

## **Stairway to Heaven**

Two qualities mark out my paternal grandfather as being an exceptional man; foresight and compassion. Born in 1888 in a town famous for its spa treatment, his dream was to run his own business, helping people add a little colour to their lives with, as he put it, “a lick of paint.”

Starting any business in the sharp economic downturn of the early thirties would have been risky but Grandad Walter was an optimist and well versed in business cycles. He was fortunate that his town was not as badly affected as the industrial centres of Britain, as work was available on the surrounding farms.

He knew better than to plough money into unnecessary overheads at that time, so using a garden shed for storing a limited supply of decorating materials, he offered his services locally as a one man band. Unemployment was a huge problem at that time but according to the family, he preferred to create his own work by identifying the needs of different sectors of the local community rather than be dependent on handouts.

Owners of the big houses asked him to wallpaper their living rooms whilst poorer people sought him out for his cheap loaves of home-made bread and the excess vegetables from his garden. His entrepreneurial spirit and ability to graft for eighteen hours a day not only fed and clothed his own five children but helped many of his struggling neighbours.

The UK economy did pick up around 1934 prompting him to expand the decorating enterprise into more central premises. Most businesses backed onto the fast-flowing river which ran through the town. It had flooded many times despite various defence

schemes and the desperate shopkeepers had witnessed with horror the loss of their stock as it floated downriver.

Walter needed to avoid this problem so he came up with a unique design for his shop. He built it on stilts. It was a white wooden chalet style building on four sturdy supports with a deep store room underneath. Whenever I climbed the twenty steps into the Aladdin's den of paints, wallpaper, brushes, scrapers and tools with no name, it was like climbing up to heaven.

His idea was to keep the shop running in the aftermath of a flood and with the help of the family, move as much stock as possible up the steps and into safekeeping. It looked incongruous against the Victorian architecture and legend has it that locals described it as an eye-sore but my grandad never worried about what people thought. He was protecting his assets for future generations, prophesying that worse floods were to come.

He was right. In 1965, two weeks before Christmas the water reached its highest level ever. Snow from the hills had melted quickly and drained into the river. While some children watching from a safe distance were thrilled to watch the frantic comings and goings, I, at nine years old was called on to help the rest of the family bail out the stock room before the water smashed through the doors.

I remember standing alongside my uncle in the freezing rain in a red bobble hat and matching gloves ready to carry a couple of rolls of wallpaper, a tin of distemper or whatever I could manage and hand it on to the next person in the chain. My dad kept an eye on the river as it was his job to shout the alarm to get us back into the safety of the shop for mugs of cocoa and biscuits. The deluge poured onto the road and seeped through under the doorways of private homes, destroying furniture,

Christmas trees and presents. It was my grandad who organised a whip-round for the children who would miss out on Santa that year.

I was ten when I was allowed to work on a Saturday morning for the sum of two shillings, rising to half a crown if I made any sales. My first job was to clear all the shelves behind the long wooden counter and dust them. With a wet cloth I wiped down the bottles of turpentine, something called knotting to stop wood knots showing through the paint and packets of sugar soap. Tins of Valspar and Walpamur, a water paint, “For the Homes of Britain,” got a quick rub down before I helped prepared the counter in readiness for the customers.

My Aunt Grace was the favourite salesperson amongst the regular customers. She wore “cat eye” spectacles with a purple rim, and a lavender overall. In between customers she’d slip into the backroom and spray eau de cologne behind her ears and on her wrists from an atomiser. Sometimes she’d point it at me and give two squirts to my throat. Under her supervision I was allowed to ask customers how I could help them. If they were interested in a washable wallpaper for the kitchen, I’d fetch three different rolls and spread out a sample on the wooden rack made for the purpose. Tomatoes, baskets of fruit, cup and saucer designs were the most popular and it wasn’t before long that I was making my own sales.

The till was a wooden drawer in the back room. It was sectioned off into coppers and silver. I learned to add up the order, take the money and count out the change – in pounds, shillings and pence, of course. Large orders often got a five percent discount which Aunt Grace told me was an incentive to keep the customers coming back. I’m surprised my grandad didn’t think up the first loyalty card!

However, he was a pioneer in customer service training. He'd line up the staff on a Saturday morning, including me, remind us of the Five Golden Rules;- 1) Smile and be friendly, 2) Ask the customer questions. 3) Listen to the answers. 4) Give them what they wanted. That might mean promising to put in a special order for them. 5) Always, always be respectful and courteous.

He would do spot checks to make sure everything was sparkling and in the right place then remind Aunt Grace that I was only allowed to work for two hours and to make sure I had milk and biscuits. Sometimes when I made a big sale, he would slip a ten shilling note into my hand and tell me not to waste it. Spend half, save half was his motto.

We lived a three minute walk from his large house with its own study and a sloping garden stuffed with dahlias, sweet peas, strawberries and a big vegetable patch. It was the place I felt free to be myself whether cartwheeling on the lawn or pretending to be a witch in the orchard. In the big freeze of 1963 we built an igloo big enough for us to sit inside with a hot drink and watch the snow fall. He'd tell me about the time he went to Canada to find work during the Great Depression but came back because my grandmother who was agoraphobic wouldn't join him. From him I learned about running a business, the value of hard work but more importantly the need to be kind to others and help them out as he'd done when times had been hard.

Running a business is tough at any time as much depends on the politics of the day but he believed it was also important to have fun and not worry too much. Every year he'd take part in the town carnival to raise money for charity where he'd dress up, not as the King but the Queen. I only have one sepia photograph of him in his silk frock and headdress as evidence of this, but his antics were the stuff of legend for many years after his death.

He loved to tramp the moors with his gnarled walking stick, bird spotting and teaching me the names of the wild flowers. From him I learned to appreciate the simple things of life. The death of his brother in the Great War at just eighteen had instilled in him the urgency to enjoy every single moment.

Sometimes we'd drive out for the day in his black Austin A70 which had been fitted with a chain at the back so I wouldn't be car sick. Belle Vue Zoo in Manchester was a favourite. For a special treat we might stop somewhere for high tea – fish and chips with bread and butter and a big pot of tea. I was one of five grandchildren but probably the most spoilt.

When he died in his late seventies, the business was finally sold and the iconic building dismantled. For a year after his death, my mother swore she could hear him tapping his stick on our wrought iron gate and calling my name.

In 1988 I set up my first business as an international training consultant in customer services and sales, incorporating those old values of respect, decency and honesty I'd first practiced way back at the age of ten in the "shop on stilts."

For thirty-five years, recommendation was through word of mouth just as it had been for Walter. Whenever I boarded a flight to see a client in the States or Ireland, those key messages accompanied me. Under promise and over deliver and never argue with the customer.

My grandfather has been my inspiration throughout my sixty odd years. He shaped my values and now when I walk along my landing and see his portrait, those gentle eyes look straight at me. I hope he's proud of me. I often think we'd have made a great team.