

The Bergen Newsletter: The Lakeside Dental Edition

Spring 2009

It has been a couple of years since the last Bergen Newsletter made its way into print. This was followed by a time of transition. However, the dust is mostly settled, and publication begins afresh.

A few weeks ago, a relatively new patient asked if I was a writer. When I said yes, I was then asked if I was *that* David Bergen (the David Bergen from Manitoba who won the Giller Prize for his book *The Time In Between*). I had to admit that I was, in fact, the other David Bergen: the non-award-winning author of an annual newsletter.

Long-time readers will remember that the first part of the newsletter usually consists of a reflection on events recent or past that had some part in forming my life. This year there are some thoughts on my mother, as well as a story in which she is the main player.

Mom:

In a world filled with diversity, there are some things that we all still have in common. Arguably, the most significant similarity is a mother – we all have a very direct connection to one of these. If we are lucky we have had a mother, who, beyond bringing us into the world, has had a very active and positive role in creating the person that we have become. She kept us nurtured when we needed nurturing; she kept us from stepping off of high places before we knew about gravity, and overall she tried to keep us aimed in the right direction. And for those of us who get counselling from time to time, professional or with friends, it must be observed that mothers and their effects on us are a great topic for consideration, analysis and dissection.

One example of this dates back to my eleventh grade. I was off on a date with a young woman from my school. All of this was well and good except that my mother insisted, quite clearly, that I be home by midnight. The young woman had a somewhat later curfew. Do you have any idea how troubling this can be for a young guy – having to get his date home in time for his own curfew? There you are, trying to figure out coolness and make some headway into the high school social scene, and then you have to contend with something as utterly outrageous as this? It is even worse when you have “nerd” written across your forehead. If I had gone in for counselling in a bigger way, this single action could have occupied many hours of contemplation, and would likely have explained the origins of some of my more significant non-standard behaviour patterns. There were other issues as well. But for the most part, I, and most of us, have survived in spite of all of those clearly outrageous things that our mothers put on us when we were just beginning. In their own way, they had our best interests at heart. And, once we grew up a bit more, we usually started to understand this quite clearly. In fact we have, mostly, become remarkably sentimental about these people, the source of our existence: our mothers.

Earlier this year, on Monday, January 19, my mother celebrated her 85th birthday. I called her to wish her a fine birthday and asked if she had gone for a run that day. She said, “Of course.” It was a two-mile run. She didn’t go out to run two miles because it was her birthday; she simply did it because she runs two miles on most days. She has been doing this for decades. Except on weekends. Mom doesn’t think that it is particularly civilized to run on weekends, so she doesn’t. We don’t question her on this: would you?

Mom lives life fully and with great energy and enthusiasm. A number of years ago, she met Gordon Saunders. Gordon, it turned out, was an old high school sweetheart, absent from her life for more than half a century and within a few years she was married to him. Interestingly, it was my father, my mother’s husband of 55 years, who helped in arranging the re-introduction. Does this sound wonderfully complicated? It is, but not necessarily in the way that you might think. Anyhow, there are some parts of a good story here.

My mother was born in Russia in 1924. It was the aftermath of the Russian Revolution, and things weren’t going well for anyone over there. As a consequence, my grandparents did what a large number of Mennonites living in Russia did: they fled as refugees and immigrated to Canada. My mother was a year old when she arrived here with her parents and older brother. She was also part of a much larger family, the Klassens, brothers and sisters of my grandmother. And she was also part of a Russian Mennonite community that found sanctuary in the Waterloo area – in large part because there was support from the Swiss Mennonites that had homesteaded and settled the area generations before.

It was a complex world to grow up into, and one that many immigrants and refugees have experienced. My mother spoke German at home¹ and English at school. The Russian Mennonite community quickly established a church. It was a church populated by a relatively cohesive community, but one that was peopled by individuals who had seen incredible hardship and brutality over many years as a result of the revolution in Russia. Events of this nature are never far beneath the surface of the survivors.

By the time my mother was five the Great Depression had begun. Her community was just becoming established economically when those financial underpinnings were suddenly removed. As with so many people, things became very difficult, although compared to Russia, these were good problems. Here in Canada, the possibility of actually starving to death was extremely remote, and the possibility of the sort of violence that had occurred in those distant Russian villages was unthinkable.

