

A celebration of life Nicholas John Levine

21st December 1938 – 23rd February 2021

Wealden Crematorium, Friday 19th March, 1.00pm

a personal goodbye

Humanist
Ceremonies

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We are going to hear from Nick's children now. Between their contributions, I will remind you of other things which Nick did.

Jess will start

Dad had a tremendous life force and this is an opportunity to share and enjoy so many things that made Dad unique and brilliant.

Dad was a deep appreciator of trees, humour, pleasure in language, delight in the arts, and leading his life openly and with a twinkle in his eye.

Dad was very unconventional in terms of expectation. He was very happy that I enjoyed a chapter of working in a primary school as a dinner lady. He knew the children enjoyed my singing as I served dish of the day, and that I would carefully make homemade play dough which to quote one four year old 'smelled like sunshine'.

He also greatly enjoyed playing too, and I feel really proud that he and Mum decided to give some money to a nursery school where I trained, partly because they had an enormous sand pit where children with a rough start in life, could play freely and expressively.

Dad always adopted a wide and open perspective, was very non judgemental and gave a new feeling of time. He had a natural flair to see the bigger picture whatever the subject.

Personally, Dad was ever so animated and keen to be active in my art world, whether in art teaching or my own practice. Dad always attended my private views taking time quietly to see something new and to praise so generously. He was an astonishing enjoyer and very much walked alongside his family, encouraging us to find our own happy way in the world.

Dad was always supportive of me teaching art to adults with mental health struggles. I really felt his hand on my shoulder as I delivered sessions to people struggling with emotional chaos. I felt his presence to communicate freely, enabling clients to find their own voice.

I felt Dad's energy and enthusiasm when teaching clients, especially when he tuned in to the feeling that it wasn't the end result it was the fact you had a go. To mark the end of my teaching chapter in East Sussex I put on an exhibition of students work attended by Mum and Dad. He was astonished and felt so joyful to see such a range of artwork in an artroom that he felt quite rightly was a very happy space.

Dad hated shopping, and never was this clearer than when the school year started and he needed new shoes. I was given the role of fashion advisor for this. We would set off and Dad and I would discuss the less elderly shops to visit. He would gingerly choose the odd pair which I always rejected.

Having eliminated about 95 % of the footwear I would show Dad two pairs of which he would very quickly choose one, and then be amazed that we had cracked it together. The drive home was always via the local shop where we would pick up a four finger kit kat eaten in the car. We relished the mischief of hiding the sweet wrappers in the car from Mum, and Dad enjoyed telling me that the chocolate was 'for shock'.

Thanks for listening.

Thank you, Jess.

Nick was born on the 21st December 1938, the second child of Sydney and Leila Levine. Learning more about Nick's past, it is clear that his social conscience and values were very much rooted in his family.

His paternal great-grandfather fled from Poland, apparently with a Polish countess, becoming a cantor in Glasgow and producing at least ten children, including Arthur, Nick's grandfather. After university Arthur went on to be successful in insurance and at one time was supporting 38 members of his family, paying for their education or easing their families' poverty. He married Myra and they had one child, Sydney, Nick's father, who went on from Oxford to become a barrister. During the general strike, while his university contemporaries were strike-breaking, he supported the miners, and he was moved by the poverty of the 30s. At the beginning of the war he joined the Civil Service, which he saw as "more useful" than being a barrister, and was much respected in his new career.

Leila, Nick's mother, was the daughter of Judah Israel and Florence, had a brother, Denis, and two step-siblings, Phyllis and Fred. Nick was fond of them all, particularly Uncle Denis who was a bit of a lad, acted, wrote naughty stories for a gentleman's magazine, and had a relationship with a woman who ran an up-market tobacco stall in Saville Row. Like Sydney, Leila had a strong social commitment. She took a Social Science diploma at London University, did a welfare role in a chocolate factory and worked with poor and Jewish East Enders. They married when she was 30 and he was 31. Catherine was born in 1935 and Nick in 1938. During the war, Sydney was mostly in London, working at the Ministry of Supply and on air-raid duty, while the family was evacuated to Berkhamsted.

