

# Introduction

It had been raining steadily for four days, and the question of whether the fete would go ahead on Saturday was constantly up for discussion at the family dinner table. I was about twelve, and very excited about the event taking place in the hospital grounds where we lived, as Dad was the CEO. I was the strongest proponent of going ahead whatever the weather.

Saturday dawned, and the rain continued. ‘They’ll have to call it off,’ said Mum. ‘The ground is far too boggy.’

‘No they won’t,’ I said, eternally optimistic.

‘I know what we’ll do,’ said Dad, who had always been an ideas man. ‘We’ll move the fete from outside on the lawn to inside in the hospital roof space.’

The volunteer set-up crew readily agreed, so at 6 am the full-scale operation of moving the contents of twenty stalls, soft drink machines, fairy floss makers, public address systems and all of the paraphernalia required for a successful fundraiser began.

My mum and sister were in charge of the cake stall, carrying what they already had stored at home to the hospital and up in the lift. My dad and brother were wheeling trolleys of soft drink boxes

to and fro, and carrying the bags of ice necessary to keep them cool. The family tradition of all hands on deck was deeply ingrained in me, and I was desperate to help. But that would be a challenge for a blind 12-year-old, where the environment was wet, muddy and constantly shifting. My face fell further and further as one after another of the set-up crew told me there wasn't anything I could do.

As it had done often in the past, and would do again and again during my life, my dad's warm hand on my shoulder saved the day. 'There's more than enough jobs for everyone today,' he said. 'The only puzzle is working out which one you can do. And I've solved the puzzle. Come and drive the lift.'

The lift was the pinch point for the whole operation. Everything and everyone going to the fete had to go up in the lift. And due to the high demand from the ground floor and the roof, it was constantly tripping out and causing delays.

'I'm going to override the automatic system and put this on manual, and I want you to drive it,' Dad said to me. 'If this lift doesn't keep going we won't have a fete.'

I couldn't have been prouder. I stood two centimetres taller, and spent the next 12 hours driving that lift – eating and drinking while going up and down, and strategically selecting quiet times for rushed toilet breaks. No-one else was touching those controls. There was no way I was letting down my dad, or risking the fete not going ahead.

This story encapsulates my book and my life. It shows me learning from my parents that I was not the kid who was blind, but an integral part of a functioning family unit; understanding that we, with our Christian values and ethics, and as well-off members of Australian society, had a social obligation to support those not so fortunate; and knowing that achieving success, as Grandma used to say, was 10 per cent inspiration and 90 per cent perspiration.

I learned from my family that most things could be achieved – the challenge was finding a way.

In this book I share my memories of sixty years on the planet – happy memories of love and support, tough memories of challenges and failures and positive memories of achievement. I share the unique experience of a life without one sense, but with heightened awareness of the information gained through others. I also share the advocacy for change for people with disabilities which has been a constant companion in my life.

I have woven stories throughout the book, because I have learned that not only are stories the way we develop and pass down our culture, but they are also what remain in people's memories – whether they are told by voices in the ear, words on a page, images on a screen or a combination of all of those. If you get a laugh from one of my stories, or find useful a piece of wisdom I have gained, then the book will have been a success. One of these pieces of wisdom, which came from seeing my daughter become the questioning and feisty teenager that I once was, is that no lesson told by an adult has anything like the effect of one you learn yourself.

Of course there are regrets in my life. But overall I'm pretty satisfied with the small part I have been able to play in the lives of my family and friends, and in Australian society. Satisfied enough to share it with you anyway.

So, you've paid your money, enjoy the story. And of course, let me have any feedback on Twitter or Facebook.

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# 1

## Early years

There's a photograph of me receiving a cuddle from Sir Robert Helpmann as he spun the chocolate wheel. I don't remember it, but the camera doesn't lie. And I would know, wouldn't I, as a person who has been blind since birth. I didn't look particularly pleased about being held by a famous dancer, with the whirring noise of a chocolate wheel close to my ear. Perhaps my face was a sign of things to come in that I would indicate clearly when I didn't like something.

We're not sure why my eyes did not properly form during gestation. Perhaps it was measles, or some other virus which Mum had. That was the original theory, though it was later supplanted by one of contact with the fumes of paint or some other similar chemical. It's an issue which has puzzled some minds for quite a time, but mine is not one of them. 'You play the hand you are dealt the best way you can' has always been my philosophy. You don't fret about why you were dealt that hand.

The doctors' bedside manner was sadly lacking when they told Mum and Dad of my blindness after I was born in 1955. 'Your son's eyes have not properly formed,' they said. 'He is totally blind, and that won't change.' Mum remembers it as a very harsh message, but

perhaps in hindsight it was the right approach. Take the hit, and start planning for and dealing with the consequences was certainly the course Mum and Dad adopted.

Perhaps it was their country town upbringing – Mum in Parkes and Dad in Bathurst. Perhaps the fact that I was their second baby helped, with my sister Robyn having been born two years earlier. Or perhaps they didn't see many other alternatives. Whatever the case, that practical approach – treating me as one sibling and an equally important member of the family, rather than as the 'special' kid with the disability – paid me back in spades in my later life.

