

GRACE FROM GRIEF

DEVASTATED BY THE SUDDEN DEATH OF HER HUSBAND, DEBORAH SHARES A LIFE LESSON IN RESILIENCE

By AJ Collins, Freelance Writer & Editor
www.ajcollins.com.au

It's January 2015. There's a knock on Deborah Vanderwerp's front door. Her body tenses. Her brain sends out warning signals. The response is intuitive, a primeval hangover ingrained in her psyche. On any other day, the knock might be innocuous, at worst annoying: an electricity company wanting her to switch over, or a Jehovah's Witness wanting her to buy a \$2.00 leaflet - a message from God.

But today is not like any other day. For hours, a deep angst has been gnawing at Deborah's gut. And when she opens the door and sees the two officers, takes in their police uniforms, their stiff expressions, she knows. She just knows.

We've all witnessed this horrific, numbing moment from a distance - television dramas, adverts for Work Cover insurance. And we think how awful for that poor woman. That poor family. But today it's real. Today, that poor woman is Deborah.

She invites the officers in: because they're just doing their job; because even though everything in her being denies the reason they're standing there; and even though they're on the threshold of what should be her safe place, her protection, her home, she still needs to hear it said:

Her husband is dead. Lance is dead.

Perhaps I haven't captured the moment's emotion exactly. After all, time has passed. And time can warp the emotions, the memory. And everybody reacts differently to stress. To pain. So my words might be colouring Deborah's perception of events. But the core is truth.

So here we are now, sitting in the shade of Deborah's courtyard in Bentleigh. She's ready to share the aftermath of living without her soul mate. Maggie, Deborah's Labrador-cross rescue dog, sniffs at our feet. Last time I saw Maggie, she was running around the yard with a bucket over her head. I can see by the way Deborah's hand absently strokes Maggie's sleek, black head that the family dog has been a comfort to her these past months. As is Scout, a grey, solid cat that sits next to my leg for the next hour. Quiet.

Guarding.

A family-sized garden setting takes up most of the



Victorian Opera 2015 -Seven Deadly Sins Workshop (HR) C Charlie Kinross

courtyard. Aged wooden shelves built by Lance hold pots and yet more pots of Bonsai plants - Lance's joy. This is where Deborah and Lance loved to host gatherings for their musical and artist friends. She tells me she's ready to let some of the bonsai go to good homes. Not all. Some she will keep for herself. Some she will keep for her two teenage boys.

Deborah inhales her cigarette. She smiles but her eyes are fragile. She's apprehensive about talking. It's been almost a year since Lance died in a head-on motorcycle accident (his bike veered in front of an oncoming car. There's been no firm conclusion as to why). Lance Michael O'Reilly, an independent soul, musician, husband, father of two teenage boys, a motorbike enthusiast, is no longer here. He was killed doing what he loved doing best: riding in high country.

Does that make it any easier? That he loved what he was doing at the time of his death? Or is that sentiment simply a sort of positivity we use to try and ease the enormity of the pain? Positivity is something Deborah, a teacher, student, musician, lover and mother, knows a great deal about. This year she completed a Diploma in Positive Psychology and Wellbeing. Did it help her and her sons deal with their loss? It's probably not a black and white answer, but there are certainly signs it's assisted them to understand their reactions.

And understanding is a huge step forward. While Shae, Deborah and Lance's older son, has already developed a coping mechanism of removing himself from challenging situations and taking time to examine his feelings, Arie, their younger son, has always had anger issues. Arie is challenged by things outside his comfort zone (just going on a family holiday used to take hours

of consultation). So much so that the family decided to attend psychology sessions. It was there that Deborah learned about "Pos Psych", as she calls it.

A simple explanation of Positive Psychology is learning to identify what's working in your life and focusing on that to get you through difficult times. In the past, most clinical psychology practices focused on what was not working. The seed of Positive Psychology arose from examining the behaviours of people who survived WWII - some suffered from Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome while others didn't. Studies found those not traumatised had implemented positive behaviours which assisted them in leading normal lives.

