

Dad and I shared a sense of direction

September is the month when writer Mandy Appleyard always set off on a great annual walk with her beloved father. But this year, sadly, he won't be at her side. Mandy reflects on the beautiful routes they took together, and the gift that means she'll always have a link to him

'Not long before my dad became seriously ill, he gave me the little compass he had always used on our walks together. It's the same one he had taught me to read years earlier, and is very precious to me. I was unspeakably touched when he passed it on. I also realised, with sadness, that Dad bequeathing me his compass probably meant he knew he wouldn't be hiking again.

I have many lovely memories of my late father – tucking into giant Sunday roasts and sponge pudding, crafting things in his tool shed – but the memories I cherish most are of the long walks we shared. That's when we saw Britain at its most beautiful, nature at its most vivid, and I saw my father at his best. In late Summer, he and I would sit down with a map and start planning a long-distance walk to do together in the Autumn. We'd decide on a route, then I'd take care of booking accommodation ready for the big day in September when we laced up our walking boots and hit the trail.

My father was in many ways an unknowable man – diffident and closed off, and not given to great shows of emotion. He always seemed distant and a little disengaged when I was a child, and he was often absent. He worked long shifts as an engineer at the local power station, and spent much of his spare time alone, rebuilding vintage British motorbikes in his garage. I left home when I was 18 and lived away for



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about 20 years, sometimes overseas, so I didn't spend much time with him in those two decades. It was much later in his life and mine, through the love of walking that I inherited from him, that I felt I got to know more of my father, and he of me.

Dad was a lifelong walker with a passion for wildlife and the outdoors. One of the highlights of his life was completing the 192-mile Coast to Coast walk across the north of England with a friend and the family dog when he was 48. But Dad was well into his 70s when we tackled our most ambitious walks, and he did so with the quiet stoicism for which I loved him. We walked the Wolds Way (79 miles), the Cleveland Way (109 miles) and the Herriott Way (52 miles), all in Yorkshire, in the final years of Dad's good health. And what fun we had.

He would share small confidences, and open up a little along the way. He reminisced about his days as an engineer in the Merchant Navy, when he visited Australia and New Zealand, the Caribbean and South America, and sailed through the Panama and Suez canals. He suffered terrible seasickness, and

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[CONTINUED FROM PREVIOUS PAGE] told me he ate virtually nothing on a rough, six-week passage back to England from Australia. After docking in Kent, he dived into the nearest café to order egg and chips. He ordered it again and again, devouring the same meal five times over until, finally, he felt full. He laughed a lot, my dad, and he made me laugh.

There were easy silences (especially on the long uphill), but also exchanges of view on the government of the day, global warming, and the merits of the different actors who'd played Doctor Who. A lot of it was small stuff, but it was stuff that didn't normally happen between Dad and me. When we were together as a family, he was always the quietest of us, often complaining that he couldn't get a word in edgeways. He was easily overshadowed by the loquacious, spirited, opinionated women who constitute my family. My mum is a chatty, open-hearted, uninhibited woman – warm, with lots to say, and given to wearing her heart on her sleeve. But she wasn't interested in long-distance walking – she'd rather be at home, baking scones or pottering in the garden. So on our walks, my dad was in his element: a peaceful place, quiet physical endeavour, the heart of nature.

I realised how much he lacked confidence in himself, but also how sociable he was. When we popped into a pub for a pint, he was chatty and effusive – a side of him I hadn't seen before. Seeing him relate to the strangers we met on our walks – fellow hikers, B&B proprietors, walking guides, the old lady in the village post office – made me realise how kind he was. When we sat down with a bottle of wine in the evenings and reflected on our day, I saw my father's generosity and gentleness. Unlike me, he always saw the good in people, and invariably won their affection with his unassuming wisdom and bone-dry wit. I think he probably saw a different side of me, too: determined, contemplative and resourceful.

I'm a townie, and loved that my wise dad could answer all my questions about bird migration, the geology of the land, cloud formation and the rhythms of nature. He taught me how to read an Ordnance Survey map and use his compass – skills that sadly failed us both on our last walk together in the Yorkshire Dales.

We took a wrong turn somehow and



ABOVE 'Dad was well into his 70s when we tackled our most ambitious walks,' says Mandy, seen here with her father on the Wolds Way trail

ended up on an unplanned 18-mile detour, shinning down a steep embankment in the dead of night and arriving in pitch-black in the village of Keld just seconds before our B&B landlady scrambled the mountain rescue team to come and find us. My father was freezing cold and badly shaken by what we'd been through – we'd walked 28 miles

that day – so I poured him a whisky and ran him a hot bath, feeling guilty for all that had gone wrong.

We walked for half the following day, but felt tired and dispirited after the events of the day before. We agreed to cut our walk short, pledging to return the following year to finish the eight miles we had missed.

Sadly, we never made it back. I understood on that last walk that Dad was failing. His memory was poor, he didn't seem able to read a map any more, and he was often confused. He was diagnosed with dementia shortly afterwards, then prostate cancer, then vascular failure. Emergency surgery on a burst aneurysm in his leg in the Summer of 2013 left him virtually unable to walk. He went from healthy septuagenarian to a shadow of his former

self in what seemed like the blink of an eye.

This must have caused him great sadness, but the dementia blunted his understanding of what was happening, perhaps for the best. I'd made photo albums of our walks and often flicked through them with Dad, hoping to spark happy memories. He looked at the pictures, sometimes remembering, sometimes not.

In Dad's dying days, I took a break from walking. I just didn't feel the desire to do it. But as he approached the end, I suggested to my partner, Matt, that we do the 78-mile Dales Way walk through Yorkshire and Cumbria in Dad's memory. It seemed fitting, since if Dad hadn't fallen ill, this was the next long-distance walk we would have done together.

Dad died in March last year at the age of 78. Matt and I set off the morning after his funeral: we walked sometimes in sadness and sometimes in celebration of my father's life. It felt wrong that he wasn't with us, but right to be doing something he would have loved.

Walking with my dad is just a memory now. I treasure the pictures in my head of the times we shared, and the photograph albums I made as mementoes of the miles we trekked. I inherited many things from him; his sense of adventure, his gregarious nature and his chin among them. But the things I cherish most that he gave me are a love of walking, and the compass that showed us the way. When I hold it in my hand and set off on a new trek, life seems okay again, and I feel reconnected with the dad I lost, but who is forever in my heart.' □