They brought me home to Petersham in Sydney's west and did all the normal stuff you do with a new baby. Robyn was apparently pleased with my arrival. She loved me and bossed me around in equal measure, and was proud of my achievements. These characteristics of our relationship have continued throughout our lives.

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Mum and Dad were children of the Great Depression. Mum's father – who died in 1958 – was a blacksmith in Parkes. They came to Sydney during the Second World War, where Mum then trained as a nurse. She met Dad at the masonic hospital where she worked and Dad's mother was a patient. Their relationship blossomed.

Mum's mother, Madeline, whom we knew as Grandma, lived in Strathfield when I was born. We moved to Ashfield when I was six, and Grandma moved into our old house in Petersham. Visits to Grandma's house are some of my fondest early memories.

Dad's father Hilton, known as Mick, fought in the First World War, incurring an injury to his knee and being gassed in France. He returned home and worked on the New South Wales railway, and Dad initially followed him into that profession. Mick's first wife, Olive, died in 1949 and he soon married Claire. We called them

Pappa and Nanna, and I first remember them living in Marrickville. They had a frangipani tree in their yard, and I loved the strong smell and the soft touch of the petals as they fell. I have loved that smell ever since.

Dad came to Sydney as his career with the railways progressed. He told wonderful and exciting stories of pushing a hand-trolley along the tracks to check them, and how you had to quickly get it off the tracks if a train was coming. Perhaps I gained my love of trains from these stories. Or perhaps it was the many train trips I took as a child with Mum, who didn't drive. These train trips have continued into my adult life, and my wife, Maureen, has a smile in her voice to this day as she tells people that I will only live in houses within walking distance of a railway station.

Dad followed the Protestant tradition for males of his generation, and joined the masonic lodge. As well as a community activity, the NSW masonic lodge soon became his employer, and he worked in Castlereagh Street in Sydney for a number of years.

When Mum and Dad acquired our Petersham house from a Mr Shoe, it came with a mantel clock that pealed Westminster chimes. This clock remained in the house while Grandma was living there, and only joined us in Ashfield after her death. I love those chimes. They evoke memories of visits to Grandma, and her tucking me into bed in what was then her spare room. And, later, of the warmth and sounds of the coal fire in the dining room in our Ashfield home. I missed that clock terribly when I moved out of home, and pre-emptively 'acquired' it when my parents moved to Gerringong on the NSW south coast. I have had it with me ever since.

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My brother, Brian, was born four years after me, and Mum could not come home from hospital for several weeks because either Robyn

or I had some childhood illness which could not be allowed to infect the new baby. We were looked after by a housekeeper while Dad continued working. She probably did an excellent job of looking after us, but my childhood rang with stories from Robyn and I of how the housekeeper checked our schoolbags every day to make sure we had eaten our lunch, and punished us if we didn't. She cooked dinners we did not like, and we could not leave the table until we ate them. And, worst of all, she wouldn't let us run down the street towards the station to meet Dad, like Mum did.

Being allowed to meet Dad on his way home was a special treat. I remember crashing into his suited legs, and the smell of the newspaper print from *The Sun*, which was always under his arm. If I told him I had been good he would let me carry the paper home, but I always had to wash the newsprint off my hands afterwards.

As well as the clock in Grandma's house, Mr Shoe had left us the contents of his back shed. Once I knew of its existence, I often spent time there, with or without permission. It was full of tools and equipment, a fascinating hidden treasure for the exploring hands of a young boy. There were wonderful shapes which I later learned were planes, chisels, awls, lasts for repairing and making shoes, and tins and boxes of various shapes and sizes containing screws, nails and hinges. There were also incredible smells – paint, vinyl, leather, grease (which was the cause of one ban from the shed after my white shorts and hands became smeared by it).

The best part was the grinder. This was bolted to the workbench, and consisted of a wheel which could be turned by a handle. If turned quickly, it made a very satisfying noise to a young boy, similar to that of a chugging engine. So the shed became my boat, in which I had many thrilling adventures. I towed big ships out of Sydney Harbour, cruised in search of pirates, and fought the Second World War alongside some of my heroes from the ABC radio serial *The Crate*, the story of brave Aussies who fought the war, and went

behind enemy lines, in an old fishing boat. I was the captain of my boat, of course, busily turning my grinder as the boat chugged along.

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Grandma recognised my early love of boats and trains, and some of the best days we spent together were on what we called our transport trips. We would catch two buses from Petersham all the way down to the Darling Street wharf. We would enjoy our picnic lunch in the park on the harbour, where I revelled in the tooting of tugs and ferries, and the sound of the wash on the sea wall. Grandma painted wonderful word pictures of the boats as they passed, describing their vivid colours, and we had lots of fun giving them names. As Grandma told me about each boat, I would develop a story of where it had been or where it was going, and what adventures it was having.

Then came the best part of the day, when we caught the ferry to Circular Quay. This involved a little boy bouncing up and down on the wharf as we waited for the ferry to pull in, listening to the exciting noises of the motor running, the propeller churning water, commands being yelled, gangplanks sliding out and hitting the wharf, and the inevitable tooting. I learned what the number of toots meant, and that memory has been a useful one as my time on boats has morphed from my imagination to reality.

