

Borne by the presence within

By Ruth Ostrow

FOLLOWING my column on grief a few weeks ago, I have been inundated with letters from people who want a voice in this often-ignored aspect of our lives. I believe it's a sad oversight that people's stories of dealing with death are not given more voice in mainstream media.

So as part of my commitment to clear away some of the cobwebs surrounding this taboo subject, I will publish letters this week and next from people who need to be heard.

This week Mary O'Brien from NSW shares her remarkable approach to grieving and one that has inspired and moved me deeply.

"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 writes.

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

"We simply did everything 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."

Mary says 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 other."

Now a survivor, Mary sent me this touching poem from an unnamed source she says sums up her and her partner's experience.

Do not stand at my grave and weep; I am not there, I do not sleep
I am a thousand winds that blow
I am the diamond glints on snow
I am the sunlight on reaped grain
I am the gentle autumn rain.
When you awaken in the morning's hush
I am the swift uplifting rush
of quiet birds in circled flight
I am the soft stars that shine at night.
Do not stand at my grave and cry
I am not here
I did not die.

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