Mom grew up in Waterloo, on Elgin Street. She completed public school and then headed off to high school, located at the top of the hill that separates Waterloo from Kitchener. Up to this point, she had lived in the shelter of her Mennonite community. She had now

¹ Russian Mennonites started in Holland. From there they moved to the Danzig area in Prussia (now Poland) where they began speaking German. About a century later they immigrated to Russia where they spent the next hundred years. During their time in Russia, German remained their primary language.

graduated to the worldliness of higher education. When she was 15, the Second World War broke out. Education continued and life went on.

It is interesting, at this point, to note that Mennonites have a history of pacifism. Pacifism may seem like a less brave way to live life, but it wasn't for my mother's Mennonite community. In the decade during and following the Russian revolution, the average Mennonite village was occupied on 27 different occasions by the Red Army, the White Army and an assortment of terrorists and bandits on horseback. Entire villages were burnt. Entire villages had all of their occupants killed by whichever group happened to be in town. All of this happened and much, much more. There was much discussion by these Mennonite villagers about arming themselves, but the majority held to their pacifist convictions. Pacifism, under some circumstances, can be a very brave and difficult position to take indeed.

My mother remembers her high school years as a sort of golden time, when her uncles, my grandmother's younger brothers, would come by to visit sometimes for extended periods. They had also fled Russia, and in the middle of the depression went off getting educations in the United States. Considering that they arrived in Canada with the clothes on their backs, this was quite remarkable. One became a missionary in India for 30 years, another a renowned American heart and lung surgeon and a third a professor and a founder of the department of sociology at the University of Illinois. This fellow, Uncle Peter, was also recruited as an American spy, finishing high in the command structure of the OSS (The Office of Strategic Services – this became the CIA following the war). Clearly not all people born Mennonite adhered to their pacifist upbringing. Mom talks about, as a teenager, visiting her Uncle Peter during his stay in Washington. At one point they came to a great government building with no signs indicating its purpose. She had to wait outside while he went in on an errand. The entrance was closely guarded. He was not able to tell her about it, but the story came out 30 years later – it was the OSS headquarters. Interesting times.

Mom, always active, joined the high school girl's basketball team. Here Gordon Saunders enters the story. He reports that, interestingly, a number of young men, his contemporaries, started to follow girl's basketball. He recalls that it wasn't so much their keen interest in the game, or even the team that compelled them. Most of their attention was focused on a particular blond player. This would be my mother. Gordon then went one step further: he talked his way into the position of timekeeper for the women's team. A keenly focused fellow indeed. And as these things will happen, he caught my mother's attention, they became friends and began going out. I gather that there were other social interests in both camps, but they did have a strong fondness for each other. My mother remembers wondering how, if things progressed, Gordon, part of the Anglo-Saxon establishment, would fit in with her family – off-the-boat Russian-Mennonite refugees, still speaking almost exclusively German. This, as it turned out, was not to be a problem.

Following high school and a year working with an accounting firm, Gordon enlisted in the air force and disappeared into basic training. He emerged as a navigator. He then became part of an extremely dangerous, little-known part of the air force known as Ferry Command. These crews would take newly constructed planes, built in both Canada and the U.S. and fly

them across the Atlantic to Britain, North Africa and even on to India. The chief danger came not from enemy activity, but from flying newly built, and essentially untested, aircraft across large bodies of water. This was in fact pioneering work: before Ferry Command, only about a hundred aircraft had attempted a North Atlantic crossing, mostly in good weather, and only about half of these had made it. Flying in all weather and all seasons, these crews had an even higher casualty rate than the bomber commands flying over enemy territory. Gordon has stories of planes flying into mountains hidden in cloud banks over Iceland; or of planes flying lower and lower with vanishing fuel, trying to get under the clouds in order to land safely, only to find that the cloud cover went right down to the water level; or simply, and most commonly, planes and crew simply disappearing without a trace, lost in radio silence.

Gordon, for whatever reason, was not a letter-writing sort of guy and didn't write my mother asking her to wait for him. So, being my mother, she didn't. Life went on. Somewhere along the line my father came onto the scene. He was five years Mom's senior and a member of her church. He had had polio as a child. It was a relatively mild case but enough to leave one leg sufficiently damaged so that he was not considered fit for any form of service, active or alternative. He was working at Schneider's Meats, where he had started as a 17-year-old. Once again, both he and my mother appear to have had more than a few things going on in their social lives (he claimed to have dated June Callwood, although when he met her years later, she had no recollection of this).