Holding tightly to Grandma's hand, I then had the exciting walk along the gangplank, above what I imagined to be that dangerous strip of shark-infested water, and onto the ferry. We always sat outside, of course, rain, hail or shine. I remember the rocking motion, the feel of the sometimes wet wooden seats and the always wet mooring rope, and the smell of engine grease, painted wood and salt water. And after the return trip on the ferry, we took the train from Circular Quay.

Having a three-transport day – bus, train and ferry – was the norm. But if I was really lucky, and it was wet or Grandma was a little tired or unwell, we would also catch a taxi, which counted as a fourth type of transport. Those were the days of which I dreamed, when we could sit in the back seat of the taxi – or if I was very lucky, I could sit in the front – and ply the unknown man at the wheel with questions, while I listened to the constant click and rumble of the meter, or the chatter on his radio. I would often tell him that he should call in on this or that job, or tentatively reach out and touch the controls and the microphone.

I would come home from these days absolutely worn out by my own curiosity and excitement. Grandma would prepare me my favourite dinner, pop me in her warm bath, then hustle me off to bed, where I went to sleep listening to serials on the radio, and the wonderful ticking and chiming of the clock.

## 2

# Mount Joy

I'm sure Dad was very excited when he won the job as chief executive at the masonic hospital in Ashfield. With not much more than his Bathurst school education, he had worked his way up as a clerk, on the railway and in the masonic lodge. The job was a major promotion, giving him responsibility for all non-medical issues at the hospital, as well as for the infrastructure and grounds, and we would live in a beautiful old two-storey house on the premises called Mount Joy.

Most of our friends and acquaintances were, I am sure, pleased for Dad and us. But the concerns I remember, as a six-year-old, were how I was going to cope with the stairs which wound their way to the second floor. This concern has been a continuing theme in my life, but I have never shared it. One of my regular and somewhat terse responses is, 'It's my eyes that don't work, not my legs.'

For a young family growing up, Mount Joy was a dream come true. From a small cottage on a corner block, with an adequate backyard and a shed, and a busy road along one side, we moved to a large house with verandas and balconies on two sides, numerous out-buildings, an area of trees at the front that we called 'the bush', a long gravel driveway with a circle at the end, and two large areas

of lawn for games. The grounds, gardens and buildings required constant upkeep and maintenance, but it provided Robyn, Brian and I with a very large and mixed environment where we could play and explore in relative safety.

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It took me a while to understand that I was different from other kids. But as I grew up, I did start to wonder why I bumped into things more often, why I could not run around and follow people as other children did, and how it was that they appeared to know much more about the broader environment than I did. I worked a lot of it out from sounds, and information I had gained from conversations or previous experiences, but I did start to realise that other people could do something which I could not.

I don't remember thinking that this was unfair – just that it was a little strange. I do remember deciding that I would have to develop strategies to deal with this annoying lack of information, as I could see no reason to let it limit me. So I began to do that.

I worked hard at memory, and keeping maps of my environment in my head. To this day, even as my memory is more stretched, I still have a fairly good grasp of areas I am familiar with. I also learned to ask more questions about what was happening, or what was around me, and my family supported me by painting great word-pictures from which I could garner much information.

My wife, Maureen, would make one of the best impromptu audio-describers I have ever met. She has also developed the skill of weaving her word-pictures into general conversation, so that it does not feel like something special she is doing for me.

I also taught myself to retain this information. This was both so that I could make use of it later, but also so that I could refer to it in conversation in similar ways to others around me. I did not avoid

words like 'look', 'sight' and 'see', because that would have made my conversation stilted and different.

My possessions were usually kept in the same place, so that I could put my hand on them easily when I needed them. This skill development has benefited me to this day, and it is unusual for me to lose something. My family support me very much in this regard. Maureen either has, or has developed, an amazing skill for putting things in the same place, and remembering that place even when I forget. And my daughter, Rachel, while not being the tidiest person herself, constantly chides her friends not to leave chairs or other items out in the paths of travel. She has developed the technique of making a noise between a squeal and a squeak when I am about to run into her or something else, and saved me (and her) much pain and embarrassment.

At a young age, I also learned to bluff when I did not know, to pretend I understood more than I did, so that I could acquire further information and fill in the gaps at a later time. This is a skill I have honed over the years. As a young boy I had a very good ear for sounds and voices. I could identify car makes by the sound of their engines, and amazed adults used to test me on it. But I often pretended I knew someone or something when I didn't, and usually worked out who or what it was before people realised my bluff.

I modified children's games and activities to 'level the playing field', and suggested or encouraged activities at which I knew I could perform well. I played rugby league on the big grass areas between the house and the hospital with my brother and his mates. They were all around four years younger than me, so my superior weight and strength compensated somewhat for my lack of sight. I didn't get the ball as much as they did, but once I got it I rarely let it go.

When we rode our bikes on the gravel drive I could follow the sound of the other bikes, and so crashed less frequently than I should have. My parents were not keen for me to have a two-wheeler bike

because they felt I would find balancing at the slower speeds at which I needed to ride much harder than on my tricycle. But when my sister and brother started to ride two-wheel bikes and scooters I was determined to do the same, and just took theirs until my parents gave me my own.