When they moved back to London, they lived in Highgate, where Nick and Julia first met – at primary school. Mind you, at that stage she avoided him, because he was part of a noisy crowd. They met again at a party when she was fifteen, went out for a couple of wonderful weeks before Nick went to University, and didn't meet again until after he had started teaching. By then, Julia had stopped avoiding him.

Though Catherine was nearly four years older, Nick had fond memories of their childhood, her comforting him when bombers passed overhead, and playing on the beach. Later, when they were both in their teens, they got on well too. Catherine went to Oxford and then got a job with the Economist, but at the age of 27 she committed suicide, a great sadness for Nick.

As a child and young man, Nick found his father quite distant, though over time he became more relaxed and engaged with Nick, Julia and the grandchildren. He had very fond memories of his mother, describing her as a "warm, loving presence". It was her decision to send Nick to Bryanston, a boarding school in Dorset, because of its liberal not academic reputation. He wrote: "Significant moments/events for me were her intuitive and warm response to Julia, her spirit in coming to Tanzania and relishing the experience..... and her engagement with Rob and Jo, whether reading with them on her lap, looking after the rabbits or cooking jam".

And now we'll pause in the narrative to hear from Jo:

I feel so happy and so lucky to have had Nick as a father. When I look back and think of Nick I almost always find myself smiling. Throughout my life I have experienced such strong feelings of love and support from him, and from Julia of course too. I loved it when he came to concerts I was playing in, or to the shows at the Globe (sorry the chairs were so uncomfy Dad). One of the things that I liked best was that Nick didn't hold back from expressing his enjoyment or appreciation, I think on my last call with him he asked after all the family then ended with 'I think you're great', who could ask for more from a parent?

Nick was also a top-notch grandad, I can picture him so easily settling down on the living room floor to do the world map puzzle or in earlier days to play with a train set or a marble run. As his grandchildren grew up he remained so interested in them as their lives developed, I think this curiosity was one of his secrets to staying so young.

Some of my favourite memories are of playing Scrabble or Cards together, with Nick inevitably being dealt 'a very interesting hand', and of sitting round doing jigsaws, with Nick often exclaiming 'see we're almost finished' as I put in one or two pieces out of hundreds. We have also had some great games of table tennis with him over the years, and of course some lovely times in his wood, with Nick happily telling us about his latest projects there.

But mostly just being with Nick was a treat, a chance to love, laugh and learn from someone so wise and compassionate, thank you Nick and lots of love, I think you're great too

Thank you Jo.

While Nick was at Cambridge, Julia was at art school, first at Willesden, then at Hornsey, and finally at the Royal College of Art. She was still quite shy, and disliked the noisy, corridor coffee breaks at the RCA. Instead she'd slip away down a private stair to the V&A to use the canteen. And one day, who should she bump into but Nick, now a teacher at Rickmansworth Grammar School, surrounded by a sea of girls in green uniform. They were on a school trip. So they began to see each other again, and in 1963 they were married, while she was in her last year at the RCA.

The following summer they went to Tanzania as part of the Teachers for East Africa scheme. Nick mentioned to the person setting up their placement that Julia was keen to paint the landscape. It was possibly this chance remark which led to them being posted to a school in the bush, 350 miles north of Dar Es Salaam, where Nick suddenly found himself promoted to Headmaster, and Julia was driven around in a Land Rover to take art lessons at surrounding schools. They were then moved to another posting, half way up Kilimanjaro, and it was there that Rob was born.

By a lucky chance, on his return Nick got a job immediately at Crownwoods School, Eltham, and the young family settled in Blackheath, where Jo was born. One of their neighbours describes Nick at that time: "[We] always admired Nick for his kindness, wisdom, his enthusiasm for the moment – fire-making, lawn mowing, jam making, tree felling – and his great love for you all." They were good years, but the loss of their third child, William, at the age of just nine months suggested it was time to move on, and Nick was sure that Julia would be happier in the country. He applied for a deputy headship in Gloucestershire. Here they lived in a converted barn, which was so cold that they had to play table tennis in the kitchen before they were warm enough to eat.

Julia did indeed flourish in the country. In time, they felt ready to have another child, and in 1976 Jess was born, just in time for another move, with Nick taking a new job as Head at Beacon in Crowborough.

