

Death's sting brings a salve

By Ruth Ostrow

"THERE is a great richness in death," says Rachael Falk, staring boldly into my eyes. She has only just begun telling her story and I am already visibly unnerved.

"Well, we can't all live Tom and Nicole lives," she says of my response. "The problem is we pretend death doesn't exist. Which is why we don't value what we have.

"Death forces us to appreciate life," she says of a saga that began in Melbourne 21 years ago, the day her mother came home and announced she was leaving for Sydney and taking her children with her.

Rachael, now 31 and a solicitor, was a child of 10 at the time. Her brother Anthony was 14. Theirs had been a very unhappy home. In Rachael's own words her dad was a typical absent father. He avoided intimacy and "hated children".

"We annoyed him. He was constantly angered by the small things we did. He was always belligerent and painfully strict. In retrospect he was a man who never should have had kids," she says, ruminating on what prompted her mother to pack up and leave.

But children always love their dad. And Rachael and Anthony pined for their father despite his shortcomings.

It seems he did not pine for them. Their letters were rarely responded to. Phone calls were brief and cold. Finally, after 15 years of frosty relations, Rachael's father turned his back on her completely over a trivial financial matter and their relationship ceased.

"I was horrified that he could cut me off like that. As if I didn't exist. I wrote him a long letter, talking to him about how I felt, but he never responded. And so for five years we didn't speak or see each other at all."

Then one day last year Rachael received a call from her aunt informing her that her father had been diagnosed with terminal cancer.

"News like that changes everything. I became determined to speak to him, to heal the wounds between us," she says. She jumped on a plane and flew to Melbourne.

Again, she was met by indifference -- as was her brother, who had travelled with her from Sydney. But the siblings remained persistent over the months, trying to break down the barriers.

Then news came that was to shatter the whole family. With no warning, Rachael's beloved brother Anthony committed suicide. He was 33.

"My first thought was: 'He wouldn't do that, he wouldn't leave me!' You don't believe they've done it until you see the body.

"I can't begin to explain the grief -- you don't even occupy the world. I wouldn't catch public transport because I couldn't stand to be around anyone normal. I just don't think Anthony had ever anchored himself in the world."

There was one tragic irony. "Tony used to say he wished there'd be a day when we could all be in a room together, he and Mum, Dad and me. I said it'd never happen. But there we all were in the morgue standing around him as if he was just sleeping.

"He brought us together for the first time in 20 years but it was heartbreaking we couldn't take him home with us."

After the trauma of Anthony's death, Rachael had a breakthrough with her father. "Our relationship changed that week. It was as if he suddenly realised how much time he'd wasted. All those wasted years," she says, with the first hint of tears.

"Dad stayed at my house. He got to meet my friends, and became 'Rachael's father'. We wandered around Kirribilli, got fish and chips from my shop. I think he'd never had a role like that before."

Then Rachael managed a transfer from work and returned to Melbourne to live with her father through his cancer treatment. "We talked a lot about Anthony, and me, and stuff like growing up. I asked him why he hadn't wanted a relationship with us. He admitted loving was hard for him. Keeping his distance was easier.

"But then amazingly he brought out a pile of everything Anthony and I had ever sent him.

"Every card, every letter. It had meant so much to him after all."

Within a couple of months Rachael's father was dead. He was 58.

"I grew to love and forgive him because I got to understand who he was and I accepted him. He grew to love me. We were very close those last weeks.

"I walked him to the gates of death, like a midwife assisting a birth. I told him to breathe deeply, I told him it was okay to let go and that Anthony was waiting for him.

"The lesson for me has been about capturing present time. To live for today and not wish it away because tomorrow will be better.

"I have also learned there is richness in death. It doesn't just have to mean blackness and doom. Death can offer so much to the living.

"It has made me optimistic, not pessimistic. I look forward to the future, I know how precious life is. When I have children, I will tell them that they shouldn't take their brothers and sisters or the people they love for granted."

From the heart

Dear Ruth,

Your column (Review, 23/10) on sex in marriage and harnessing pelvic energy was uncanny. It was as if you were talking about my own relationship. While I wouldn't have much problem seeing a sex therapist, I think that my partner wouldn't be very forthcoming with intimate details of our love life (or lack of it).

There must be an incredible number of people out there who are in the same boat as us. I don't have any answers to the problem but the thought of having an affair with another woman does excite me.
C.K., e-mail

Dear Ruth,
You apparently live in, or idealise, a subculture dominated by the "good life" of gays and singles, whose members believe that better sex means everyone's happy. Apart from that kind of immediate gratification, sex in itself enriches no one. That "good life", contrary to what you write, has nothing of substance to offer to people in committed relationships. Only love enriches. Maybe you really are the trivial person you appear to be.
Bob March, e-mail

Dear Ruth,
I had a special experience during a recent visit to Uluru with a group of Christians to pray for reconciliation. As the Aboriginal pastors shared the grief of their people, many of us wept. But I was caught away in the spirit world and for an hour or more was not conscious of what was going on around me. My spirit went somewhere else.
It took me quite a few minutes to work out where I was when I finally came back. Others believed something in the spiritual realm was changed at that time. The same power is available today -- for us to see beyond the physical and be assured that death is merely a gateway to life beyond the grave.
Betty Hocking, Andrews, Queensland

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