

## The Questions that Matter

**The questions that matter** is something that most nurses in our profession think about quite often. Nursing has given me the wisdom to deal with death, face the learning it has afforded and help others to pass on. Maybe this is akin to hidden talents, knowledge, and skills that are so deep and spiritually meaningful. I just know about death and dying. It's like something I've experienced many times before but do it with such honour and privilege. Being a nurse is a privileged position. Any position of privilege, if used with the right intention enables, your innate gifts or skills to shine, especially when opportunity meets your talent. In times when we shine, we just know that we are in synergy with life, if we choose to see it.

Synergistic situations create immense opportunity, often without expectation but the bar is high. In essence, life has given me enormous opportunities to practice my craft i.e., experiencing death and dying both personally and professionally. Most of us want to know that our lives have had some meaning and if not; then at least a feeling of being at peace with how we have lived and experienced life. What is the value of being human if we don't reflect on how our lives, our work, and relationships provide meaning in life; so that we truly live, love and matter?

I believe there are only three things that people focus or reflect on when they are dying. In the last days or weeks before you die; I can guarantee your inner self (depending on your level of awareness and insight) will spend time exploring and evaluating the following:

**1. The Value of your Relationships?** Will you think about the immense moments of joy and pleasure you've had with your friends and family or about the missed rare moments, regrets and painful experiences? Some of us may not have any or little insight regarding our actions towards others, which is sad, as our souls will accumulate this karma. Those with deep insight will know that the Universe is scanning your life across every event, meetings with people and the value of your connections with others (much like when a computer scans for viruses, we get a warning or message). Therefore, the Law of Cause and Effect comes into play; we ultimately have choice around our actions. The value of this is that the Universe is asking you to accept the responsibility for your actions and how it feels. Maybe it could be about the conversations we didn't have, the isolation we felt, missed opportunities to meet someone (especially when our paths crossed) or just the emotions we felt when we thought of someone in that passing moment.



World AIDS Day Panel 2014. Pictured on the back row, from left: Bill Bowtell and Nic Holas. Pictured on the front row from left: Abby Landy, Myself and Sebastian Robinson. November 2014

**2. Did I make a Difference in this World?** Most people when they faced with death reflect on this. They often dwell on the things they've set out to achieve and accomplish. They might ask, “why didn’t I do the impossible (however you define this) it seems so logical to me now” or “it’s so obvious to me now I can’t believe I’ve wasted all this time focussing all my energy on that (however you may perceive it)”. In essence, there may be a range of personal questions you may ask here; I have just thrown in some examples of what they could be. Only YOU will know whether YOU have a made a difference in the world, no one else but YOU.

**3. What was my legacy?** I know this is something that my first partner Michael most questioned. Many of us will ask questions about our legacy i.e., how others remember us by what we have left behind. We will all do this to varying degrees but just through different lenses in which we have lived life. For some of us, it will be about the importance of property and security; for others, our ‘legacy’ will focus on the children we have left behind, and for many others, it will be about whether our existence has meant anything and is not forgotten. The last one is quite common as we most often focus on the fear that our loved ones will not remember or "forget us". In reality, we will all be forgotten in time unless history has a way of recording or telling your story. Even then history has a way of altering or distorting things.

“If you cannot stop yourself from getting angry, then at least get angry about things that matter”.

Amit Kalantri

## Holding My Man

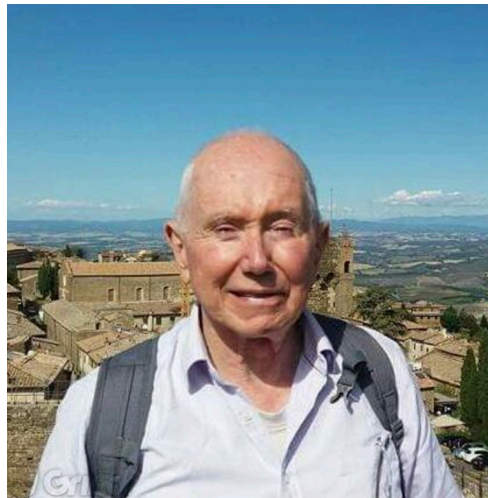


My first partner Michael Wayne Garnum who taught me about the meaning of unconditional love. Bless you “my boy wonder” you were my soul mate and a true spiritual warrior of the highest order.

**Holding my man.** Is our understanding of unconditional love the ultimate life lesson? It’s indeed one of them. I nursed my first partner Michael Wayne Garnam when I was a nurse at St Vincent’s Hospital in early 1988. After a brief interlude together, I headed off to Europe with tears in my heart; not knowing I was in love. I travelled to Germany first and stayed with a lesbian friend Sigrid, who shared an apartment with three or four other lesbians in Potsdamer Straße, Berlin. For a young gay man, it felt foreign, not so much for being around women but more the language barrier and cultural fit. I did learn a lot of things especially knowing about the Trümmerfrau, the women who rebuilt cities in Germany and Austria, out of the rubble in the aftermath of World War II.