They arrived at their house on Marden's Hill with Rob, Jo and baby Jess – then along came Tom, and suddenly the house was too small. They moved to a bigger house on Crowborough Hill, maybe a bit too near to Beacon, but Julia told me that you could shut the world out when you closed the front door. Except you never shut Beacon out completely, because all four children went there. But Nick could always manage his crossword, despite the demands of children and later grandchildren swarming round him, and find time for a game of Scrabble.

At Beacon, he flourished. A colleague wrote: *"Nick ... appointed me as a young probationer and although I remained in the profession for over 35 years I never saw his like again. I still remember going to a County meeting and being shocked that other teachers were so disparaging about their heads – it was inconceivable to me then and now that you would choose to work with someone you did not respect.*

I was totally inspired by Nick's eloquently expressed values and the vision he had for Beacon as a truly comprehensive school. Ahead of his time in so many ways he insisted that every child mattered long before it became a political catchphrase. He also nurtured his staff as the school's most valuable resource and saw potential in everyone. Where others saw problems he always saw solutions and possibilities. I have been eternally grateful that he negotiated on my behalf the first job share in the county for a head of department following my maternity leave. Egalitarianism was his middle name!..... Countless staff and students will remember and thank him for that and mourn his passing.

Another colleague described how he was asked to define his Head Teacher for a seminar. *"There were half a dozen categories but Nick just wouldn't fit into any of them! So I took the 1980 staff picture featuring 100+ colleagues and asked the group to pick out the head. The group's total lack of success confirmed the impression Nick conveyed that every one of us was part of the success of Beacon."*

He retired in 1994 after 18 years as Head.

Family holidays were mainly camping in the early days, once in Denmark, but mostly in the UK. But after a while Nick found he rather enjoyed staying in posh hotels too, and their travels took them further afield, and in more comfort. They'd always loved Italy, since the first time Nick & Julia went to Florence, with rucksacks, on the train. Their trips were often based around art, and in 2019 Julia finally managed to get Nick to Ravenna, which he loved, just as she knew he would. In fact, he loved it so much that they returned only a few months later, with Jess, to introduce her to that wonderful city. They had a great Christmas in Barcelona, and toured Germany by car to visit German family

Rob will now talk to us about his Dad

It's such a shame more of you can't be here because of this wretched virus, but somehow this intimate gathering feels quite fitting for Dad who I think wouldn't have wanted a fuss.

It is lovely too though that so many people have wanted to join us virtually.

As Lauren put it, he really was an exemplar as a Grandpa, and as a Dad too. Whatever was going on at work, he always seemed to be really present for us, always up for a game, always able to help clarify my thinking without ever telling me what to think. I loved golfing with him - sharing his enjoyment of a decent 7-iron, along with discovering at the end that he had somehow managed to help me work out which life choice to make without me noticing how.

Dad really assumed the best of people and I think we all benefited from that. No curfews, just a key under the mat and an assumption that we would be home at a reasonable time.

He also always seemed to find the right words. When I had to shake his hand in front of half the school during a Good News Assembly he said, not exactly under his breath, "we must stop meeting like this" which got a laugh from the staff and the kids. If your Dad has to be your headmaster, I really can't think of a better role model. One of my school friends said simply of him that "he was a truly good man" which I think sums Dad up pretty well.

Mostly I'll remember his youthful twinkle, which never seemed to dim. When he was 43-ish, I lobbed a ball at him and instead of instinctively catching it he just let it bounce off. He was kind of proud of that and we often discussed whether that was the moment that he grew up, but I think we both knew that it wasn't. Even on the day before he died, we had a long tongue in cheek banter about how it would be nice if Julia – the most selfless person - did something for someone else for once ... I loved his phone greeting "Hi Dad, it's Rob." "And so it is!" which used to be followed by "I'll just get your mother" but he became chattier and chattier as time passed.

They had such a wonderful relationship – NickandJulia or GrannyandGrandpa seem like one-word terms in our house. As time passes, I am if anything appreciating him even more – the emails and letters have been a bit overwhelming at times and it is typical of Dad's humility that we've learned so much about him and the amazing things he did in the time since he died. I'm also aware with some lasting happiness of how much I still really feel him - in the love our family has of cards and words, in the kindness and intelligent curiosity of his grandchildren, in our banter and irreverence and our desire to give. Love you Dad, and thank you.

