

This is the text of David Brumley's reflection at the recent Ballarat Hospice Care Inc. & Gandarra Celebration of Remembrance.

INTERSECTIONS: HERE WE ARE

We have shared something important in the past, and so it is good to be together again. In the past our lives intersected for a time. That time was important, and we want to remember it. So here we are. For most of you that important time included the death of someone you loved, and the intense emotions and experiences of that time have never been lost. Although changed, these experiences are still with you and are part of you. You also know, and you would not be here without knowing this, that the people such as we whose work it was to support you were also changed by that experience. So here we are, sharing, searching and trying to make some sense of it all.

Many years ago I travelled to India, and heard an ancient story from a place called Jetavana. The story was of a young woman called Kisa Gautami, whose one year-old son had died. She was weeping, she carried her dead baby in her arms and went from house to house begging the people in the town for a way to bring her son back to life. Of course, nobody could help her until she approached a wise man who listened compassionately, and then said to her, "Kisa Gautami, there is only one way to solve your problem. Go and bring me four or five mustard seeds from a family in which there has never been a death." Of course she was unable to do so, and understood the lesson. This difficult lesson must be learnt by experience and feeling rather than by intellect. It is a lesson that we are all learning.

We are by nature social animals. We are born to live in groups, and can't be fully human without others around us. We feel for others, and there is in at least most people the natural desire to be of help to others. Recently there is support from science for this as well. Our nervous system is designed so that we can recognise the feelings of others. It turns out that we are wired to understand others feelings – that there exists in the front part of our brain a set of nerve cells that fire both when we do or feel something and when someone else does or feels something – which enables us to have insight into the way the other is feeling. This may be the structural basis of empathy – the capacity to feel what others are feeling.

This is the basis of our humanity, and sometimes it is not about what can be done, but whether the other person cares. There is a wonderful story told by Viktor Frankl, a holocaust survivor who became a world famous psychiatrist, about a midnight phone call he got from a woman who was talking about suicide. He tells us that he spoke to her at length that night, and when he later met her and realised that she had not suicided, he asked her what he had said to change her mind. She said that he had said nothing to change her mind, but that the fact that a world famous doctor would take the trouble to talk to her in the middle of the night and be concerned for her made her think that there must be some meaning in life.

We humans seem to be searching all the time for meaning. Here is Frankl again, at the time he was in the concentration camp: *"A thought transfixed me: for the first time in my life I saw the truth as it is set into song by so many poets, proclaimed as the final wisdom by so many thinkers. The truth – that love is the ultimate and the highest goal to which man can aspire. Then I grasped the meaning of the greatest secret that human poetry and human thought and belief have to impart: The salvation of man is through love and in love. I understood how a man who has nothing left in this world still may know bliss, be it only for a brief moment, in the contemplation of his beloved. In a position of utter desolation, when man cannot express himself in positive action, when his only achievement may consist in enduring his sufferings in the right way – an honorable way – in such a position man can, through loving contemplation of the image he carries of his beloved, achieve fulfillment. For the first time in my life I was able to understand the meaning of the words, "The angels are lost in perpetual contemplation of an infinite glory...."*

Which naturally leads me to the last of this short talk, which is the idea of the spiritual in our lives. In our work these days we see a lot of people who have no religious connection. They have either never, or not for a long time, been anywhere near a Church, a Temple, a Mosque, a Chapel, a Kirk, a Meetinghouse, a Kingdom Hall, a Synagogue, a Gurdwara, a Daoguan, a Jinja – you get the picture – but because they are human, they nevertheless have spiritual lives. They nevertheless wonder about what it means to be. As Frankl says: *"Ultimately, man should not ask what the meaning of his life is, but rather must recognize that it is he who is asked. In a word, each man is questioned by life; and he can only answer to life by answering for his own life; to life he can only respond by being responsible."*

One of my favourite poets, Mary Oliver, writes:

Wild Geese (last stanza)

Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.

from *Dream Work* by Mary Oliver
published by Atlantic Monthly Press

Here we are. We share the despair of loss, but also the wild excitement of being alive together, and the exhilaration of the ride. Go well, and thank you for being on the ride with me.

David Brumley

Grampians Regional Palliative Care

2013 Conference Date for Diary

Thursday 2nd & Friday 3rd May

Novotel Forest Resort, Creswick



POSTGRADUATE PALLIATIVE CARE SCHOLARSHIPS FOR 2013

The Department of Health, Palliative Care, Continuing Care has made funds available for Postgraduate Palliative Care Scholarships for study undertaken during the 2013 academic year. Applicants must be currently working or actively seeking employment in specialist palliative care, primary care, aged care or in other health services where enhanced expertise in palliative care would be beneficial. It is expected that applicants will have already completed an undergraduate course of study. Palliative Care Victoria will be administering this program on behalf of the Department. The Guidelines, Application Form and an indicative list of approved courses can be downloaded at: <http://bit.ly/Qromh8>. Information is also available on the Palliative Care Victoria website: <http://www.pallcarevic.asn.au/service-providers/scholarships-2013/> Applications close at 5pm on Monday 26th November 2012.

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