Deborah was fascinated by the concept. 'It rang a lot of bells around Buddhism,' she says, reflecting on her introduction to the philosophy as an exchange student in her teens. 'My American mother was interested in Buddhism and meditation. She talked to me about it.' Deborah's sister, Connie, was an exchange student in Thailand. 'Every Thai child, at the time, learnt how to meditate at school,' Deborah says. 'When Connie came back, she was captured by the way they live life, their philosophy.'

Over time, Deborah became entrenched in positive meditative practice, reading about Buddhism, watching TED talks, 'A lot felt familiar, felt right, made sense.' When she injured her back and her children were in their most difficult phase, 'Connie suggested we do meditation together. I started looking at the world through a different lens.'

But having a life philosophy and facing the reality of losing a husband are very different animals. Two days prior Lance's death, after working at Holmesglen TAFE for 25 years, Deborah had just taken a leap of faith and accepted a new position: a dream job working with Victorian Opera. Her teaching qualifications and years of experience in theatre proved a perfect fit for the company and she was euphorically excited and nervous about her career change.

The lead up to this move had been months of stress and uncertainty, the result of reductions in TAFE government funding. As a course co-ordinator, Deborah had to deal with incredibly difficult situations. Did her Positive Psychology studies help when she was finally made redundant? 'All the tools didn't seem to help, but without those tools, I might have actually gone into a depression or another space. They don't help you avoid what you have to go through, but they help you go through it better.'

Clarity

But then, just as the pall of uncertainty lifted for Deborah, her world came crashing down again. She had to decide if she could cope with a new job after the sudden death of her husband. Incredibly, within 24 hours of Lance's death, Deborah says a clarity of space

kicked in: 'I realised if I was going to take the boys on the journey of overcoming this trauma, I needed to lead by example. If I allowed myself to go into the place that I wanted to go at the time - crawl into a hole and disappear - I wasn't going to give the boys the message I needed them to get.'

She takes a moment to breathe. 'Shit happens. Life happens. It's our job to do the best we can in whatever circumstance we're given. There are things we can control and things we can't. I couldn't control Lance dying, but I could control how I chose to respond.'

So I rang my manager and told her what had happened. I said I don't know what I'm going to be doing but my gut feeling was that I was going to want to start. She gave me the option of who I told on the job.'

Deborah says her first weeks at Victorian Opera were a blur, that between bouts of massive note-taking, she was awed by how accepting, understanding and supportive the team were. She tears up when she recalls how she gradually revealed her circumstances to staff, and how each time the pain of telling was fresh. She wipes her eyes and laughs. 'They're creative nutcases. Like-minded people. A team of extraordinary, loving people. We clicked very quickly.' And she says the music itself has been healing: 'My desk is right next to the main rehearsal room. I would be listening to these phenomenal singers, day in, day out. I cannot begin to fathom how important that's been.'

She reflects now on the connection between Buddhism and her Positive Psychology studies. 'Buddhism means always preparing for death. Every single day of your life. We don't have that in our society. We push death away. We're all going to lose someone, something, at some point. So by focusing on that one thing that's working at that moment, for that day, it can help. Just keeping the fact that every day is going to be okay in one form or another.'

She tears up again. 'I probably can't say this without becoming emotional but ... and I think Lance gave this to me ... I really think that on that first night after he died, after I knew he was dead, it was like this huge light over me. A realisation that this was the one opportunity I was going to have in my life, to do the best I could for him, and for the boys, and for me. And choosing to be the best I could be, whatever that was - it didn't matter whether it was a mess on the floor, if that was the best I could be. That's what I had to focus on. And that's pretty much what I've tried to do every day since he died.'

Deborah breaks down now. 'Oh fuck. It's still gets me every time. That realisation.'

It's beautiful.

'I just wish he didn't have to die for me to get that.'