Then, there was a fateful night. My mother had finished high school and was working at Woolworth's. She had a date with my dad. He came to pick her up at Woolworth's after work. Interestingly, so did Gordon, unannounced. Gordon had accrued some time off and was back in town. My mother thought: "So what do I do now?" She decided that since she had a date already scheduled with my father, she had to honour that. Gordon said that he understood and he left. He was not to be seen again for some 50 years.

Several years later mom and dad got married. Mom was able to bring a good Mennonite, German-speaking boy into her family. Three sons came along. Mom stopped working and raised those three sons. They grew up, left home and got married and had children of their own. Thereafter, she and her friend Leni Staller skied at Chicopee, a small hill just outside of Kitchener. They were out every possible winter day for years. Once, when they missed three consecutive days, a ski patroller called my mother at home to see if they were both well. In the summers she volunteered as chief cook at Silver Lake, a Mennonite camp. Dad retired from Schneiders after 48 years. He joined The Boys of the Thirties, a Kitchener-Waterloo group of men that had attended KCI, the twin cities' only high school in the 1930s. They met on a regular basis. One day he encountered a face that he hadn't seen in years. It was Gordon's brother, Harold. Shortly after this, Mom and Dad were invited to Harold's 75th birthday party. Gordon was there as well, so after those 50 or so years, Mom and Gordon met again.

Gordon, it turned out, had finished in the air force and studied accounting. He got married, had four children and retired as a senior partner in KPMG, the accounting giant. Once retired, he moved to Niagara-on-the-Lake, where he, his wife and one son became my

patients. I knew that he was from Kitchener and that he knew my parents but got no sense of any of this back-story. After a number of years, Gordon's wife passed away, and so he returned to his hometown of Kitchener, to be closer to his brother and other family.

Dad wasn't much given to insecurity, and so thereafter my parents got together socially with Gordon on a number of occasions. And then in June, 2001, Dad, in his 82nd year, died.

It was at the funeral home that I met Gordon for the first time in several years. I still knew none of the history that had unfolded in years gone by. I was touched by Gordon's respect for my father – but interestingly, and with no good reason at all – I remember wondering just momentarily if there was more to this than met the eye. Not the sort of thought that one should be considering at the funeral of a parent, but then things are often curiously altered at times like this. And, as it turned out, it was an intriguing and somewhat prescient reflection.

Mom had a great love for my father. They had been together for 55 years. She was very strong, but she was wandering around in a world empty and less good than the one that she had known. We all worried for her. She may not have been impressed with this turn of events, but she kept up her spirits and she kept on running her two miles a day.

Six months later, Mom called to say that she had been invited on a date, and how did I feel about this. It was with this Saunders fellow. It is a curious thing to have your mother call you and ask you for permission to go on a date. She made the same call to my two brothers. We all had the same response, which was essentially: "Date away!" Our collective attitude was that Mom and Dad had a great, long and happy relationship, but that life goes on. Three months later another telephone call came: "I have just received a proposal of marriage. How do you feel about this?" The response from all three of us was: "Marry away!"

Between that first call and the second, much of the so-called back-story began to come out. It turned out that mom had even kept a record that Gordon had given her in those early days,² along with his photograph. Mom's observation on all of this was that, at their stage in life, time was of the essence; they did not have the luxury of what might be considered proceeding at a slow and measured pace. They were married in July of 2002.

Since then, they have gone off on long cruises, driven across the continent and solved a lot of crossword puzzles (they particularly like the really complex weekend puzzles). As with all relationships, I am sure that there have been the usual numbers of adjustments and concessions – all part of the complications that life brings.

It is good having Gordon as a new part of our family. It is also good that Mom and Gordon get to live more involved and complete lives. And finally, all of this probably gives Mom several more things to think about as she completes her daily two-mile run through her neighbourhood.

² The record is a 78-rpm recording of Artie Shaw. My nephew Alexander, a product of modern times, looked at the record and was completely perplexed that this large disc of plastic only held three minutes of music on one side.

Sometimes a romantic story can have more than one conclusion. For myself, I suppose that I have only one regret in all of this. There would have been a fine and satisfying sense of poetic justice to have worked in something about a curfew for Mom on that first date. How often does an opportunity of that perfect circularity ever present itself? And especially after all those years!

