

Issue 72 Winter 2016

Dialogue

WN BULL



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Member of InvoCare Australia Pty Limited
ABN: 22 060 060 031

Dialogue Publications
© 2016

ISSN: 1832-8474

Dialogue is published quarterly by

Dialogue Publications
- a publishing division of
WN Bull Funerals

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can be obtained by
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Cover Image:

Peninsula Dawning

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Editorial

The gas fire is blazing and the fan is on. There's this hum, steady and constant. But, now and again, there are bird sounds too. I can hear them, from the garden outside. I'd like to turn the heater and the fan off, but I don't. I'm interested that I can still hear the birds, despite the noise in the room.

It's the stillness. This room is cut off the rest of the house; older houses may have a drawing room, we call this room the with-drawing room. In the four years we have lived here, I have come to love this small sanctuary. This is where I have some quiet time of a morning, where I write and where . . . I hear the birds. This is what stillness, even for a little time, can do.

In the midst of grief, such stillness seems impossible, the mind is racing or the dull pain is stifling. Gerard Manley Hopkins expressed this well in one of his sonnets of despair:

Soul, self; come, poor Jackself, I do advise
You, jaded, let be; call off thoughts awhile
Elsewhere; leave comfort root-room, let joy size

At God knows when to God knows what; whose
smile
's not wrung, see you; unforeseen times rather – as
skies
Betweenpie mountains – lights a lovely mile.



Richard White

'Call off thoughts awhile . . .' and we will see the sun break through between two mountains or hear the birds above the heater fan. We will be surprised when sadness or distraction lifts for that moment and joy shines warmly where there seemed no hope of joy before.

There are moments of stillness and rewards of seeing and savouring in this edition. Kim Shannon and her friend Robyn let their paintings illumine the faces and lives of Vietnam veterans. Patsy Healy looks back over twenty five years of service with W N Bull Funerals and sees how her life has changed and been enriched.

Jelly cubes and brass pots are so much more than sticky or dusty objects in the stories of Madeleine Pizzuti and Erica Greenop. Simple things in the lives of all us are transformed when we allow ourselves to see them as they really are, bright with meaning and affection.

'Bring him home, bring him home' arose from a conversation with Brett, a funeral director involved in the recent repatriation ceremony from Richmond air base. Brett's story took me into this event; he created the stillness for the significance to emerge.

Cecil Yazbek reflects on a Christmas letter and its unsettling impact. The quiet time allowed for an unsettledness to become sadness and sympathy, for her to see through the gloss and feel the fragility. 'Eye to Eye' speaks for itself; two young people seeing and being seen caught in a moment where each figure is present, alive and real.

Wishing you moments of stillness and the peace that this always brings, from all of us at WN Bull Funerals.



TWENTY FIVE YEARS ALMOST A LIFETIME.

written by Patsy Healy

It is twenty five years, this year, that I began work at W N Bull Funerals. Richard White asked me about the celebration we had for this anniversary. It is a tradition to celebrate milestones such as this and our gathering was a mixture of colleagues and family. Some very complimentary things were said and I was able to respond. However, in talking with Richard, I realised there was so much that was not said because it was difficult to put into words.

Twenty five years is a long time; it also seems like yesterday that I began. Andrew Pulsford, my regional manager, calculated the number of funerals I may have conducted in this time and it went into the thousands. These figures brought home to me the sheer volume of work I have done; however they could not convey what had gone on in me, how this work has become my life.

“ Over my twenty five years at W N Bull Funerals I have met so many people; I have met them at a most vulnerable time in their lives. ”

Death is the great mystery. I am surrounded everyday by death and its consequences. I know, too, how all of us need to keep death at arms' length. It is the ever present reality that we want to ignore, trivialise or 'make safe'.

My conversation with Richard went all over the place with that great mystery, death, at its centre. At one stage, I related the ending of a funeral where a young boy followed his mother's coffin out of the church, sobbing. It was a cry from the heart of him, a lament. I am sure there are people who can describe it better than I. There was something

primitive or primeval about this sound. I was shaken by this innocent, unrestrained expression of grief.

This sort of elemental sorrow, obvious and public, is comparatively rare at our Anglo-Saxon funerals. It was a reminder to me, as I recalled the event and the boy, that something can break inside us when that deep connection with someone is shattered. We all die, but we only have one mother, father, first born, husband, wife . . . to lose. There is no grief like my grief, as there is no death like my death.

Perhaps that was where I was going, talking about that young boy, the many and varied ways we are connected to one another and the ways these connections change or shape our lives.



Over my twenty five years at W N Bull Funerals I have met so many people; I have met them at a most vulnerable time in their lives. Death and its mystery have come close to them. The tragic, shocking and unpredictable or the drawn-out and draining and relief-bringing deaths all involve a shattering of lives. Nothing can ever be the same. This is the moment when I enter people's lives.

It is true, I enter their lives. For those four, five or more days that it takes, I can meet with, plan, discuss and, eventually help ritualise one of the most significant events in their lives. In their trust and dependence on the expertise and personal presence of me and my colleagues, these people, our clients, open up and take us into their worlds, broken and shaken by death.

This is what I cannot put into words. It is possible to tally the numbers and to count the years; it is not possible to capture or convey the connections and the love, yes, the love, that has been exchanged.

I am hesitant to use the word. I am a professional person and I need that observing of boundaries, the refusal to



“ I want to speak about the ‘occupational blessings’ of being a funeral director.”



become ‘involved’. Such detachment is respectful of others and essential for clear and appropriate service. However, looking over my life, I know that there may be no other word to describe what has happened.

It is right to be hesitant; such language is open to misunderstanding and question. I am more comfortable describing what happened to me than who I am or what I do.

