

Till Death Do Us Part

"I'm not afraid to die, I just don't want to be there when it happens." - Woody Allen

Andrew's Call – Yes *That Call*

Friday 11th August 2017. Picking up the phone, I could feel Andrew's fear before I heard it in his voice.

"I wasn't sure if I should call you" he stammered, not stopping to take a breath, "I've had a scan."

Instinctively I knew what he was about to say, although I'd had no inkling that he was ill until now. Not waiting for him to finish, I was already heading for my car.

"I'll be right over!" I said, still holding the phone.

Why would he consider not phoning me? We were push-pulling our way through again – just as we had done throughout our 30 years together. There is nowhere else I'd rather be than supporting the man I'd spent more than half my life with. Not married. Not yet divorced. Not really friends. Yet clearly not enemies. We were linked like conjoined twins sharing a lung - it was impossible to separate us.

"It's not clear" he went on, "I'm not sure what the scientific terms mean, but I *think* I have lung cancer. I'm not sure though." he repeated again. "There appears to be a lump high in the right lung. Nothing of note anywhere else".

With the push of a Google button, we're online checking pathology lingo, attempting to get some clarity. Perhaps our panic is unfounded. We immediately regret going online. It's not good news.

"Until we see the specialist" I say, offering hope, "it's anyone's guess what we're dealing with". There was every reason to be optimistic - my own bowel cancer diagnosis one year earlier was at stage 4, and yet I was already defying the odds. "When would you like to say something to the kids?" We were both dreading that conversation.

Haven't Stacey, Loren and Matthew been through enough already? They were still grappling with the breakdown of our family unit when I was diagnosed. And now.... *this*. We decided to tell them early. Andrew needed as much support as was possible at this time. When challenges faced the children or himself in the past, he would loudly declare "Who are we? We're McMaster's!" as though the surname itself had superpowers that helped us meet every obstacle fearlessly and come out on the winners side. Now, it was just a name like any other.

Looking for our Zen

Finally, after an excruciating seven days waiting for an appointment, we were sitting in the office of Dr Simon, a Respiratory Physician. Although we were eager to get the initial scan's full results, Dr Simon encouraged us to be patient and wait for everything to take its rightful course. The rightful course being that we should wait for his 'team' of specialists to have their fortnightly scheduled meeting to discuss all their clients and form a consensus regarding treatment options.

"In the meantime," said Dr Simon, "I'm referring you for a PET scan to ascertain if there has been any spread. It's likely you've already been living with cancer for six months, so two more weeks of waiting isn't going to make any difference."

Recognising Andrews obvious distress, with a hint of gruffness he added, "Until then, I suggest you try to be more Zen-Like."

More Zen-like? Really?

I despised Dr Simon instantly. His insensitivity was an unexpected affront.

As soon as we had the PET results, we dropped them back to Dr Simon's rooms, but not before casting an eye over them ourselves. Blotches of red lit up the pages like lights on a Christmas tree. His entire pelvis was a blaze of crimson.

Andrew was oblivious to the metastasis, but I'd seen it before on my own PET scan and had done extensive research. Painfully meandering our way through peak hour traffic, when I saw a chance, I pulled the car over to the side of the road and began to cry.

"It's okay" I reassured Andrew, not wanting to alarm him further. "I'm just overwhelmed. It's all so surreal." As much as I was thinking about what lay ahead for Andrew, I was also sad for our children. "I'm so sorry. So very sorry." I said out loud to Andrew, as much as to myself. "How did our lives come to this?"

And how did Andrew's cancer journey come to look so different from my own?

When I had been spotting, the specialist suggested we take affirmative and immediate action 'just in case'. When metastases appeared in my hysterectomy pathology, the surgeon had phoned me immediately and spoke in hushed apologetic tones as though he felt somehow responsible for not knowing that cancer had invaded my body. Dr Stamatiou had picked up the phone immediately and personally connected me with the very best surgeon to deal with the next phase of diagnosis and ensuing treatment. Three days later, I was in surgery.

While in hospital, doctors I didn't even know were phoning me to make suggestions and recommendations for how to proceed - they'd heard about me during their specialist teams meetings. I had the best team of surgeons and the highest level of care from day one. I still have high levels of support all these years later.

