



DEATH AND GRIEF ARE LIKE THE OCEAN

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They say that grief has many configurations and that coming to terms with that grief is part of the healing process.

Having said that does not help me or others to process the loss of a friend, loved one or someone we knew intimately. Even though someone we knew from afar, dies, their death still affects us in a way that is a demonstration that we too will one day succumb to the ultimate end of our journey. **A copy of the article may be downloaded by clicking on:**

Death is a part of life that is like the rolling waves upon the seashore. Death comes knocking when one least expect it and when it does, why are we are surprised by its sudden arrival? The ocean has its patterns and is governed by the moon, but in the depths of that ocean dwells the unknown. Death is the same. We know it is there, but we don't know the time of its arrival and we can only guess when it is time. Grief like the waves of the ocean on a seashore, wash away the tears and fills the void in our heart with time. Such is the way of the world.

I have spoken with many of a bygone era who were reluctant to speak of their wartime experiences and yet they too found the time to express their grief to me about losing a mate in time of war. Only later in life did those horrible images of war manifest themselves in men and women who had experienced those horrors. Then and only then did we as a society recognize the illnesses associated with such experiences.

Some people believe that it is only through the experiences of war that individuals can suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome, but society is coming to grips with new technologies that demonstrate that such syndromes can manifest themselves in the workplace through terrible experiences and thus causing society millions of dollars. Others that suffer such stress find that there is no known illness that can describe their malady and thus come under a general psychological illness that evades normal societal expectations.

Death in itself is well documented and it is not for me to say what the best method of coming to grips with it is; other than to state that such experiences, grief with all of its associations must be allowed to flow without the barriers being created. If grief is not experienced the body cannot heal itself psychologically and/or physically and in time, will manifest itself in illness and diseases that lose themselves in the mists of time.

I remember my first experience of death and the funeral that followed. I was but a ten year old who went to school with my twin brother and sisters friends. One of their friends who also happened to be a twin, drowned in the ocean and subsequently we as young children attended the funeral. During my teen years, I became aware of murders being carried out in our neighbourhood of Windsor. The partner in crime of Ronald Ryan had killed an associate in one of the adjoining streets, and was later sentenced to life imprisonment for that heinous crime while Ronald Ryan was hung. I found that somewhat harsh as a young 17 year old to stomach.

Another young lad was set upon by youths and murdered in the streets of Prahran. This was not uncommon and now I can understand why our parents forbade us to open the door to anybody but them. Not even relatives were allowed to enter our home even though we could see through the window who they were. Another time, there was a car accident at the corner of our home, in which the driver of the vehicle had his head decapitated and it was left lying in the street. I remember my father coming in and forbidding us from going outside to witness the gruesome scene.

We would often hear of deaths occurring in the Prahran and St Kilda suburbs, of youths and gangs fighting each other for supremacy and other dying of gangland internal fighting. To us, growing up in that era, we became accustomed to the environment and adjusted accordingly in order to survive. The Police would often be seen travelling in cars with at least four to five in one vehicle breaking up gangs, youths standing on the corners late at night, stopping fights, melees, domestic violence and in general bringing about the peace in an environment that was explosive in nature.

The Prahran Police station in Greville Street, Prahran had a very tough reputation, but the toughest police station in Melbourne in my era was the St Kilda Police station in Chapel Street St Kilda. It was located further down the road from the Astor cinema and 3 Base Workshop Battalion, (Royal Australian Electrical and Mechanical Engineers) which was a Citizens Military Force Militia Barracks. Yes we as youths would have our experiences with both these Police Stations but in a mild sense of the word and nothing that would attract attention to ourselves, other than being falsely accused of some misdemeanour or another. Yes the patrolling police would disperse us from time to time when we would congregate in groups on the corners and their actions only made us feel more hostile towards authority, law and order.

When the West Gate Bridge collapsed, my Foreman John Baker and I should have died along with the other some 35 men, but providence or an act of God on the part of John Baker in changing the schedule saved us from the same horrible death. I was a young electrical apprentice at the time and I fail to find the words to describe my grief at losing mates I had come to know on the bridge before it collapsed. But that's another story.

Then there was the time I felt very much for my young brother Phillip, when his best mate Archie died in his arms after a hit and run by a drunken driver. Archie was struck violently but the Adrenalin in him helped him stand up and collapse in my brothers arms. I always wondered how my young brother coped after that experience. We heard later that the drunk driver did not go to prison and got away with it.

Violence and fear throughout my youth was a constant companion and if you did not know how to defend yourself then you made alliances with stronger groups or individuals in order to survive or you never ventured out after dark. Broken beer bottles, knives, broken beer glasses, tools of every kind, cricket bats, hockey sticks, bricks, rifles, shotguns, studded belts, razor blades, iron bars, rope, chains, knuckle dusters and many other known or home grown implements were used in order to survive. Many of these regional battles would not be chronicled nor would they form any part of any Police investigation when the Police themselves used rough tactics to bring to an end the gangs and the violence. Such covert violence, drugs, prostitution, crime and hostile acts of vandalism were a constant reminder that life in the suburbs were not what they seemed.

During my time in the Army, I did not find it odd that on my first tour of duty on guard at Kapooka I would find myself guarding a blood stained coffin in the guard house. Earlier that day it would appear that a truck had rolled over on the rifle range and some or someone had been killed. It did not affect me as I thought that it was part of the drill so to speak and took it as a natural part of the course that people would die when training for war. Later in my military career, I came to understand that death was a constant companion and the best method of avoiding become a full blown candidate for death was to learn to control ones fear and to learn and arm one's self with knowledge, skills and learn from the challenges in order to survive any hostile environment.