What I am celebrating is ‘twenty five years of happening’. Richard used to talk about the ‘occupational hazards’ of being a funeral director; I want to speak about the ‘occupational blessings’ of being a funeral director.

I am good at my job. I was well trained by John Harris, the previous owner of W N Bull Funerals. This competence has given me confidence and an ability to respond flexibly and sensitively to various circumstances and needs of grieving families. The confidence has enabled me also to be open to the families and their grief, less caught up in the details. These details and the careful planning have been attended to by my colleagues; I trust them and so am myself able to become more present, more open and more vulnerable.

This is what has happened to me. This is what time has done, time and the daily, weekly, monthly, yearly exposure to the shattering of people’s lives. I did not know that was happening, that I was changing in such significant ways.

Sometimes that occupational hazard of exhaustion would catch up with me, a reminder of my own humanity and limits. I did not always treat these symptoms as seriously as they deserved. It is only now, after all this time, that I can see what I might have thought as weakness for what it really was – a wearing away as well as a wearing down.

“ I carry great responsibility in a funeral ”

As I said, I find this experience hard to put into words. All I can do is marvel at how people continue to take me to heart, welcome me in. The faces of family members, the body enshrined in coffin or casket – all of this becomes part of me. I carry great responsibility in a funeral; I now see that I carry much more than expectations. I carry these people and their lives and their love. And, they seem to know this.

I have been extraordinarily blessed. If anything could express my understanding of the past twenty five years, that is it – an extraordinary blessing.



Put those you love in the hands of those who care

Of all life’s celebrations the funeral liturgy can touch us the most deeply.

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PAINTING, GRIEF AND THE VIETNAM WAR

written by Kim Shannon

I am a painter. I might say that 'painting is my life', has been my life, (apart from family). I paint what I see and try to express something about what I see through drawing, tone and colour.

The Vietnam painting project has come into being through a series of seemingly unconnected events. It began at the funeral of a neighbour, Jim Devitt, who died in July 2013, the funeral was held at a church in Mittagong in the Southern Highlands.

Jim had been in the Regular Army and was a veteran of the Vietnam war, but having retired was also part of a life-

drawing group which I also attended, so there were a few of us 'artists' there as well. The funeral was a fitting tribute, attended and overseen by the Southern Highlands Vietnam Veterans. At the time I was aware how much of a bond this group of men and their wives had with each other. I saw these men with greying hair in their suits not much older than myself, obviously moved by Jim's death, veterans of a war everyone has chosen to forget. They seemed a close knit group, looking after each other, brought together by a shared history. Below is a quote from a tribute to Jim in the Southern Highlands Vietnam Veterans' Peacekeepers and Peacemakers Association Newsletter: -

"Our small group of veterans looked up to Jim as an old-school Infantry officer. We enjoyed his company, his stories, his high spirits and his mate-ship. So it was with great sadness that we watched our mate fade away and succumb to his war-caused health and medical conditions. We commemorate his service; we salute him; we miss him; we will not forget him."

There was a lot I didn't realise or have any awareness of, except the Anti-Vietnam protests in the 1960's. These young men began going to Vietnam when I was in my early teens, still at school and didn't end until the early 70's. My father had flown in the RAAF in WW2 and died at 67 from a war related condition, I was born well after he had returned and was back home living a 'normal life' unaware of that other part of his life which he didn't talk about. To me, war for our generation seemed a bit unreal, Peace and Love was the mantra, it was anything but, for the soldiers, a lot of them National Servicemen, coming back from an unpopular war to a hostile home coming, it was as if they were blamed for the war, as if they were the cause.

“ . . . coming back from
an unpopular war to a
hostile home coming,
it was as if they were
blamed for the war . . . ”

After the funeral, while we were milling around outside I spoke with a friend, Robyn Kinsela, and learnt that we both had a similar idea: wouldn't it be interesting to paint portraits of some of these men.

After contacting the RSL, two veterans, while a bit suspicious, after some persuasion, showed signs of being interested, so Robyn and I began. We got together with Phil and Norm talking and having coffee, they showed us photos and talked about what they had done and what it had been like, about the sound of the helicopters, the defoliation of the rubber plantations, the heat and feeling constantly on edge, with the fear that they could be attacked from any direction at any time.

When we began painting we had no real idea of where it would lead, we got together about once a month for a few hours, Robyn and I drew and painted, while Phil and Norm chatted, we learnt a lot, they had a lot to talk about, being instrumental in organising a Veterans support group.

After about a year we stopped for one reason or another, later we got in contact again, Phil and Norm were organising

the Southern Highlands event for the 50th anniversary commemoration of the Battle of Long Tan, they wanted our portraits to be part of it, they had some other blokes lined up whom they had persuaded to sit for us. We also had the idea that it might be interesting to paint some of the objects, memorabilia and uniform the men had kept from that time.

The Battle of Long Tan was fought on 18th August 1966, Australia's first significant engagement in this 11 year war, The Viet Cong on this occasion particularly targeted the Australian base, hoping to immobilise them. Their base was in a rubber plantation, it was a surprise attack at night and the Australians were seriously outnumbered. Australia lost 18 men and 24 were wounded that night. However, the next day 245 Vietnamese bodies were counted.

After this engagement Agent Orange was used to defoliate the rubber plantations in order to make it more difficult for the Viet Cong to hide, but this also meant there was no shade from the heat, but that was a small issue compared to the serious side-effects not only on the soldiers but also on their children, and is still effecting the Vietnamese population today.

I feel so fortunate to have had the experience of our contact with these men through painting them, they all have stories to tell, all affected in different ways and all have been changed by the experience.

The portraits have a degree of informality but also introspection, how were these men shaped by the war? How could they just slot back into their old lives again? We hope these portraits express something about their experience, through an image of the men they are now, it is hard to imagine them as 20 year olds but how could their experiences not have left a mark?