I only stayed in Berlin for a few weeks; with much yearning in my heart, it would turn into a flame of restlessness. I decided to head off to Oxfordshire, England to stay with my dear friend Andy. He lived in a little village just near the White Horse on the Hill. It’s a highly formed prehistoric figure; formed into the shape of a horse, carved out of deep trenches filled with chalk rock. Andy was a farmer, academic and linguist (he could speak well over twenty languages and is still learning more languages today) and among many

other accomplishments served as a Deacon in the Russian Catholic Church. I only stayed with Andy one week, as he could sense my sadness and the abandonment I felt.



My dear friend Andy, 2017

I always remember his wise words of wisdom “David if you feel such strong feelings for Michael it's not going to serve you any purpose to be here; love is something that is so special. Why don't you follow your heart; call him right now and tell him that you want to come home”. At that moment, I did, and Michael was so excited to hear my voice. Within twenty-four hours Andy drove to me Heathrow airport and had me on a flight home to Sydney. Michael greeted me at the airport, I was home, and we spent four and half glorious years together.

That's how we met, and I often reflect back to the moment when he died on the 31st August 1992; as this was the time I learned about the meaning of unconditional love. Michael embodied it. Most relationships are somewhat conditional, with varying degrees of transactional obligations, emotions, fear, and love that are interwoven in the mix and spanning a spectrum of function to dysfunction.

Our relationship was great at the start, although a little uncertain with a mixed bag of emotions (both love and hate); two completely different people who came together for four and a half years to share our lives together. The only difference was that he had HIV/AIDS and in those days, every day seemed precious as there was a lot of confusion and uncertainty; given that death could strike any moment. Michael was a foreign exchange dealer and worked for The Bank of America. Michael's father died early in his life and his mother Wilma was on a veteran's pension, so had to raise her five children on her own. Michael always had a curiosity for life, and certainly lived life to the fullest like every day was his

last. Even before he got diagnosed with HIV in 1985, he had travelled to every major continent on earth including Africa, Russia (on the trans-Siberian railway) and South America.

It's by no design fault that I have included Michael's picture twice in this book, in two different chapters. It just felt right!

Michael was a larger than life figure, with an infectious laugh and zest for life and quite blunt to say the least. He was a pure Aries; fiery, passionate, self-determined and independent. You either liked him or not, and he didn't give a shit what anyone thought about him. Given my sensitive nature, poor self-esteem and lack of confidence, from the very start; I took a back seat in the relationship. Possibly my search for spiritual meaning in life made it hard for me to live in the real world and he was just the complete opposite - ambitious, flamboyant, and fearless and loved adventure. When we argued Michael would often say that, "Your halo will come down and strangle you one day". He was half right, but I'd rather think of it as a metaphor for me being a fallen angel of some sort. Michael always said that when he got sick, he'd do himself in. However, when the time came, he chose the complete opposite path and became the spiritual warrior.

When Michael's health started to decline, I knew it was the beginning of the end. It was that frightening dread of not knowing what would happen next and I'd often wonder how I'd cope and question why me? In the midst of it, all I knew was that my man was eventually going to die. Nonetheless, I knew his love for me was the thing that enabled me to find the inner strength to go on. Michael endured long periods of sickness over nine months with a debilitating illness caused by Mycobacterium Avium Intracellulare (MAC). MAC symptoms are similar to TB and are one of the AIDS-defining illnesses. It causes a person to have fevers, diarrhoea, malabsorption (difficulty absorbing nutrients from your gut), as well as a loss of appetite and weight loss. Michael certainly had all these symptoms and needed regular blood transfusions due to anaemia from the toxic HIV drugs.

During this time, I also was working full-time as a nurse on a rotating roster in the HIV unit at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital. My mother and Michael had an exceptional bond, and she would make regular trips down from Brisbane to support both of us, mainly when he was sick in the hospital. Often I would surprise Michael with her unannounced visits. When I would walk into his room, my mother would be following me; not far behind, visibly in my shadows. Michael's smile was endearing, and my mother loved him so much. At the end of his life Michael was skeletal, and after three long weeks, when he was in and out of consciousness, he died. I always remember that moment, as he was Cheyne stoke breathing

(the breathing that often happens when someone is dying, and it's nothing like portrayed in movies). We often gasp for every last breath. I shared this moment with my best friend Kevin by my side. Michael's mother Wilma arrived just minutes later, but she was relieved not to see him die. So as I always say, when people are dying, they choose the moment of their death.

