

# Being and Becoming

— words for a special friend

St Mary's Church, Bloxham, Oxfordshire, 12 March 2012

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We the friends and family of Alan gather here this morning with, between us, thousands on thousands of memories and tributes.

His chuckle and laughter, his voice and smile, his sense of fun, his jokes and wit, his acts of kindness, his quiet wisdom, the impacts he had on our being and becoming.

Some of our memories here this morning date from the last few years. Others go back many decades, throughout our lifetimes. There's at least one person here who first met Alan in the 1930s when they were both in their prams. There are several here who knew him at Hall Green Primary School, Birmingham, in the mid 1940s, and at King Edward's School Birmingham in the period 1947–1955.

At King Edward's, those of us who knew him at that time recall that in his first year he was the Under 12½ athletics champion, the *victor ludorum*. He

could run faster over every distance, could jump higher and could jump longer, and could throw the cricket ball further, than any of the rest of us.

We were in awe of him not only for his athletic prowess, though, but also for his cheerfulness and good cheer, his continual infectious giggling and *joie de vivre*, his delight in the unexpected and unpredicted, his sense of life as a cosmic comedy. Throughout his teenage years he shone in our lives, our being and our becoming, not least through the intricate and elaborate practical jokes and pranks he organised and orchestrated, with endless, breathtaking imagination.

Alan never did any academic work, so he said. But we were none of us surprised, and secretly, quietly, Alan himself (I think) was not surprised, when he in due course won an open exhibition in history to read law at Cambridge.

He went up to Cambridge in 1957, after two years as a second lieutenant in the Royal Army Service Corps. One of the influences on him there was the social gospel preached by the vicar of Great St Mary's, Mervyn Stockwood, later Bishop of Southwark.

During Alan's first year, Stockwood arranged a series of sermons about, as the term was in those days, Angry Young Men. Stockwood himself preached the sermon about John Osborne, whose landmark play *Look Back in Anger* had been premiered in the West End about a year earlier. The text for that sermon was Mark chapter 3 verse 5 in the authorised version: '[Jesus] looked round in anger'.

It has been said that the Church of England is like a swimming pool — there's a great deal of noise at the shallow end. Alan was full of light and laughter, but his religious life was lived at the deep end, which is also where there is quietness, reticence, understatement, stillness.

On coming down from Cambridge, Alan worked very briefly in industry. He decided, however, on a career in law, first in local government and then in

private practice, and — for the last 18 years of his official career, 1978–1996 — as a district judge.

Throughout his adult life Alan was a member of the Labour Party, a Guardian reader, and an active participant in the work of Amnesty International. Frequently he spent time in the beloved city of his birth, Birmingham, which he customarily referred to as the holy city. And he was a lover of French culture, music and art. It was fitting here this morning that he was brought into the church amid the rousing strains of the Marseillaise.

All people here today remember Alan's wisdom and wit and his kindness, and the friendship he extended to us. We remember he kept himself in contact with the foibles and follies of humanity, the human comedy, not only by staying close to ourselves but also through his intense fascination, several days a week every week over many years, with *The Archers* and *Coronation Street*.

We treasured the postcards he sent us, which we read often with difficulty but always with pleasure. Pleasure that he had remembered us, and was thinking of us, and pleasure to be reminded of him.

Pauline and I last saw Alan about six weeks ago when he and Annie called on us at Woodstock. He mentioned he was soon to be taking part in a poetry evening organised by the British Legion here in Bloxham about war and rumours of war, and that he was thinking of using that poem by Edward Thomas about a train stopping unexpectedly at a tiny station.

Many people here no doubt know the poem, and know the village not far from here where the train stopped.

It's not strictly speaking a war poem, for it is about something that happened shortly before the war broke out in 1914. But poignantly, elegiacally, it captures the peacefulness which the war shattered, and which in so many ways has never returned.

There is so much of Alan in that poem.

First and most obviously there is a train, a train powered by steam.

Then also there's the cherishing of this part of England, Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire, and the fascination with English words, for example *unwontedly*, and English place names, in this instance *Adlestrop*.

There's the fascination too with all that is small-scale: a single minute, a single miniscule moment during which a blackbird sang — in which, however, there was inexhaustible depth and distance. And there's fascination with peace, order, predictability and pattern.

And fascination with that which is unpredictable, unscheduled, unwanted — an express train stopping at an empty station in a tiny English village.

**Yes. I remember Adlestrop –  
The name, because one afternoon  
Of heat the express-train drew up there  
Unwontedly. It was late June.**

**The steam hissed. Someone cleared his throat.  
No one left and no one came  
On the bare platform. What I saw  
Was Adlestrop – only the name,**

**And willows, willow-herb, and grass,  
And meadowsweet, and haycocks dry,  
No whit less still and lonely fair  
Than the high cloudlets in the sky.**

**And for that minute a blackbird sang  
Close by, and round him, mistier,  
Farther and farther, all the birds  
Of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire.**

So much of Alan in that poem. Poetic, patterned, peaceful, predictable. But also artfully unpoetic, unpatterned, unpredictable. It starts with a sentence

consisting of a single word, the word 'Yes'. It contains an extraordinary rhyme at the end, 'mistier' and 'Gloucestershire'.

And its last line seems to end in mid sentence, in mid air.

In their sound and rhythm, most poems come to a predictable conclusion. But not this one, it hovers unfinished in the air. The miniscule moment which it recalls and celebrates goes on, in consequence, for ever.

In the same way Alan's light and laughter are unfinished, the quietness and wisdom and kindness of him, the song and the stillness, they live on in the memories and lives of his family, and in the memories and lives of his many, many friends, our being and our becoming.



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**Source:** tribute to Alan Donaldson (1936-2012), 12 March 2012.