



ONE

# sacred death

Despite the silence that usually surrounds the forbidden subject of death – so repressed, so denied and misunderstood in the west – over the years, I’ve been blessed to have been inundated with letters from people who wanted to share their stories of grief, courage and heartfelt emotional honesty about this great ‘taboo’.

One story stood out so profoundly as to have changed my whole world view. A courageous reader, Mary O’Brien, shared these moving and remarkable thoughts with me, which I immediately republished in *The Australian* newspaper with her generous permission. Because they are words that are powerful enough to reframe an entire cultural view. They wash away blind conditioning. They are magical tools, sacred power objects, verbal medicine that can heal at the deepest level.

‘Dear Ruth, This time two years ago my partner discovered that he had a melanoma metastasis and died eight months later. And this time last year I discovered a lump on my breast and have just finished chemotherapy and radiotherapy following a lumpectomy and partial lymph node removal.

‘Contrary to people’s interpretations of such events – and indeed my own past assumptions – it has been the richest time of my life. That is not to say that I would have chosen the circumstances or that I would not prefer to have my partner still alive. But there is another reality we have access to if we don’t get immersed in, and overwhelmed by, grief,’ she wrote.

Mary explained that she and her partner did everything to help themselves by using mainstream and complementary medicine. But then they accepted what was.

‘We simply did whatever we could and then surrendered to the outcome. I saw in both cases that when we got out of our own way, when we didn’t interpret the events as good or bad, when we allowed life to come through us, that we were showered upon in the most extraordinary ways.

‘In the last two months of my partner’s life, when the cancer had spread throughout his body and he knew he was facing death, an amazing thing happened. He became really present and a great energetic vitality entered him, and he was filled with gratitude and love of life. A few days before he died, even when he couldn’t roll over in bed, he said: “I never knew life could be so good.” The closer he came to death, the more beauty emanated from him.

‘I was right there in it with him. The love between us had taken on another dimension. As he said two days before he died: “There is no separation between us. We are like one body.”

‘I didn’t grieve when he died because his death was the pinnacle of his life. It seemed that he had died into love or beauty or God, or whatever you want to call it. His death released a joy and radiance in all who were present. If I had grieved, I would have lost touch with that living love inside of me.’

She said that she still misses him. ‘No matter how profound the experience of his death, I still have had to live my life without his physical presence. There is a huge adjustment to living, sleeping, even cooking alone, especially as I’d lived with a man whose first priority was his love for me. But somehow I’ve been carried

through by this presence within, and by the love that has been shown to me from so many sources.’

Mary says that the experience changed her approach to death, and deeply influenced her reaction when she was recently diagnosed with breast cancer. ‘I didn’t have the fear that I would have expected to have in the circumstances.

‘Just as happened to my partner, an energy was released inside of me. I felt very enlivened. At the time I likened it to being in love. Suddenly every cell was alive, I was very alert to the essence of life, and all former concerns receded into the periphery of my attention and priority.

‘Strangely, this energy became even more intense when I was having chemotherapy. It seemed that the lower my physical energy, the greater this spiritual aliveness. It was almost as though one was released to absorb the effects of the other.’

Her words have soothed me over and over during these last few years on my metaphorical island of Calypso, where I have been forced to confront mortality in many such brutal ways. There has been so much illness and death around me. And every death of another has meant burial of a part of myself. Four young women who were close to me died, all leaving children. Two friends lost children, one then herself died of a broken heart. My husband’s father died at a ripe old age but it brought back all the pain and sorrow of my own father’s untimely death at fifty-seven almost ten years earlier. It also brought up much grief about the Holocaust which had claimed my husband’s entire family in Poland.

Then there are the other losses I’ve had to face, losses we all face – aspects of our health, our youth, our old homes, our treasured friendships and beloveds, and the precious objects we must relinquish in order to grow, like the final throwing out of my father’s jumper which I write about in *Penelope’s Loom* (page 49).

I have had to go into the deepest parts of myself, the underworld of my soul, into the deepest, loneliest, hollows of despair, in order to bring things back up to the light and deal with them in a

transformative manner, the way Mary has. But having stood in the face of emotional, metaphorical and spiritual death, I have emerged greatly changed.

