

Battle scars of a life well lived

By Ruth Ostrow

I WAS having a coffee with my friend, film-maker and TV producer Vanessa Gorman, the other day and asked how she really was.

I'd written a column about her last year. Vanessa lost her daughter, Layla, after childbirth and went on to make the award-winning documentary *Losing Layla*, about her struggle to have the child and the subsequent, terrible loss of her infant daughter.

Now, 19 months after Layla's passing, Vanessa turns to me and says: "Ruthie, I'm not really good at all, and the thing is people all expect me to be.

"It's as if they are thinking: 'Well, you've grieved enough, now get over it.' As if there's some time limit on pain and grief. But the thing is that every time a friend's child has a birthday I think that Layla would now be one or two, or running around with me here. You grieve for the baby who would now be a little girl.

"Every celebration is tinged with sadness and I carry the pain of the grief around with me every day," she says with tears in her eyes.

I got to thinking about how we grieve in the West. Unlike our parents' generation, we are encouraged to express our sadness. But the new rule is that there is a definite limit on how long we are allowed to mourn.

Grief has been fast-tracked. The nominal "appropriate" time is about three to six months, then people start getting a bit tetchy with those in grief.

I've certainly noticed that, after a year, people get quite impatient. Some of them feel angry because the depth of ongoing grief eventually forces them to confront their own demons and the pain they haven't processed. There is often lack of empathy because it may be hard for someone in, say, a bad marriage to accept that another person has such profound grief over losing a husband.

Some just get uncomfortable because they have run out of things to say and don't know how to simply sit quietly and hold another person in their pain.

But one well-respected grief counsellor I've been seeing, after my own recent losses, says that society has got to be made aware that chronic grief is normal and healthy, and should be accommodated in any compassionate culture. People grieve with differing degrees of intensity depending on upbringing, love and the nature of the loss.

Indeed, I remember that, although I had gotten on with my life after my father died, for at least five years I couldn't say the word dad without bursting into tears.

The counsellor says there are myriad expressions of grief. For instance, when I developed a suspected skin cancer (which proved to be benign) immediately after my young cousin died of cancer, the counsellor said: "What is coming out in your

skin is possibly your unconscious trying to help you fathom loss and your own mortality. Our bodies are amazing in how they help us to process emotions and heal at a deep level."

In *Losing Layla*, Vanessa talks about various forms of grief, including exhaustion, escapist behaviour, jealousy, numbness, anger, but mainly about the endless sense of sadness and melancholia. All of which, according to the grief counsellor, are natural reactions and need to work their way through the body and soul without repression.

The other complex issue with grief is that some of us have a legacy of pain to deal with. Vanessa, for instance, didn't just lose her child but also her treasured relationship, which in turn tapped into an earlier wound she was carrying -- a father who died when she was a young girl.

"People have stopped asking me about the ongoing grief of Layla," says Vanessa. "They just want to chat to me about safe things, like work. There is an expectation that I'm better now.

"And I am getting on with life. I've grown enormously. I have wonderful friends and I know my film has done great good in giving people permission to grieve.

"But it doesn't mean that every second of my life hasn't been changed by this child who isn't here with me. I just miss her."

It seems to me that in the East, people grow up understanding the impermanence of life and learning how to mourn each passing: our lost dreams and opportunities, our beloved intimates and eventually our own lives.

Here we have to pretend it's all happy ever after, which is bizarre. So, how long is an appropriate amount of time to grieve? The sky is the limit. Our griefs are the battle scars of a life well lived, and people well loved, and should be honoured as such and incorporated into the very fabric of our souls.

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