Introduction

David Updike's "Tribute to Dad"

This tribute was originally delivered at a public gathering that took place in the New York Library on March 19, 2009 in honor of John Updike, who had died two months earlier. Among the twelve speakers were Sonny Mehta, chairman and editor-in-chief of the Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group; David Remnick, editor of The New Yorker*; Judith Jones, Updike's longtime editor at Alfred A. Knopf; Lorrie Moore, short story writer and novelist; and Roger Angell, writer and one of Updike's editors at* The New Yorker. *David Updike was the final speaker in the program.*

The tribute was later published in The John Updike Review. *I am indebted to both David Updike and James Schiff, the editor of* The JUR, *for permission to reprint this speech.*

TRIBUTE TO DAD

David Updike

Thank you for all of those wonderful tributes to my father, and thank you to the organizers for giving me a chance to add my own. I am sure he would agree that his career was blessed with wonderful editors, and you have been fortunate to have heard from five of them. That said, I should tell you, however, that this past fall, when I mentioned to him that something I

wrote was being rather lightly edited and I hoped they weren't taking it too easy on me, he said, "That's good—the best editors are the ones who don't want to change a thing."

I want to introduce you to my father's family—his wife, Martha, and her sons Jason, Teddy, and John. My father had four children, of which I am one. My wife, Wambui, is here, as well as my sister Elizabeth and her husband Tete; my brother, Michael; my sister Miranda and her husband, Donald; and of course, our mother, John's first wife, Mary, and her husband, Robert Weatherall. Five of my father's seven grandsons are also present—Sawyer and Trevor, Seneca and Kai, and my own son, Wesley. Missing are the two eldest, Anoff and Kwame.

Here in spirit, too, are my father's own parents, Wesley Russell Updike, a high school math teacher and coach, and his wife, Linda Grace Hoyer, a bookish farm girl who gave her only child his first inklings of a creative life beyond their small Pennsylvania town. Their son, *Jahnny*, as they pronounced it, was not famous in 1950—he was a skinny, brainy boy bursting with creative energy, an aspiring cartoonist who also suffered from asthma, psoriasis, and a stammer, and in the high school hierarchy felt himself a considerable step down from the jocks, the athletes and their glamorous girlfriends.

Despite being ranked high in his class, he was not accepted at Princeton—admissions office take note—and so went to Harvard instead, and flourished there, in class and on the Lampoon. But an unexpected obstacle remained to his graduation: all Harvard graduates must be able to swim, and he could not. Inhibited as a child by the state of his imperfect skin, and despite the fact that his own father was, for a time, a high school swimming coach, he had shied away from public swimming pools and never learned. And so he dutifully went to swimming classes in the Indoor Athletic Building, and eventually managed two lengths of the pool—an achievement he seemed as proud of later as graduating summa cum laude. And for the rest of his life he swam with what I would describe as a rather studied but confident dog paddle.

In an art history class in his sophomore year, he met a smart and beautiful woman two years his senior, wooed her with kindness and wit, and spent his senior year in an off-campus apartment as a married man. His writing career began, as you know, at *The New Yorker*, but although he was a prolific Talk of the Town reporter, he was not yet famous then, and it took a lot of confidence and courage to pack his wife and two very small children

into a car and drive north to set up shop in the small Massachusetts town of Ipswich in 1957. He borrowed money from his not so wealthy parents to buy a house and occasionally drove back to New York to write another Talk piece to bolster his income but had begun to publish light verse, short stories, one novel, and then another.

Hints of recognition, then fame, began to appear in our small-town life: interviewers from New York, articles and photographs in magazines, visiting Russians in fur coats and funny hats. But for someone who was getting famous, my father didn't seem to work overly hard: he was still asleep when we went to school and was often already home when we got back. When we appeared unannounced at his office—on the second floor of a building he shared with a dentist, accountants, and the Dolphin Restaurant—he always seemed happy and amused to see us and stopped typing to talk and dole out some money for movies. But as soon as we were out the door, we could hear the typing resume, clattering with us down the stairs like a train gathering steam.

As it grew, he wore his fame lightly, as his due, like one of his well-worn sweaters, hanging limply on his frame, thin at the elbows. He loved public institutions: libraries, schools, the post office—letters arriving and departing, the simple act of completion, dropping it in the slot. I did this for him this past January when he couldn't make it downtown himself—a small typed letter, a final correction for an English publisher who was reprinting the Maple stories. He had reread them in proof, he told me, "not without some pleasure." He was eager that this small letter, a final, important word in their correspondence, get in the mail, the truck, the plane—on its way.

