



Issue 74 Summer 2016

Dialogue

WN BULL

Contents

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Under the Christmas Star

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Editorial

'There are parts of the human heart that do not exist until suffering enters and bring them into existence'. This is a quote from a Frenchman, Leon Bloy. I came across his words years ago; every now and again they pop up and seem fitting for what I am thinking or writing. It seemed a strange quotation for the Summer or Christmas editorial; this is a joyful, celebratory occasion, surely.

This *Dialogue*, however, is about 'parts of our hearts coming into existence'. I am sure that is the message of Christmas, too. There's line from one of Michael Leunig's prayers that captures this thought:

*Love is born
with a dark and troubled face
when hope is dead
and in the most unlikely place . . .*

The men at W N Bull Funerals who carry out the day-to-day service of a funeral are human beings like you and me. Seeing them in their smart suits and shining shoes on a funeral, or heavy boots and work gear cleaning cars and preparing coffins, one might think they are just part of the process of making a funeral 'happen'. In fact, it is what goes on in the hearts of the men wearing the smart suits or work gear that brings presence and compassion and humanity to a funeral.



Richard White

It's humanity, too, that Jesse Campbell Brown brought to Number 37 and discovered in the person of Bradley. Amid the dust and the dilapidation something new came into being. And for Rob Greenop, Uncle Dick comes alive in his story of friendship over generations.

Erica does what Erica does so well, navigates the choppy waters of the past to bring her sister and herself safely home. It is the gift of the writer, making of connections, really seeing what is there and allowing the story to unfold.

Cecile Yazbek illustrates all this as she does her 'looking around'. We all have 'our man in the ute with his dog', someone who catches our attention even momentarily. Something in us comes into existence then, maybe curiosity or concern or fellow-feeling. If we are 'looking around' we are never really alone nor are the people in our world completely isolated.

Leigh Bowden and Richard White have something in common; the magnolia is about celebrating life in remembering a death and for Leigh life and death are inseparable. In both cases, an anniversary and an almost-dying, there emerges a richer, more appreciative humanity.

Rosalind Bradley's *a matter of life and death* is a wonderful book; I cannot recommend it too highly. 'A matter of life and death', a mysterious seriousness that gives substance and strength to the joy of Christmas, where love is born, love is always born, to quote Michael Leunig.

Wishing all our *Dialogue* readers a blessed Christmas, from Patsy Healy and all of us at WN Bull.



ON THE FRONT LINE

THE FUNERAL STAFF

written by Richard White

My Irish daughter-in-law was talking with me about ‘The Year of Three Funerals’. A couple of years ago, she recalled the deaths of three members of her family, in close succession. ‘Funerals are important events in Ireland; you would never miss the funeral of a family member or close friend’.

Her comment was prompted by my discussing a conversation I had had with the funeral staff at WN Bull Funerals. Roisin went on, ‘I paid close attention to the funeral staff; they were very professional.’ ‘In fact’, she said, ‘They were so good, they were almost invisible!’

That’s all very well, I thought, but what does it feel like to be ‘almost invisible’? What impact does this sort of work have on the men and women who do it? In this case, I had a list of questions that I had given to the eight men who conduct, prepare and accompany families on a funeral.

“ Then, there was the not-so-obvious, but possibly most important element – the personal experience and response to the funeral itself. ”

Think about a funeral, or a couple of funerals, that have left strong impressions on you.

What was it about this funeral, or these funerals, that was special?

Would you describe some funerals as ‘better’ than others, and if so, why?

What part do you play in the smooth running of a funeral?

What have you learnt about death from working with a funeral company?

What have you learnt about grief from being with friends and families on funerals?

There were various levels of experience and role in the group: experienced conductors, skilled embalmers, relative newcomers to the profession, drivers of hearses and cars, all with knowledge of mortuary procedures, all acquainted with the details of cleaning and preparing and planning that are a part of every funeral. Then, there was the not-so-obvious, but possibly most important element – the personal experience and response to the funeral itself.



There was little hesitation when we met; the men all had something to say and they listened respectfully to one another. There were no ‘experts’. Despite the differing years of service, what was important was the honest, personal response. And, how often do you have a group of men talking about death or of being deeply moved, or shocked or shattered?

The tragic, cruel and unexpected nature of death and the subsequent funerals have left their mark. These men have carried the coffins of young children, murder

victims, people who have committed suicide, young wives or husbands, homeless and unmourned people as well as those much loved, long-lived and celebrated ones. Professionalism requires composure and dignity; humanity draws forth the emotion and honesty of our conversation.

The tradition of WN Bull Funerals demands the reserve and quiet attentiveness my Irish daughter-in-law so admired. But, these men are not robots or ceremonial

“ Underlying the telling of stories and emotions expressed was the fact that they were first and foremost human beings with a need and desire to preserve and develop this humanity. ”

functionaries. Underlying the telling of stories and emotions expressed was the fact that they were first and foremost human beings with a need and desire to preserve and develop this humanity.

In the descriptions of tragic funerals, there was a sense that recognizing the loss and the pain was very important. We all have our different defences against pain. We can ward it off with distancing and detachment, medication and avoidance. At times, this is all we can do. As funeral staff, such defences can be necessary to maintain appropriate responses and behaviour. However, allowing ourselves to be vulnerable, capable of experiencing and understanding a little of the terrible grief of others is how we remain human ourselves and how we grow in our humanity.

Then, someone spoke about the importance of ‘presence’. I understood this to mean more than being attentive to the needs of the family. Presence was something undefinable. It was a way of ‘being there’ for someone that could change the inner meaning of a funeral. One of the men told a story that seemed to illustrate this ‘presence’.

There was a burial at a cemetery and there was no one attending the funeral. From the description, the men carried the coffin to the grave with the dignity and respect they would if there was a crowd in attendance. They stood

for a moment or two before lowering the coffin, then each of them scattered rose petals as so often happens.

“ This seemed yet another example of importance of accepting our humanity on ever deeper levels. ”

This was a funeral that left a strong impression on the man who told the story. He and his colleagues were present, there for the deceased person. There was no fanfare, not obvious demonstrations of grief. As far as I know, there was not a discussion about what to do or how to be. I think this might be what the man meant by ‘presence’.

There are defined roles and responsibilities in the funeral team. The movement and procedures requires alertness and confidence. Respect for the family and awareness that a funeral is a ‘once-off’ and there are no second chances adds to the seriousness of the preparation; it also generates

an inevitable and significant stress, especially for the conductor of a funeral.

Stories were told of what could go wrong and what did, on occasion, go wrong. I was aware of the stress and the challenge that such mistakes or accidents could be for the conductor and the team. This seemed yet another example of importance of accepting our humanity on ever deeper levels.

When a mistake occurs, there is little room for explanations or defensiveness. This is a highly charged emotional situation; explanations can wait until later. What people need at this moment is this presence we have been discussing and an ability to be vulnerable and



open to the distress of a family. It goes without saying that calmness and ingenuity are essential as are the gathering of resources to find some solution, however inadequate. The demands of this work, like many others, have an impact, often described as ‘occupational hazards’.

