

A pain bared is grief shared

By Ruth Ostrow

A YEAR ago Vanessa Gorman found out the happy news that she was pregnant. As a typical modern woman with a career in television -- a producer on the ABC program Australian Story -- she had spent her early 30s debating whether or not to give up her career for children, whether her relationship was strong enough to sustain the cries of an infant, and what would it all do to her sex life.

By her mid-30s the biological clock started ringing loudly.

But, as is the case with many women, her partner remained ambivalent. Those of us who were close friends spent hours with both Vanessa and partner Michael Shaw debating the pros and cons of child rearing 1990s-style, as the New Age couple carefully considered all their lifestyle options.

But, like many of my peers, they realised that time waits for no one and, as Vanessa neared 37, she became desperate to conceive. After a long and difficult year, trying to co-ordinate cycles with a partner who travels a lot, she found out she was pregnant.

This, too, proved a challenge. Michael remained ambivalent. Vanessa coped by recording everything for a TV documentary she was making on how the modern couple deals with the arrival of a child in a period of history when children are not necessarily trendy or welcomed by the world.

But Vanessa, by now 38, was overjoyed with her impending motherhood, talking often to camera about her growing excitement, joy, but also about her apprehension and pre-birth nerves.

A week before the birth she rang me. "I feel something is going to go wrong," she said. "I can't believe I'm going to be this happy." I calmed her down by telling her that since she had booked herself into a good hospital, nothing was going to go wrong.

"Millions of children are born each year. Every mother fears birth but it always turns out well."

Not always. As the cameras rolled, capturing Vanessa in childbirth, something began to go wrong. The doctor was saying to Vanessa that the baby had gone into distress and there was the need for an emergency caesarean.

Vanessa, semi-conscious, agreed and was wheeled into theatre where the baby girl, Layla, was pulled from her belly covered in meconium. The dark substance, emitted from a distressed baby, is often present during childbirth but it can be lethal to babies if inhaled.

Which is what had transpired. Somehow the child began to suffocate and the next horrible hours were spent trying to save the little girl's life.

Then the call came which was to shatter all Vanessa's friends, sitting by the phone, waiting, praying. Layla had died.

It was days before we got to speak to Vanessa, relying on messages from her sisters and a couple of confidants. But two bits of information stunned us all.

One was that Vanessa was continuing her filming, talking to camera through the shock and tears. The second was she was taking the body of the dead child home with her so she could grieve the process of death in a way once forbidden to women, whose dead babies were whisked away by over-zealous hospital staff.

We huddled in groups and started discussing the way Vanessa was grieving as we all received photos in the mail of the new mother holding the dead infant to her breast, bathing her and loving her.

"It's too much. It shouldn't be allowed," said some. "Maudlin," said others. "It's natural," said others. Everyone had something to say. News of Vanessa sleeping with the child or walking from room to room showing Layla the house she would have lived in, had us staggered.

Our own grieving intensified as we saw a woman unable to let go. And still the filming continued, capturing raw grief, and the truth of life and death.

Through the process Vanessa's friends began to agree that perhaps going deeply into grief was not such a bad thing. That it was unnatural for mothers who had spent a year in expectation, hormonally in love, intoxicated, to be told "just get on with it", or "go make another" without respect for the child who had been cruelly wrenched from them.

In fact, that is how all loss is treated in this society. People don't know how to grieve, or how deeply to let others grieve.

But for us the biggest shock was still to come. Vanessa and Michael held a ceremony for 50 close friends and relatives a week after Layla's body had been cremated. At the ceremony Vanessa said she was showing the video. She wanted us to honour their loss by watching it.

We sat dumbfounded, mesmerised, in sorrow, admiration, horror, but most of all love, as the surreal story played out in front of Vanessa's own mother, and us.

Men and women wept. Despite our pain, it was a privilege to come face to face with the facts of life, not myths. Not Hollywood "happy ever after".

We watched intimate scenes of a mother and her dead child. A father cradling them. A couple lost in confusion, sorrow and incomprehension, talking truth from this terrifying dark space.

Now Vanessa, 39, is producing the film for the ABC in a documentary called *Losing Layla* which shapes as extraordinary, brave and confronting.

And it is Layla's gift to the world. Her little soul was here very briefly but she has given her mother enough courage to go on and make a film that will comfort mothers who have gone before her and parents who will come after her.

Three out of every 200 children die in and around birth. Hopefully this film -- to be released early next year -- will heal wounds never discussed in polite society.

"Scratch any woman and you'll find pain around reproduction," says Vanessa. "Babies who've died, babies intended but never had, terminations, miscarriages. These feelings need to be aired.

"I also want to show grief is healthy, loss is something precious, spiritual, meaningful and there is beauty in it. But it needs to be digested with patience and dignity."

Vanessa misses "her little angel" but can take solace knowing her passing will not have been in vain. Layla has already brought much insight to friends, and soon to the world.

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