He played in the same poker group on Wednesday nights for more than fifty years, along with the local cobbler, a doctor, the owner of the auto supply store. He learned to play golf on a couple of scruffy courses and looked most at home there, most himself. Later he joined a fancy old country club. But he always seemed slightly ill at ease there, like someone who had wandered into the wrong cocktail party and was afraid of being found out. He would worry about slow play—about slowing down the stalwart regulars who were coming up behind us—and would sometimes annoy me at the first hint of delay by rushing over, asking them if we were holding them up, and then letting them play through.

In late October we played at the same marshy course where he had learned the game, my brother and father and I and a friend, but he looked a little frail and had a tough time on a long par four, and I watched from

a distance as he topped a couple of fairway woods before he finally caught hold of one. "Come on, Dad," I muttered to myself, "hit the Goddamned ball!" But he had a way of feigning disinterest in a match until it really mattered, and by the last hole, the match tied, I noticed in him a gathering concentration, a newfound focus. Politely competitive and gracious in defeat, he far preferred to be gracious in victory. He hit a good drive and a "useful" second, twenty feet short of the green. Our opponents were up in the familiar, ball-grabbing apple trees and I, after a good drive, had muffed my second into a greenside bunker. I watched him as he bounced a low, workmanlike chip to twelve feet, and while the rest of us bungled our way to sixes, he calmly two-putted for a five. He walked off the course quickly and wanted to get home—no soft drink or potato chips today. He was already ill. When he got home, exhausted and discouraged, he told Martha that it had been no fun and put his clubs away for the season. But I don't think he would mind my telling you that he won the last hole and match he ever played.

Among the last books he was reading was *Dreams from My Father*, by Barack Obama. He read it in bed in a sunny room overlooking the ocean, and I believe for him it was especially poignant, trying to catch up on the history he was about to miss, that was about to leave port without him. He was well aware too, that Mr. Obama shares with his three eldest grandsons a parentage both of America and of Africa, of Kenya and Ghana, and so connected him in a personal, familial way to this transcendent moment in American history.

Through it all, his unkind illness, he remained, in his wife's words, dignified and noble—continued to be what his own father called a *gen'leman*. And he continued to shave—each day, my sisters noted, even when it was perilous to do so. And as he so often did, he left for us a glimmer, a gift of himself, of his own cherished life on this earth, heart and mind conjoined. This is from his last published story, "The Full Glass," in the *New Yorker*, May 26, 2008:

> As a child I would look at [my grandfather] and wonder how he could stay sane, being so close to his death. But actually, it turns out, Nature drips a little anesthetic into your veins each day that makes you think a day is as good as a year, and a year as long as a lifetime. The routines of living—the tooth-brushing and pill-taking, the flossing and the water glass, the matching of socks and the sorting of the laundry into the proper bureau drawers—wear you down.

I wake each morning with hurting eyeballs and with dread gnawing at my stomach—that blank drop-off at the end of the chute, that scientifically verified emptiness of the atom and the spaces between the stars. Nevertheless, I shave. Athletes and movie actors leave a little bristle now, to intimidate rivals or attract cavewomen, but a man of my generation would sooner go into the street in his underpants than unshaven. The very hot washcloth, held against the lids for dry eye. The lather, the brush, the razor. The right cheek, then the left, feeling for missed spots along the jaw line, and next the upper lip, the sides and that middle dent called the philtrum, and finally the fussy section, where most cuts occur, between the lower lip and the knob of the chin. My hand is still steady, and the triple blades they make these days last forever. . . .

The shaving mirror hangs in front of a window overlooking the sea. The sea is always full, flat as a floor. Or almost: there is a delicate planetary bulge in it, supporting a few shadowy freighters and cruise ships making their motionless way out of Boston Harbor. At night, the horizon springs a rim of lights—more, it seems, every year. Winking airplanes from the corners of the earth descend on a slant, a curved groove in the air, toward the unseen airport in East Boston. My life-prolonging pills cupped in my left hand, I lift the glass, its water sweetened by its brief wait on the marble sink-top. If I can read this strange old guy's mind aright, he's drinking a toast to the visible world, his impending disappearance from it be damned.