For several months Andrew had a persistent cough that wasn't healing despite several prescriptions of antibiotics. His GP had sent him for a scan only *after* Andrew had demanded one. Then we needed to make our own appointment with a specialist, who pompously told Andrew to be

more Zen-like. But Dr Simon was right about one thing. Andrew had likely been living with cancer for some time.

"Mum, I'm concerned about dad" Stacey said in several panicked calls over the months before his diagnosis. "He's losing so much weight. I'm sure he's not well."

"He's not used to fending for himself darling" I reassured her. "And you know he's never been a big eater. I'm sure he's okay."

Stacey, now 26, had moved out of the family home when she was 18. She had worked in her father's' office since leaving school. They ate lunch together every day, sometimes breakfast. It was a ritual they both enjoyed immensely. But seeing him every day didn't blind her to the physical changes that were taking place. She's always been intuitive that way.

"I know he's not a big eater - but that's never changed. Something's wrong" she repeated. "I know it!"

Right up until that first x-ray, Andrew continued to play golf every Saturday, pushing through the pain that had begun to develop in his lower back, around his pelvis.

"Probably muscle pain from coughing so much" he reasoned to himself.

It's Not Good News I'm Afraid

Two weeks after his initial meeting with Dr Simon, we met with the specialist team to discuss their findings. As it turned out, the team was made up of only one other doctor - an oncologist. Having been down this road before, I knew full well that the details get lost in the fogginess of a mind that shuts down during stress, and we didn't want to miss a single detail. I hurriedly turned the phone to 'record' the conversation. Generally, I would ask permission before taking such a liberty, but we'd barely settled ourselves into our chairs before the oncologist began speaking.

"The cancer is so far advanced and aggressive" she stated outright, "that we'll need to start chemotherapy immediately. With chemo, you'll maybe have two months. Without chemo, you'll only have a couple of weeks."

No sooner had the words fallen from her mouth, Dr Simon was on his feet, announcing that he had elsewhere to be.

"I need to be on my way. The oncologist will help you with further arrangements". And, as if propelled by some brutish force, he angrily shot at me: "It's manners to ask permission before you record, don't you know?" Then he disappeared into the night, leaving us motionless, in shocked silence, not quite able to grasp the gravity of what we'd just heard. There simply were no words. Andrew sat still, motionless. Numb. My phone rang, jolting me back to the moment. Loren was phoning between uni tutorials to check on our dinner arrangements for this evening. A floodgate of tears burst forth. How am I going to tell them?

As it turns out, two weeks of extra waiting did make a difference! Andrew accessed chemotherapy the very next day but, multiple clots that had already formed in his lungs, and two days later he was admitted to hospital. Now, without the ability to access chemo, we knew..... Just as the

oncologist had predicted, Andrew passed away 2 weeks later - five short weeks after the call. Yes, *that call*.

None of us had time to absorb the gravity of the loss that was about to take place. Unlike the many blessings I found through my journey with cancer, Andrew shut down the minute he heard of his cancer.

In Search of Spiritual Peace

I had no doubt Andrew would not be experiencing spiritual peace at the time of his passing. Some years earlier, we'd had a discussion on this very subject.

"Do you believe in God?" asked Loren.

"Sure I do," I replied, enjoying this opportunity to peek inside the mind of a 12-year-old. "Who do you think is helping us and guiding us throughout our lives if there is no God?"

"We create everything with our own thoughts and beliefs" she responded with wisdom beyond her years. "We make this happen. We have choices."

Andrew was on his way to the upstairs bedroom. I heard his footsteps stop, signalling he'd paused to listen, safely hidden in the shadows. Prone to avoiding discussions that required deep reflection, this particular conversation struck a chord. As a young boy he had experienced great hardship after his father's passing and it tainted his faith, causing him to turn his heart away from God. He was angry with God.

"Bad things happen for good reasons" I'd once told him. "It's all part of a grand plan designed before we incarnate. There are many blessings to be found in your childhood struggles".

"What loving God would take a father from a child and make him suffer?" he'd retorted angrily on more than one occasion. "And what possible good has come of the suffering we all went through?"