For surviving, I must thank my military instructors who at the time included, WW2, Korea, Malaya, Borneo and Vietnam. Without the Battle skills learnt in training, survival within the Army could not take for granted but that each experience enhanced skills already learnt. Endurance, the guts to keep going, the never give up attitude all helped to sustain us later in life.

What we could not possibly learn or know in the Army was the psychological trauma of betrayal, disloyalty, vengeance, revenge, envy, greed, theft, lack of respect, work ethics, dishonesty and letting others down. These concepts were alien to us and were looked upon as an abomination as they did not fit in with our way of life. It is therefore no wonder many mates and colleagues took the road of suicide, drink, broken marriages, domestic violence, homelessness, psychological problems and a host of many other ailments too numerous to catalogue. Every time I go past a homeless person, I will always put in some coins in their lap or container.

Not because of guilt, but because I felt they were down and out and needed a small token of understanding, while on the other hand I would think that had I not the decisions that I had in life, I too could have succumbed to the same illnesses and find myself in the same environment. I don't do it out of charity other than to let the person know that despite his or her circumstances, I am not in a position to help them back on their feet, but that I can contribute to making life that much easier for that one day. Such is the way of life.

I remember a mate being murdered on the train going home from work and the youth that knifed my mate tried to worm his way out of a prison sentence by blaming it on my mate. My mate is dead but the other bastard got a few years in prison. A few other mates shot themselves because of pressures of home. In one case, the wife of one bloke who had shot himself ended up killing her two children as she could not live life without her husband. Others got drunk and walked in front of cars or trains and ended their lives.

The smart ones sought psychological help and in many cases were able to extricate themselves from difficult situations and went on to live meaningful lives. Others in recent years became involved in being attacked and by defending themselves ended being the one to take another man's life. Life is what it is and we must defend ourselves against the unknown within the parameters of a civilized society.

Another childhood friend was killed in a motor car accident. His wife may have been driving the car and not her fault, but my mate still died. His death sent shocks throughout our bodies and life was never the same after that. Another mate climbed an electric pole in West Australia and was electrocuted, others died in aeroplane crashes into the sea during training, another dived into the ground after his main parachute and reserve failed, one died in New Zealand run over by an armoured personnel carrier, another mate was hit and run in Butterworth Penang, Malaya. Despite all the deaths we experienced, we never became immune to them and even though most of these deaths occurred in a non-two way firing range, life still went on. Such was life.

So many of our veterans have died from toxins, cancers of every source, liver damage, kidneys failure, psychological trauma, heart attacks, brain damage, strokes and still we have epidemiological studies pointing to deaths being associated with life style decisions. What utter bullshit. I cannot prove it but I am becoming convinced that our Defence Force people are and were subjected to toxins that became cancerous or injurious to health many years later. However having said that, proving the origin of their disease is nigh on impossible unless one kept meticulous records.

While many walked out of difficult marriages in order that their families could survive without them; families could not understand them nor know of what was going on in their minds. Only later after their deaths would the truth come out that these individuals could have been helped had they reached out. It is the Australian way

to look after a mate who is down out. You don't kick them when their down and we as Australians are known for sticking up for the Aussie battler who just will not give up.

We who have served this nation and have worn the uniform of Australia are not any special than our counterparts in the civilian world, other than we lived by rules that governed and judged us more harshly. Justice was swift and merciful and only the worst of the worst that could not be rehabilitated were removed. It has been alleged that more people died in car smashes in one year that all the deaths in Vietnam.

Yet why is it that we who have served continue to suffer long after we have left the embrace and the umbrella of the Defence Force. A question that has pursued me long after I left the Defence Force and an answer that has eluded me ever since. I would like to add that wearing of the uniform also means those who are law enforcement, fire brigade, paramedics and those who work for the Government for long periods of time.

At this point we get the stage of our narrative where we ask ourselves, what this all has got to do with grief and the factors that lead to death and/or to and to the life as we know it. One would have to reflect back on their own life and make informed decisions whether they are alive today because of the upbringing, their environment, their life experiences, the challenges they have faced, the support they have received, all of the above or none at all. Such are the ironic vexations of life and I wrote this article to come to grips with death itself. I have written this long overdue article out of anger. Anger at finding my friends are dying around me at a faster pace than I expected and with each day our ranks diminish in size.

What is the answer, I dont know. I honestly do not know and that elusive answer is driving me up the wall. Today of all days being Christmas day, we lost another mate. Why, may I ask, did he leave us so young, leaving behind a grieving widow, children, grandchildren, cobber, digger, and mates? We have lost mates before and suddenly; and yet with each death the grieving becomes more significant. I look forward to a long life without knowing what lies ahead of me and yet despite my optimism, I am ready to meet my maker. I guess I am not alone for there are many who must feel the same.

I guess when my times comes, I hope it is swift, with no pain and that my affairs are in order. I would go knowing that I have done my duty to my parents, four sons, my wife, my family, my siblings, my community, my heritage and above all to the country I call home, Australia. Bury me in some sunny ground, high on the hillside looking towards the rising sun and thus allowing the sun's rays to bathe my plot of real estate once more. I do hope that it is not too much to ask? I realise that it is not a very good Christmas article but this is how I express my grief I guess.

As always, apologies to purists for my poor grammar and savagery of the English language. I wish you all well and hope that this article does not cause ambiguity in the minds of those who read it.

This article is memory to all those who have gone before us.



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