We talked about particular professions that had a high incidence of depression and suicide. Some of these involved direct exposure to trauma, such [as] the police, the military and the medical profession.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) has become a common diagnosis if not explanation of distressing symptoms. It is possible that working in the funeral industry could expose people to this sort of hazard. However, the brief conversation I had with the WN Bull staff suggested less obvious manifestations of occupational hazard.

The daily exposure to death and grief can lead to a more keenly developed defensiveness. It is possible that person could become more distant and detached in this work. Such detachment, far from ensuring peace of mind, could create the exact opposite – an out-of-sort-ness and dissatisfaction and an inability to express or speak of this confusion. This is why our conversation was so important; defensiveness leads to isolation, conversation creates community. There was a story that brought this home to me.

A friend of one of the staff had died and WN Bull Funerals had been entrusted with her funeral. The staff member had been invited to assist in the transfer of the deceased person from the hospital back to the premises at Newtown. With some nervousness, he had agreed; his colleagues knew of the significance to him of this event.

My memory was of the man describing the attending at the hospital, completing transfer details and ‘bringing the body of his friend home to our mortuary’. It was the word ‘home’ that struck me.

“ There are occupational hazards, but there are also the satisfactions and the blessings. ”

When he and his companion arrived back and entered the mortuary, there was a white rose on the table. It was a simple gesture, a welcoming and acknowledgement; the significance of this transfer was not lost; the routine, necessary task had added meaning, recognized and shared.



I don’t want to exaggerate or romanticize. Funeral work is often mundane, repetitive – the daily cleaning of cars, the driving and preparing and checking, the shiny shoes and the boots and work gear, the inevitable irritations... There are occupational hazards, but there are also the satisfactions and the blessings.

We didn’t address one of my later questions: ‘What would you say to someone interested in working in the funeral industry?’ On a good day or after the conversation I have described, I wondered if the answer might include – ‘You learn a lot about people, a lot about life and death and a lot about yourself. That’s enough for me.’



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There was a lot of new around.

A lot of glass and chrome veranda and high flat walls, rendered and painted the colour of sand. Or stone. Flowers trailing between the high tension wires of entranceway patios, comfortable behind the thick rough trunks of the tall sprawling palms, manicured coast rosemary and topiaried fig. Wide driveways; fancy cars parked in front of double garages. Privacy, exclusion and a guarantee of the best possible view from any floor. This was repeated down the street, with minor variations. No two alike, but all the same.

Number 37 sits amidst them, quite happily old it would seem; perhaps a little tired. Untidy branches pull at my hat and get caught against the mop handle jutting from the bucket; roots have undermined the large slabs of concrete path, now turning their noses up and wanting nothing more of one another.

I rest the bucket down on the loose and chipped porch mosaic of brown, tan and beige. The few places where the white paint on the posts hasn't faded, cracked or peeled, appear to have dry rot.

It is stinking out. It's early still, just coming up for 9am, but the heat is already oppressive.

Now, it's not actually my house, the text message had said. My Uncle Bradley currently lives there and will let you in. Feel free to contact me if you have any questions.

Bradley answers the door long enough after my initial knock to allow a return trip to the car to retrieve the vacuum cleaner and a mid-size purple garbage bag. And to give a second knock.

Still partially sun blinded, the inside of the house behind the fly-screen of the security gate is dark and Bradley is another, paler, shadow. Thick glasses on a round face reflect the limited light that has managed to enter the door.

'Are you the cleaner?' he says.

I tell him that I am, and that I just need to pop back to the car for a few more things.

Bradley says okay, and I make another quick and crouched round-trip of the garden path.

The hydraulic wheezes pathetically and the gate bounces a bit before settling, requiring just a light pull to properly close it behind me. Bradley has gone.

I swap my sunglasses for my seeing glasses. The deep blue carpet and the skirting-board-to-picture-rail dark, wood panelling are suffocating in dust. Even with the nicotine curtains pulled open on the only window in the room - only foot high, and way above the picture rail - the layer of pale grey felt is obvious.

In the corner at the far end, beside the door through to



NUMBER 37

written by Jesse Campbell Brown

the kitchen, a small flat telly sits on a small side cabinet. Other than a white striped rug that looks thrown down as an afterthought, there is nothing else in the room.

There are two equally bare rooms off this one, both equally dusty. In one, curtains, like a huge stained doily are wrapped carelessly around a white plastic rod, laying discarded on the floor under one of the windows. In the other, a single boxspring bed against the wall has been draped with a bright blue mohair blanket. The slip-less pillow and undressed mattress look sweaty and used. At one end of a low, long, side table, a plastic plant sits in a plastic china vase. A low square side table of the same design is stacked, step-like, at the other and an old snow globe containing a poorly painted nativity scene is perched on top.

I take a minute to open some curtains, and render any number of tiny spiders homeless.

The single chair at the dining table, sits at an angle. Rudimentary signs of life, tea and toast by the small appliances, have been scattered and dripped across the otherwise clean kitchen, like a precautionary trail in a Brothers Grimm tale, hinting at the way back home. 'Home' appeared to be through another door, off the sunroom beyond the kitchen.

I hope it all goes ok this morning, the text had said. You should be able to get through it within an hour. Bradley will likely hang around. He has a mild disability so may seem anxious, but he's harmless. Call me for anything. I live nearby.

The carpet in this room is a mangy dog, balding and scabbed. The bookcase is empty and the wicker chair by the window is a death-trap. Bradley sits at a desk with his back to the door, in the far corner of the small room. He doesn't move and I am not sure he is aware I am behind him. Constellations of blue-tac and used chewing gum pattern the walls around the desk to the ceiling.

The kitchen and bathroom are the least problematic, but not without their issues. I've given up on the stains in the toilet, and stopping the shower drip.

It's hard to guess how long Number 37 has existed like this, but I am probably safe in assuming it has been quite some time. Other than the very spare furnishings, the only

“ This half centimetre has been here since their mother finally died and the house grew quiet. ”

other things in the house are the layers of grot, and Bradley. They say dust is seventy-five to eighty percent dead skin cells. I try not to think about this too deeply as I get to work. Perhaps the dust here falls heavily and quickly. There is no evidence there was ever other furniture. No marks in the fluff on the pile. No indication there has ever been a picture hung. No hooks.

Pulling the TV away from the wall reveals a tangled web that the cracker crumbs and pistachio shells clearly could not escape. I empty the clear bag-less vacuum twice doing the living room and once after each bedroom. Only halfway through, and the purple garbage bag I brought for eventualities may not have been enough after all.

It's only once the vacuum stops whirring that I hear

a plastic popping and bending and a desperate gulping. Bradley is sweating at the fridge and has upended a bottle of water into his mouth. He must be in his mid-fifties. His tight collared t-shirt covers his round belly; his high, tight socks cover his calves. His shorts have belt-loops and the belt holds them halfway up his stomach. People are sometimes described as having a wide, plain face, which I never understood until now.

'What time are the people coming?' I ask.

'Dunno,' Bradley says, before he disappears through the sunroom again.

Rolling the white shag rug up in the sunroom has exposed holes in the ancient or sun damaged carpet. The rug will need a clean too, but I'll get to that in a minute. The worn blue foam underlay tears off in chunks as the vacuum head passes over it and gets stuck in the hose, blocking it. Sand and dirt and presumably all those skin flakes build up behind it. Removing the blockage leaves my fingers feeling grainy.