All this is part of the hero's journey. Psyche, Odysseus, Persephone of Greek mythology and Inanna (Ishtar) of Sumerian mythology all went down into the Underworld, faced death and their demons, and came back to the world made whole and able to carry the torch for others. Buddhists see us dying all the time, and that life is about continually letting go of possessions, identity, attachment to emotion, ego and, finally, self. Going willingly to the place of great divestment is considered enlightenment.

In the Inanna (Ishtar) myth, the Goddess of Heaven goes down below the Earth to witness the funeral rite of the sky god, into the Underworld region ruled by Ereshkigal, the terrifying queen of the great Below. She is the dark, destructive, savage Kali Goddess who lives buried in our psyches. Ereshkigal murders Inanna and hangs her up on meat hooks until her body rots. But in a moment of deep compassion Ereshkigal unhooks her, restores her to life and sends her back to Earth, where Inanna reaches spiritual awakening, having known death and the darkest depths of her own soul.

British author Teresa Moorey writes in her book *Shamanism* that indigenous cultures believe shamans become healers through near-death experiences. Only once someone has had a close and intimate brush with terrible illness, profound loss or grief and faced death (metaphorical and real) in many forms can they emerge a healer of the tribe. For it's believed that in these states of pure vulnerability, one enters the sacred, deeper parts of the spirit and emerges wiser, more self-aware and in tune with the world around. This is the 'gift' of illness, pain, suffering and death – it is the sacred wound that opens our hearts.

For those of us who are still alive, death is a transformative power. Death is the fire of rebirth and resurrection. When mystics draw the Death card in Tarot they are happy because it means a new start, or death to parts of ourselves that need to be cut away. It is also the

essence of love, as pain is the essence of pleasure. There is no life without death, no light without dark, no joy without pain – great seers know this.

In her book *Descent to the Goddess*, Jungian scholar Sylvia Brinton Perera likens the Goddess Inanna's initiation into the dark Underworld as a journey into *muladhara*, the chakra at the base of our bodies that symbolises our survival instincts. In the Hindu yogic tradition we must visit this place and clear the energy in order for our life-force or *kundalini* to be set free. In many primitive cultures it is believed that the ritualistic dark places in ourselves are our greatest teachers. And we should kneel to Death in homage for the remarkable lessons She teaches us. Her darkness is not a black hole; rather, it is a vibrant, teeming universe with pain as the gateway.

For me, facing up to death and loss has been powerful; a time of passion and pain, of deep creativity and of meeting my own Ereshkigal, who has consumed parts of me so that other parts may go free. Death has brought me closer to the natural world which is full of warmth and light but is also blessed with winter and dark moons and storms. It has opened me up to love and allowed me to grow. For there is great beauty in sadness, and great mystical, magical healing properties.

Ultimately, dealing with death has been part of my own shamanic journey from which I have emerged a more compassionate being with greater awareness of other suffering souls. I have written many words over the years about the necessity for us as a society to be allowed to grieve openly, to grieve hard and passionately. To not 'get over it now', but rather honour loss by continuing the sacred ritual of crying and lamenting or railing angrily at the universe as a tribute to people and things we have held precious to our hearts.

There need be no 'time limit' on grief, just as there is no 'right way' to grieve. The manic sexual activity that stalks many people after the death of a beloved is as worthy and important as the tears that flow from another person's eyes. All reactions are the outpourings of intense feeling, fear, pain, terror, awareness of our

own impending mortality. All show a need to reach out and be closer to some force greater than ourselves either in a church or in the arms of another.

It is human to mourn. It is inhuman and inhumane to immunise ourselves from death and ageing, to pretend it doesn't exist, to disallow our emotions to flourish in the face of sadness and loss. These intense emotions are our links to the Divine, they are the source and wellspring of insight that catapult us out of mundane reality and into an extraordinary, heightened state of awareness where we touch God.

We need not be silenced by the 'passion police' nor by anti-depressants. Our words spoken during our times of grief need to be spoken aloud, not just whispered privately behind closed doors. We need to speak the truth, as Mary O'Brien has. Her own truth of being in bliss in the face of death is as powerful and inspirational as those whose truth is the cracking open of their souls.

