

## Painful void when baby dies

By Ruth Ostrow

A COUPLE of weeks ago I wrote a story about my friend Vanessa Gorman and how she and her partner Michael Shaw are dealing with the death of their baby girl Layla.

Particularly significant is the fact that Vanessa, a producer with the ABC, was filming the birth for a documentary at the time the tragedy occurred, and has continued filming the raw emotions associated with the loss of a child for a program now titled Losing Layla, which will screen early next year.

The column sparked a powerful reaction from many who had lost children and loved ones.

Tess Driver wrote, "Dear Ruth, Vanessa's story is surreal, as you so gently and lovingly told it. Many of us have stories which are never told, but which sit deep inside. We carry them for our life. Emma Spense was named and acknowledged 20 years after her birth. She has a special place now in which to rest, thanks to a caring doctor.

"Some years ago, about the time of year of my baby's death, I wrote the following poem:

"` The baby's dead,,'; the nurses said and smiled; ` You're very brave,,'; the doctor said and smiled; They could not look at you; but stared out through the window.  
" ` I'm sorry, dear,,'; the mother said and smiled; ` We're sad for you,,'; the friends all said and smiled; They could not look at you; but showered gifts of magazines and food.  
" ` You cannot try again,,'; the husband said and smiled; then held you tight and cried; The baby's clothes; were in a basket underneath the bed."

From Lisa, who was talked into a termination by an unwilling partner, came this email: "Grief is always there. It comes in waves -- waves that you must let wash over you, carry you along. Perhaps grief is a way of keeping our little ones close to us.

"I loved my baby the few weeks I was privileged to have him inside me. I saw him in my dreams. I love him still and remember, for what might have been. But I must grieve in secret. He is a dove flying off into the sunset. He is the flame of the candle I light for him. He can try again, but it can't be with me."

For Jill North from Tasmania the column was a reminder: "Dear Ruth, Tears are streaming down my face as I am tapping this message to you. I cannot even begin to imagine what it must be like for Vanessa and Michael. Tonight I will hug my two beautiful children especially hard as I kiss them goodnight and tell them how much I love them, knowing how lucky I am to have them in my life and realising how transient life, love, happiness and contentment can be."

Susan Lohmeyer-Wood had a revelation about women of an older generation, after attending a funeral service for friends who'd lost a baby through miscarriage and buried it at Adelaide's Centennial Park Cemetery "amidst similar, tiny graves, each one bearing just a name-plate".

"Speaking to my mother about the service, who had herself suffered several miscarriages many years before, I was surprised and deeply saddened to see

tears well in her eyes as she recounted the last miscarriage she had suffered. Not being given any chance to grieve at the time, she was still carrying that grief with her some 40 years later."

Tim Law who lost a child in similar circumstances to Vanessa and Michael a few years ago, wrote in to give us the address of this website, designed to help grieving parents, which he set up in memory of his child:  
<http://www.sandswa.org.au>.

On the controversial point of Vanessa taking the dead baby home and spending five days sleeping and being with her, the writer Carmel Bird wrote of a friend seeing a mother whale that wouldn't leave its dead baby.

Don McInnes was not as sentimental. "I am concerned you did not mention the dangers involved with women postponing childbirth in the interests of a career, because the choice between career and childbirth is not without costs.

"My partner certainly thought she had that choice, planning to postpone children until her 30s, only to find that due to the [common] disease endometriosis she could not fall pregnant. This was despite five IVF attempts and ultimately it ended her then marriage. My partner grieves for the children she can never conceive."

After losing her beloved twins Simon and Clare, author Adrienne Ryan compiled a newly released book of people's experiences: *A Silent Love* (Penguin Australia).

She says, "From the moment of conception each of our babies offers us a potential for the future. When our baby dies ... there remains a constant vacuum, a space that was reserved for a child to fill, or at least partly fill. We remain constantly aware that while our child would have said and done many things to alter our lives, our lives are instead altered by all the things they haven't said and done.

"The greatest gift others can give to a parent whose child has died is acknowledgment. All our hopes, dreams and aspirations we held for our child have also gone and our lives will never be the same again."

Andy Kissane wrote a book of poetry, *Every Night they Dance* (Five Islands Press) to ease the grief of his partner's multiple miscarriages and a hard decision taken after discovering their unborn daughter Bridie had severe spina bifida.

"Perhaps the hardest thing with miscarriage is how helpless you are once they start, how you can't do anything to prevent them. Although friends can be a wonderful support during these times, some will tell you, 'It's not meant to be', as if they somehow have more insight into meaning than you do. They tell you to stop trying.

"The people who are helpful realise that you can't brush away pain or ignore it; you just have to live through it."

I think Stephen Best summed up the sentiment when he wrote that Vanessa's decision to grieve so intensely was a powerful reminder to all of us to deal with death openly and directly:

"I wish I got to cry and say goodbye to my dad 30 years ago and see him just once more. If I did then I probably wouldn't have the same fear that I have now about losing someone close to me.

"Thank you for bringing to light a subject that needs to be addressed in our society and is never talked about."

[www.ruthostrow.com](http://www.ruthostrow.com)

© Ruth Ostrow

First published in The Weekend Australian SAT 29 JUL 2000