"You're a wonderful father, Andrew" I reasoned with him. "You go above and beyond to be the father you never had. You might not have put so much energy into your relationship with your children if you had grown up with your father." I had a heart-felt belief about the perfect wisdom of the universe.

"And look at the career you've chosen as a Financial Planner." I was determined to ease his pain, to help him find some sense of peace. "You're one of the best in the business because you go above and beyond for your clients. You care about safeguarding them, and their families, in the event tragedy should strike. You've experienced hardship and poverty due to your father's passing, and you don't want others to experience the same fate."

But nothing would shake his belief, or rather, lack of it. So deep was his sense of grief and loss; he couldn't say his father's name without crying. After five decades, the wound had never healed. The mere mention of his father's name would rip the scab off again, causing Andrew to miss him even more. And so, he never spoke of him. And neither did we.

In Search of Emotional Peace

Arriving at the hospital, Andrew is given an oxygen mask as the clots in his lungs have made breathing difficult. During his final two weeks in palliative care, he held tight to his oxygen mask, as if it were a lifeline. Palpable fear etched in the lines of his face, in his eyes. The cheeky, playful sparkle we had always known was diminished.

The hospital is near his office, so Stacey is already there by his side, holding his hand while I ask him questions from the Emergency Room Admissions form.

"Are you depressed?" I ask casually.

"Yes" Andrew answered.

"Depressed because you have cancer?" I probed, "or depressed because of *us*?"

Stacey and I locked eyes, both feeling a sadness washing over us. Once a man who sprang out of bed in the morning, full of enthusiasm as he approached his day, he now found himself in constant despair. Instantly I had a flashback to the fortune-teller I'd visited in Kuala Lumpur, warning: "If he makes a mistake, he will regret it for the rest of his life."

To say Andrew had regrets is an understatement. Once settled in the hospital ward, he looked me in the eyes and whispered:

"I wish I hadn't fucked up the last 3 years. Wish I'd tried harder to win you back." Still no apology for the hurt he had caused during our marriage. No acknowledgement of the years of infidelity, and three decades of leaving me feeling invisible and alone.

While apologising might open the door to guilt for most of us, for someone like Andrew, with his intense fear of intimacy, it opened the door to shame. Apologising made Andrew feel bad about himself—bad about who he was—which makes shame a far more toxic emotion than guilt. Seeking an apology seemed a trivial matter now anyway. But his 'shame' will have been causing him to feel unsettled, and all I wanted was for him to find some semblance of peace within his heart. Wanting to reassure him now, I kissed his forehead and lovingly whispered:

"I forgive you for the all the hurt Andrew." My assurances only served to make him more anxious, and I had to work hard to calm him again.

I hadn't wanted him to win me back. It had taken so much courage for me to leave the marriage. Since being on my own, I'd put a conscious effort into rediscovering who I was and stepping into the empowered woman I had always shied away from. Life was propelling me forward to new heights. What I wanted, *needed*, was closure. Now I was getting it. But it came at a heavy cost. First my cancer... *Now his*.

Each day Andrew's anxiety grew. He watched the clock constantly, impatient for death to take him, yet fearful that it would. I witnessed my friend Moira struggle with the same anxiety in the weeks leading to her passing from cancer. Deeply spiritual, Moira had no fear of death. However, she had never healed from a childhood fraught with violence, and a marriage that replicated the trauma of her youth. In her final days, she often cried, was denied sleep, and struggled to find relief from the anxiety

that developed. There was no peace to be had for a heart filled with the pain of the past. Not for Moira. Not for Andrew.

One Last Chance to Say I Love You

In a further act of irony, it hasn't escaped our attention that I was diagnosed with cancer the day after Mother's Day. Andrew arrived at the hospital on Father's Day weekend! The kids and I gathered around his bedside, showering him with kisses. We ate cake.

They made giant homemade Father's Day cards which we hung around the walls of his room. He'd always preferred homemade cards but, as the kids grew older, they'd protested this childish task. This day, they made them bigger and bolder than any they'd ever done. Back in 2012, for Father's we had created a video - a compilation of family photos, complete with emotionally stirring background music. At the time, he wept openly while we all sat watching this tribute to his place in our hearts. The kids and I attempted to play it for Andrew now, but he shut it down the minute he recognised the music. He didn't want to break down in front of us. He couldn't bear to appear vulnerable now.