The objects, uniforms and memorabilia have proved an interesting challenge, to express something of what these things meant, the fact that they have kept so much of it must be significant, they include a trench digger, an ammunition pouch, a water canteen, a Dixie for cooking their meals even packets of dehydrated food, a hat, some steel soled boots - the Viet Cong buried sharpened pieces of bamboo in the mud which went straight through a leather boot, a bundle of letters and some dog tags.

These paintings are obviously our personal interpretation we have tried not to embellish or sentimentalise but hope that they may give a sense of what it was to be there, not heroic but just surviving in a completely hostile environment.

The commemorative event is being marked by a dinner at the Mittagong RSL and I feel humble and proud that our paintings will be a part of it. I hope that it will be a fitting tribute to these men and that it may enlighten a broader audience by touching on some of their own experiences of this time.



THE STORY OF THE OLD BRASS POT

written by Erica Greenop

It's like being at this slightly 'other world' intersection of time, where the end of the story happens before I really knew the importance of its beginning; being at the spot where this story ends, and having been round the world and round the world again, this is where it begins too.

It is Christmas 2015. My son and his family, his wife and three daughters, are in England on holiday from the Southern Highlands in New South Wales. My sister, who is as poor as a church mouse, has invited them to buffet lunch at The Foresters, a country pub set in woodland in Church Crookham in Hampshire. I have been there. It is magnificent. And expensive. Not your average pub for church mice. She has also invited her son and his wife who live in Cambridge and their two adult children, and her daughter and her two children. I know my sister – if she had only two pennies to her name, she would give them to someone who had none. She is generous beyond words. But the cost of this buffet lunch plus wine and drinks for

13 people prays on my mind; so I ring her from Sydney and tell her I have looked up the cost and I know she is generous beyond words but I am worried and can I send her some money.

"No, I've got it covered" she says mysteriously. So I ask how and she tells me.

"You know those funny old brass pots our parents had in Hong Kong? You know, the antique Chinese brass they used to collect? Remember? The collection started when they were given a piece when they were married. That censer, it was a stand for burning incense, you know the one?" I remember the one. A fat brass pot with an open top and handles and little fat legs and a square identifying

imprint underneath which told the story of the maker and the dynasty and the century it was made in. Our mum had it on the kitchen window ledge when she retired to England, with a potted plant in it. "Yes" I say, "I know the one."

"Well -" says my sister. "I remembered it one day because Lewis (that's my sister's grandson) was looking for some of his rock collection in the bottom of the dresser in the kitchen and he came across it and all the other bits and pieces our parents had collected, the brass pagodas and the little fat pots, each with their identifying imprint, and wondered what it was. So I told him the story."

They put the collection on the table. My sister picked up the censer. "This piece" she said, "Was the start of the collection, given to my parents on their wedding day in November 1934 by Leung Fat Tin, the Chinese Manager at my dad's workplace. And then in 1940 during the Second

“ I remember the one. A fat brass pot with an open top and handles and little fat legs and a square identifying imprint underneath which told the story of the maker and the dynasty and the century it was made in. ”

Our mum spent the war years in Sydney and dad was taken prisoner by the Japanese and that could have been the end of the story. But it wasn't. After the war our parents returned to Hong Kong to pick up their lives. One morning our mum was reading the newspaper and she came across a small notice in the Police Notices section. A coolie had been arrested in Wan Chai, selling a collection of valuable antique Chinese brass, which, the police thought, he had stolen. But his story was different: he had been working on a building site where the house at 308 The Peak had been badly damaged during the war and had come across the pieces and dug them up and was selling them, making the most of his good fortune. The police notice asked anyone



World War the Japanese invaded Hong Kong. On 1st July in 1940 all European women and children in Hong Kong were ordered to leave within 5 days. That included my mum and me. I was just over 2 years old. We were instructed to pack up our house possessions and lock up the quarters and ordered to report at the Hong Kong Club at 7am on Monday to be evacuated. Our baggage was limited to 2 cabin trunks for each adult and 2 suit cases for each child, and we were boarded on to British passenger liners to take us away from Hong Kong and the Japanese invasion. Volunteers for the British Defence Forces were mobilised. My dad was one of them. So my mum and dad left everything, including their treasures, in their home at 308 The Peak. Their Chinese house-boy – as the story goes - thought the collection of brass was gold and therefore valuable, so before he left he dug a hole in the garden and put the brass pieces in the hole and covered it over with soil."

who had knowledge of the pieces or the pre-war address at 308 The Peak to contact them. So our mum went to the police station and claimed them and brought them home. And that could have been the end of the story. But it wasn't.

Lewis, who evidently at the age of 12 has entrepreneurial skills, said may be they were *actually* valuable, maybe they should take them to the local antique dealer and get them valued.

"I'll give you £200 for the censer" said the dealer. "No way" said Lewis. "I'll give you £300" said the dealer. So Lewis, thinking that such an immediate change in value was probably significant said "Come on granny, we'll take it elsewhere." So they lined up at one of these Antique Road Show places, queued up for hours and hours. They could have just gone home. But they didn't. Suddenly they became the focus of attention, dealers moving in on them

from all directions. One of the dealers advised them to take the censer to *the* antique Chinese brass dealer in London, or he would take it if that made it easier, where they would get a proper evaluation and if they wanted to sell it, it would be included in the forthcoming auction. So they left the censer with the dealer and went home. And let's face it, *that* could have been the end of the story, but it wasn't.