I defend the right of people to speak openly about this last taboo in the hope of setting us free from delusion, illusion and continued suffering.

## The Circling Eagle

‘You got a live animal, then you got a dead animal,’ says my friend, who has come over to help me bury another bird that’s flown into a window and broken its neck.

‘It’s the way of the bush. If you have a live horse then you’re gonna have a dead horse; if you have live cattle then you’re gonna have dead cattle,’ she says.

Her job was to behead the chooks for dinner. As a child – one of several farm kids – she was the one holding open their wings with her feet and standing over the bodies with an axe. Me, I’m still trembling at the sight of a shattered, little bird body, unable to sweep up the carcass. Certainly not able to deal with the blood.

It’s a throwback from childhood. My first encounter with death was when my cat Julie brought a suffering, shuddering bird between her teeth and lay it at my feet. I fed the bird water and bread, stroked it, sang to it and watched it die in front of my eyes.

Mum carried it out to our garden and we dug a hole. But I cried for hours, horrified at what had happened. And still to this day feel unable to digest the unpalatable reality.

‘I’m a coward,’ I sigh, as my friend picks up the bird.

‘No. You’re just a city girl,’ she smiles. ‘When you grow up on a farm you understand the cycles of Nature much better. Death doesn’t seem so tragic. You eat the animals you rear, you watch your livestock going through drought and having to be put down.’

‘You know, some make it and some just don’t,’ she says as we look over at the flowers on a tree, some in bloom, some in decay, some blown off prematurely by the wind. ‘It’s just the natural cycles of things, nothing personal,’ she shrugs, picking a flower and putting it on the tiny mound, for my sake.

With her words ringing in my head, I fly home to Melbourne for a few days. I haven’t been home since my beloved cousin died of cancer almost a year ago.

Touching down, I know it’s going to be hard to deal with memories evoked, the look on my aunt’s face. The death of the young is so hard to understand.

At night I watch old home-movies with my family. The reels, filmed in the 1960s, blinker and spit as our childhood unravels.

There she is on the screen, my cousin, a little girl with chubby cheeks, holding my hand. She was a couple of years older than me, and cradles me in her arms like an older sister would. I stifle my tears.

But there they all are, a parade of ghosts: my cousin, my nana, my other grandma, my papa, my dad, a childhood girlfriend. All dead. I sob and shake quietly in the dark, overwhelmed by grief.

Flickering images. Flickering heart.

‘Gone . . . he’s gone . . . she’s gone,’ I hear my sisters murmuring in strange disbelief.

It’s always hard coming home. Every street holds a story. One has my nana’s house, another my childhood home, another the home of a boy I loved, dead in a car crash at twenty. Why?

But I know the answer. ‘You got a live animal, then you got a dead animal.’ We are all just growing things. Some of us have genes that will enable us to make it to ninety. Others, like farm animals, will be eaten – by cancer, by infection. Some, like the bird on my veranda, will fly into things they can’t see and break their necks.

It’s our separation from the natural world that distorts reality. We live in a society that immunises us against the truth. Glossy magazines promise ‘happy ever after’, deny aging, deny fallibility. We

get an exaggerated view of our own precious importance from the top of tall buildings. Safely bricked in, we believe death will never happen to us.

Without trees, insects and Nature to teach us about the sacred cycle of life and death, we are lost in the fantasy of immortality.

‘It was just her time,’ I tell my aunt, having spent a quiet hour in my mum’s garden. ‘Nothing personal.’

But she can’t hear it. What mother could?

Back on my country property, something ironic happens. While I’m lying on the grass, depleted from tears, a dead-weight with outstretched arms, looking up at the sky, an eagle that lives in the Byron hills comes into view. We watch it often, but it’s usually much higher up. Today it is flying low, straining to make out what I’m doing, as I watch in awe.

And suddenly I know what it’s thinking. ‘You got a live animal, then you got a dead animal. This one just moved, so I’m flying off.’

And there it is again. The lesson. Brutal. Liberating. I am flesh. I am dust. One day I’ll be dinner. Perhaps when we can understand and accept the perspective of our lives from an eagle’s eye, we can finally free ourselves from suffering.