I watch the whirlwind of filth through the clear plastic, layering like sediment. That centimetre has been here since Bradley moved in years ago. This half centimetre has been here since their mother finally died and the house grew quiet. The next few centimetres cover the years that Bradley sat alone in the empty house, with a visit every other week from one member of his family or another, checking he was alright.

The house is up for sale and tomorrow is the Open House, the text had said. So it just needs a refresh. I won't be there 'til midday to look it over but trust it will be ok.

Bradley is nowhere to be seen, not even at his desk in the little back room. He may have gone down the steps outside from the rear porch into the split-level yard, but I can't be certain. Perhaps he's gone for a walk.

No. I have gone out to the porch to empty the vacuum cleaner again; the bag is filling quickly and there is bound to be some over flow soon. Bradley is sitting on the bottom step, in the garden, smoking. He seems happy. He doesn't come inside for another forty minutes.

I wonder if he knows that I am up doing [to] his room, and if he has decided to stay outside 'til I'm done.

I wonder if he is embarrassed that a stranger is seeing how he lives.

I wonder if *he* sees how he lives; *knows* how he lives.

I wonder if he even cares. I am, after all, a stranger.

The purple bag is fed another two loads, so thick I have to use my hands to scrape it from the filter. I am filled with quiet revulsion and a strange sadness as I move in to clean his quiet space at the back of the house. The air in here is thick and choking and, again, I try not to think of the seventy five to eighty percent dead skin.

The chewing gum is like a modern art installation,

suggesting isolation and freedom in equal amounts. It is shrine-like, and it doesn't feel right to even consider trying to tackle that job. Besides, there are only so many hours in the day.

“ I have a compulsion to make this house as comfortable as possible in its final days. To present it in its best possible light; put its best foot forward. ”

Bradley must be right handed. The surface of the desk is the give away; that side has become black and grey with a thick build up of cigarette ash and moisture, possibly from the occasional glass of something, perhaps a sweaty hand. Twills of pouch tobacco tumble across the desk in a faint breeze. The grime has become part of the wood grain and, like the toilet, there is only so much I can do.

The carpet in here is old and worn. In many places it simply disappears into the vacuum, leaving bald patches where only the hessian weave beneath can be seen.

It must have been a lovely home at one point but now, after apparent years of inattention or indifference, Number 37 is for sale.

In the early afternoon, when it finally comes blinking into the open, to be seen for the first time after decades in hiding, wealthy raptors will swoop in to tear it to pieces.

I have no doubt that Number 37 will be knocked down. Something shiny, smooth and tall will replace it and the fancy cars in the driveway across the road will be mirrored in this one.

In this regard, there is no real point to the work I have been doing here. A lit match and a can of petrol could have saved everybody time and effort, myself and the new owners alike.

I have been here two hours. Technically, I am done but I cannot leave just yet. I let Bradley's niece know I'm nearly finished but need a little more time, and would she like to come and have a look over the place around midday, as I'd probably still be here.

I'm so sorry it's taken longer than we thought, the text message says. I'm out right now but happy for you to finish up.

I fill the bucket, add detergent and take the layers of grime from the skirting boards and walls. The water turns black quickly and is changed three times.

I have a compulsion to make this house as comfortable as possible in its final days. To present it in its best possible light; put its best foot forward. Admittedly, it has a limp and may never dance again. I'm not sure which side is its good side either but I don't want the viewers mocking it; despising it, as no doubt they will anyway. If I can let them see even hint of what Number 37 was and could have been, rather than the way I found it, I will feel better.

It has now been three hours.

Bradley approaches me as I am packing up my things.

'You've done a great job,' he says. His voice is flat and unemotional but his eyes twinkle and he looks happy. He is smiling at me. I thank him and offer my hand, which he takes, and we shake. The job is done.

I leave Number 37 certain of its fate, but unsure of what the future will hold for Bradley. I am hopeful that he will find another desk to sit at and another wall to decorate however he sees fit.



A middle aged couple sit behind a gleaming glass balcony, enjoying the sunshine with pastries and coffee and watch me duck and weave back up the path to my old blue car. I load my mop, vacuum and bucket of gear into the boot and give them a little wave as I unlock the drivers-side door. They are still watching but completely ignore my wave and I cannot help but think this area might not be for Bradley or number 37 anymore.

Sometimes things just work out that way.

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UNCLE DICK

written by Rob Greenop

During the 40s and early 50s I grew up in a household with only my mother and sister – not uncommon in those days with many men off at war and perhaps not returning. In 1940 my parents became separated when my father, a doctor, remained behind to support the hospital system in Surrey while the rest of the family went to live in the comparative safety of Shropshire. When peace came in 1945 and we returned to London he and my mother remained apart, their marriage over. But I was fortunate, maybe more so than one of my friends whose father had died somewhere in Europe, in that for me during my growing up years I had my uncle Dick. He and my aunt Joan lived one house away from ours in Heatherset Gardens in Norbury, so he was always there for me.

If anybody fitted the role of a father-figure at this stage of my life it was he. My first memory of him was in 1942 when he married Joan – he in his lieutenant’s uniform and me, at the age of 6 dressed, as a page, in the white summer rig of a junior naval rating that had cost my mother a whole month’s clothing-coupon ration allowance. At the end of the war, during which he had commanded a minesweeper in the English Channel, he returned to his banking job with Barclays in the City. He was not an outgoing gregarious sort of person, just someone who resumed his old pre-war life with a quiet unassuming nature. For the next 35 years he travelled from Norbury to London Bridge Station and

back, every day of the week, probably catching the 8.10 ‘Up,’ and the 5.35 ‘Down,’ just another regular commuter seemingly content with living in the suburbs with his wife and two young daughters. He never had a son so maybe I filled a small vacant spot in his life.

During the next 10 years he provided me with a level of support which I could have expected from my father. Looking back it was an accumulation of little things that I now recognise as having made our relationship so meaningful for me. I had no tools of my own, no drills and saws and things, so I was allowed to borrow whatever I needed from his toolbox he kept in his garage, to try and



mend something I had broken, or should my efforts prove a failure he would fix things for me. On cold winter days, if it was a weekend and there was snow was on the ground, he would take me up to the top of Norwood Grove and we would both clamber on the old home built wooden sledge that I had found in my grandfather’s garage and slide down to the bottom of the hill, Dick laughing and enjoying himself as much as me. And there was the interest he took in my school life at Dulwich College, where he had also been a pupil some 28 years earlier.

“ He never had a son so maybe I filled a small vacant spot in his life. ”

Each year for as long as I can remember Dick took me to Earls Court for the annual ‘Schoolboys Own Exhibition,’ a mecca of excitement for the two of us. In my early teens, when I started to learn to play tennis at the Wigmore Lawn Tennis Club in Streatham he spent countless hours at the other end, patiently returning my wayward shots, or retrieving balls I had hit over the surrounding netting into adjacent gardens. When I had finally mastered the art of keeping the balls within the court we teamed up in the annual club tournament, one year coming close to winning the men’s doubles. And when I was old enough he taught me to drive in my mother’s old pre-war Vauxhall 10, which our two families shared until he and Joan were able to get their own when post-war cars became available. That I passed my test on the first attempt was undoubtedly due to his calmness and patience.