The Rest of the Newsletter

Some Thoughts on Lakeside Dental

Many of you know the story. The space that now houses Lakeside Dental spent its first 30 years or so as my woodworking shop above the garage beside the house. It was involved in the creation of mahogany beds for my daughters, our cherry kitchen table, a built-in china cabinet for the dining room, a canoe and the major rebuild of an Akroyd (a sailboat dating from the 1930s). There were many minor projects as well. Slowly, the idea of turning it into a very contemporary and interesting one-chair dental office formed. With time this vision became a reality. My stockpile of hardwood along with an assortment of power tools went off to my friend Hans Bräul. My collection of clamps and hand tools went to Owen Culp, an apprentice woodworker. The table saw, planer, jointer and a few essentials ended up downstairs in the garage – one doesn't want to be completely helpless when it comes to wood and projects.

Contractor John McQuay and his brother Jim looked after the conversion of the woodworking shop into Lakeside Dental: my good friend Max and I attended to the trim carpentry. As with all start-ups, there were wrinkles that had to be resolved, but now it is all making more and more sense. The dentistry was always fairly clear, but becoming better acquainted with my computer, digital charting and digital X-rays took a bit of time. Although occasionally there are still issues that we need to think about, they are becoming much rarer.

It is a great pleasure running an office that focuses on just one person at a time. And working at home is also a pleasure. We have to schedule more time for procedures, but since this is hoped to be a 20-year semi-retirement project, not rushing is just great. I reported to my wife, Deborah, that there were some days where we started a bit early and ran a bit late, and it hardly felt like I had been working at all. This is a good job description. Perhaps I should have thought of this earlier.

I understand that being in a dental office isn't always the highlight of someone's week, but I am delighted at the number of people that have tracked us down in our new location. Speaking personally, having my molars attended to isn't my own high point either, but when

I'm in that chair, I want to have a fair level of confidence in the person doing the attending and am grateful that they are there. And so I thank you for your confidence in us.

The office has been growing at an almost perfect rate. Slower and there would be major holes in my schedule. Faster and we could be swamped. We started out with some marketing to let people know that we are here, and that we would be happy to see them. Recently our word of mouth referrals have been developing very nicely. Thank you all for recommending us to your friends and family.

Welland

My good friend and colleague Tony Mancuso, a highly regarded dentist in Welland, approached me a year and a half ago to see if I could give him a hand. He has a daughter in dental school at the University of Western Ontario (then in her first year). As it happened, a dental practice next door to his was for sale. He asked me if I would be in a position to spend a day or two a week helping look after the practice until his daughter graduated, and possibly stick around for a while until she gets her bearings. I said that I would be delighted. This has worked well, with my time in Welland helping to cover the start-up costs of Lakeside Dental. Thank you Tony.

Semi-retirement: What does this really mean?

Thanks for asking. Dentistry is, for me, an intellectually satisfying occupation. Interesting people show up and you get to work with them to solve or prevent issues that they might have. I have always enjoyed this and I like to think that I am reasonably competent at it. In my old practice I had five dental chairs and a fair number of staff. We did a lot of good work for a lot of people, but when I thought about how I would like to spend the last portion of my dental career, something much more relaxed came to mind. This is basically the model that now exists here on the shores of Lake Ontario: a well equipped one-chair operation providing a focused level of care for a small number of people. We are open Monday to Friday, 8am to 5pm. I am scheduled for about half of this time with hygiene utilizing the other half.

Emergencies

If you have a problem that won't wait, please feel free to call. My home number (listed in the telephone book) is 905-934-8598.

Over the last two weekends we looked after two emergencies, both on Sundays. When we were finished, a front tooth that had broken off was replaced, and an infected tooth was treated and no longer painful. For me this involved walking upstairs and for Barb, my long-time assistant, it involved a five-minute drive. This hardly felt like an imposition, and it was a pleasure to be able to return these people to normal with so little commotion, and with so little disruption to the flow of the day. Ah, the joys of the home dental office.

Parking

Please feel free to park in the driveway. Since we are located in a residential neighbourhood, we would like to be as unobtrusive to our neighbours as possible. Parking in our driveway, when possible, would help in that regard.

Weather

We had some good storms this winter. Those of you who braved the elements on those days had a good show. We have set up a website (lakesidedental.ca) and one of our postings is photographs of the weather that we see out of our window.

Final Thoughts

David Crombie was described as Toronto's tiny, perfect mayor. We would like to be thought of as Port's tiny, perfect dental office. While we are small, we strive for perfection, though we know that this will never be achieved. Still, it's a target. Having said that, we welcome observations and direction. If we could be doing something better for you, let us know. We will thank you.

And finally, we want to thank you all for your support and wish you well until our newsletter next year.

David Bergen and the (very limited) staff here at Lakeside Dental