# The Violin

It was many years ago. My father had just passed away. In the divvying up of his possessions, there were only a few bits and pieces I really wanted. Dad's violin was one of them.

Though he played it rarely in his later years, he cherished the thought of it. Often pulling it out, stroking it, fondling it. Tears would well in his eyes as the memories flooded back. Memories of his own father playing the beautifully crafted instrument. Of his childhood, sitting in front of a harsh European teacher as he struggled to produce the magical voice his father could tease out.

Our home was always full of the sound of violin concertos in those early years of my life, pouring out of the record player with such passion. And not just classical violin, but violin in all its eclectic forms: fast, slow, the Irish fiddle, the exotic sound of Middle Eastern fiddle, central European, folksy or bluegrass violin.

Eventually my father abandoned his violin, preferring the trendier guitar instead. Or maybe the pain of his grief was just too great. He had never recovered from the tragic loss of his father, who died too young.

And when my own dad died, too young, I flew down to bury him, and to take back with me the thing that most reminded me of him.

Everyone else wanted to keep his guitar. But I wanted that sacred wooden thing, so vulnerable, so fragile and filled with emotion. I wanted to protect it, clinging to it on the plane and wrapping my body around the case.

But what do you do with a man's soul?

Once home, I put it lovingly in our storage room, opened the windows for ventilation and placed a large, smiling photo of my dad on top. I tended the case, dusting it regularly. The one thing I never did, never could do, was open that case and take the violin out.

Though I promised my daughter I'd give her lessons, each time

she approached the instrument, I would make some excuse and walk away.

It was as if by opening the case, I would open Pandora's box. I was afraid that all the pain and loss of missing him would swamp me like a tidal wave, and his grief would hit me too. Because I believe energy continues to exist in objects long after the owners have gone, reaching out, touching, engulfing.

I often thought about learning to play myself. But would retreat. For if opening the case would cause such sadness, then what of the crying from the instrument itself – hand-made in Russia for my great grandfather, carried through generations of Jewish persecution and pogroms, thrown out of one country to the next, displaced and homeless until finally reaching the safety of Australia?

Like my father I, too, fell in love with the violin. So it was an amazing gift to find myself recently at the annual Woodford Folk Festival in Queensland, which attracts many of the world's finest, coming to bathe us in fast and furious Celtic, Gaelic, klezmer, gypsy or electric/rock violin.

But on the last day, during one concert, when a group of the best violinists and fiddlers in the world had gathered on stage to perform wild fusion, the emotion in my heart became too great and I suddenly felt the tears rolling from my eyes.

'Dad . . . dad . . .' I whispered to myself, heartbroken that he couldn't be there to witness the pleasure of it all. For do we ever recover from our losses?

I imagined the notes reaching him wherever he was, and I let them take me to his soul, and I told him how much I missed him.

'Come visit me some time, dad,' I said to the ghost I hoped was there.

That night a very mysterious thing happened. We had arrived home after days of camping and I was utterly exhausted. While I was unpacking, a stranger came to our door.

She said she'd been at Woodford and had decided to drop in to Byron Bay on her way back to Sydney, to visit the musician we had

house-sitting while we were away.

Standing in the kitchen, while I chopped vegetables for dinner, she told me that she was a fiddler and had been blown away by the incredible violinists at Woodford.

‘I wish I had my violin here now. I would love to play!’ she said.

‘Hey, Ruth has a violin. I’ve seen it in the store room,’ said my house-sitter enthusiastically.

‘I’d love to see it,’ she said.

‘I’ll go get it,’ said my house-sitter. And before I had a chance to stop him, the instrument was put on the table and opened by the stranger.

‘Oh . . . it’s very old. I love old instruments,’ she said, lifting the violin and fondling it gently. ‘I’ll get my mandolin and we can tune it,’ said my house-sitter, who plays in a local band.

I wanted to protest. Wanted to stop them. But she was already twanging in tune with his mandolin, and before I had even caught my breath the bow began grazing the strings and my dad’s violin began singing to me.

‘It’s beautiful,’ she sighed. My husband stood beside me, squeezing my hand as I fought back tears.

And suddenly they were off together. Our house-guest playing frenetic mandolin and she in some altered state of fiddling. Notes soared wildly into the spaces between us as dinner simmered on the stove and magic simmered beneath the veil of day-to-day life.