I was very fond of Dick and have many happy memories of him. During my 30 years of travelling around the world as an airline pilot, when slipping in London I would travel down to Norbury to see my mother and would always pop in next door to catch up with him and Joan. Even at the age of 70 he still played tennis but with the onset of Parkinson’s

that soon became a thing of the past. Slowly but surely he became more and more immobile but still retained the same old cheerful outlook on life. Eventually it became too difficult for Joan to look after him and he went into care, being brought home on Sundays for lunch with the family. Many times when my visit to Heatherset Gardens was on a Sunday I felt it a privilege to be able to drive him back to his nursing home later in the evening. It wasn’t much but it was some time together.

Perhaps my last and most endearing memory was in the last year of his life when, after lunch on a cold blustery day in early spring, I took him for a ‘Walk,’ in his wheelchair to the park at the top of the road. What inspired an act of near irresponsible madness I’m not sure, but at one stage, after talking of many things, we got onto the subject of Formula 1 car racing and found ourselves hurtling across the grass at high speed as though we were part of a Grand Prix, Dick laughing so much it was a real tonic for both of us. Tearing round imaginary corners on two wheels how he managed to stay in his wheelchair I shall never know and what any person may have thought on observing a sixty-three year old pushing an eighty year old around in such a fashion defies the imagination. We arrived back at his house, he with a sparkle in his eyes and red glowing cheeks and Joan asking what on earth had we been doing.

Later that night I took him back to his nursing home – the two of us still talking about how much fun the day had been.

That was the last time I saw Dick.

In memory of him, after he died, Joan asked me if I would like to have the old, somewhat tattered naval white ensign that he had flown from his minesweeper during those dangerous times in the English Channel. He had kept it for over 60 years, tucked away in a bottom drawer in his room. It had been one of his treasures, a reminder of the important role he had played during the war. It was something he had been very proud of and I would have loved to have taken care of it for him.



But I didn’t feel that was quite the right thing to do as it was more appropriate that one of his grandsons should be its custodian. I needed nothing else from Dick; I already had my own fond memories.

POET'S CORNER

Wiseman's Ferry

I first awoke
To the multitudinous cries of kookaburras
All along the wide river
Greeting the first dawn.
I awoke again with the sun striking my eyes
From over the mountains,
Calling me to be up and out
To the lush bush,
To the tall white gums,
To the prawn boats
And the old graveyard.

The dew lay thick and wet
On the long grass among the graves,
And my dog bounded over them
Chasing butterflies and bees.
The old gravestones are tilting and sinking
Under the earth of the hill –
Old bones mouldering in old earth,
Making new earth and new life.
I could lie on such a quiet hill
By such a still, deep river
When my time comes,
And have dogs chase butterflies and bees
Over my discarded bones.

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AT THE KITCHEN TABLE

written by Erica Greenop

It is June 2015. I am visiting my sister in England. We are reminiscing; it's what we do, now we are old, sitting at the kitchen table, remembering inconsequential things which have made our lives memorable. She puts her photo album on the table among the mugs and the Portmerion coffee pot with the purple wisteria motif. I pull my chair round and sit beside her.

"Sorry I haven't got any biscuits" she says. "I didn't think to get any in. Not very hospitable of me. I have forgotten about doing hospitable things like biscuits."

My sister is carrying on about biscuits. She does that, carries on about things, gets an idea in her mind, or a colour scheme, or a word she likes the sound of. She is dyslexic. She lives with the feeling of not belonging, a refugee on life's landscapes. Most of her life that it is how it has been. She doesn't know her left from her right. Roundabouts are the ultimate nightmare, the keep-going-right-until-you-take-the-second-left sort of nightmare. Her writing is disorganised – it starts too far over and travels uphill and runs out of space and Ts don't get crossed and capitals appear mid-sentence. I don't know how dyslexia

happens, but I wonder if early life trauma leaves its history etched on young minds. If it was anyone else we would feel stuck, we wouldn't know how to get ourselves out of the discomfort of dyslexia and how it twists understandings and spoils things between people.

But we are not stuck. This is not anyone else, this is my beloved sister. I gently pinch the skin on the backs of her hands so it stands up like a tiny mountain range. I pinch up the skin on the backs of my hands too. It takes our minds off biscuits. The backs of our hands have become the Alps, or the Himalayas, or the Great Dividing Range. "Wow! Look at that!" I say, "What amazing wrinkles!" So we talk about the wrinkly bits of skin that have appeared now we are old, on our knees and on the dangly bits under our

arms, how it doesn't seem to matter now it's us who are wrinkly, how it used to be the biggest worry that it would ever happen to us.

“ Evacuees were ordered to report at the Hong Kong Club at 7am on Monday with baggage limited to 2 cabin trunks for each adult and 2 suit cases for each child. ”

“Do you remember Bertha Hicklin's wrinkles?” We remember the deep awe of Bertha Hicklin's wrinkles. “She even had wrinkles on her ear lobes -” In the summer we used to cycle with our mum up to Bertha and Harold Hicklin's place for afternoon tea. We tucked the hems of our dresses into our knickers and off we went, up the Richborough Road to their farm house in the orchard and they had dogs and Bertha and Harold would be sitting in their deckchairs on the tennis court in the patchy sunlight and the dogs would be watching the sandwiches on the tea trolley, dribbling; and Harold used to get stuck in his deck chair and his stomach gurgled when he sipped his tea and our mum used to look at us that sort of ‘don't-giggle-remember-your-manners’ look.

My sister pulls the photo album towards her. “Ready?” she says.

+

The photo album is brown leather with a stylised York rose sculpted into the cover. My sister opens it. The cellophane corners which stick the photos to the pages have dried out. The photos fall off the pages on to the table. I pick one up. It is an image of my sister as a baby, in Cheshire in England, being held by our dad. He is looking at her, that look of love that loves so much it hurts. I brush my finger across the black and white photo. “How precious” I say. “How unbelievably precious.” We sit looking at the photo. It is 76 years old. My sister puts her hand to her throat and her words are struggling, and in a while she says “I was his princess.”

Our dad's work was in Hong Kong. After his leave in England the family went back to Hong Kong, our dad and our mum and my sister. And then war came. Our mum was pregnant. “I have done some research” I say, “for something I am writing, what happened when you and our mum were

evacuated from Hong Kong.” My sister looks at me as if I have just arrived from another planet. She leans forward.

I begin “On Wednesday afternoon 1st July 1940 all European women and children in Hong Kong were ordered to leave within 5 days. They were instructed to pack up their house possessions and lock up the quarters. Evacuees were ordered to report at the Hong Kong Club at 7am on Monday with baggage limited to 2 cabin trunks for each adult and 2 suit cases for each child. Volunteers for the British Defence Forces were mobilised. Our dad was one of them. He was 34.” I hesitate, take a sip of my coffee. I am telling my sister something she has never known.

“You OK?”

“Go on.”

“Volunteers were to be billeted. Families received one week's pay before departure. Our mum and you, with hundreds of other women and children, boarded an evacuation ship, a British passenger liner, in Hong Kong harbour.” I wonder about the evermore effect this could have on a child, the belonging and believing and safety things of life, the complex patterns of interrupted stability.



I look at my sister. Her face is sad.