On the day of the auction my sister had a stomach upset and Lewis had a migraine and that too could have been the end of the story, but they got in the car and drove to

they went. The image of the item for sale being shown on the television screens all around the auction room was the censer, being turned this way and that, its funny fat little legs, its handles, its inside, its exterior, the square imprint of its age and its maker and its dynasty and its provenance all being explained by the knowledgeable auctioneer in terms of antique Chinese brass. The bidding started at £600. It went up and up. And up. And up. The hammer fell at £1,800. In our Australian money that is the equivalent of \$3525.70.

“Let's look at it this way” I said – “Our mum's best brass pot has enabled you to bring together her grandchildren and her great grandchildren from each end of the globe. . .”



London. If anyone knows about parking in London, you simply don't drive; but off they went, stopping at multiple garages on the way, feeling sure they would have missed the auction. But they hadn't. My sister drove up to the auction rooms and there was a parking spot right outside. She drove in, turned off the engine, locked the car and in

“So you had enough money to take 8 adults and 5 children to buffet lunch at The Foresters” I said. I am being flippant. I don't know what else to do with the delight of it all. But it is still not the end of the story.

“When the hammer fell” said my sister, “I suddenly thought ‘what have I done?’ I've sold our parents' best wedding gift. And all their memories. Everything it meant to them, its story, all that history. What would our mum have said? I feel so guilty.” She was in tears.

“Let's look at it this way” I said – “Our mum's best brass pot has enabled you to bring together her grandchildren and her great grandchildren from each end of the globe. She would have loved that, her two daughters' families, brought together – I can just imagine, she would have been so happy – ” And so, over the phone, my sister and I do a kind of dance of pure joy, for ourselves and our families and especially for our mum and her funny old brass pot.

And finally, having finished at the same place it began and having been round the world and round again, that is the end of the story.

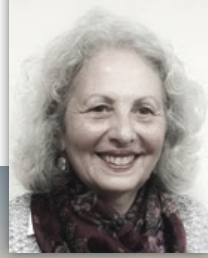
THE GREAT SYMPHONY

Looking back down the centuries to the beginning,
If there ever was a beginning,
I hear the great symphony of man and womankind
Playing and replaying its many themes.
Each generation produces its own melodies,
Sees them as unique, as dramatic, as never expressed
before,
And yet I hear the same themes, repeating and
repeating –
The terrible marches of war and slaughter;
The lullabies of lovers and mothers and the newly
born;
The strong rhythms of the pioneers and merchants
and the builders;
The excitement and the sadness of the young;
The disappointments of the old;
The rumble of natural disasters, of flood and famine,
Fire and earthquake;
And the low song of death,
Singing its slow counter-theme below them all,
Singing and singing.
Each movement is the same and each is different,
And the heart is broken and the heart is fulfilled,
And the babies become men and women and have their
babies
And so it all goes on.
Loneliness and love, failure and success, loss and gain,
Pleasure and pain, again and again.
So it has been, so it is and so it will be,
The great symphony playing itself to itself,
Playing itself to us and to the universe,
Until the last syllable of recorded time,
Or playing, perhaps forever,
Because it is so true and so painful and so beautiful.

Marjorie Pizer



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TOO MUCH VARNISH

written by Cecile Yazbek

Sydney, I read somewhere, has the biggest New Year's Eve fireworks display in the world, on the planet and if there're no other competitors out there, in the universe. For the largest landmass with the smallest population per square kilometre, that's an awful lot of bang for our buck. These superlatives make me wonder how we as Australians identify ourselves: bravest, kindest, cleverest? We'd never say cruellest, stingiest, weakest – usually we highlight the positives in our national characteristics.

With such thoughts, I remembered the last year-end letters that a few still sent enclosed in cheerful festive cards or behind jingling email attachments. Some of them stay with me: as the saying goes, people will not remember how rich and successful you were as much as how you made them feel.

An elderly couple wrote a cheery letter about their grandchildren and an interesting local trip with scant mention of their battles to remain functioning despite escalating medical challenges.

A cousin, who's been widowed twice, wrote of her children's successes despite their difficulty coming to terms with the loss of two fathers.

A friend wrote of the comfort in their family gathering to support a daughter, herself the mother of an infant and a toddler, through major surgery for a life-threatening illness.

Because these letters contained light and shade, on face-to-face meeting, a conversation followed with ease. Balance makes us feel steady, enables us to appreciate all sides of a story and extends friendship between the author and recipient, even if they're far apart.

There was one letter last year that surpassed even its bragging from the previous years. Containing pictures of the glossy retirees just over sixty, yet retired for decades, in exotic locations, it looked like a brochure from an exclusive travel agency for the not-so-young super-rich. In more than



half of that year, they experienced tropical islands, North America, South America, Africa and Europe, ubiquitously smiling with five-star food, everything first class and glowing. There is no mention of the social fabric or any of the local people in those places – six-star hotels abound in countries with a vast impoverished underclass. The letter concluded with a single item of personal news: both their daughters were 'engaged to top earners'.

I'm not averse to a few pagan pleasures but the gloating tone in this last one, with its *look at us, how fantastic are we*

“ There is no mention of the social fabric or any of the local people in those places – six-star hotels abound in countries with a vast impoverished underclass. ”

in this luxurious life left me feeling empty and a bit afraid. What would happen if an accident emptied their coffers? A friend, part of their Team-Triumphant lifestyle, ended his life a few years ago leaving a wife and teenage kids when the wherewithal disappeared in a financial miscalculation.

This pair is losing some of their less affluent friends from the small circle that they are able to maintain in their long absences from home. A mutual friend remarked to me how *OTT that last letter* was – shorthand sounded less nasty than saying *over the top*. In some cultures, fear of the evil eye, a great social leveller, prevents such boasting.

Like social media, in a Christmas letter we can present an image that we create for others to see; the letter may be

the only communication shared from year to year. When my year has been filled with all sorts of welcome and unwelcome experiences, unadulterated glory-stories from friends leave a bitter aftertaste. Such a condensed brag may fit the culture of the firework season, but not its spirit.

