

From the Kitchen

27 April 2011



I was probably around fifteen years old when I experienced the death of the first relative I knew. He was my mother's father – a grandfather I knew only for the less than two years we lived with my grandparents in the south of Nederland when I was around four. Even then I only knew him distantly. When he died, I had been in Australia for about seven years.

I don't have any experience of a grandparent who I've known intimately all my life, dying. When my mother died it was my first experience of being with someone very close to me as she was in the last days of her life on this earth. By then I was a mature adult with training in psychotherapy and shamanism. That training gives a very different perspective to the phenomenon of living and dying from that of a child who is still working hard at making sense of the world

So many of us now live in a world that seems to be defined in a linear fashion – everything has a starting point and an ending point. Much of life then becomes about reaching that ending or even trying to avoid it, rather than about the journey. People used to be more aware of the cycles we live with and the cycles that define the phenomena around us. Then it was more about journeying than arriving. People were more prepared to accept diversions along the journey and even not arriving at the intended destination. With more extended families living in the neighbourhood, the cycles of being born, living and dying were more apparent, even to young children.

In some communities, those who have not migrated still experience the wonderful complexities of extended families and children still have frequent and close contact with their grandparents and great-grandparents. This can make the passing of those beloved elders part of the known pattern of life; it can also make the loss more immediate and more keenly felt. Having someone you love and with whom you have a close bond disappear from your life can leave a gaping hole, causing immense grief and pain. It can also bring about the experience of continually reaching out to that person as you have so often done, only to be shockingly reminded that they are no longer there. That space is now empty and cannot be satisfactorily filled except with memories. That hand will never be held again and that knee will no longer be available to sit on as stories are told. With the passing of time and with new experiences along the journey, the space loses its sharp edges and the grief and pain diminish and even disappear, though the absence of this wonderful person may still be felt.

What you can take with you on your own continuing journey are not only the memories of those missing but also the things learned from them – the wisdom, the stories, the insights and the skills, the ways of looking at the world and of being with other people. If you recognise this as true, you may then realise how valuable it can be to those who see *you* as an elder, to be there for them with *your* wisdom and stories and insights and skills and to share with them *your* ways of looking at the world and of being with people. The way *you* are with the younger ones around you can equip them for much of what they are likely to have to deal with in life.

I have only two blood relations living within two hours' drive – my father and my son. One of my sisters lives more than 2700 kilometres away – all other relatives between 13 000 and 17 000 kilometres. I therefore have very few people, even counting my wife and stepchildren, with whom I have frequent, regular close contact. This is a consequence of migration that I live with. Since coming to Australia in 1955, I have travelled back to Europe (where most of my relations live) only twice. I see one of my sisters perhaps three times a year and the other one only every few years. My extended family is dispersed around the 'global village'.

My experience of the passing of grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins has been at a distance. In many cases the hole left by them has been more intellectual than emotional. In a few cases I have been able to say, "I am glad I knew them, if only a little." With most I have not really known them at all.

To put all this into context, I need to declare how I view the phenomenon of human life: an incarnation of intelligence into physical form and then eventually leaving that physical form again. This is a far from orthodox view but it serves me to make sense of the universe. While this is much more than an intellectual exercise for me (it is a deep knowing) I am still subject to the emotional and visceral reactions to the losses I experience. However, as with anyone who holds a strong belief about the workings of the universe, that belief helps me process those reactions to loss. I also know that, no matter what one's beliefs and no matter how much a loss is shared, dealing with a loss is always an entirely personal journey.