

A CELEBRATION OF THE LIFE OF  
**JOHN MICHAEL CONWAY**

23<sup>rd</sup> January 1982 – 25<sup>th</sup> June 2018

held at  
Westmill Woodland Burial Ground  
on 11<sup>th</sup> July 2018



**Humanist Celebrant**

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## OPENING WORDS

Good morning everyone. We're here to celebrate the life of John Michael Conway who died at Sobell House on 25<sup>th</sup> June aged only 36.

## INTRODUCTION

I should introduce myself. My name is Ian Willox. I'm a celebrant for Humanists UK. John's family have asked for a Humanist funeral – a non-religious funeral. That doesn't mean anti-religious. This is a ceremony for everyone – including those with a religious faith.

## THOUGHTS ON LIFE AND DEATH

With or without religion, one of the important things a funeral does is remember. So that John lives on in our memories at least.

So let's remember...

## TRIBUTE

John was born in Oxford, educated in Kidlington and Didcot and, after a couple of years studying Arts and Drama at Abingdon followed by further education in Aberystwyth and Guildford, he returned to Oxford – where he pretty much stayed for the rest of his life. This was his ground.

Before we go any further, John's Nan is going to read a poem that will guide us through this tribute. It's by Nancy Wood. It's from a collection called *Many Winters*. Antonia – please...

## ANTONIA:

### **Many Winters**

The earth is all that lasts.  
The earth is what I speak to when  
I do not understand my life  
Nor why I am not heard.  
The earth answers me with the same song  
That it sang for my fathers when  
Their tears covered up the sun.  
The earth sings a song of gladness.  
The earth sings a song of praise.  
The earth rises up and laughs at me  
Each time that I forget  
How spring begins with winter  
And death begins with birth.

*Nancy Wood*

When John came back to Oxford he started with pub work before taking a carpentry course at City of Oxford College – which led to work at the New Bodleian and then to estate management at the John Radcliffe Hospital.

In 2009 he was diagnosed with a brain tumour – an astrocytoma. Enough to stop anyone in their tracks. Let alone a young man with everything in front of him.

We're going to pause for another reading – this time from John's Uncle. James is going to read a short excerpt from Terry Pratchett's *Reaper Man*. James please...

**JAMES:**

**Reaper Man**

In the Ramtop village where they dance the real Morris dance, for example, they believe that no one is finally dead until the ripples they cause in the world die away— until the clock he wound up winds down, until the wine she made has finished its ferment, until the crop they planted is harvested. The span of someone's life, they say, is only the core of their actual existence.

*Terry Pratchett*

Time for John's Mum Sarah to give us an idea of his character...

**SARAH:**

There are so many possible memories to share about John and so many things I could say about him.

One of the most recognisable things about John is his immense sociability – this was evident right from his birth, and possibly had something to do with the fact that he was such a 'lovely' baby all the nurses used to come into the ward and ask me if they could take John for a walk and a cuddle. I barely saw him! Admittedly he was slightly less cuddly as an adult and possibly this is not the memory he would have liked me to share.

John was also very independent and from an early age. He got through the teen years, by being easy going and 'just not telling me anything I might not like – result very few arguments (and lots of stories I found out years afterwards). But most importantly, he got through them all, and found his way in life.

John was not prone to emoting or discussing his feelings, but his care and concern shone through and he was always willing to help anyone who needed it. I can't begin to describe the multiple ways he showed his care for me but I could always count on him to do so.

John regularly showed his concern by trying to improve us (his family), this included general 'life and social improvements' for instance he hated me getting chocolate powder on my upper lip (cappucino's) – so much so that if we were out for coffee together and the barrista said ' would you like chocolate on that' – he would say no for me! He did have a particularly withering look when any of us had been just too embarrassing by word or deed and as a family we gave him lots of opportunities to perfect it.

John was also less than fond of my driving, he would sit there wincing in the passenger seat of the car (making me even more nervous of course) and some of my earlier driving fails were remembered and rehashed rather too much for my liking (John had a great memory for this stuff) – After John became blind he once said to me – (sic) well at least I can't see what you are doing now! It was certainly true that when John learnt to drive and for the too short time he was allowed to drive, he was a far better driver than I have ever been.

During the 9 years since John's initial diagnosis – he led the way in showing us how to deal with it. He wasn't always Mr. Positive, but he was real and he didn't 'fight cancer', he just ignored it as much as possible. After his first operation, virtually his first words to me were something like (I hope you aren't going to clutch my knee) – I realise now that in the hospice I did indeed hold on to his knee and I don't think he minded – on the whole I stuck to waving like a loony whenever I saw him walking towards me. The last months were very difficult for him as the illness took his sight and progressed. But even during this time – John did his utmost best to carry on 'as normal', asked us all to look after each other, and somehow accommodated his loss of independence with remarkable grace.

I am so proud of John and everything he achieved despite adversity. So John, I promise I will continue to avoid chocolate powder on cappuccino's and try my best to live life despite everything. I will carry your memory (and apparently some of your cells) with me for the rest of my life and continue to care for those around me as you did, and as you asked me to.

Six years ago – almost to the day – John met Zöe.

It was at The Library – the pub not the Bodleian. But this is Zöe's story...

#### **ZÖE:**

I think John would have liked it here- for someone so chatty, I also have some lovely memories of us sitting quietly, just being together and watching for birds.

He also would have liked seeing so many of you here- as you know he loved a good party!