Inevitably, as someone who could not see, I had some major misconceptions about what things looked like. I thought for a long time that birds were just like small cats or dogs with wings, because I had been able to touch a cat or a dog but not a bird. I could not understand why the Sydney Harbour Bridge was referred to as the 'coat-hanger' until much later in life when I felt a scale model. The shape of Sydney Harbour really confused me until I felt a map. And only recently, while attending an audio-described performance at the Sydney Vivid Festival, when light was projected onto the sails of the Sydney Opera House, did I really come to understand the shape of the sails. Even today, I can be caught out with an assumption about a thing or a place which is just fundamentally wrong because I have not seen it. It's a bit of a shock, but I normally get past it.

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My parents were keen to ensure – right from the start – that I contributed equally to our lives. This was partly because they knew that the whole family would gain a greater benefit if everyone 'pulled their weight'. But they were also determined to ensure that I would not be treated differently because of my disability. The same expectations were placed on me as on my brother and sister, and I received the same rewards of independence and opportunities. Mum or Dad, and increasingly I, just had to work out how I could best meet those expectations and take those opportunities.

I realise now just how much these family activities benefited my later life and career. They taught me many things: to work as a team,

and plan to maximise the contribution that all team members could make; to enjoy the process of a shared challenge and a shared reward; to not limit someone by setting the expectations bar low; and when expectations are not met, to search out a different process by which they might be achieved. Life was about finding a way.

Life was also about giving thought to how a task might be done so that it included others. If Mum was cleaning or shopping we would often do it with her. If Dad had to rake the gravel drive or sweep leaves or rubbish into piles for composting or burning, we would do it as a family. This meant that sometimes one person was not doing things at peak efficiency – although you tried to achieve that whenever you could – but the overall result was more efficient, and everyone gained from the shared experience. Fantastic life lessons!

Many of these values arose in part from the religious commitment that was a central part of our family. Church at Holy Trinity in Dulwich Hill was a regular weekly event, and Mum and Dad both played significant roles in the congregation. As part of those values, we were always taught that we had a somewhat privileged place in society, and an obligation to recognise and sometimes challenge disadvantage, and to demonstrate fairness and ethical behaviour. I remember Dad's outrage when he was offered a bribe while an alderman – as they were called at that time – on Ashfield Council, and his determination both to refuse the offer and to be very public about his refusal.

As a teenager I drifted away from the church and church activities, but never that far away from God. The moral compass I gained at that time has guided me through much of my life. In the last few years, Maureen and I have again come to appreciate the value of participation in a church community, and that closeness has reinforced the compass direction.

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As well as fond memories of Mum's mother, Grandma, I have clear memories of Dad's father, who we called Pappa. After his second wife, Claire, died, and as he became older, he came to live with us at Mount Joy. The end of the veranda which ran around two sides of the house had been closed in and turned into a sunroom. This was his diurnal space. He would sit there reading the paper and smoking his pipe. I think I gained my love of the smell of pipe tobacco from him, and I took up pipe smoking when I went to university. This, mixed with the smell of the newspaper ink as he turned the pages of his *Herald*, was a heady mix for me.

Sometimes Pappa would read out things from the paper which he thought may be of interest to me. They were usually of more interest to him, but I loved having people read me information which I could not get in other ways. I was a voracious reader of braille from a quite young age, but the material available in braille was limited and dated.

On other days Pappa was just not interested in reading to me. The only sounds we would hear from him were his grunts of annoyance as he read something about which he was unhappy, and his asthma-like cough. As well, of course, as the sounds of lighting, smoking and cleaning his pipe. He had been gassed in France in the First World War, and this cough may have been a result of that. He had also been wounded in the knee. The two options he was given at the time were to have his leg set so that he could never bend it, or to wear a caliper for the rest of his life. He chose the second, and the creak of the leather as he walked, and the smell of the leather straps, were – for me – his other constant companions.

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As with any big old high-ceilinged house, Mount Joy was cold in winter. As a family we dealt with this by gathering around one of

the few heat sources, and then at night running upstairs to bed and quickly getting under the covers on top of our electric blankets. The fact that I could read under the covers, and not have to have a hand get cold while holding the book, was always a benefit for me. It was a further benefit, both for me and my brother, Brian, who shared a room with me for a while, that I could read in the dark. However, it was a continual frustration for Mum, who always wanted me to be asleep before I wanted to. Eventually she gave up on the going-to-sleep requirement, and many was the night where I stayed awake late finishing the volume of braille that I was on.

Most books came in many volumes of braille. The Bible, which I had in my room, was in 26 or 30 volumes. Sharing my passion for reading, Mum took me into the Royal Blind Society in William Street, where I met the librarian Louise Long, who also shared the reading passion. She became a firm friend for many years. I did not often see her, but I would ring her up to discuss my reading selections. On very special occasions, I would go into William Street and be allowed to browse the shelves, and pick books for myself. Louise was not keen on my choice of Zola's *The Drunkard*, but at my entreaties she put it on my list. However, to an eight- or nine-year-old boy, the title was far more fascinating than the content, and it was one of the few titles I sent back unread.