The violin was singing in pure joy. There was none of the sadness of loss that I had feared. Rather, its voice rang with the delight of being found.

And I knew dad was there. In the room. In the sounds, mystical and profound. In the beauty. In the love pouring out of that woman’s heart. He had heard my prayer. It was too coincidental that the stranger had come.

She stopped playing and put the instrument lovingly in my arms. I let the bow run over the strings. I let go a few tears, because I too had been found.

# Scarves that Bind

‘It must be here somewhere,’ I yell, turning pillows up and down, throwing doonas on the floor, pulling bedclothes back, pushing the couch to and fro, running from room to room.

‘I can’t have lost it. I can’t,’ I yell again, darting about some more and tossing clothes out of drawers.

It is an hour before I have to catch a flight. I’m visiting a couple of close friends who are very sick. I’ve misplaced my favourite scarf. The one that matches all the clothes I’ve packed. And I suddenly feel overwhelmed with anxiety.

‘When did you last see it?’ I demand of my husband.

‘You were wearing it last week,’ he offers. ‘Can’t you just get another one?’

‘Another one?’ I say, glaring at him in shock. Since I got this scarf fifteen years ago, I can’t imagine life without it. It goes with everything. It has my favourite colours in it. The fragile silk has memories woven into each fibre. It holds secrets of my wilder days.

That scarf was ripped off in passion more times than I can remember. That scarf was around my waist when I met my husband, when I was trying to get pregnant. I wore it around my neck often when I was carrying our child. It’s been with me on many of life’s adventures.

‘It’s special,’ I finally blurt out as my husband just shakes his head in surprise.

‘Buy a new one when you get there,’ he offers. But some things are simply not replaceable.

On the plane I trace my steps meticulously. Could it have been stolen from the back seat of my car? Could one of my daughter’s friends have taken it off for dress-ups? An hour goes by, food is brought on trays, fortunes are made and lost on the stockmarket, and I am still walking around rooms in my mind.

The taxi takes me from the airport to see my dying friend. I stand

in front of her with a big, brave smile. But love is not enough to quell fear. Both emotions are doing battle for dominion of my face, each trying to take hold. Each feeling believing it has the right to be there. Love has clearly won my eyes, but my poor, quivering mouth surrenders pitifully to the enemy. Later when I look in the mirror I am pale from trying. My face is too taut, too stretched. A nerve rash covers my cheeks. My eyes are bloodshot from holding in what I need to say.

Back where I'm staying, I collapse in exhaustion.

My mind goes again to the scarf. A casualty of war. I'm so drained by the illness around me, I can't seem to think straight about anything. I've been misplacing things for weeks. The scarf isn't the only thing I've lost – earrings, a set of keys, my child's top – but it's the most precious.

'Have you found it yet?' I say to my husband as the phone line crackles.

'No, I looked in the car. I looked where you said. I rang the cleaning lady. I think it has gone. You just have to be okay about that,' he says.

But I've never been okay around loss. I remember when I was a child and my baby tortoise ran away. Each day I ceaselessly scoured the stones and rocks in the garden, turning each one up in the hope it was him, as my mother shook her head and told me to accept the facts.

'He's gone. Let him go now,' she implored, holding my trembling body in her arms as I obsessed and prayed, and continued to believe.

'Nothing lasts forever. Everything passes. Everything changes and moves on. It's the nature of things,' she told me to ease my pain.

And then one day it happened. After weeks of desperate searching, hoping, grieving and turning up countless stones, one tiny, black pebble was him – miraculously alive and well – a survivor, despite hunger and neighbourhood cats, and the remarkable one-in-a-billion chance of finding a creature as big as a 20-cent coin in a huge backyard.

‘Please don’t give up,’ I whisper to my husband, to my sick friends, to myself, and then I start to sob. Small sobs. From a small, precious place inside, where scarves and tortoises and treasured friendships collide. Where love and hope do battle with fear and brutal facts, and win.

For this I have learned. All things do pass. To pretend otherwise is folly. But we, as humans, are not privy to how and when. And there is always room for hope.

*Both girlfriends passed away within a year of my writing this.*