When Nick left Beacon, he bought himself a lovely piece of woodland, which remained his passion, and a major occupation, to the end. Sometimes he would just drop in on friends, with a load of neatly cut wood in the car – this was always hugely welcome, the wood being a pleasant excuse to spend an hour in Nick's company.

He and Julia moved to Goldsmiths, under the protective gaze of an ancient oak, and with a huge garden merging into more woodland. It's a beautiful house, enhanced by many things which they have acquired in their travels, and by the paintings of both Julia and Jess. It has been a wonderful haven, not least during this last year when they experienced a "good lockdown", surrounded by their much loved Sussex countryside. They missed going to concerts and exhibitions, but the garden and the woodland offered compensations. And of course, Nick continued to make Julia laugh.

Nick stood in the 1997 general election as Labour Party candidate for Wealden. He was the perfect candidate, already hugely well-known and liked. And with a passion for social justice.

In his election address, Nick said: 'What motivates me is the wish to create a more fair and more compassionate society - with a better quality of life for the many; not the increasingly harsh and divided society we have now.'

Nick doubled Labour's vote in Wealden. He also served as a Labour councillor on Crowborough Town Council, and made a great and lasting contribution to the local Labour Party.

And then there were the two book groups. One quote really sums Nick up: "The way Nick helped me most was to reflect on what we read in our discussions. He was an excellent listener and was often quiet for some time before explaining his thoughts. For me, he recognised the complexities of life: that there were rarely simple answers to human problems. And he expressed this with great intelligence and compassion which touched us all."

Then there was the Bridge Club. Again, a quote from one of his partners: "He was a truly lovely man; charming, witty, kind, very good company and always fair. It was a pleasure to play bridge with him and our partnership was one which I shall treasure and look back on with great satisfaction and nostalgia. As Nick would often say, 'we had our moments!' ... The bridge world and indeed the whole locality will be the poorer for Nick's passing."

And then the Circle Dancing. This was Julia's idea. Nick was wary at first, but once he got drawn into it, on a holiday in the South of France, he of course took to it whole heartedly. Later he started to organise table-tennis tournaments, awarding the winners with extravagant imaginary prizes.

And finally Citizen's Advice Bureau, and then the food bank. A fellow volunteer described the last time she saw him there: 'He sat there so laid-back and relaxed, chatting easily to other volunteers, women from the refuge and other clients, treating us all alike, with respect. He was a great man'.

There's that word GREAT again.

The last of the children to talk will be Tom, who rounds off this tribute.

Hello. Thank you all for being here and with us online, and thanks everyone that has been in touch with thoughts and memories about Nick. Here's mine....

So... here are a few of the things about my dad that brought me joy. The way he cut down a tree, the expansive answer he would give whenever asked about how his bridge was going, the labels on his damson jam. I'll tell you about one of these. When he retired from Beacon, Dad bought a patch of woodland and we used to cut down trees, sometimes for logs, or to help other trees grow, or to bring light to the forest floor. It was all by hand with little saws and an old blue rope and it was just a bit dangerous and difficult and therefore exciting and rewarding. In those moments it was really such a treat to see the twinkle in his eye. I think his capacity for happiness in living, and sharing that happiness was a beautiful quality.

I loved sharing thoughts with Dad too. He was very young and curious in his mind, and I loved it when he got animated in a discussion. He was a wonderful person to talk to, a quiet listener, who helped me clarify my thoughts as we spoke. He was very open. I loved the way that whenever I needed anything from my dad, or my mum, they gave me the support, for sure, but they did it in an amazingly gracious way. They made me feel like any solution was all my idea, and any request was me doing them a massive favour in letting them help. I think as his children we've all benefitted from that loving encouragement.

There are other depths to my dad too that only revealed themselves to me as I've grown older - how decent he was, how he cherished what was important - which includes having fun - and how consistently he had energy for and took pleasure in making the world a better place.

Some of these things are lost now, and some of them live in my memories. I have felt incredible sadness these last weeks - because I know I still have a love for my Dad which I wanted to carry on expressing. But I also know I had a fair go with him, that I was lucky to have him as my Dad and that I wouldn't change any part of the relationship we had. And I guess that is a good place to stop.