These thoughts take me to a scene in Michael McGirr's book, *Things you get for free* when he and his mother on a European trip ate '...a massive Chinese takeaway. It wasn't the most delicate cuisine that Paris has to offer, but it did the job. It took up all the room in us which might otherwise have been left for unruly emotions to occupy.' *

That letter crammed with perfect picture postcard moments, prompted me to think about what uncontrollable feelings were given no space in that pair of lives and on those holidays. My irritation gave way to sadness and the conviction that no matter what we think we know about ourselves and what we want others to think they know



about us, too much varnish kills authenticity. Recipients are left with a bundle of unruly feelings that the author has not owned, just as I was when I read that letter.

*Page 284 *Things you get for free* Michael McGirr Picador 2000 Sydney



‘BRING HIM HOME, BRING HIM HOME . . .’

written by Richard White

This title is from the musical ‘Les Miserables’. It is a haunting refrain and sometimes used at funerals. ‘Bring him home, bring him home . . .’ could well have been the refrain of the families and friends who gathered at Richmond airforce base on June 1, 2016 for the two C-17 A transport planes to arrive. They were carrying the remains of thirty three service personnel and family members who had died overseas, in action or as support. The cost of repatriation was considered too great at the time of their deaths and the deceased, many of them Vietnam veterans, were buried at Terendak Military Cemetery in Malaysia and Kranji War Cemetery in Singapore.

‘Bring him home . . .’ had been a constant refrain for Mrs Sara Ferguson. Her husband, David Brian, had been killed in the communist insurrection of the 1960’s, up near the Thai-Malaysian border. Mrs Ferguson and her now-husband, Major General Ferguson, had worked hard for the return to Australia of David Brian and the other Australians whose families longed for their return.

‘Lest we forget’, like any ritual, can lose its power with familiarity. However, behind this remembering, a daily practice in RSL clubs, there is an awareness that the deaths of soldiers and sailors, air force men and women, have a meaning that is deeply significant for us all.

There’s a romanticising, certainly, but there is also something that can touch us deeply, unconsciously, by this

particular remembering. Those deaths, those bodies and that ‘dust’ have become precious to us because of how and why they died. The World War I poem by Rupert Brooke, ‘The Soldier’, expresses this well.

If I should die think only this of me:
That there is some corner of a foreign field
That is forever England. There shall be
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;
A dust whom England bore . . .

These are dated lines and by a sentimental Englishman, but they have a ring of truth. Why else would there be

“ . . . there is an awareness that the deaths of soldiers and sailors, air force men and women, have a meaning that is deeply significant for us all. ”

those pilgrimages to war cemeteries overseas, to Bomana in Papua New Guinea, to Gallipoli and France? Successive generations have visited these sacred sites and honoured these so often youthful dead.

While we may rightly be a little cynical about politicians who can speak so easily about sacrifice when the realities of war are far from noble and glorious, there remains a truth that we instinctively identify. The giving of one’s life, a death in the service of one’s country has a power to touch us. This was the experience of the staff of W N Bull Funerals who assisted in the repatriation ceremony at Richmond air base.

It was a solemn occasion and a complex one. There were thirty three hearses involved, seven from W N Bull. The drivers and the vehicles were stationed in a huge hangar as the planes carrying the coffins arrived.

The drivers heard the planes land. Then, there was silence. They could see nothing of what was being done on the air strip. Eventually the great doors were opened. Military precision and ritual, and a prior rehearsal, ensured that the procession from the planes to the hearses was accomplished with due reverence and solemnity.

‘It was quite emotional’, one of the W N Bull drivers, Brett, told me, ‘but there was more to come’. The line of hearses, eight hundred metres in length, made its way from Richmond towards Parramatta. It was not the traditional



reduced speed of the normal funeral. There were police motor cycle outriders, at times perilously close to the swiftly moving hearse.

“ There were tears and attention, a stilling that marked the experience we have only now and again when our own thoughts fall away . . . ”

‘I was concentrating intently and there were two or three close shaves’, Brett explained. But, as the hearses approached Parramatta, the drivers could see the crowds. People were stopping and lining the streets. There were tears and attention, a stilling that marked the experience we have only now and again when our own thoughts fall away, the event holds us, something important, even sacred is

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happening. Those who served and died are coming home.
Brett and his colleagues from the funeral staff involved
all spoke of this occasion with respect and awe. As I
listened to them, I caught their emotion and wonder. I
thought again about the nature of sacrifice, the giving of

one's life for others. I recalled the words of Sydney Carton,
a character in Charles Dickens' novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*.
The story is set towards the end of the eighteenth century,
during the Revolution in France. Carton is a brilliant lawyer,
an Englishman who has squandered his life in frivolous
activities, gambling and drink. He loves a young woman
whose fiancée, an expatriate Frenchman, is lured back to
France and arrested and due to be executed.

“ We are all fragile
and vulnerable in
the face of death. ”

Carton bears a likeness to the Frenchman and goes to
Paris with the intention of tricking the man into changing
places with him. The switch takes place and Carton dies to
save the life of another. His words have a ring about them
that convey something of what sacrifice means:

A far, far better thing I do than I have ever done;
it is a far, far better place I go to than I have ever
known . . .

These are not words we can ascribe to the men and
women brought home the other day. But, they are words
that hint and suggest why people might stand still in a
busy street, be brought to tears and wonder at the effect of
thirty three coffins, thirty three hearses and the ritual and
ceremony of a repatriation.

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SEEING EYE TO EYE

written by Richard White

People who frequent art galleries tell me it happens to them. It does not have to be a special event like an Old Masters exhibition. It can be an off-the-cuff wander, an impulse to 'have a look'; something stops you, they say.