“There was a shortage of space on the ships. Husbands and fathers were not permitted to board the vessels to farewell their families. They would have seen the mine and anti-submarine defences across the entrance to the harbour. They would have known that outside the harbour there were no defences.” I pause again.

“Can you remember anything from that time?” What



a stupid question. My sister was 2 years old. “I don't remember it as a thought memory” she says, “but I remember the feels and the sounds as if they happened yesterday. I remember holding on to metal railings, and I can hear people screaming, and I am being pulled away.” I pull my chair closer. They would spend 3 months in Manila in a refugee camp.

I pick up another photo. Our mum's pregnancy is evident. It is me, her unborn child, in there. They have left Manila and are on deck on board ship heading for Sydney. There are Japanese mines in the Coral Sea. American war ships are being sunk in the Coral Sea. My sister is wearing a party dress, puff sleeves, a wide satin sash round her middle. It is incongruous. “I remember that dress” says my sister. “It was pink.” She gets up from the table. She doesn't seem to know what to do with the memory. “Fancy packing a party dress -” She moves to the sink. “More coffee?” She fills the kettle. She stands by the kitchen sink, holding the kettle. “When you have only got 2 suitcases and you spend 3 months in a refugee camp” she says, “fancy packing a party dress. I wonder why our mum packed a party dress.” My sister puts the kettle on the kitchen bench.

“What if...” I say. I am sure there must be a reason. “I mean, it doesn't seem to fit does it - a refugee child in a party dress on a ship in the Coral Sea with mines all around and war ships. What if you had put it in your suitcase?

What if our mum had said you can choose one special thing you want to take?”

“No. No, that's not it. That wouldn't have been it.” She pauses, waits for the memory to surface. “I took my teddy bear. I remember. He would have taken up a whole suitcase.” I remember my sister's teddy bear, inclined to fatness, eyes like ripe blackberries. Velvet paws. Soft. Sort of untidy. The sort of character who you can tell your secrets to.

“- what if” I say carefully, “What if our dad took your dress from its hanger and packed it in your suitcase?” We look again at the baby photo. “You were his little princess. He adored you. He thought he would probably never see you again. He must have been so afraid, for himself and you and our mum, and you were too young to understand. We can't imagine, can we?” My sister and I look at each other. After the war our dad was such a remote character. The floor is rocking.

“Go on” she says.

“What if he took your party dress off its hanger and put it in your suitcase because he wanted you to have a pretty dress whatever else happened, something he had bought

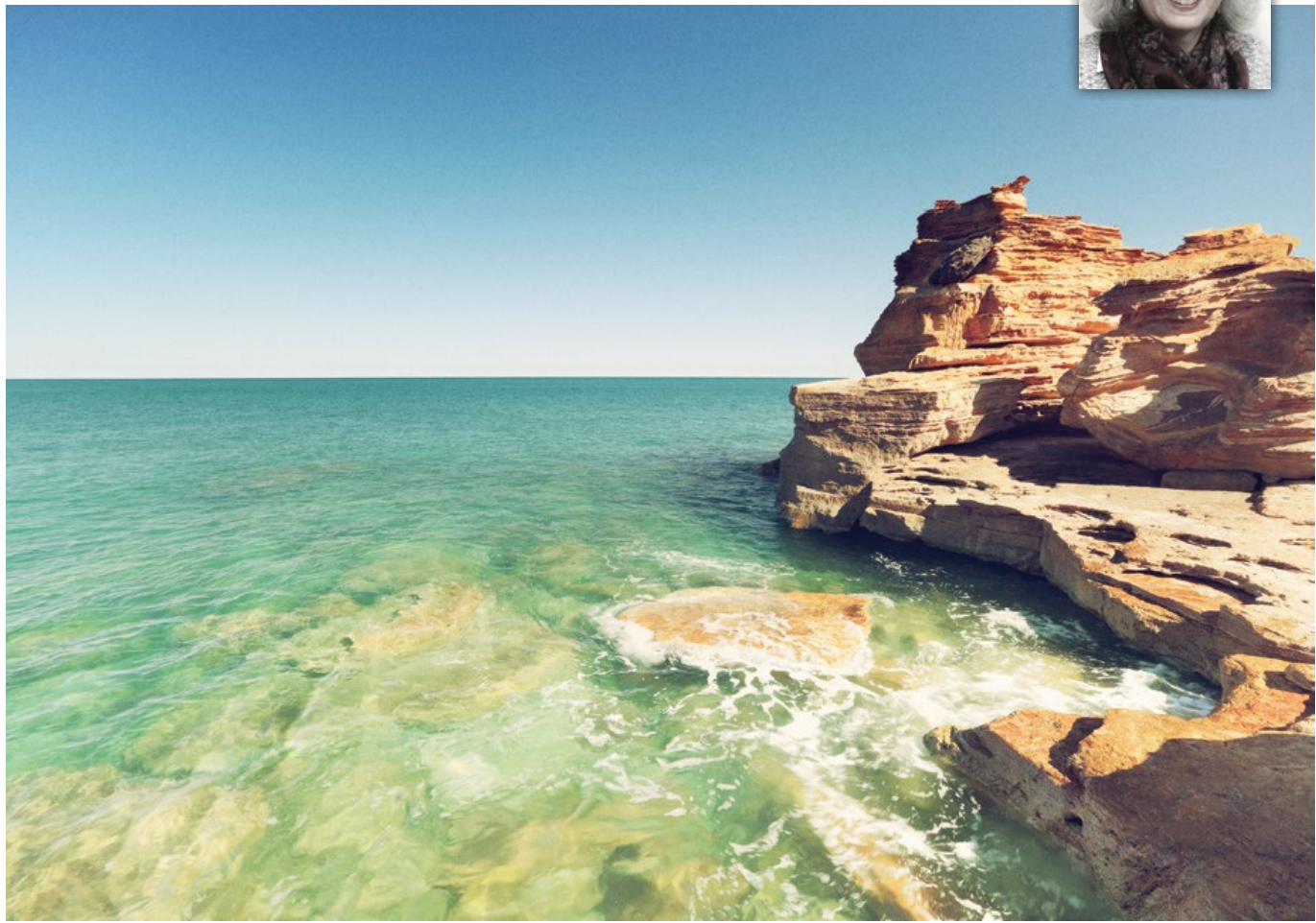
“ What if he took your party dress off its hanger and put it in your suitcase because he wanted you to have a pretty dress whatever else happened, something he had bought for his little princess and it was the only thing he could do. ”

”

for his little princess and it was the only thing he could do.”

The day has gone quiet. We stop talking and thinking and imagining, and let ourselves feel the sadness. “Where did that come from?” my sister says. Slowly she puts the photos one by one back into the album.

We close the album. There is that feeling that somebody has been here before. Gently I touch the wrinkles on the back of her hand.



LOOKING AROUND

written by Cecile Yasbek

From the headland, the full glory of Solitary Islands Marine Park, horizon north to south, is splayed before me. In the east, across still azure waters the outline of a container ship slides towards Brisbane; a whale or dolphin would be easily seen.

Techno-music draws me from the view to a mud-splattered ute where an unkempt young man leans from the window, his old blind dog in the tray at the back. I move to sit away, on a bench at the point, the ocean wide and vast around me. At last, I feel insignificant; my itches, aches and pains dissolve in my roving gaze. My mind settles on sea-smells, gull calls and changing light on the gliding water.