We invited his mother, Patricia, to join us - it would be the last time he would want her there, as he shut down and closed himself off from everyone and everything.

The hospital chaplain has dropped by several times. No, Andrew doesn't want to talk to anyone, about anything. I always imagined that people on their deathbed suddenly opened up with expressions of love and wisdom never before seen or felt. But he never shared feelings before, so I don't push for it now. To be honest, none of us has anything to say. We're still in shock. One month ago, Andrew was telling jokes, playing golf... *being Andrew*. He abandoned himself the minute he received the first scan.

Stacey, Matthew and Loren longed for a meaningful final word from their father. To hear that he loves them. That he's proud of them. But they will have to suffice with the many, many, many, wonderful memories they have of him as the great father that he is.... *Was*.

It wasn't that he didn't want to say, "I love you". He simply couldn't get the words out with all the emotions that were caught in his throat, strangling him. Instead, Andrew is consumed with wanting, *needing*, to be told that he was a good father. He needs to know he's leaving a significant footprint behind. That his contribution to their lives mattered.

"We had fun didn't we kids?" he asks – a heart-felt statement more than a question. "I took good care of you, didn't I? I'm a lucky man." He had only ever wanted to be the 'father' that he had never had; to give his children the life he'd wanted for himself.

"You were a truly remarkable father." They all agreed. "We love you dad." And they do.

Matthew is afraid that he won't get the chance to tell his dad all the things he's feeling. So, I tell him to write a letter.

"What will I say? I don't know how to start?" Matthew asks. But I know he'll find the words. Now in his late teens, he has always lived from his heart.

"Start with I'm sorry... I forgive you... I love you... Thank you. The rest will follow. You'll see." I encourage him. "If you don't get a chance to read it to dad, you can place it in his coffin. When it burns it will be like a ritual, sending your letter of love into heaven with him." When I left Matthew and Andrew alone together, mostly it was silence that filled the space between them.

For the next two weeks, I sat by Andrew's bedside. Sometimes alone, at other times with our children. He's always anxious until I arrive in the early morning hours. Once there, I lift his mask from his face, and gently kiss him on the lips. It grounds him, calming him instantly. There is nowhere else I want to be, and he wants me there. We have finished playing games. I draw strength from believing that we have made a karmic pact to walk this journey together.

No Visitors Allowed

Besides the kids and I, Andrew wants no other visitors, not even his family. He's in his own space now, which doesn't have room for others. Knowing I'm stronger than he is in every way, he's depending upon me to be the gatekeeper for him. I must tell his family and friends that they cannot come. Instantly I feel guilty and concerned that they will be angry with me. That they'll be *judging* me. I am, after all, Andrew's ex-wife. "*What right does she have to be here?*" I imagine them saying. My long-held fear of the judgement of others takes my attention momentarily away from being fully present and focused on Andrew's needs.

Then I remember, I'm exactly where I need to be. *Exactly where I want to be.* And our children are glad of this too. Selfishly, we don't want to share Andrew with anyone in his last precious moments. How possessive we've all become.

But I'm a mother, and a sister, so I understand their angst and their want of a chance to say goodbye. Andrew is the eldest son and brother. The head of the family since his father passed. Patricia, already 91, is not supposed to outlive her children. She's known a lifetime of unimaginable loss and grief already. Her father died when she was twelve. Later she carried a baby to term, and it was stillborn, causing her to fall into a terrible depression. Then, at 42, her husband passed away suddenly. Now she was outliving her son. The unpredictable fragility of life...

When I insisted that he must allow his family to say goodbye, he screamed at me.

"Just do whatever you want!" He doesn't want to make decisions. He has dying to do. And again, I feel guilty for causing him distress at this moment in time.

But his family jump at the chance to spend time with their brother, and suddenly there are multiple visits scheduled throughout the day. Andrew felt obliged to be the upbeat man they had always known him to be. Even now, he was clinging to his personality. But he was utterly exhausted when they left, and even more determined to now be left alone, adamant that I keep visitors away.

