the deep happiness he found with his wife of nine years, who challenged him and made him laugh at himself.

It's strange how you can almost forget someone has died and suddenly remember again an instant later. Like listening to National Radio's Kim Hill, whose feistiness Dad adored. Eating a Mars bar (his favourite). Seeing a Len Lye sculpture. Glimpsing a man on a motorbike. His birthday. Father's Day. Opening my books with their inscription "For Soss": the \$2 paperbacks found at garage sales and the classics ordered from England. And then there's that split second where I think, "Oh, I must tell Dad about such-and-such."

Usually he scoffed at sentimental rubbish but, not long before he died, Dad started saying "Bye, I love you girl," just before putting the phone down. Did I say it back? I think so, but I'm not sure.

After he died, I scrawled through my emails and found one from the week before. He'd signed off, "Love Dad".

In my reply I'd just signed off "Cheers", but Dad, I meant love. +

