

Dad's Rooms

WDP

Over the last few years Dad made his wishes for his funeral well known. He wanted a lot of music, he wanted it done using Rite One, and he wanted the King James Version. It wasn't so much that Dad disapproved of the more contemporary language used in Rite Two, or the more recent translations of the scriptures, it was more that he missed the majesty and poetry of the old language.

For example, The King James version of the Gospel reading chosen for this service contains the evocative passage, "In my Father's house there are many Mansions." The New Revised Standard Version, however, gives us the more pedestrian "In my Father's House there are many Dwelling Places". Dad frequently told us that when he died, he didn't want a Dwelling Place – he wanted a Mansion!

When Andrew and I sat down last week to put together these remarks, we were, at first, at a loss where to begin. Dad was a large man – less large physically as age and illness took their tolls, but always large in presence, in personality. When Hugh Paine was in the room, you knew it. How, then, could we possibly distill him (sorry, Dad, no pun intended) into mere words? How could we convey a sense of this man who had so many different facets, who impacted so many people in so many places?

Places... It was at that point in our musings that the Gospel reading came back to mind: "In my father's house there are many mansions." Our faith promises that Dad is now thoroughly enjoying his mansion – certainly not a mere "dwelling place" – and we started to wonder what that mansion looks like, and in what places *our* father's spirit dwells.

Imagine, if you will, a series of interconnected rooms and places, some indoor, some outdoor, transcending space and time. Dad is there, in each place, always appropriately attired, of course, and always greeting us with just the right *bon mot*.

Let's go on a brief tour:

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The first room I want to take you to is one that is familiar to most of you... The East Room at the Union Club. Dad is sitting at the round table or in one of the comfy chairs in the bar. He is dressed in his three piece suit, watch chain, and bow tie. His legs are comfortably crossed and a cigarette dangles in his fingers. He listens contentedly to the conversation, occasionally adding a word or two, but for the most part letting others direct the flow and topic of conversation. He has nothing to add to the discussion of the Stock Markets latest fluctuations. He tosses in a quick remark about the benefits of real butter and heavy cream when the topic shifts to cooking. But when someone starts an account of a recent trip to South East Asia ... something clicks in his mind. There is a twinkle in his eye and he smiles... and begins: "There once was a man from Rangoon...".

It is amazing how he always seems to have a poem, a limerick or a joke that relates perfectly to the topic of discussion, no matter how obscure it might be. The strange thing about this uncanny ability is that if you ask him to retell a specific limerick or joke at a later time, out of context, he won't be able to do it. It is as if he has a mental form of Google, a search engine of jokes and poems, which needs a key word to operate.

Enter another room and we find ourselves at a meeting of Holland Lodge. Here we find Worshipful Brother Hugh Paine, seemingly asleep, seated on the Past Master's Bench. His head is bowed, his arms are crossed, and he has a slight frown on his face. But if you look closely, he is not really asleep; his lips are moving and you realize that he is in fact listening intently to the ritual, ready to give a little "Hurrumph" should anyone make a mistake. And then the young Lodge Officer who is performing this particular piece of ritual, one who is doing his best to follow in his father's footsteps as a ritualist, comes to a favorite passage, and manages to deliver it to his father's satisfaction. Dad opens his eyes, and looks up. His frown changes to a smile. And he nods, as if to acknowledge that the traditions of the Lodge he loves have successfully been passed to a new generation.

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Less known to his Club mates and Brother Masons are some places in Willsboro, on the shores of Lake Champlain in upstate New York.

One, forever a part of every Paine's heavenly mansion, is the porch at Flat Rock Camp. It is the pre-dinner cocktail hour in late summer. Golden late-afternoon sunlight turns an isolated puffy cloud or two into transient sculptures of unbelievable beauty, and gurgling lake waters lap gently against the ancient rock slabs below the porch. Dad sits in the corner, next to his own father, as they tell each other their latest stories, guffaws and chuckles echoing across the water.

Then, there is the swimming pool behind my father's house, Green Bay. His relations will recognize the gracious host, the "landlord" as an infant cousin once described him, seated in the shade of an umbrella stand and wrapped in a fuzzy white terry robe, surveying a riot of friends and relations of all ages taking the edge off a hot July day. But, when everyone has gone, a quiet, solitary side of Dad emerges, watching the pattern of tiny whirlpools swirling out from the pool's intake jet in an uncharacteristically Zen-like meditative focus, or moving slowly through the pool's waters, leaf-net in hand, chasing down offending bits of outdoor detritus and dead bugs.