It's a heavy burden on me to say "no", leaving me plagued with guilt and reminding me that I have more work to do around my fear of judgement and issues of abandonment. But I've made the decision to abide by Andrew. His peace of mind is paramount now.

The tributes to his fine character as a friend and father continue to pour in. I read these messages to him, but he doesn't seem to register.

Grasping – The Pain of Letting Go

We're now entering our second week in the Palliative Care unit. How can a day feel like an eternity, yet simultaneously feel to be gone in an instant? I am reminded of Mark Levy's beautiful verse,

"If you want to know the value of one year, just ask a student who failed a course. If you want to know the value of one month, ask a mother who gave birth to a premature baby. If you want to know the value of one hour, ask the lovers waiting to meet. If you want to know the value of one minute, ask the person who just missed the bus. If you want to know the value of one second, ask the person who just escaped death in a car accident. And if you want to know the value of one-hundredth of a second, ask the athlete who won a silver medal in the Olympics."

I plan to come late today and leave early, as I have other plans. But I arrive early and stay late. I'm exhausted. Utterly. Energetically, I know it's not good for me to be soaking in this highly oppressive environment. I can feel my nervous system taking a hit. If I don't take a step back, I'll get sick. I'm duty-bound to myself in my desire to keep my own cancer from returning. I stay anyway. I don't want to leave Andrew's side. I am, as always, inextricably drawn to him. Shaking my head, I still can't believe the absurd pathway our lives have taken since 2014, when I first made the decision to leave.

There are no words to describe this dream I feel we're lost in.

Andrew's more comfortable in a darkened room. He is always tired yet can't sleep, which makes him sensitive to light. Before long, the sound of our voices becomes a source of agitation. The kids and I sit in silence around his bed, taking it in turns to weep softly. Despite being administered drugs to help with his anxiety, he remains resistant to falling into a state of peace. The oxygen mask remains a 'security blanket'— he presses it tightly to his face, not willing to let it go, not even for a moment.

September 12th. Three Days before Passing

The kids and I have checked into the Chancellor Hotel adjacent to the hospital. Although only 30-minutes' drive, traveling the distance every day feels arduous now that emotional exhaustion has set in. Huddled together in the tiny hotel room at the end of the day, we can laugh and find comfort in each other's company. Although it's been incredibly fast, we're grateful to have this chance to say goodbye. To say thank you. I love you. I'm sorry. It's an opportunity that many don't get. In facing a number of challenges over these past few years, I have learnt to find blessings in the most tragic of circumstances. Even now.

I invite Patricia to visit again on her own. As the week passed, she has become more distressed. She holds vigil by Andrew's bedside all day 'til the evening. One hand resting on his shoulder, it never leaves, not for a moment, as though she hopes there is a magic in her palm that will propel him to stay

with us. With his body breaking down internally, I know this loving act of touch is painful on his skin, which is now sensitive to physical stimulus of any kind. But such is his love for her, he says nothing. By 7pm, he is asking that we leave. Although we have spent the entire day in silence, our mere presence stops him from completely relaxing. He wants to be left in peace, to wrestle with sleep which still eludes him.

Patricia is resisting me. "What if he dies Ros?" She is sobbing in the corridor, unwilling to leave. "Can't I stay?" She pleads.

The kids and I hold her tightly. Our hearts break for her.

"I'm sorry Pat." I tell her through my own tears. "He doesn't want us in the room. We must leave him in peace now. We want him to find peace now." It's hardly reassuring.

During a Buddhist course on Death & Dying which I'd attended some years ago, Chodron, the facilitator, told us "*Don't cry or openly grieve in front of the dying person. They should be in a virtuous state of mind in the moments before death, because a better rebirth may result. ...*" I was conscious of that now, recalling stories of people passing *after* their loved ones had visited; *after* they'd all left the room.

The End is Nigh

Andrew's body was beginning the process of fully shutting down now. The oncologist and Palliative Care doctor felt it was a sign - it was time to make Andrew as comfortable as possible.