I first met John at a mutual friend Rose's birthday party- I'd come over to Oxford from Reading with Eva and we didn't know anyone else. So Rose asked John, as he was a sociable person, to chat to us and make sure we had a nice evening- a duty which he clearly took very seriously! In fact we had such a good time that we missed our last train, and all stayed over at Rose's flat. Eva and I had to get back to Reading early the next morning- John walked us to the train station, and went out in search of breakfast while we were waiting for the train (nothing much was open, so he returned with water and tracker bars!). So I got the sense that as well as being a very friendly and fun person to be around, he was also very kind. And over the years he continued to show me that as well as being the sort of person you would have a really fun night in the pub with, he was also the sort of person that would buy me a set of slippers for at his

house, and warm them on the radiator for when I arrived on a cold day, or would buy me flowers because I was sad the flat looked bare after taking down the Christmas decorations.

These qualities have come up repeatedly in people's messages of condolence. People have remembered John as always willing to help out a friend, as the life and soul of the party, as kind, energetic, positive, for getting on and enjoying life, for his sense of humour, and for his 'evangelist love of bacon' as one person put it (so much so that I promised in my wedding vows to cook him bacon!).

John was the sort of person who will talk to anybody and everybody- I remember once I said a friend was picking me up to go for drinks and said that was good because even if we were first there, I wouldn't be waiting on my own- he looked completely baffled and asked why that would be a problem- 'you just find someone to talk to!'. As a generally shy person, this was equally baffling to me! Though I am not (and probably never will be) as good at that as John was, he has shown how life can be enriched by being so open and friendly, and this is something I hope to carry forward with me, and will make me think of him.

I am so lucky to have shared this part of my life with him. I wanted to share a quote which expresses this, and John's attitude of living optimistically and as normally as possible. It's by Richard Feynman, who got married in his 20s knowing his wife was terminally ill:

*"It's hard to explain. If a Martian (who, we'll imagine never dies except by accident) came to Earth and saw this peculiar race of creatures--these humans who live about seventy or eighty years, knowing that death is going to come--it would look to him like a terrible problem of psychology to live under those circumstances, knowing that life is only temporary. Well, we humans somehow figure out how to live despite this problem: we laugh, we joke, we live.*

*The [] difference for [us] was only a quantitative difference--the psychological problem was just the same. The only way it would have become any different is if we had said to ourselves, "But those other people have it better, because they might live fifty years." But that's crazy. Why make yourself miserable saying things like, "Why do we have such bad luck? What has God done to us? What have we done to deserve this?"--all of which, if you understand reality and take it completely into your heart, are irrelevant and unsolvable. They are just things that nobody can know. Your situation is just an accident of life..*

*We had a hell of a good time together..."*  
John- thank you. Cheers, prost, nastrovje.

So this is the John who courts with a swordfish supper. Who will happily eat crocodile and kangaroo – but can't bear the slightest hint of chilli.

This is the John whose idea of a good night in was sitting on the sofa watching Predator – or The Princess Bride.

This is the John who proposed to Zöe on Christmas morning while they were still in bed.

This is the John who engraved teaspoons with the name of every guest who came to the wedding.

This is the John who honeymooned with Zöe in New Zealand – three weeks visiting Hobbiton and the Glowworm Caves. Who went whale watching and seal watching. Who was elected Chief of the Tribe at the Maori Village Experience.

This is the John who would talk to anybody – often in their own language.

This is the John who piloted his maiden flight only two years ago. It was actually Sarah's flight – she'd won it in a raffle – but John and Zöe got to accompany her – and John got a go at the controls. He loved it. Loved it? He actually flew the plane for the whole hour flight, landed it twice and was apparently a natural. Zoe and Sarah just sat in the back!

This is the John behind the “party ward” at the JR. Who had so many visitors that they had to give him a visitors room of his own to cope.

This is the John who as a child would, according to Sarah, roll down that White Horse “in a terrifying manner”.

This is the John who died at Sobell House on 25<sup>th</sup> June.

This is the John who is still rippling through our world.

### **QUIET REFLECTION**

We're coming to the end of this celebration of John's life. But before we do we're going to pause for a moment of reflection. A chance for you to digest all you've heard. A chance for you to recall your own memories of him. A chance, if you wish, to pray silently.

### **SILENCE**

### **COMMITTAL**

Just as we welcome a child into our lives we must say goodbye to those who leave us. This celebration of John's life is complete. It's time to say farewell to him. This may be difficult but it is important. I hope the memories we've talked about here may give you some comfort.

## FINAL FAREWELL

Our atoms and molecules come from the earth;  
Are ordered by ancestry;  
Are fired into life by union;  
Are sustained by the earth and powered by the sun;  
And return to the earth when life ends.

*John Stuffin*

John Michael Conway. Beloved husband, son, brother, grandson, nephew, cousin and friend to many. Chief of the Tribe.

We commit your body to the earth. Rest in the hearts and minds of all you love and all who love you.

Or as Terry Pratchett would have it: "We commend your soul to any God that can find it."

We're going to round off the committal with a song. The same song that was sung at Zöe and John's wedding. You'll find the words in your order of service.

## MUSIC:

**Lean On Me – Bill Withers**

## CLOSING WORDS

We've celebrated John's life. We've said our goodbyes. But we have our memories. And the rest of our lives to remember.

If you want to share those memories – or just some refreshment – you're warmly invited to join the family at a bring your own picnic here in Westmill. From two to five this afternoon John's favourite pub – The Library in the Cowley Road - will be open just for you. You'll find details in your order of service.

As you leave you'll see that you can make a donation in John's memory to Sobell House, Maggie's Centres and The Brain Tumour Charity. Again you'll find details in your order of service.

But before any of that there's something you could help with. Once you've paid your final respects to John you can help fill in his grave. It's not obligatory and the traditional gravedigger is on hand to guide you. But it might be a final kindness that you want to do for John.

I'm going to step back now and leave you alone with John. Lucy has some earth you may want to scatter on John's grave. Or if you prefer – some sprigs of rosemary.

Please take good care of yourselves and each other.

Thank you for coming.