And then, back inside the house, it is deep winter, the soft silence so profound that you can hear your own heartbeat rushing in your ears. Dad sits in his favorite wing-back chair, partly in shadow, just to one side of a cheerfully dancing fire. From time to time, he lifts a fine cigar to his lips, the tip glows bright for a moment, and a cloud of aromatic smoke flows out, incense-like – a prayer of thanksgiving for the perfect place and time for a really good frowst.

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Pass through another door, and we find ourselves in a classroom at 4 East 98th St. ... St. Bernard's School. A small boy in knickers (unbuckled, and let down below the knee so as to be as close to long pants as possible) sits at a battered wooden desk. A blue cap, with the school shield emblazoned upon it, hangs from the back of his chair. It is recess time, and Hughy would prefer to be out playing in the yard. But, once again, Sir has made him stay in. Sir does this a lot. There was but one comment on Paine's recent report card: "Cheeky!". And so, Paine may not go out and play, but must instead sit here and copy out some boring old piece of English poetry. But Hughy doesn't really mind. He adores his teacher. Sir has given him a life long interest in British History, and a love of the English Language. And so Hughy lowers his head and gets to work... One can't help but wonder if he knows that, some sixty years later, he will still be able to recite, from memory:

*Lars Porsena of Closium,
By the Nine Gods he swore,
That the great house of Tarquin
Should suffer wrong no more."*

Time and space shift, and we're in the living room of apartment 12A, 1035 Park Avenue, and Hugh is now the teacher, his eldest son snuggled comfortably in his lap gazing with rapt awe at *The House at Pooh Corner*. Dad is teaching the boy how to read - from a first edition set that, ten years later, he will not permit the teenaged son to even touch. But the lesson doesn't last long, and soon Dad is watching one son vigorously conducting a Mozart Symphony blaring from stereo speakers, while the other son gurgles happily on the carpet, slobbering over an affectionate, but long suffering, ASPCA mutt.

Then it is evening, perhaps before the National Horse Show, or the Union Club Ball. The lights in the living room are muted, and Dad, in white tie and tails, waits for his wife to emerge and, once again awe him with her elegant beauty. He sits at the small upright piano and begins to pick out a few chords, a measure or two of Cole Porter, a stab at a Gershwin theme. Then he smiles, addresses the ivory keys, and launches into a rollicking stride rendition of Fats Waller's *Ain't Misbehaving*.

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Then there is Paris. And by "Paris," I mean a swath of Europe extending from the bow berthing compartment of the converted troop-ship Volendam, into Amsterdam, and right on through to the Norman coast. There, at a sea-side hotel, he is in the company of a stunningly good looking, but sun burnt, blond: pink skin in a pink bridesmaids dress. But Paris itself looms large. Only in Paris is my Dad in constant motion, walking endlessly through the streets, along the banks of the Seine, through museums and galleries (sometimes in the company of a tired, but uncomplaining, eleven year old boy). He comes to rest in the little bar of the Ritz, practicing his "French noises" with a barely tolerant, but well-tipped, bartender. But then he is again in motion, surrounded by a merry band of Yalie delinquents, climbing into an implausibly American car known only as "Le Grand Buick" for a night filled with jazz, drink and mischief.

There is one last room. It is the hospital room where I last saw my father. It is a room of profound sadness, but it is also a place of deep love. The night before he died, my mother, Andrew and I happened to be all together visiting Dad as he had his supper – a packet of Union Club chicken finger-sandwiches prepared by East Room staff co-conspirators, and smuggled past the hospital’s jack-booted guardians of Culinary Mediocrity. When he was done eating, he announced that he wanted to prepare for bed, so we cheerfully let him order us around as we caddied toothpaste, Efferdent, TV headphones, and other impedimenta as required. Then, we said goodnight and walked out of the room. Halfway down the hall, I remembered that I had left my hat behind, so I ducked back in to retrieve it. As I turned to go again, something, I don’t know what, moved me to an unusual gesture of filial devotion: I blew him a kiss. He looked up with his beautiful sky-blue eyes, smiled, and lifted a hand, wiggling his fingers in farewell. He said nothing; I said nothing. There was nothing that needed to be said.

Hugh Paine is in many rooms, but I will often visit him there.