My "Holding the Man" moment is different to the one told in the book of the same name. Michael and I planned his funeral down to every last detail including the music, eulogy, flowers, priest, and venue. We had the White Ladies carrying his coffin and an openly gay Catholic priest doing the service in the Penshurst Catholic Church, in the southern suburbs of Sydney. There were well over a hundred people if not double that number at his funeral; a mix of extended family, our friends, his school mates, a group of older ladies from the Penshurst Catholic club, some hospital staff and his work colleagues from over the years. I sat in the front row with his mother Wilma and during the service; it was acknowledged that I was his partner and that Michael died from AIDS. It's how Michael wanted it, and it was a testament to the kind of person he was, loved by so many. There was no shame, fear or hate; only love for this most beautiful man. Later that day after the wake, a group of his closest friends including my mum went down to Neilson's Park, lined up along the beach and threw Gladiolas into Sydney Harbour in memory of "my wonder boy".

“Maybe we'll meet again in another life. Maybe we're better in another paradise. Maybe we will meet again. Maybe we will fall again. In another life...”

Another Life, Afrojack & David Guetta

## **Reconciling the Past - Liberates the Future**

**Reconciling the past - liberates the future**, sounds like an old adage. How can we become the great beholders of our destiny if we do not learn from the past?

“Living in the moment is much like the zero degrees of separation from our past and our future”.

David Shaun Larsen

It commands us to be present at the moment knowing that each degree of separation

from our past intricately links to each degree of separation from our future. Reconnecting with my Norwegian family seemed impossible all those years ago, much like 99 degrees of separation.

I knew in my heart that there must be a way to find out whom my family was; all I vaguely remembered was where Grandad was born, what ship he sailed on and that he had four daughters. Without email, it was challenging, but the pleasure one gets from writing and receiving letters now seems like a dying art. I initially contacted the Norwegian embassy, and they sent me a document titled, 'How to trace your ancestors in Norway'. It provided a lot of helpful information but nothing that enabled me to do anything useful with it, given the distance of living far away in Australia. One day after much deliberation, I thought to myself, why not write to one of the Norwegian newspapers? I thought it would be a long shot, but I ended up writing to a newspaper called VG in Oslo (Norway's capital and largest city). In my letter, I asked them how much it would cost to have my letter transcribed into Norwegian and published in their newspaper. A few weeks after this, to my amazement, VG wrote back to me with a copy of my letter translated and published in their Saturday's readers section with the heading 'V.A. Larsens Familie'.



Letter to VG with a description of my Grandfather - V. A. Larsens Familie, 29th February 1992

When I saw the newspaper clipping that VG sent to me, I was filled with sudden joy and just knew the Universe was intervening in some way. A few weeks after this, I received a letter in the mail from Unni, the oldest of my Grandad's daughters. The letters that followed

from all the sisters were humble and sincere and provided an enriching cultural exchange for me at the time. I discovered that my Grandad's first wife Dagmar had to clean train carriages at night to support the family and it seems Unni, as the oldest sister took on the role to help support her sisters and her mother later in life.

What a strong woman Dagmar must've been, as it wouldn't have been a comfortable life. If anything it would've been a very hard and tough life for her and surprisingly, I often think about Dagmar with much admiration. I will never know her, but maybe our paths crossed in some distant past life; who knows I can't explain why I think about her. However, I have never questioned why my Grandad left Norway; I guess some things are meant to become what they are meant to become. As Norway was occupied by the German's during the war, it must have been a tough time for everyone. It's a distant reminder that war in itself, is traumatising and futile in the end.

I finally met my Norwegian family for the first time in 1993. It was truly a joyous moment in my life and on many levels, I believe it was a healing experience for the whole family i.e., a reconciliation with the past. I know that the future holds a wealth of new experiences and untold connections with Norway, as I am in contact with my cousins Britt and Arne. I'm very proud of my heritage. Mum eventually made the journey to reunite with her sisters in 2004 after many years of writing letters. Unni was ten years old when her father left Oslo for the last time, and she has now passed away. Bless you, Unni, I often think of you and have the utmost respect for my aunts Mary, Irene and Grethe and their families. Mary is now in a nursing home and well cared for by her family.

“Dear David

I am known with your article in a Norwegian newspaper.  
It was big surprise to me and my sisters.

As far as I can see, your grandfather is my father. The dates and the names in the birth certificate (also mentioned in the newspaper) are correct.

He was married to my mother when the 2nd World War broke out, but during and after the war we all lost contact. My mother searched for him after the war. She knew he was signed off in Melbourne, and she also knew he was married again. But no contact from my father.

She died in 1979 a short time after her 75th birthday.



We are four daughters. I am the eldest, born in 1928. Then there is Mary, born in 1930, Irene born in 1935 and Grethe in 1938...

I write only this for the moment. If you want more details, we can write more later.

We should like to know how old my father was, what he was working with and if he was in good health in his elder days. If possible can you send us a picture of him as an old man.

Will you give our kind regards to your mother.

Kind greetings to you too.

On behalf of us 4: Unni”

Letter from Unni Larsen 10th March 1992 - Reconciling the Past