



# A Family's Farewell

by Lisa Finn-Powell

Spring is taking hold of the city, delicately layered like colourful tissue paper, slowly unwrapping itself to reveal each natural treasure. Magnolia trees having already peaked, and are beginning to rain their milky blushed blossoms to the sidewalks. People are slowly venturing outside into their gardens, carefully slicing into the ground, the silver glint of their tools shining in the long-awaited sun. Pastel Easter eggs swing from trees in the breeze. The repetitive thud of a basketball hitting a garage door can be heard somewhere down the hill, towards the beach.

The mountains disappear for days on end in the colder months and are visible again more frequently at this time of year. Their meringue whipped peaks connecting in a long line of craggy grandeur, skirted by the water; surreal and akin to an enormous postcard. The Puget Sound shipping canal runs through the city and shares its fluid space with enormous container vessels bound for Asia, cruise ships headed for Alaska, rusty rimmed fishing trawlers and small white sail boats. Today this vision is breathtaking and indeed that is precisely how I feel, breathless. The hopefulness of the season is relentless; it's choking me. I can't breathe at all. It's as though my whole existence is centered just below my Adam's apple. 'You've got to eat,' they all say to me. 'Have you eaten?' 'Yes, a little,' I lie. How do they really expect me to carry on as usual, when nothing will

ever be the same? I can't eat or sleep or sit still or read or watch television. We used to watch those scientific crime shows after the kids had gone to bed, guiltily indulging in a bowl of expensive ice-cream – the kind that comes in overpriced Lilliputian tubs with a handful of fresh walnuts or cherries. I can't eat when I'm gasping for air.

In the gorgeous Seattle Spring of 2005, my four children and I watched as nature displayed her power in a way we will never forget. Our experience began as the cold, dreary, wet Pacific Northwest gave birth to the vibrant colours, sounds and fragrances of new life, while at the same exact time ruthlessly ending another. One breath in. One breath out.

My then 46-year-old husband and father of our four children, ranging in age from two to 14, lay in a coma with a hypoxic brain injury. We watched helplessly as he was taken away from our family. I have never felt such unbearable pain. The losses were enormous. My partner and best friend, the potential of a man's life that would never be realised, the relationships with friends and family, but mostly, for my children – for what might have been, and for a lifetime of wondering about it.

My feelings of hopelessness and desperation were overwhelming. I wanted so badly to find a way to help all of us, especially the children, to process what was happening. I wanted to do whatever it took to prepare my children for the death of their father. Not being a religious family, I realised how devoid of ritual we were. And, as a

## Other ways to include children

■ Take them to the hospital if you can. It helps to see the person very ill and realise the gravity of the situation.

■ Take them to the funeral home – we chose an urn together and I explained to them that cremation was a way to gently melt down the body. I asked if we could take the top lid of the cremation tray home and the children painted messages on it. They also chose items to be cremated with him (they called it the 'Daddy Goodbye Pack'), his favourite shirt, a silly beach hat, a family photo, etc. There are many lovely wicker or banana leaf caskets available for a natural woodland burial.

■ Include them on the funeral planning – music, verse, poetry selections and honour their need to speak or not during the service. Have them help to design the funeral program booklet – my children drew pictures and wrote poetry to be included.

■ Help them make a memory box. Include photos of the person who has died and some of their belongings. We had Daddy's tie and some bits of pottery and clay pipe. The children can then decorate the outside of the box or write some of their favourite memories and slip them inside.

Western culture, how children are intentionally separated from death in an attempt to 'protect' them.

I am forever grateful to an insightful palliative care doctor who offered me very frank advice. He explained how important it is to keep the children in the loop. Tell them the truth no matter how difficult. Children are very intuitive and know when you are holding back, which might eventually lead to them feeling betrayed.

This wonderful doctor also made me take a good hard look at what was happening. If I could accept this reality for myself, I would be able to take control and make his death something that my children could be a part of. "I'm just imagining a life with him again," I told the doctor when he interrupted me daydreaming by Paul's ICU bedside. "Well," he simply said, 'have you imagined one without him?'

It struck me, hard. So much of what I knew about death was that it was always terribly sad, something to be feared. Nobody wanted to die unless they were 100 years old and had lived a long and happy life. Hollywood images of deathbed scenes involve loved ones crying and shouting, 'No, no, no, don't leave me...' Ironically, this is the same way that birth is portrayed – as a painful, unwanted, yet unavoidable situation that we must bear, or just struggle through the best we can, even if that means medicating the pain away.

The truth is we can't prevent death. We have to accept it as a part of life. The parallels between birth and death kept running through my head.

All of my children were born at home without drugs or interventions, summoning the strength that other, wiser women told me I had.

This same doctor was seated next to me in a tiny room crammed with nurses, doctors and relatives all looking at me with the deepest compassion and concern on their faces as the news was revealed that my husband had no hope of recovery. It was time to remove the life support. The doctor whispered in my ear 'You can take him home to die with you and the children.'

I was shocked and frightened for my vulnerable family, but it seemed to me that so much of what was happening was out of our control. We were reactive. We needed to be proactive. We would embrace the pain.

I went home and approached the children. "We've had four home births, we can have a home death.' I felt strong and positive and explained how we would plan every detail and make these few days with him very special. My children had all been present for the births of their subsequent siblings. They knew how to welcome a new family member – the transition to saying goodbye to their father was a natural one. They immediately agreed.

His hospital bed was placed in the window with the beautiful view I described above. During those last days,

we created a lovely memory table and hung posters of each child with individual photos of them with their dad. We had a small family birthday celebration for three year old Isabelle and celebrated Mother's Day. My father came over to have a final barbecue with his son-in-law and other friends and relatives came to say their goodbyes. I took lots of photographs – even after he died. Sometimes I have to look at them to remind me, even confirm that indeed he is gone. We moved mattresses around his bed and slept on the floor near him every night. Together, the children and I wrote a 'Death Plan' (not unlike a birth plan), where we designed a ceremony for the hours after his death. The doctors told us we had about 10 days and in fact he died on the 11th day.

My brave, brave children held his hand and told him how much they loved him as he took his last breaths. They covered him in rose petals, burned candles and incense, blew bubbles and recited poetry. They put 'tattoos' on him – those kid kinds that are applied with wet paper towels. A butterfly from Isabelle, a lizard and Jolly Roger pirate flag from Nick, a snake and Will's name in Chinese from William and a beautiful poem by Grace. We each placed something of importance in his hand for him to hold – something small but significant. "This is what they call the 'thin time'," Chris, the chaplain from the hospice told us, "those last hours of a person's life."

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So, we waited together – sitting around Paul's bed – playing music that he liked. We waited together in that space somewhere between death and dying. We laid photos of his

ancestors on top of him – his mother and father – his grandparents and great grandparents. We asked them to come and get him – to take care of him – to help him make the transition to what the children were calling the 'spirit world'. When the coroner arrived he said he had never been to a scene quite like this one. Paul left this earth with so much love. I am convinced that no king or greater man had a better send off than him.

The hardest thing I've ever had to do was tell my children that their father was going to die. It was more difficult that the actual moment that he did die and I believe that's because we were all ready. We had made our plans and we were sending him off in the best possible way we could think of.

As a parent, I've made many mistakes. I've done and said things I wish I could take back. The struggles we faced after Paul's death challenged and changed us all – for better and for worse. I have had to become a different woman, a different mother in my attempts to cope.

But, I do know this. I often tell people that his exit from this earth was the most beautiful, awful experience I hope my children and I will ever have. For that I am extremely grateful – even proud of our 'home death'.

Every death is a birth. This one was mine. ■