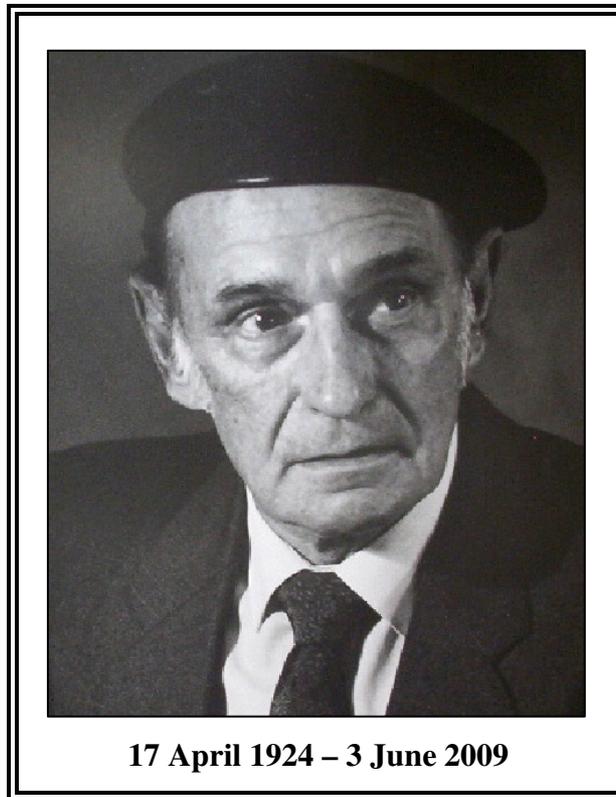




Memories of my Father, Thomas Marx Dreyer Kruger

by Amanda D'Angelo



My father was without doubt one of the most remarkable individuals I have ever known. Since I knew him as my father, my memories are personal ones of the man I loved and admired very much throughout my life.

What was he like as a father? He was not perfect of

course. He could be very impatient and shout at my sister and me when we were too slow in opening the tap when he was watering the garden (helping him in the garden was something I loathed) and he expected, and got, instant obedience when he wanted a cup of coffee, a search for keys, his walking stick (*Pappa se kierie*, as it was known by us, the legacy of an

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accident at the age of nineteen which left his one leg weak), needed a gate opened, or when helping me with my arithmetic (I was hopeless), and I frequently dissolved into tears. Although he could thus be bad-tempered, he never resorted to physical punishment. His own father, however, had beaten him terribly. Yet both my sister and I were careful of him and there is still a trace in me of the *soet Afrikaanse dogtertjie* [good little Afrikaans girl] which I think I grew up as and in which I fulfilled my role in our family.

My father was born on 17 April 1924 on a farm in the North-Eastern Cape, and grew up in a staunch Calvinist household, the second youngest of seven children. He was close to his mother, a gentle woman who had married my grandfather little knowing what a volatile man she was marrying. Stories about Oupa Kruger are legendary in the Kruger family, and mostly very funny, because he was eccentric and very *Boers*: domineering, intolerant and authoritarian. My grandmother devoted her life to her children and to keeping the peace. Nevertheless, he was a competent, hardworking farmer, who spoke impeccable English (the result of having grown up in Queenstown, then still very colonial) and their household was one of the few in the district with books and the newspaper (*Die Burger*).

My father seems to have been rebellious from an early age. He had to attend church, but told me that he stopped believing in God at about twelve, although he was careful not to tell anyone. He and his father clashed frequently, and there were problems in the family my father hinted at, but never spelt out. My father adored his mother and was close to his eldest brother, who was much older and a father-figure to him. My father and his two elder sisters and the youngest child, also a girl, were known as the *vier kleintjies* [the four little ones]; they played together and were ruled to a certain extent by the oldest of the group, my one aunt, a clever, lively child who grew up to be a teacher and was formidable to me as a child. All the children, except for the youngest child, a beauty who never fulfilled her potential, did well for themselves in life, with a farmer, a lawyer and a businesswoman amongst them. Life revolved around the farm and church. Every child had duties, the boys outdoors, helping with the animals and ploughing, and the girls in the house with their mother. My father went to a farm school and later attended the high school in Elliot. Apparently he once lost his temper with a teacher in primary school and stormed out of the classroom! There is a photograph which I have of my father, aged about fourteen, and his tremendous vitality and otherness is very evident.

