31st August 2024

Sunflowers

"Light-enchanted sunflower, thou
Who gazest ever true and tender
On the sun's revolving splendour."

Pedro Calderón de la Barca, *Magico Prodigioso* (1637)

Towards the end of his life, my father had a stroke. As part of his rehabilitation, he attended a Day Centre, where he was encouraged to take part in a variety of activities, to stimulate his movement, keep him mentally aware and improve his overall well-being. The first and second of these aims might well have been fulfilled. But there were times when improving his well-being fell short. It's not that the people weren't kind to him and thoroughly professional in all they did. It's just that … well … sometimes the activities felt a bit demeaning to a proud man.

"What am I reduced to," he complained one day, "when I have a walking-stick placed between the legs of my chair, and I have to cross my feet over it, and back again, and over and back – all in time to Scottish Country Dance music? If I ever hear another Jimmy Shand tune, it'll be too soon." On another occasion he brought home a yoghurt tub with potting-compost, and a little green shoot poking through. "What's this?" I asked. "*This* is what they call gardening," he muttered. "And what's the little plant?" "A sunflower! Who the hell wants a sunflower growing on their kitchen windowsill?" No "light enchanted sunflower" for *my* dad …

A couple of weeks ago, my daughter took my wife and me to Balgonie Estate in East Lothian, to walk the "Sunflower Trail" that wended through acres of waving sunflowers. At different stages of growth, there were sunflowers as far as they eye could see. You could cut even your own for a floral display (with secateurs provided.) The funds raised were for a Brain Tumour Research charity. Given the number of families around and the sunflowers being bought, the charity was in for a bumper collection.

As I walked the Sunflower Trail, I remembered my father's yoghurt tub with a big smile on my face. And I found myself humming a Scottish Country Dance tune – which may even have been from Jimmy Shand! For my dad was right there with me, with his little sunflower in its pot, and his walking stick, and his pride – *and* his complaints.

A prayer for today

The blessings of God in a sunflower; the blessings of God in a memory. Thank you.

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