Books regularly arrived from the Royal Blind Society in wicker baskets. Hearing the clunk of the new basket on the wooden veranda was always a moment of intense excitement for me. What had Mrs Long sent me this time? I would devour the books, particularly during school holidays, often surprising her when I phoned in a few days' time to ask for a new basket.

Braille has played an incredible part throughout my life, providing me with a script with which to read and write. Most people who are blind, particularly those who lose their sight later in life, do not learn braille. They rely on listening to speech, synthetic and real, and they

input through a QWERTY keyboard, or through dictation. Sadly, some teachers discourage even young children from learning braille, asserting that with the technology available using voice is adequate. They are patently wrong.

Just like any script, braille takes time to learn. But once learned, even to be able to read notes or labels slowly pays you back in spades. And because it is an active rather than a passive form of reading, memory retention from reading in braille is higher than that from reading using voice.

I do not dismiss the value of recorded audio material. There is far more of it available, and it can often be a good way to quickly read through a large document. But for study or concentrated work, reading in braille cannot be beaten.

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The primeval human gene for fire and warmth has always been strong in me. Perhaps I gained it from my father's love of following fire engines and being a spectator at fires. The urban myth in our family was that he almost missed my arrival because he had raced out after a fire engine when Mum was about due to go to the hospital.

One of the heat sources in Mount Joy was a coal-burning cozy. The start of winter was always marked by Dad's decision to light the cozy – something I encouraged him to do earlier and earlier in the year. It had to be heated with paper and then wood before coal – or coke – could be put into it. Once this fire was lit we would keep it burning all winter.

I was often sent to fill the coal scuttle from the heap at the back of the house, and as I grew older I was allowed to pour the coal into the top of the cozy. As the coke burned it grew lower inside the cozy, and I was forever sticking the poker in the round door at the top to see how far it had dropped, and whether I could pour in more coal.

Mum was a very tolerant woman, but not always forgiving of the coke and ash I liberally distributed through the dining room where the fire sat.

When we went on holidays to a friend's cottage in Lawson, in the Blue Mountains, I always wanted to light the chip-heater which heated the water for our baths. I was always keen to build up the campfires we had when Brian and I were in the Boys Brigade. And on one occasion as an adult I was saved from burning our house down in Perth by the arrival of a friend. I had been there alone and let the open fire get too big – so much so that it had crept out of the fireplace and started to lick around the wooden supports of the mantelpiece.

Many people were concerned about me dealing with fire, and how dangerous it could be to both myself and the general environment. I did burn my fingers occasionally, and have had the odd minor catastrophe. But usually, as with many other things in my life, I worked out ways to minimise the risks so that I could fully participate. I very rarely accept limits on what I want to do.

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At Mount Joy I would lie on the floor next to the cozy, after school and at night, listening to the radio. Radio introduced me to news and current affairs, and I am still a current affairs junkie. These days, though, current affairs come to me much more via Twitter and RSS feeds.

But I also gained a love for serials, and had regular ones to which I listened in the afternoons or evenings. I was a devoted member of *The Argonauts Club*, and 'Dracon 14' was my number. I just loved stories, and the radio gave me the words while my imagination created the pictures.

My love of cricket was reinforced by hearing Alan McGilvray and others commentating, both from grounds around Australia and

in places as far away as South Africa and England. The first cricket series to which I listened was from South Africa in about 1962 or 1963, and I vividly remember McGilvray's outrage at South African Jock Irvine neutralising the effect of Johnny Gleeson's finger-spin by padding away the ball with his pad, on which he had put an excess of whitener, to make it harder for Gleeson to grip the ball.

As well as sharing my passion for reading, Mum shared my passion for cricket. We would take a picnic lunch and make a day of it in the Ladies Stand at the SCG for Sheffield Shield matches. We always sat in the front row just behind the picket fence, and the sounds of bat on ball, running feet and calls from all parts of the field by the players were explained for me by the ABC commentary. Cricket on the radio, as described by Greg Champion, has been a constant part of my life ever since. I now listen to it on the internet rather than the unreliable crystal set which used to bring the tones of the BBC's John Arlott, Brian Johnston and Trevor 'Barnacle' Bailey to my ear late into the nights of an Ashes series.

Cricket remained my passion, but while growing up I also enjoyed tennis and football. The thwack thwack of ball on racquet as Laver, Newcombe, Roach and Rosewall 'owned' the Australian Open, with commentary from many ABC doyens, was a familiar January sound. Winter was marked by rugby league calls from Frank Hyde, Rex 'Moose' Mossop and Ray 'Rabbits' Warren on the commercial stations, as well as Alan Marks and others on the ABC.

The Western Suburbs Magpies were our team. Brian and I had cups with the then 12 league teams on them, and we would line them up according to the league table at the end of each weekend round. As we grew older, Brian and I would go to the football to support Wests, and I still remember the sounds as the ball was kicked, bodies collided and players yelled. I particularly recall being one of those who banged on the tin fence at Lidcombe Oval when Wests scored a try.

