



**Australian Government**  
**Chief Scientist**

**DR ALAN FINKEL AO**

**Macquarie University Graduation Ceremony**  
**Conferral of Doctor of Letters *honoris causa***

***Lessons from my father***

**Monday 26<sup>th</sup> November 2018**

**Art Gallery of New South Wales**  
**SYDNEY**

A few weeks ago I went bicycle riding along the banks of the Yarra River in Melbourne.

It was a sunny Sunday morning and I was joined by my wife Elizabeth, my son Alex and my daughter-in-law Brinley.

After the four of us had been riding for some time, we passed by coincidence near to the factory that my late father David Finkel had owned in the suburb of Abbotsford.

At this point, I suggested we hop off our bikes and take a break.

I assure you this wasn't because I was out of breath!

Rather, I proposed stopping because I wanted to reminisce about my father.

I'm not usually a sentimental person.

I try to live in the present with one eye on the future.

But as my mind turned to the business which Dad had worked so hard to establish, I realised that I had never conveyed much to my son Alex about his grandfather.

Alex was born many years after Dad died so never had the benefit of his presence.

I felt that I wanted to share my memories.

Today, as I reflect on what I have done in my life to merit the distinction of an honorary doctorate, I am similarly drawn to speak about a person who influenced me greatly.

For as I get older, I see more and more how my achievements are shaped by the values and attitudes of those who have influenced me.

With that in mind, I would like to share with you, too, what I learnt from my father.

But first, I feel it is my duty to tell you that, just 14 years after Barack Obama published a memoir entitled *Dreams from My Father*, he was elected President of the United States of America.

Yes, you heard me correctly.

When Barack Obama shared his father's story, it began his journey to the Oval Office.

To Commander in Chief.

To Leader of the Free World.

You will be pleased to know, however, that I hold no such lofty ambitions.

Nor do I intend for my recollections to fill an entire book!

I merely wish to convey a little about my father in the hope that it is of value to you.

In what is an uncanny coincidence, Dad arrived in Australia 72 years ago to this day.

He and his brother were on the first ship to bring out Jewish Holocaust survivors.

The Ville d'Amiens, a French steamer, docked at Circular Quay, Sydney, on 26 November 1946.

Dad was 32 years old.

He was born in Bialystok in north-eastern Poland and as a young man had been sent by his father to the southern part of the country to establish a rug-making business.

But the Second World War interrupted this venture.

Being Jewish, Dad's family suffered Nazi persecution.

Many of his relatives were murdered.

Others managed to survive.

Dad spent most of the war in Siberia, and for a while he was lucky enough to find a job working in a textile factory.

Yet when he arrived in Australia, he had nothing except the desire to start a new life.

He soon met his future bride, my mother Vera, whose family had migrated before the war.

Mum tells me that the first time she met dad she knew she would marry him, not just for his good looks but for his charm and initiative.

She tells me that in those early years he could only afford one suit but that he hand-stitched it so that he could wear it inside out.

That way everyone would think he was a wealthy man with two suits!

Yet by the time he died some 30 years later, Dad had become a leading businessman.

He had worked hard to build a large clothing business that employed over 400 staff.

He had given his children the life he himself missed out on.

And, most important, he had bought a second suit!

Dad passed away in 1974, when I was just 21.

It was a young age to lose my father and I would've liked to spend more time with him.

But I am grateful for the time we had together and for the lessons I learnt in those years.

One of them was the value of hard work.

I remember Dad explaining the 'credit squeeze' to me in the 1960s.

It was a time when the banks tightened their lending policies, meaning that businesses lost their overdraft facilities and thus their ability to expand and employ more workers.

The financial pressure on the average person and small businesses was excruciating.

Dad's approach was pragmatic and long-term.

He told me that you had to work hard to survive the tough times so you could thrive in the good ones that followed.

He also advised me to only ever borrow from a bank, because banks always take care of you and never lend you more than your ability to repay.

Though I doubt he would give that particular advice today!

From Dad, I also picked up my lifelong commitment to creative design.

As his business grew he built the factories into which the business expanded.

I mean that literally.

He spent many long nights sitting at his desk with a large sheet of Mylar, a clutch pencil and a Staedtler eraser, drawing the designs for the next factory or factory extension.

Years later, as a PhD student in electrical engineering, I too spent many long nights at my desk with pencil and paper, filling in the details of my electrical circuit designs.

Two years of postdoctoral research in neuroscience were similarly punctuated by long nights at my desk with pencil and paper, and soldering iron and electrical components.

When I left academia to start my own business in the United States, my efforts to manufacture scientific instruments were equally informed by my father's example.

It goes to show that there's no tension between working hard and being creative.

On the contrary, it's those who work hardest who have the soundest basis for creativity.

Finally, though my father was proud of his success, I learnt from him that far more important than another factory, or another suit, are the principles that guide one's life.

Dad was a generous philanthropist and I gained much of my moral fabric from him.

Just one example that has stayed with me is my father opening the door to the rabbis from synagogues in Melbourne and from Jerusalem who sometimes called at our home.

Though he was not a religious man, Dad always invited them in, spoke to them with warmth and respect, and gave them something to pass on to their communities.

Even at a young age, it was an illustration to me of charity being the highest virtue.

Of course, I have come to learn a great deal from many people besides my father.

Some people have helped me to develop a deep knowledge of particular fields.

Others have nurtured my innate curiosity or provided advice at key moments.

Yet more have been a source of support or comfort when I have needed it.

I was lucky to have as my PhD supervisor a great scientist in Steve Redman.

He taught me the value of persistence and of committing to quality above quantity.

Then, when I was a postgraduate, a renowned neuroscientist named Paul Adams from New York visited my lab.

After I explained to him one of the pieces of electronic equipment that I had personally designed and constructed, he asked me on the spot a question that transformed my life.

He asked, “Wow, Alan, could I get one of those?”

I was ready for a change from research, and I started my own business within a year.

From this I learned that luck owes a lot to the hard work and open communication that precedes the fortunate moment.

Later when I was at Monash University, the then Vice Chancellor Ed Byrne taught me by example what qualities one needs to succeed in a large and complex organisation.

An ability to manage in all directions.

A capacity to address the concerns of all stakeholders.

And a resolve to navigate towards a clear vision.

I'm sure that any University Council would agree that this is no mean feat!

But I'm sure they would also agree that there is value in learning from others.

And I mean this not just in the academic sense of mastering a subject, but also in the broader sense of being guided by people who have experienced something of life.

My father was one such person for me.

As I stood with my son Alex on the banks of the Yarra a few weeks ago, I was thrilled to be able to share with him some of those lessons that I absorbed from my father and which I have articulated today.

The importance of hard work.

The value of creativity.

The need for a strong moral compass.

I would add to this a lesson that I learnt not from my own father but from the man who is regarded as the father of neuroscience, the discipline in which I have forged my career.

And that is to retain a sense of wonder.

Spanish neuroscientist Santiago Ramón y Cajal saw pattern, and order, and an intricate kind of beauty, in the 100 billion cells that make up the brain of a human being.

I hope you keep at the front of your minds that same sense of marvelling at the world.

When he disembarked at Circular Quay on 26 November 1946, David Finkel could not have imagined that 72 years later his son would be accepting an honorary doctorate just a kilometre away.

It is a wonder, and I am deeply grateful to Macquarie University for this honour.

I owe much of it to my late father and to the many other people who have, to paraphrase the University's motto, gladly taught me about life.

Thank you.