You'd think it would be an easy decision to make when you want someone to be free of suffering but giving the doctors permission to administer drugs that will place Andrew into a state of unconsciousness was incredibly gut-wrenching. We were being made to let go, and we didn't want to. There would never be a time when we would be ready. Not really.

"We can only expect him to be with us for a matter of days now", the doctor informed me. "We're certain he resisted sedation earlier because he still had business affairs to sort out. Now that this is done, he can relax and let go."

"He's been very resistant to letting go", added the oncologist. "We often see this with people who play competitive sports. They're very controlling in nature so it's harder to let go. Was he sporty?"

"He played golf pennants for many years", I managed to say through my sobs. "And he was competitive in every aspect of his life, not only on the sporting field." But I think he simply wasn't ready to leave his life behind. 'Grasping,' the Buddhists would say!

"Without his oxygen mask", Doctor Thomas added, "Andrew will pass away within a day or two. If he continues to cling to it, possibly a little longer."

When I walked into the room the next morning, Andrew's mask was off! I didn't know if I should put it back on for him. Seeing my concern, the duty nurse reassured me:

"He's enjoying some real air" she smiled up at me. "At one stage he pulled the tube out altogether! He's been doing it all night."

"Should I put it back on for him?" I asked, unsure of what was 'right'.

"Leave him be." She soothed. "On some level, he's purposely making the choice. He's ready."

I was relieved to hear that Andrew was making this choice himself. Several times throughout the day, I witnessed him swipe the mask away, then swipe it back on with an effortless flow of his wrist across his face. But I felt so guilty just the same... like I was somehow an accomplice to his dying.

The kids are taking time out to catch their breath and connect with each other today. The doctors suggested I do the same. Self-care. But there would be plenty of time for that later.

I'm thinking perhaps Andrew's frightened to let go because he believes there is nothing but blackness waiting for him, as is often the reason for hanging on, for grasping at life. I can hear Chodron words again:

"Whatever you believe, believe it fully – be at peace spiritually at the time of your passing."

Although Andrew didn't believe in God, perhaps in this moment, he'll welcome me painting a picture of something more exquisite than the plot of dirt he's envisioned for himself. So, I'm creating a palette of hues in heaven.

"You're going to love it in heaven Andy!" I whisper softly. "The love and peace you'll feel...!" I'm excited about the prospect of such a place myself. "The colours are magnificent", I continue, "and music like you've never heard before! You can create any golf course you want - perhaps you'd like to play the Masters again! Won't that be something?"

After years of Mediumship practice, I feel an authority on the subject of the afterlife. The white light, the tunnel - it all sounded so enticing to me.

"And I know your dad will be there to take you over to the other side", I added, continuing to help him find peace some semblance of emotional and spiritual comfort during his final moments. "You'll be happy to see him, won't you? And I'm so happy you'll finally be reunited with him."

And then, I gave him our blessing to let go, reassuring him that the children and I would miss him... but we'd be okay. Letting him know that I'd take good care of our children.

The next day, Andrew's still struggling to let go, leaving the doctors shaking their heads at his wilfulness. And so, given our past history with his infidelity, I take a different approach.

"You know Andrew.... some religious faiths believe there are virgin maidens waiting for them when they reach the other side. Perhaps you find this more appealing than flowers and music?" I'm laughing at my own wry humour and imagining him rolling his eyes at me. He never did think I was funny. After he passed, I visited Kathleen, a friend who worked as a psychic medium. I hadn't told her about my bedside conversation, but out of the blue, she said, "Andrew heard what you said, and he didn't like it. But he understands."

During these final few days, the previous oppressiveness of the darkened room has been replaced by a feeling of warmth. Sitting by his side in silence, a welcome calm settles over me. I've a chance to contemplate the journey Andrew and I have taken together through the years of betrayal and heartache.

Unrequited love.

I ponder on the journey I have begun towards finding my most authentic self in the years that followed our separation. Now, more than ever, I'm conscious of the need to continue striving for emotional

and spiritual peace. Knowing as I do, that life is fragile. And sweet. And bitter. And painful. *And* a blessing. I'm reminded too, that nothing happens by chance. I am, as always, exactly where I need to be.

Unforgiveness still a stain on my heart.