One of my favourite early childhood memories was the New Year's Eve party which we regularly attended at Uncle Fred and Auntie Audrey Brown's house in Ashfield. Uncle Fred had acquired a huge fire station bell from a Blue Mountains fire brigade when they had modernised and installed an electric one. He used to ring it every New Year's Eve, and as I grew tall enough to reach it he used to let me ring it with him.

After his untimely death – the event that I observed to most upset my dad – when their house was sold, I acquired this bell and it was hung at Mount Joy, where I continued Uncle Fred's tradition. I also regularly rang it each time Wests scored a try in a semi-final or final game.

I stored that bell in Mum and Dad's house in Gerringong when Dad finally retired from the masonic hospital, and then in my own houses in Sydney, never quite getting around to hanging it up again so it could be used. And a few years ago, when we moved into an apartment, the fire brigade were pleased to receive it back for placement in their museum. Given Dad's close friendship with Uncle Fred and Dad's love of following fire engines, it was fitting to close that circle.

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Dad used the car when we travelled on weekends or for holidays, or if he used to go to meetings during the day or night. I travelled with him whenever I could, often accompanying him to Parents and Citizens meetings at North Rocks school and reading a book or listening to the radio in the car while I waited for him. It was wonderful to spend this time with my Dad, and have him all to myself.

The first car I vaguely remember we had was an A-model Ford. Dad was very proud of this car, and many of his friends did not yet have one. I have much better memories of the next car, a Ford Prefect.

As I grew older I was allowed to crank the engine for Dad when he wanted to start the car. Many people thought that cranking an engine was a very dangerous thing for a young blind boy to do, as if you were not quick to pull out the handle when the engine fired, it could start spinning very fast. But Dad had showed me this, and quickly realised that I used the sounds, and quick reflexes, to minimise the risk. For him this was just a job that a family member with the right skills did, and it meant he could be at the wheel and in control of the car.

As I grew, I became intrigued by the clutch and the gears. Dad would let me put my hand on top of his on the gearstick to understand how it worked, and after a while he would let me change the gears on my own. At first he told me when to change them, but soon I was doing it automatically by listening to the sounds of the engine and the clutch. I was disappointed when – after the Prefect and a Ford Falcon station wagon – our next car, a Ford Fairmont, was an automatic and the gear changing was no longer required.

On long holiday and weekend trips the car was always a family place. We sang songs, Mum or Dad described what we were passing or we played endless games of Spotto or I Spy. I would often sit behind Dad with my window open, and he invented a counting game for me when I could not compete in certain games. I had to count the number of vehicles which passed us going in the opposite direction, separating out cars, trucks and motorbikes. He would regularly ask for reports on these numbers, and we would bet on whether I would pass a particular total before we reached the next town. It was great fun.

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As well as Mum's relatives in Newcastle, we frequently visited Dad's relatives in Bathurst. The ups and downs of the three hills on the road which marked the approaches to their house always caused me

great excitement. The McGregors owned pieces of land all around Bathurst, Blayney and Kelso, and we would often stay for a few days or a week and help with farm activities.

Some of my fondest memories involved moving mobs of sheep from one paddock to the next along the road. This was a team activity, with four or five of us walking along with the mob and keeping them moving and on the side of the road. Uncle Keith usually drove the hospital ute behind the mob, picking up any injured or sick sheep that was walking too slowly. I worked with Uncle Keith, helping lift the sheep aboard and putting it back down on the road if the ute got too full or the sheep was recovered after its rest. Working with Uncle Keith in this way meant that I played a role and was part of the team doing the work.

On other occasions, often during dryer seasons, Uncle George would drive to the Edgell's factory and pick up a truckload of corn cobs to feed to the cattle. I liked to go with him, and feel the different pull of the two-tonne truck when it was loaded or empty. We would bring back the full load of cobs, and then drive around the paddock pitchforking them out to the cattle. Uncle George thought it was a bit dangerous for me to stand in the back of a moving truck full of corn cobs while using a pitchfork, and he was never satisfied that my distribution was even. So he got me to drive the truck instead.

After a few jerky starts I got the hang of the clutch and the gears. I would drive through the paddock with the window open, listening to Uncle George's instructions about turning left or right, or going straight. I could judge how close I was to the fence or a creek or dam by the way his voice would rise in pitch. The cattle were more interested in what was coming out of the back of the truck than being at the front, so just got out of the way. The possible collisions so often talked about by others never occurred.

Uncle Allan, the oldest McGregor brother, used to take me with him to auctions – for cattle, sheep and many other things. He was

always determined to get absolutely the best price, and his bidding technique helped me later in life.

Other memorable family holidays included visits to Chittaway Point, in a cottage that backed onto Ourimbah Creek and came with its own wharf and boat. I used to sit on the wharf for hours each day and listen to the river, the birds and the boat traffic going up and down. I learned to distinguish the sounds of canoe paddles and oars in rowlocks, and determine the size and type of boats by their motors. And I finally persuaded Grandma to let me climb down into the boat by myself. I loved to feel the different motions as the river flowed, and the wash as other boats went past, and it was only my great self-restraint, and the fact that Grandma had made sure that the oars were not aboard, which stopped me from letting off the line and rowing away to see what I could see. My imagination worked overtime, as only a young boy's can, and all the river sounds became part of secret sea journeys in my mind.

