

# *leadership*: lessons from a life well lived

**John Greenall** shares a personal example of his grandad and the giraffe





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**T**he wooden giraffe was my favourite. Hand-carved by one of my grandparents' friends in Cameroon, it joined my collection of carved animals that gathered on my shelf. By the age of twelve, these were not the only reminders of my grandparents' missionary life overseas. Stories of conversions and miraculous escapes imprinted themselves on my brain. I wanted to be like my grandad. I craved adventure, recognition and the knowledge I'd been useful to God.

But he died recently. I find myself reflecting on this, as I learnt as much about him at his funeral as I learnt when he was living. He didn't write books or blogs. He rarely preached. He was a quiet, salt-of-the-earth type who had no airs or graces. And yet from the tributes of friends and family, I learnt that this remarkable, quiet, humble man was a true leader. The fruit of his life is incredible – five children, 13 grandchildren and nine great-grandchildren (and counting – although no more additions to my family!). He was a missionary in later life to Papua New Guinea, Cameroon and Malawi. There are countless stories of faith, love and hope. So much could be said about him, but here are five leadership lessons he has taught me.

## he built

Born in Middlesbrough in 1931, grandad was committed to his family. My mum, one of his five children, remembers the night shifts and taxi driving to make ends meet. On his days off, he spent time with the children, played games and used his woodworking skills to make unique presents. Genesis 6 speaks of Noah finding favour with God. He was a man entrusted with building an ark, the type of which had never been seen before. He was entrusted with taking on board the animals God commanded and limiting the number of humans to his close family. Why was he trusted to do this? Because he 'was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he

walked faithfully with God....'<sup>1</sup> He had built his character on an earth that was 'corrupt in God's sight...and was full of violence.'<sup>2</sup> And he had built his family, teaching then to obey and follow him. The Apostle Paul picks up this theme when outlining the qualifications for elders and deacons,<sup>3</sup> the majority being based on character rather than gifting or competency.<sup>4</sup>

Leadership doesn't mean prominence, glory or fame. It doesn't spring from ambition or even gifting. Instead, it requires men and women open to God who allow him to build their characters, and if given to them, their families in the middle of a depraved and wicked generation. Such people will be entrusted with spiritual leadership in God's economy.

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## he was obedient

They say that sport can turn the mildest of folk into a frenzy. My grandad was a mild-mannered gentleman; he never seemed to raise his voice; he sat quietly and spoke gently. And yet behind this lay a steely passion. Trips to the old Ayresome Park to watch his beloved Middlesbrough Football Club would leave his youngest son, my uncle, rather shocked as he saw the referee receive clear and vocal 'advice' from my grandad. But his passion didn't stop at Middlesbrough FC. He wanted to please Jesus, and his passion for his name meant he was willing to be radically obedient, at every stage of life.

Aged 49, my grandparents sensed God asking them to fill in for a missionary couple in Papua New Guinea for a year. When the church leadership



considered this, someone asked, 'If we felt you should not go, what would you do?' Grandad thought for a moment and then replied, 'We'd go anyway'.

They took their youngest daughter (aged 16) and she gained much from the experience. They later went and worked with a German mission in Cameroon, West Africa. Using his experience as a clinical nurse teacher in the UK, he and grandma developed a much-needed health centre among the villages of the Ejagham people in the rainforest near the Nigerian border. They would later move to Malawi, working with a South African Bible School, giving basic Bible teaching to village church leaders who had neither the money nor literacy to go to Bible School.

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They had a mortgage on a house, so had to sell it to help finance the trip. A kind friend told them they would come back with nowhere to go. Grandad told him that God is a good employer and was well able to provide a house when needed. Fifteen years later, my grandparents came back to UK and a house of their own. They knew it was a miracle.

As you read this, you might feel that you can be introverted, quiet, and perhaps go almost unnoticed. Whatever our personality and gifting, we can know a steely passion for the glory of Christ as his servants,<sup>5</sup> bound to him with a determination to make his name known and a willingness to go anywhere and do anything for him.

he prayed

Sometimes a full paragraph is required to make a point, but this one requires very little. Quite simply, he prayed. Letters, cards, phone calls – all would assure me of his and my grandma's prayers. Paul models this life of prayer so well, praying for those he was leading to have hope,<sup>6</sup> peace and unity,<sup>7</sup>

to be filled with spiritual power,<sup>8</sup> and for righteousness and purity.<sup>9</sup> If as a leader, I can show interest in people's lives and bring them to my Heavenly Father in prayer, that will be a life well lived.

## he meant what he said

Living in Malawi was not without danger. Travelling to Zomba, the former colonial capital of Malawi to hold a seminar one Saturday morning, a driver coming the other way warned my grandad's team to stop because of a pitched battle between the army and the Young Pioneers (the paramilitary group of the Malawi Congress Party) further up the road. But my grandad drove on. He was followed at speed along bumpy back roads until he arrived at his destination and met the convenor of the seminar. Grandad said, 'We promised we'd be here by 9am, and here we are'.

As well as being a man of his word, when he spoke, he was worth listening to. At home, whether it was the special 'one-on-one' times or when he had to tell them off, his children really cared about, and took notice of what grandad said. Abroad, he watched, listened, and spoke out when he saw something was wrong or unjust. In his later life, his quiet words of encouragement and wisdom were valued by church leaders and members of all ages. Even his Parkinson's didn't stop those quiet, well-chosen words!

The words of leaders can be constructive or destructive. We have power to build up or tear down. We can keep our word or break it. Let's be those whose 'yes' means 'yes'<sup>10</sup> and who choose our words wisely to speak truth into situations and lives around us.<sup>11</sup>

## he kept going to the end

Parkinson's is a nasty disease and watching my grandad suffer was hard. It wasn't so much the physical symptoms, but the mental and emotional ones. He would often be very low in mood. He would sometimes voice his feelings of helplessness. He got frustrated at being so limited. But what was

incredible was seeing the way God worked through him right to the very end. His gentleness, kindness and love impacted on people, even my children.

One of them took to praying for him every night for months that he would look forward to the day when he would be dancing in heaven. He lived out the truth that 'from life's first cry to final breath, Jesus commands my destiny'.<sup>12</sup> And he reminded me that should I lose many of my abilities or roles in life, that whilst I still have breath there is work to be done.

Leaders go all the way to the very end because they know the ultimate goal awaits them. The Apostle Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 4:16-18 call to mind my grandad who knew his God and therefore did not *'...lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So, we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.'*

The wooden giraffe is still on my shelf. And my grandfather's genes and passion live on in me. But it's no longer a thirst for adventure, recognition or significance. No. It's a thirst to be a humble servant-leader who builds his character and family with a passion born from eyes fixed on Christ, that drives me to radical obedience; who yearns to be a man of prayer, speaking truth in love and who keeps going to the very end. ■

### REFERENCES

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2. Genesis 6:11
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7. Romans 15:5-6; 2 Thessalonians 3:16
8. Ephesians 3:16; Ephesians 1:18-20
9. Philippians 1:9-11; 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24
10. Matthew 5:37; James 5:12
11. Ephesians 4:25-32 is an interesting study in the way we are called to use our speech, all rooted in verse 24 which is clear that this comes from our being made righteous and holy by God and then living in the light of that sanctification.
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