The breeze teases icy fingers around my neck. The music gets louder – he’s in my peripheral vision. If he leaves his vehicle, I’ll jump into mine. Escape route planned, I resume my immersion in the munificence of nature.

This spot reminds me of Crowdy Head lighthouse, also out in the ocean, ti-tree forests behind stretching to the blue

hills in the distance. I used to take a folding chair to sit on the unprotected cliff and read with the roar of the ocean fifty metres below until a fisherman told me that the winds once whipped a man over the edge. But here at *Wigulga*, ‘black apple’ in Gumbaynggir language, National Parks have erected a protective steel cable. Walkers step beyond the barrier to follow the ancient coastal path down to the water, around the bend and up onto a lower cliff.

His music fades but the picture I have of him and his dog lure me into an eddy. He looks about thirty, his dog about sixteen. The old dog sees nothing, but surely the smell of his master and the smell of the sea inform him. Their memories must be as one, childhood and youth

where they roamed the bush and sat on river banks, no wonder he carries this old man almost at the end of its life with him. Cat Stevens’s words come to mind: *The view from the top can be oh so very lonely.*

“ I focus my search for whales, or at best, the pod of dolphins I’d seen some weeks before – feeding my tired city soul with nature’s bounty. ”

I return to my car for binoculars and mercifully, the dog is lying down in the tray. I no longer need to pursue my thoughts of how cold, hot, thirsty or excluded it must feel from contact with its master who sits in the comfort of the cabin. I focus my search for whales, or at best, the pod of dolphins I’d seen some weeks before – feeding my tired city soul with nature’s bounty.



“ . . . if I can be fully present with what calls to me, including my own vulnerability, my spirit restored by nature will be revived. ”

Ute man and dog long gone, I sit alone until the light begins to fade. With a farewell sweep of my eyes over the ocean, I start the car and wind down the hill to the road home. Dvorak’s *American Quartet* frolics out of the radio. It is a fun-filled piece with nostalgia lurking in the unobtrusive spaces – a fitting end to my road trip, a variety of flavours balancing my view.

**The Right to Write* by Julia Cameron Macmillan, London 2000 p.29



FLOWERS HAVE
A LIFE OF THEIR OWN

written by Richard White

At least, Magnolias have a life of their own. That was what came to mind as I looked at the photos Ann sent me.

Six years ago, when her mother died, Ann planted a Magnolia in her back garden. Around the twenty-second of November, each year, the date of her mother’s anniversary, the Magnolia blooms.

I’m not sure if there is some sort of rational or horticultural explanation for this regular ‘bursting forth’. My initial reaction and that of other people to whom I told this story was, ‘Wow!’

Whatever of ‘rational explanations’, there is something wonder-filled about this story. Every year, Ann gets this reminder. There is some collaboration going on between Ann and the tree in her garden; they are sensitive to one another’s lives, to their moods and rhythms.

Then, there’s the way this extravagant and light-filled blossoming occurs on the anniversary of a death. If there is a natural speechlessness that accompanies this surprising connectedness between a garden shrub and a deeply held memory, there is something equally mysterious about the way life is celebrating life.

For, an anniversary, lovingly honoured and recognised, is not a remembering of a death, as in a loss. It is more that each anniversary has the potential to reconnect us with a life, a life wholly lived, not matter how long or how

“ If there is a natural speechlessness that accompanies this surprising connectedness between a garden shrub and a deeply held memory, there is something equally mysterious about the way life is celebrating life. ”

short. The person who lived and loved and whom we loved, continues to unfold, reveal, illumine our lives.

The mystery who is the human person is always beyond our understanding; their lives defy our ‘rational explanations, no matter how splendid the obituaries or eulogies. We may all have come across old letters or photographs or heard stories or felt or thought differently about someone and understanding or gratitude or sadness ... breaks forth. Anniversaries are about life not about death.

Ann’s Magnolias set me thinking. I phoned one of my sisters to check on my father and mother’s anniversaries.

The Magnolia is working her magic; there has been a shift in my thinking.



The blossoms are unmistakable and glorious signs of life. Flowers know something that our rational, limited and limiting thinking often forgets. I am very grateful to Ann and her Magnolias.

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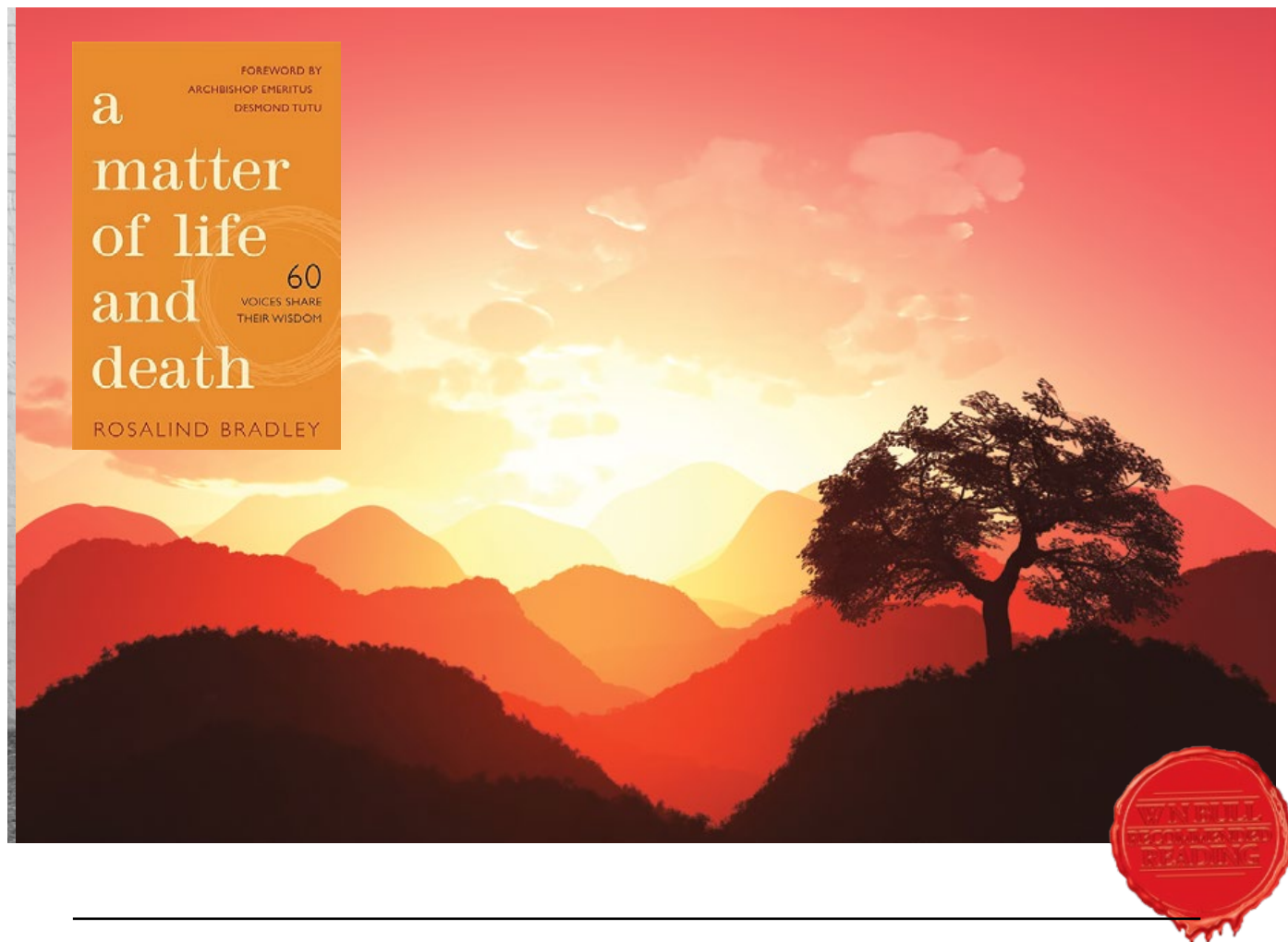
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A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH

BY ROSALIND BRADLEY

Reviewed by Richard White

This is one of the best books I have recommended for *Dialogue*. It is a practical book for a start; a book one can dip into to find wisdom and inspiration. It is also a profound treatment of the nature of death and death's inherent connection with life.

Then, from the Foreword by Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu onwards, *a matter of life and death* is peopled by an encyclopaedic collection of sixty writers, many of whom are well-known names.

'Dipping' is what I have done and the more I dipped the less I wanted [to] read on. You may have had the experience of reading a rich and imaginative book and slowing down, not wanting to come to the end. With Rosalind's book, it was more that the power and provocative nature of the brief, two or three page accounts demanded attention.

At first, I had to deal with my own emotional reaction to a story of loss and overwhelming grief. These are stories and they have the credibility and insistence of the personal.

I was reminded of Samuel Coleridge's *'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'*. The unfortunate sailor was forced to tell his story of suffering and redemption and the wedding guest was obliged to listen.

The poet's skill is to make the personal universal and to hold us long enough to stop asking 'for whom the bell tolls?' The 'bell' or the poem and in this case, the stories of loss apply most surely to you and to me. If you, like me, have an inbuilt resistance or defence against the reality of death, the personal story has the power to breach these defences.

One of the first stories I read was written by Brigadier Michael Griffiths CBE, Retired army officer, Duke of

Lancaster's Regiment, police officer. Here was a man, surely, who had experience of death in its many appearances. When I read that he had also had service in Northern Ireland, Cyprus, Bosnia, and Afghanistan I thought, 'here is a professional, a man of wide experience, more than prepared for trauma and loss'. From what he has written, he was not, however, prepared for the death of his son.

“ No wonder we are afraid; with the end of a life, we come to the limits of our knowledge, the end of our manipulative and creative powers. ”

As one of our daughters said recently, 'Our lives have and will always have an Andrew-sized hole in them'. This is our living forfeit.

Brigadier Griffiths' son was a soldier who died as a result of wounds suffered in Afghanistan. The story is told in three short pages. It is more than enough space to garner the love, admiration and comradely affection that this father-soldier had for his soldier-son. Those archetypal images of loss come to mind, the soul-shattering loss, the personal death over-shadowing and illuminating the great victory.



That is what these stories do; they punctuate the predictable and the anticipated and lay bare another level of living and feeling. That is, of course, is what Rosalind Bradley intended. Her book is entitled, *a matter of life and death*; it is about the necessary and life-enhancing connection between life and death.

French films end with the three letter, one syllable, *fin*. It has always seemed to me more definitive, more unambiguously final, than our 'The End'. One of the nurses writing in the book spoke of the final breath of a patient, stillness and the world-changing moment, the transformation of a living person into a corpse.

Even as I wrote that word 'corpse', I hesitated. I wanted to soften the sound and feel of this word. Death, *fin*, corpse are like that. There is nowhere to go, no one there when the breathing stops. No wonder we are afraid; with the end of a life, we come to the limits of our knowledge, the end of our manipulative and creative powers.

'Working Closely with Death' is one of the sub heading[s] of this book. There is a learning that occurs in care of the dying and sick. One of the writers used the expression, 'death is a process'. I understood this to mean that the *fin* is also a beginning. Whether from the experience of caring and tending the dying or living more consciously our mortal life, an understanding can begin to grow.

When I began work as a bereavement support person, I attended as many conferences as I could, read books and tried to overcome the feeling of helplessness when I took phone calls about the death of a young child in the family pool or the suicide of a seventeen year old, the son of a former colleague. Like the families and friends of grieving people, I was always unprepared, my defences broken and needing time to gather my resources to be of assistance.

Over time there has been a learning; death is a process. At times I think I know, really know, what death 'means', then something happens and I am back at the beginning, helpless and defended against the mystery and the pain. *a matter of life and death* combines stories of this helplessness and regret with wise and encouraging beliefs and faith.

My final word is a quote from the contribution of Dom Christian de Cherge OCSO, a French Trappist monk, murdered in Algeria in 1996:

My life is not worth more than any other ... not less, not more ... I have lived long enough to know that I, too, am an accomplice of the evil that seems to prevail in the world around. If the moment comes, I would hope to have the presence of mind, and the time, to ask for God's pardon and for that of my fellowman, and, at the same time, to pardon in all sincerity, he who would attack me.



DEATH AND DYING

written by Leigh Bowden

“We won’t get out of here alive!”
It’s true. We won’t. We’re going to die. All of us.
Sometime. Somewhere.

I didn’t die on 25 September, 1991. I didn’t die on every other date either, but September 25, 1991 is significant. On that date I suffered a cerebral haemorrhage and, although 80% of people who have one do die as a result, I didn’t.

I wasn’t fearful. I was 41 and I had been praying about what I was going to do with the rest of my life. When the haemorrhage was diagnosed and brain surgery was discussed, I thought, “Well, that’s [my future] sorted. I’m going to die.” But I didn’t. I survived and recovered and while I’m certainly living a very good life, I know that one day, now sooner than later, I’m going to die.

So since then I have been thinking about living, but at the same time, thinking about my dying.

I often explain to people, especially doctors, that I don’t want to scratch and claw at life. I don’t want to be “the

aneurysm in bed 27”. I’m not having mammograms or pap smears or colonoscopies or fecal tests. I don’t want to worry about what could be wrong with me and have that become my focus. I don’t want to wait for the results of tests and spend dreary hours in medical centres or hospital waiting rooms. I don’t want to be surrounded by monitors and machines and buzzers and buttons and tubes. And strangers, on shift work. I’d rather concentrate on my family and friends, occasions and celebrations, good books and thought provoking theatre, food and wine. And of course, “saving the world”!

And all the while, death is a certainty. So I’m trying to prepare for it.

In not so recent times the experience of death was common place. Old people died at home; women often died during child birth; infants died from childhood diseases and farm and workplace accidents were common place. And our parents and grandparents either survived or died in one of the many wars which have been fought

over the past 100 years, especially the first and second world wars.

Now death is removed from the living. I didn’t see a human corpse until my father died in 1997. I was 47. I saw his body in the mortuary at the hospital. He had said, “You don’t want to see me white, Lil?” trying to dissuade me from viewing his body. He wasn’t white. He was yellow, his flesh retaining the jaundice that had accompanied the cancer of the organs that had killed him. My mother simply

“ I try to take myself into that place where my mind says, “This is it. Now I’m going to die. And it’s OK”. I slow my breathing right down and my body becomes heavy. I am ready. ”

commented, “It doesn’t look like Ken. He’s gone. He is not here.”