# 3

## North Rocks

Essays were a weekly occurrence in Mr Grunsell's history class. He would give us the essay topic on a Friday afternoon, and expect the work on the next Monday afternoon.

Mr Grunsell never learned to sight-read braille, as some of our teachers did, so he asked us to read our essays aloud in turn so that he could mark them. Our desks were set out in a U-shape, and mine was at the top of the U furthest from the door. Mr Grunsell always started the essay reading at the other end of the U, so I got to hear five or six essays before it was my turn.

I enjoyed history, and studied it diligently, but weekends were often filled with family and other activities, and one weekend I ran out of time to write my essay. I waited my turn to read with some dread, knowing that Mr Grunsell would impose some form of punishment. Then, as the essays droned on, a happy thought struck me. I opened one of my geography folders, found last week's essay in braille, and placed it in front of me. I then listened carefully to the other essays being read.

When it came to my turn, I composed the essay in my head, and spoke it out loud while moving my fingers across the braille page in a

reading motion. It was a little more hesitant than my usual text, but Mr Grunsell didn't notice, and I avoided the dreaded punishment.

I made this practice a regular event, saving me an hour or two of homework every weekend. It worked out well until, at the beginning of a new term, and with no prior warning, Mr Grunsell commenced the essay reading at the opposite end of the U. My trickery was exposed, and my dread of Mr Grunsell's punishment was confirmed.

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The Victor Maxwell kindergarten in Woollahra, run by the Royal Blind Society, was my first place of formal learning. It was a kindergarten for children who were blind or vision-impaired, and I went there several days a week. I remember its highly polished, and therefore very squeaky, wooden floors, the glossy painted wooden toys and the severity of Matron Scott. Various medical and other experts were constantly looking at my eyes, and talking about me in words and tones which I neither understood nor liked very much. Mum or Grandma, with whom I had spent most of my life thus far, were usually not there, and this reinforced my sense of unhappiness. The environment was strange to me, and seemed to consist of large open and noisy rooms and corridors. I didn't know any of the other kids, and don't remember that changing much while I was there. This kindergarten was a long way away from home.

My first school was one for blind children in Wahroonga, again a long journey from Mount Joy. We were collected each morning and brought home each night by the teachers in a series of school buses. These were usually Volkswagen Kombi vans, and as one of the smallest children I was often allowed or encouraged to sit in the boot on top of the motor, which meant that the floor was constantly warm. I was scared by the stories of older children who said that fanbelts regularly broke on the engines, and that the loose rubber

belt would come up through the floor and whip me to shreds. It never actually happened, but the thought of it was my constant companion.

I didn't much like going to this school. I would wait with Mum at the front gate quietly until the bus arrived, and then run off to the large space of lawn which separated our house from the hospital. I remember Mum chasing me around this space and, after a few minutes when she caught me, bundling me embarrassedly onto the bus.

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About six months after I started school in 1961, a new public school for blind children was opened at North Rocks. It was purpose-built by the Royal Institute for Deaf and Blind Children, as was the school for deaf children next door. My dad had been instrumental in encouraging the building process, and was president of the P&C for much of the time I went there. The institute also built facilities in which country kids could board, and a dining-room used both by boarders and day children at lunch-time. We referred to the school colloquially as North Rocks.

The school played a significant part in my life for the ten or so years that I was there. It was staffed – in the main – by excellent teachers who were passionate about ensuring that children who were blind or vision impaired received a great education. Keith Watkins, the school principal for much of my time there, had studied education for blind children throughout Australia and overseas. And Don Hones, who also taught at the school for a long time, probably had the strongest influence outside my family on my development from a little boy into a young man. His work ethic, honesty, fairness and love of fun were values I learned and which have stayed with me throughout my life.

But the school was a closed environment, containing around 60 children from infants to Year 10, all of whom had a significant level of vision impairment. Views are strongly divided in the blindness community on whether education should be integrated or segregated – although integration is now largely the norm. The benefits of segregation are the passion and commitment of the teachers, the focus on braille and other similar skills which blind children need to learn, and the less pressured and smaller environment. The benefits of integration are that you go to school with the kids where you live, you build lifelong friendships with your local community, and you learn what living in the larger community is like. With the benefit of all the hindsight I now have – which of course gives you 20-20 vision – I support integration from an early age. But many people who are blind or vision-impaired would disagree with me.

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We travelled to school by taxis, paid for by the Department of Education. I would leave around seven-thirty in the morning, and not get back to Ashfield until four-thirty in the afternoon. In contrast to the school at Wahroonga, my memories of North Rocks are quite positive. The school was built in a square shape with an area of grass in the centre. There was a concrete path around the four sides of the grass, with two sets of classrooms facing each other across the square, the assembly hall at one end and woodwork and craft rooms at the other. We would sit on the benches along the walls to eat our lunch or morning tea, and the rest of our playtimes were spent in games on the grass, or riding bikes or scooters round and round the square. The consequent noise was just like any other school playground.