My father went to Stellenbosch University to study

law. I get the impression that this is what my grandfather wanted him to do, but he changed to Psychology because he felt it might help him in understanding himself and his family. My grandmother supported him in this decision; she was very proud of him and for years after he had done his doctorate told him he might become a professor. My father half-laughed at this idea, but she was adamant. Unfortunately she died before he became a professor at Fort Hare University in 1966. He told me that her death was one of the most terrible things that had happened to him. Only now, after his own death, do I understand what he meant.

He also told me again and again how bad he felt, how he felt he had let her down, by not acknowledging her need to share the fact that she was dying when very ill and conscious of the fact that she was dying. This had a profound effect on his thinking about death and dying, because in the 1960s, of course, open discussion about this subject was not encouraged.

At Stellenbosch he made lifelong friends who shared his love of classical music and German. He wrote poetry and had girlfriends and became a social worker in East London at the end of World War II. But he found East London very colonial and stultifying and social work frustrating. He went to Pretoria where he met my mother, very young, very beautiful and English. My father's sisters regarded this young *Engelse meisie* [English girl] with suspicion, but my grandmother accepted her completely and my grandfather seemed to have liked my mother, who regarded his eccentricity with amusement and was not in awe of him or his authoritarian manner.

My father and mother shared the same irreverent sense of humour, both poking fun frequently at anyone who was pompous or *skynheilig* [hypocritical or sanctimonious]. My father was attracted not only by my mother's beauty, but also by her tremendous intelligence, warmth and her artistic talent, which her own family did not actively encourage. One of my best childhood memories is of the two of them howling with laughter. My mother could reduce my father to tears of laughter and he revelled in her rebellious streak and individuality. Unusually for an English-speaking person, she learnt Afrikaans very quickly and we spoke Afrikaans to her as children and teenagers. She learnt to share his love of Afrikaans literature (although the modern writers such as André P. Brink left her cold) and even wrote stories for children in Afrikaans which were praised by Alba Bouwer, the *doyenne* of Afrikaans children's literature.

The marriage ended in divorce in 1975. Though a

tempestuous relationship, it endured for twenty-one years and my father later regretted his decision to leave my mother. A few weeks before he died, in a moment of absolute clarity, he said that ending the marriage was one of his greatest mistakes and that he should have been less uncompromising towards my mother. Not one of his other relationships with women endured. His last marriage, which was as disastrous as the others, was a sad affair. His last wife, Carol, did not even attend his funeral. She does not even know where he is buried. And yet, as he said in an interview with David van der Want shortly after his 80th birthday, "I'm determined to make this one last until I die." By then he had reached the insight, as quoted by David van der Want, that "I think that there is a rare thing called love and if you know how to love you won't change partners so often."

I adored my father from an early age apparently and one of my earliest memories is of him lying on the bed next to mine at Motswedi, the beautiful house and smallholding outside Pretoria that featured so largely in my formative years and which is still a very strong and binding memory for all of us. I was too afraid to go to sleep by myself and my father would lie on the other bed in my room, holding my hand until I fell asleep.

My father and I would have long conversations when I was small. He always took me seriously, never doubted my feelings, and somehow made me know always that he loved me unconditionally. He was often busy and worked long hours, but he fostered a love of Afrikaans poetry in me, and one of my most precious memories is of my father reciting *Winternag* [Winter Night] by Eugene Marais to me. This is one of the poems I read to him when he lay dying. I do not know whether he heard me or not, but it was comforting and very special to me.