An image, combination of colours, a line and you're caught. That painting or sculpture grabs you; the casual distraction is over; in that moment the rest of the world falls away; there's a meeting and that's all that matters. For me, it was a couple of photos.

The girl with the bull was the first of them. I have never met Lauren, the girl in the photo. Her aunt has a calendar Lauren made and this photo featured, a month early this year. I saw it by chance and asked for a copy.

It has nothing to do with 'Beauty and the Beast', although there is an element of that. The image is of a young girl, completely relaxed, kneeling. She's beautiful and comfortable and perfectly still. Close, too close, there's

another figure, also kneeling. He's massive, powerful. If there's a hint of innocence and delicacy in the girl, this brute breathes the wild air of the bull ring, the Minotaur myths, an untameable power.

Certainly, all that is there is part of the impact. It's like the emotional setting, the necessary context for something more wonderful still; they are looking at one another, eye to eye.

Lauren's aunt told me Lauren has a way with animals. This 'way with animals' seems an inadequate expression. There's a connection here, a meeting. That massive animal has been brought to its knees not by violence or cruelty or brute force. Whatever it is, and I hesitate to give it name, the



conventional, commercial and dismissive chasm between us and this magnificent animal has collapsed in this photo. There is a oneness that is magic.

The second photo is of Leon, the eight year old boy and Otto, his cousin's dog. Like many a child raised in the city, Leon is uncomfortable around animals, particularly dogs. The Leon I knew would never get this close to a dog and particularly one the size of Otto. This photo amazed me.

“ When he saw
the dog from the
family car, Leon
was reluctant
to get out. ”

Leon's mother explained a little of what happened the day Leon met Otto. When he saw the dog from the family car, Leon was reluctant to get out. It took considerable urging and assurances to persuade the boy to enter the house where Otto lived. At that stage, such a photo as this seemed highly unlikely.

I do not know what went on in the course of the day. Maybe Otto was not boisterous like other smaller dogs Leon had encountered; maybe a mutual respect grew through distance and caution. Whatever of that, this photo captures a moment of focus and attentive seeing.

The expression eye-to-eye indicates agreement, but there is more than agreement here. There is seeing, more than looking. This eye-to-eye-ness is what happens when the other person, animal or thing ceases to be an object of my curiosity, fear or desire. He or she, whoever or whatever they are, are just here, there, present. They've grabbed me and held me, like that painting in the gallery, and I'm more than happy to be grabbed and held.

For, there is a mysterious mutuality in the gazing of the young girl and the boy; they are gazing, transfixed and so are the bull and the dog. It as if they recognize and know one another. There is a real meeting.

These photos are a reminder to me of those moments when I have seen eye-to-eye, when something or someone I have previously ignored or judged or feared appears in a new light. Something falls away and I see and am seen. At that moment, we are who we really are for one another, without the masks and distortions of ordinary life. There is this recognition and meeting. This does happen and Lauren and Leon are assurances that it can happen again . . . and again.

written by Richard White

For Christmas, when I was a child, my parents used to buy me books. The pillow case at the end of my bed on Christmas morning had sharp, square corners. There was *Lion Annual*, *Coles Picture Books* and ‘Boys’ Own’ stories. I would enter these worlds, adventure, success, triumph and humour. The world outside and beyond would fade and I would be happy.

In his book *The Sacred Journey, A Memoir of Early Days*, Frederick Buechner describes this childish experience as ‘Once Below a Time’. It was a time when fantasy and timelessness combined. It was a time, too, when images and feelings were laid down, the substance and the agenda, the nourishment and the seeds, for that ‘Sacred Journey’.

And, I can understand Madeleine Pizzuti writing her book, *Tell Me A Story, Memories of a Happy Childhood Spent In the Fens*. Madeleine now lives in Sydney, but her book is a collection of stories from her time growing up in England in the Fens district.

The Fens were a marshy wet land on the east coast. Descriptions of the area compare it to the Netherlands, subject to flooding and with distinctive grasses and land forms; towns were sited on ‘islands’, surrounded by the flat, flood prone plain. It was the place of



TELL ME A STORY MEMORIES OF A HAPPY CHILDHOOD IN THE FENS

BY MADELEINE PIZZUTI

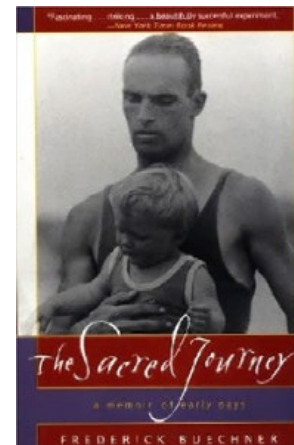
Madeleine’s childhood where her ‘memories and feeling’ were laid down.

‘Once Below a Time’ is the place of angels and fairies; it is the place, too, of demons and terrible darkness. For, where children are meant to swim in the safety and wonder of discovery and sensation, we know that disaster and loss can create chaos and fear. There are a mixture of both places in these two stories.

A book like Madeleine’s is an affirmation of childhood, a series of illustrations or reminders of how simple and rich memories from this period can be. Perhaps because it is ‘below time’, when moments and images, smells and feelings were so often still and endless, this is why stories from this time have a particular power.

“ It is that innocence of childhood where enjoyment and wonder are not unsettled by tomorrow or how long? ”

The childhood of ‘once below a time’ was one of timelessness, a glimpse of eternity. There was less ‘before and after’ and much more ‘now’. Buechner describes a memory



THE SACRED JOURNEY A MEMOIR OF EARLY DAYS

BY FREDERICK BUECHNER

of a summer evening, running across the green grass through the glittering of fire flies. It is that innocence of childhood where enjoyment and wonder are not unsettled by tomorrow or how long? I remember a moment like this.