My father’s death was a good one. He was ready to go, after a very short illness, although a bit sad that he wouldn’t see in the new millennium. My mother had asked my father, in the days before he died, if there was anything that he wanted her to do. “Yes,” he had answered, “buy yourself a new car!” Too easy! A blessed death.

But I have heard of so many deaths where the people who are dying have railed against it. They have sought out every possible “cure” and have spent much time traveling to appointments and hospitals; attached to machines and monitors and tubes, all the way crying out that it was so unfair; that they were not ready to die. They had become their disease.

Friends of the dead also pass comments like, “She was too young”; “We never expected it”; “So unfair”; etc. It’s as if there is some pre-appointed time to die: a time when one is old enough; we expected it and it’s absolutely fair. As far as I can ascertain, at this time, that seems to be from the mid-eighties onward.

The majority of people I talk to about preparing for death tell me they don’t want to talk about it. It’s too morbid, fearful and weird. Yet there are people and organisations who are putting death and dying out there. Last November, Peter Banki, a Sydney academic, organised a three-day

event called the “Festival of Death and Dying”. During the festival participants attended workshops which addressed various aspects of the topic, not the least of which was its inevitability and preparing for it.

Apart from having my affairs “in order”, I prepare for death – my own which could happen at any time - in the following ways.

I participate in a weekly gym class called “Body Balance”. At the end of the class there is 10 minutes of relaxation where we lie on the floor and well, relax. My practice, during that time, has become an exercise in letting go; a sort of death preparation meditation. For example, I might imagine that I’m flying in a plane and the captain announces that we will have to make a crash landing. I know there’s no way that I could reach under the seat for the life vest, yet alone put it on. I try to take myself into that place where my mind says, “This is it. Now I’m going to die. And it’s OK”. I slow my breathing right down and my body becomes heavy. I am ready. Then the 10 minutes is up, we reawaken our minds and bodies, farewell each other with “Namaste” and get on with our day.

Also, at the end of each day, in bed, with the lights out, I do a little reflection on the day. What did I like? What could I have done better? And the things for which I am grateful. A kind of “examine”, from my-would-have-had Jesuit training years.



There are still some things I have to get organised.
Trypheyne McShane, a presenter at the Festival, suggests that one puts together a “Soul Kit”. “A “Soul Kit” is where you will keep all your end of life wishes, stored in one easy to find place for one day when it will be needed. It will also have the things you are proudest about your life that you want to be known as your legacy. It can include practical things like passwords to your social media accounts and emails so they can be shut down to ideas on how you would like to be remembered to songs you would like played, funeral arrangements and what you want to be

done with your body". My husband suggests that I include in my Soul Kit a collection of note books that consist of the dates of dinner parties/lunches/drinks parties etc that I've hosted; the guests invited; the menus and the recipes (which were to give me an idea of the shopping lists and timing). There are several of them and they date back to the 1970s. I'm not sure about accepting the advice of others with one's own Soul Kit, but I guess if my nearest and dearest think it's important, I should consider it.

“ ... take action toward developing the know-how to plan well for end of life. ”

Trypheyne also says: "We're all going to die at some point. Our lack of preparation for the one thing we will all do, die, can cause such heartache and angst for those left behind that it makes real sense to spend some quality time on considering how we would like our end of life to be, long before it actually happens." Wise words.

Another workshop presenter at the Festival of Death and Dying was a woman called Kerrie Noonan. Kerrie's workshop was about planning for a death in the comfort and intimacy of your own home. My mother wanted this and I failed her. There just weren't enough of us (I'm an only child) to look after her. She died of renal failure and she knew she was dying. Her doctor described it as a glider finishing its run. A slow petering out. But it was only a two-week stint in a private hospital, where she was well known, and where everyone knew she had come to die. She requested a private room with a view and she got it. In those final weeks she sat up, smiling but mute, receiving visitors who came to bid their farewells. Some still tried to jolly her along with talk of when she came home, but she knew she wouldn't and after a few days in a coma, she died.

What I liked about the description of Kerrie's workshop was the talk about how you want to be remembered. She explained that dying was the last thing you're going to do in your life, so give it some thought. I especially liked the talk of "dressing for dying" in a "biodegradable burial garment". I was caught out on this with my mother. She was a large breasted woman and always wore a bra. We even joked about it discussing the things you would need to take if we were fleeing for our lives. She would say that she would always take a bra! If she was going to be dressed in day clothes in her coffin, then she would need to be in a bra. I opted for a shroud. Had I known about the bio-degradable option I would have gone with it. My daughter helped dress

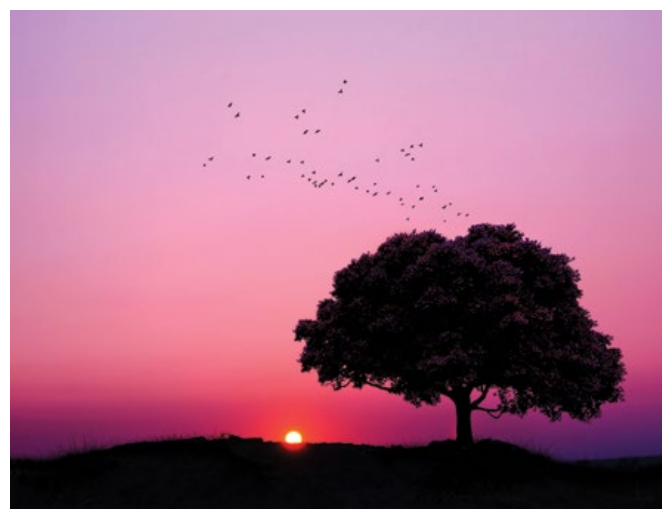
and prepare my mother for burial. That was something we had never discussed but it was good for her and good for me. I think my mother would have liked to have known that her grand-daughter was looking after her body. Again, it's something that was never discussed.

Kerrie's workshop also aimed to provide an opportunity "to reflect on your personal experiences with dying and death and your personal values so that you can take action toward developing the know-how to plan well for end of life".

So why this article now, at Christmas, when we're celebrating a birth?

In August this year, one of my son's was given a turntable for his 40th birthday. For some reason, I had hung onto some (about 40!) old vinyl records, including one by the Kinsfolk, a family folk group, from the 1960s.

On that album is a Christmas carol, of which I'm fond and to which I have listened to check that the words were as I remembered them. The song was written in the 1930s and there are several variations.



These are the words that I know and which the Kinsfolk sang

*"I wonder as I wander out under the sky
How Jesus our Saviour was born for to die
For poor 'onry people like you and like I;
I wonder as I wander out under the sky"
(The Kinsfolk, Ain't That News, 1968)*

So, like Jesus, we're "born for to die". Jesus knew that he was going to die. He didn't want to but he was ready. And so young. Only 33. But in God's plan, it was the right time. So for each us, it'll be the right time. We won't be too young and it will be fair. Dying is part of every-day life, so let's talk, prepare and plan for the inevitable. Christmas, when families are together, seems like a good time to do it.

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