My father was never emotionally manipulative and instilled in me a respect for honesty, hard work, integrity and facing problems and life head-on. When I suffered from depression in my late teens, he recommended a student of his, Margaret Anema, whom he knew would be right for me. She helped me overcome many obstacles, and it was his honesty about himself during family therapy sessions which made me realise yet again what a unique and humble person he was.

He grabbed life by the horns and enjoyed his retirement in Cape Town, exploring new places with interest, going out for meals and the theatre. I had been living in Cape Town for many years and I remember how happy I was when he announced his decision to live here and begin a psychotherapy

practice. He particularly enjoyed going to Zerbans, an elegant Viennese-style coffee shop Cape Town, with a former student and colleague of his who had become a valued friend, Dave Ruthenberg.

In 2005, at the age of eighty-one, he published his last book, *Dreams and How to Understand Them*. His memory had already deteriorated, but he enjoyed the recognition and was buoyed up by the favourable review in *Die Burger*, which described him as a legend in South African psychology.

The last year with my father was sad, because Alzheimer's had by then taken hold completely and his ability to communicate was fading and he was lonely. He often spoke about dying. His wife Carol having by then taken her refuge in alcohol, it was a very difficult situation and he was severely neglected. In an effort to rescue my father, I employed a care worker, who was very kind to him and did not seem offended by his inability to remember who she was.

A role-reversal took place and he became like a dependent child. He forgot many things, but never my phone number. Whenever there was a crisis at home – and there were many – he would phone me to come and help. Thank God I did. In the last few weeks he became terribly anxious and there were several trips to the hospital in the early hours of the morning when he could not breathe properly. He was always grateful and expressed his appreciation and thanked me profusely.

I regularly took him out for coffee and drives in the car in the last year and he enjoyed this enormously. He loved sitting on his stoep and reading his newspaper (*Die Burger*) in the sun and commenting on the view of the mountain. He enjoyed taking his dogs for short walks almost up until the end. His pleasures were simple. I am very grateful for the times we spent together. He was lonely and frustrated by his inability to communicate what he was feeling, but I am so glad that Dave Ruthenberg came to see him while in Cape Town in March this year. He recognized Dave and, even though he could not really say much, he was overjoyed to see him.

In the last two weeks before he died, he stopped speaking. Two days before his death he refused food or liquids and I knew that what I needed to do was to help him through the process of dying. The manner of his death was, I think, as he would have wished. In his own bed, his own house, surrounded by his family, not in pain, with dignity, on his own terms. I lay beside him in the early hours of Wednesday 3 June, the day he died, an icy wintry morning, and read "Winternag" and "Winter" by N. P. Van Wyk Louw,

the Afrikaans poet he loved best, to him. I held his hand and told him how much I loved him, what he had taught me, that I would never forget him. I dozed at one point. It felt completely natural and comfortable. I even felt safe, as on those nights long ago as a little girl at Motswedi when he held my hand. I will never forget those last hours with him alone. It was a *voorreg* [privilege] to be with him.

My father helped and inspired many people, including me. He had a huge amount of energy and enthusiasm and he lived in the moment. He was critical of his fellow Afrikaners, condemning apartheid and the manner in which people of colour were treated. He was far ahead of this time and his article “Die Ondergang van die Afrikaner” [The Downfall of the Afrikaner] did not endear him to them. Still, he never turned his back on his language or culture, and was uncompromising in his love of Afrikaans and about the damage the Nationalists were doing to it. He did not

suffer fools gladly, loathed the Broederbond (a member of which, who made his life very difficult while they were both working in the Department of Labour, ironically was instrumental in his resigning and becoming an academic), always fought for the truth, persevered when things were difficult, and used his talents and abilities to the utmost.

I miss him terribly and often long to be able to pick up the phone and speak to him. I think of him when I am enjoying a cup of good coffee and a cigarette or when something funny happens. My father had a finely tuned sense of the absurd and black comedy.

He lives on in me and my daughter, as in my sister and her daughter. I hope that he will be there to meet and guide me over the threshold when, one day, I am dying.

Pappa, ek is baie lief vir jou.

Reference

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