“ ‘Well, if we’re going, you better shake a leg!’ It was a spontaneous and for me uncharacteristic response, I reached up and kissed him. ”

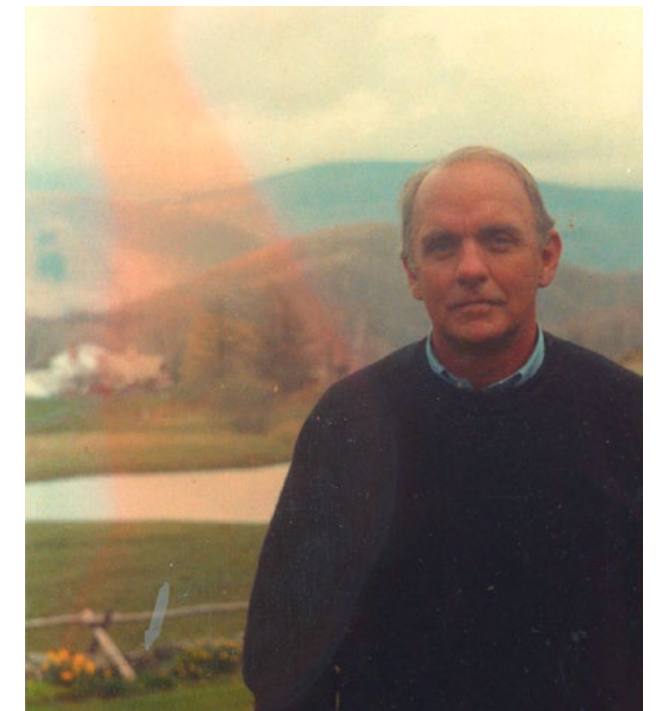
I was probably a bit older than the boy in Frederick’s story of the summer evening. It was the late afternoon. I had been pestering my mother about going to see an AFL match that evening. This was the time of night games at the end of the main season, a consolation for teams that had missed the finals. I dearly wanted to go but would have to wait until my father returned from work to find out, so my mother told me.

As usual, my father went into the kitchen to greet my mother when he got home. There was a conversation, then he called me in. ‘Well, if we’re going, you better shake a leg!’ It was a spontaneous and for me uncharacteristic response, I reached up and kissed him.

This memory has stayed with me, as did Buechner’s. It was a moment of unrestrained affection, untainted by time or reflection. Even now, and in the context of another person’s story, the significance of this moment lingers and continues to unfold its meaning.

As I’m writing this, on an overcast Sunday morning, the fire smouldering, I remember another vivid memory of my father. It would fall into the next chapter of Buechner’s book, ‘Once Upon a Time’.

My father had dementia, not the personality destroying Alzheimer’s Disease, but the short-term memory loss and mental impairment. However, he was there, alright, slow and different; but strangely more peaceful and alert than he had been for some years.



It was just before Christmas, at the nursing home where he now lived. My mother was visiting him for the first time since she had recovered from surgery; it was a reunion and a Christmas party in the gardens of the home.

The children from the local school were singing Christmas carols and Santa, a male staff member duly attired, appeared. Santa stopped by my father where we were sitting and handed him a bell. ‘Here you are, Bill, you ring this as I hand out the presents!’

I was stressed, feeling particularly the helplessness of seeing my father in care and now this clown was treating him like a child! It was then that my father picked up the bell and I’m sure he winked at me.

That wink said it all. ‘Relax, son, it’s OK, it’s all OK’ For want of a better word, it was a blessing, an embracing moment of affection and comforting, a shared intimacy that I’ve never forgotten.

That's what I mean about stories. They move back and forth through our lives, gathering and rising and linking. They are our instinctive efforts to make sense of our lives and the lives of the ones we love; they have their roots in

“ Buechner buried this event for years; he spoke of his father's death to people later in life as ‘a heart attack’.”

‘once below a time’ when we may not have had the words; they flower and blossom when the telling of stories is all we have and all we want. This was particularly the case from my experience of funerals.

When I used to visit families as a funeral celebrant to assist them to plan a funeral service, I would ask them to tell about the person who had died. I was a stranger; I had heard none of the stories. Sometimes the story telling would begin slowly and at other times there was a constant stream of anecdotes. As the stories were told, a pattern or image would form in my mind. The name on my reference sheet would gradually become a person.

This process would often take me back to a poem I have often quoted in *Dialogue*, ‘People’ by Yevgeny Yevtushenko.

No people are uninteresting.
Their fate is like the chronicle of planets.

Nothing in them is not particular,
And planet is dissimilar from planet.

We tell stories to bring people to life; we tell stories to bring ourselves to life. Life or living is about bringing together the timeless moments of childhood and the time-filled, time-threatened years between birth and death.

In Buechner's book, the timeless moments are peopled by memories of his father,

When he came to say good-night, he would give my brother Jamie and me what he called a ‘hard kiss’, which was all sandpapery whiskers and snorts and struggle. I remember sitting in the front seat of a car, with him and my mother up front, singing songs like ‘Me and My Shadow’ and ‘That's My Weakness Now’, remember eating dark Swiss chocolate and salty French bread with him on the long drives he took us on sometimes. . .

Then, one morning when Frederick and his brother were playing quietly in their room before the house came to life, his father looked in at the door, just for a moment; the boys hardly noticed. Shortly afterwards, there was a cry from downstairs. The boys opened the door to their room to the news that their father had thrown himself from the top storey of the house. Childhood was over; responsibility, concern and grief had begun.

Buechner buried this event for years; he spoke of his father's death to people later in life as ‘a heart attack’. However, as his memoir shows, the memory lived and worked and emerged, just as those happier memories did.