We often played cricket at lunchtime. Blind cricket is played with a ball woven in a basket-weave fashion, originally from cane but latterly from nylon. The ball, somewhere between a sphere and a

wheel shape, has bottle tops and a piece of lead inside it, to give it weight and to make it rattle. The ball is bowled underarm, and each team has some totally blind players, as well as some with partial sight. We used a metal garbage tin as a wicket as it made a satisfying ping when a batsman was bowled. Also, the person keeping wickets used to bang the lid on the tin three times to let the bowler know in which direction to bowl.

The other game we played was swish. This is a form of table tennis, again designed for blind people, which I am told is like air hockey in having goals at each end. The table has wooden sides raised about six centimetres above the level of the table, and a wooden net. The round plastic ball – about the size of a tennis ball – is hit under the net, and again contains a bell or bottle-tops to make it rattle. The game can be played in doubles or singles.

A further innovation of this game is swish cricket, where the bowler is at one end of the table and the batter at the other. Fielders stand along the sides of the table. A single is scored each time the ball is hit back to the bowler, two if it is hit into the net, four or six depending on how far it is hit back past the bowler or over the side onto the ground. The batter can be out bowled if they miss the ball and it goes off the table. They can also be out caught by one of the fielders.

Many lunchtimes were spent on these pursuits.

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As a child who was blind, I had various tools and equipment available to me to reinforce my learning – a large braille library, wooden blocks and metal frames used to teach early mathematical concepts and the crashing sound of six or eight Perkins braille machines all writing at once. Don Hones had a wonderful map of the world on the back wall of his classroom, made of foam rubber pinned onto canite board, outlining the shapes of every country in the world,

and their relative position according to Mercator's projection. Rivers were cut in the foam, and topography represented by extra padding. Cities were marked with one type of pin, capital cities were marked with another. Borders were all marked as well. Don must have spent days and days of his time making and modifying this map. All the features were done to scale – geographical and topographical. And everything was labelled in braille. One day he told the class that he had spent much of the previous weekend doing an 'operation' on Africa, because his geography lessons of the previous week had drawn an imperfection to his attention.

I loved looking at this map, and planning the travels I would take in future years. I sailed the seas of the world and imagined fantastic adventures. This work reinforced an understanding of geography and history which has stood me in good stead for the rest of my life. Sadly for me, although pleasingly for millions of people throughout the world, the rise of the Iron Curtain and the fall of communism has meant that my understanding is now significantly out of date.

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Even though we couldn't see, as children we were not averse to a little naughtiness and advantage taking. On one occasion, when a music lesson being taught by Leah Wilson – who was also blind – became a little boring, my mate Charlie and I climbed out the classroom window. We stayed close by so that if Miss Wilson asked us a question we could pop our head back in and answer, but were eventually caught when Charlie, enjoying the sunshine, lay down and went to sleep, and his snores drew her attention to our real whereabouts.

In my more senior years I was given the job of ringing the bell to mark various changes in the school day. I discovered that the tongue of the bell could be screwed out, and when a class I had was

particularly disliked, I would take it out so that the bell could not be rung. As well as shortening the class, it amused me greatly to watch the teachers trying to deal with the situation, while I stood there with the tongue of the bell in my pocket.

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I learned many lessons at North Rocks, both from the official curriculum and the 'book of life'. A final one that I recall related to leadership, and the importance of taking people with you on any journey. It was in the year when I was house captain, and the annual sports day was coming up. Many of the school's best athletes were in the other house, and I knew that we had to come up with a different strategy if we were to win the competition. So I started to think about how the house points were awarded, and realised that winning the tug-of-war might just give us enough points to get over the line.

Cook house, our opposition, had the advantage in weight and strength. But we had one boy whose weight could be used as our anchor, if we could only get him to be committed and try hard. He came from a disadvantaged background, and did not have the benefit of the positive family encouragement which I had enjoyed. Expectations for him in school had been low, and he met those expectations.

I sat with him at lunchtime every day for the week before the sports carnival talking about the tug-of-war. I showed him the rope, and explained how he would need to tie it around his waist as the anchor, and how he could lean back on the rope and make a huge contribution to the team. I talked through the scenario of the actual tug-of-war, helping him to visualise the process, and encouraging him to think about it at other times during the day, because I had learned how that type of positive visualisation could make a difference.

When we lined up our teams for the tug-of-war, I placed myself just in front of him on the rope and kept up my positive talk. When we started it was a tense struggle for some time, but I could feel our team being slowly but surely dragged towards the line where we would lose. In a final desperate effort, I turned to him and yelled, 'Come on, anchor, remember what we talked about.' Suddenly, I felt the tension increase from behind me, and our losing slide stopped. Slowly, ever so slowly, as he leaned into the rope, we started to pull the other team backwards, until we were finally successful. I turned and gave him a huge hug, knowing that he had made the difference. He didn't quite believe me that he had done so, but I assured him again and again that he had.

He finally came to glow in the success of the moment. I learned a major life lesson about lifting the bar of low expectations. I've spent much of my life working to lift that same bar for many other people.