All our memories, like all our stories, all of our life are interconnected, interwoven. These memories contain our secret, the mystery that we smile at or weep over when we do our own reflecting and the reminiscing that is so important in preparing a funeral.



Madeleine and Frederick do their reminiscing in their own ways and for different reasons. However, they both show us the importance of story-telling and are encouragers for us to do something similar, in our ways and in our own time.

NANNY'S JELLY CUBES

written by Madeleine Pizzuti

The dull white, lace curtains hung limp in my grandmother's window. It was a familiar sight as my brother Mark, and I turned the corner at the almshouses on our way home from school. Nanny's small cottage was our first stop, where we would receive a ‘grandmotherly’ kiss and hug, a slice of bread and honey and a thr'penny piece to send us on our way.

“Stop treading on my heels!” I scowled at Mark – six years my junior – who was following in my footsteps – literally that is! I grabbed his hand and together we marched our way down the hill towards Nanny's small wooden gate. It gave the usual drawn-out squeak as I pushed it open against the prickly, untrimmed hedge.

“Are you there Nanny?” I called out through the slightly open door.

“Is that you, Madeleine?” came the jolly-sounding reply from my grandmother.

As I heard the steady shuffle of her feet on the stone kitchen floor, a fleeting thought came to me of what it would be like when I may one day call out and she wouldn't call back. I dismissed that thought the moment I saw her cheerful smile appear around the door. Mark flung his arms around her apron and she clasped his face between her weathered hands and planted a huge kiss on top of his dishevelled head of hair. “Hello Nanny,” I said, as I hugged her small frame. She hugged me tightly and then looked straight at my face.

“What's the matter with you? – you don't look right.”

“It's him,” I declared – pointing to Mark. “He's been annoying me all the way from school – treading on my heels on purpose!”

“Oh, he's only a child, poor thing. I'm sure he didn't mean any harm – did you love?” And taking my brother's hand she walked in towards the warm, coal fire burning in the living room.



“Come on in and sit yourselves by the fire, until your father gets here. It's bitterly cold out there. I wouldn't be surprised if we have some snow soon.”

Mark stuck out his tongue at me just as Nanny reached down for the poker to stir the fire. I quickly pulled a face back at him before she turned around to sit in her armchair.

“Nanny, did you ever fight with your brothers and sisters?” I enquired, as she settled herself smoothing down her apron over her knees.

“Of course – Oooh! we had some fights we did. There were eleven of us – eight boys and three girls. Annie would always pick a fight with the boys – tease them she would. I'd always have to come to the rescue. I remember one day when ...”

I listened attentively whilst Nanny relived the memory of her days as a child. This was the part of visiting Nanny that I loved the most – her stories.

The heat of the burning coals had already made a red mark on my legs by the time the storytelling had come to an end. I remained by the fire staring into the embers trying to make shapes out of the red hot coals.

“Where's your brother got to? I bet he's in my pantry looking for food.”

I followed Nanny from the warmth of the living room into the cold of the kitchen.

“BOO!” shouted Mark, jumping out from behind the old pantry door.

“For goodness sake – you frightened the life out of me!”

What are you doing in there, anyway?” cried Nanny.
“I’m looking for some cake – have you got any?” enquired Mark.
“No, I haven’t done any baking this week,” came the reply.
“Let me in there and I’ll see what I can find for you.” And she disappeared inside the pantry leaving Mark and I waiting expectantly for some goodies to appear. We waited and waited - our eyes glued to the pantry door, behind which we heard jars being shuffled about and packets shaken.
Eventually Nanny emerged from inside the pantry holding a small packet of something or other.
“Here, I’ve got nothing else to give you that’s sweet – this will have to do for now.” And on the kitchen table she placed a packet of raspberry flavoured jelly cubes.
“What’s that Nanny, is it sweets?” my brother asked, turning the packet over and over with his small hands.
“Oh, they’re sweet alright,” came the reply, and Nanny proceeded to open the packet containing twelve red, wobbly, dissolvable jelly cubes. Before we could say anything she had pulled two cubes apart from the rest and gave one to me and one to Mark.
“They’re very wobbly,” said Mark, jiggling the cube around on the palm of his hand.



Nanny’s apron!
“Oh my goodness!” exclaimed Nanny, “It must have been the jelly cube.”
“Is he alright, Daddy?” I enquired as I knelt down beside them on the cold, stone floor.
“He’ll be fine. He just needs a drink of water.”



The drama of the day had long passed when we waved goodbye to Nanny standing at her gate. Mark and I clambered into Daddy’s car – sliding along the vinyl covered front seat next to him.
As we drove off I turned to him, “It really was lucky that you came to the rescue today Daddy?” He smiled.
“Thank you Daddy,” came the small, grateful voice of my brother sitting between us.
“You’re welcome. Just remember though, you two, no more jelly cubes – alright?”

“ I listened attentively whilst Nanny relived the memory of her days as a child. ”

“Just eat it,” I said, as I popped mine into my mouth.
“Look! It’s even wobbling in my mouth,” he mumbled, as he danced around the kitchen like a clown.
There we both stood - Nanny with her hands on her hips, and me chewing on my jelly cube, smiling at the antics of my brother – ‘the clown,’ when suddenly Mark began to cough. It was a choking cough. I hurried over to him and patted him violently on his back – but he coughed more and more.
“He’s choking Nanny, he’s choking!” I screamed.
“Aye up, what’s all the screaming about?” came a familiar voice from the door.
“Daddy, Daddy!” I cried. “Mark’s choking”.
At once my father took charge and rushed over to Mark, who by now was on his knees gasping for air. He promptly grabbed him from under his armpits, placed him on his lap and with both his arms around his middle, he gave him an almighty thump on his stomach. Whatever was in Mark’s mouth came hurtling out and landed in a big red mess on

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