

Reflective Article

When the closing session is final

A therapist's journey with her client through terminal illness and death

By Margaret Plunkett



It was some time before I heard from V, when he got in touch again he informed me that he had undergone tests and was having treatment. At this stage it was “so far, so good”.

started counselling I felt he was treating it like a work project but on himself.

Over the years we had a number of sessions and then he would go off and look at implementing some of his new-found discoveries and practices into his life. He came back to me a number of times. The therapy room was a safe place for him to talk, free from judgement, to consider what changes he needed to make. During this time he became a more relaxed man, got married, and started a family.

He continued to explore what he would like from life and what further changes he needed to make. Around this time he began to feel unwell and, while his symptoms seemed innocuous, I suggested he go to the doctor which started a series of tests. (I mention this as some of his symptoms could have been seen as being caused by stress.)

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Introduction

When I first met V some years ago, he came because he was somewhat dissatisfied with his life. He was stressed and anxious. He appeared very frightened and prone to panic attacks.

V came from a large family who all seemed to be quite close. His contact with them was frequent. He came across as quiet but from what I learned was that when it came to parties he liked to sing. He held a very responsible job and when he

heard from V, when he got in touch again he informed me that he had undergone tests and was having treatment. At this stage it was “so far, so good”, albeit he said there was still some way to go.

Some time later we met and the prognosis was not the best but he was told that with treatment this could be managed. However, as is the case with a lot of these situations, his condition changed and he became quite ill. We met again during his treatment when he had no hair and had lost a lot of weight. He spoke of the beautiful love between himself and his partner and the family. He spoke of his plans for the future, quality time with the family, watching the children grow up and focussing on progressing in his career. Our work was about his connection with himself, being more self-compassionate and feeling worthy of the gifts he had received. During the session, I had this rising up of a great admiration for this man. I felt he was really brave in saying how he felt about the situation that was laid out before him.

Due to his illness he texted to keep me up-to-date with his treatment. The next time we met he was still planning for the future. He had at this stage been told that his time was limited. I asked him how he felt about hearing that news. He replied, “shit”. He laughed, I laughed. He asked, “Why me?”.

He questioned me about death. What would it be like? I answered, “that as we had made our way into this world there must be a mechanism to allow us to exit”. Obviously I had no concrete experience of anything else. I quoted from a book I had read called Birth and Death

I remembered a quote from The Tibetan Art of Living, that dying people feel love intensely when it is directed towards them. Love creates an immediate connection which reassures the dying person they are protected.

(Saraswati, 1993) ‘The fear of death haunts the mind of even the bravest of people. The only way to avoid death is to avoid being born. It is not possible to be born and not to die.’ (Saraswati, 1993, p. 9).

And:

We fear death because, under the influence of delusion, we have forgotten ourselves (Divine Self). And it is this forgetting of the Divine Self which makes for us all the troubles we get. It is not a God who is the maker of our troubles. (Saraswati, 1993, p. 10).

He wondered what he would need to do in preparation. So there were practicalities as well. These we discussed. All the time he was there taking notes. I quoted from the book *The Tibetan Art of Living* about dealing with his affairs: ‘Assisting with unfinished domestic matters. Dying with few attachments to this life and a calm sense of having put things in order.’ (Hansard, 2001, p.261) This would be useful to deal with material matters and thereby bring rest for him.

He wondered about God - where was he now? While not being a very religious person he said he had believed in a god and also believed that there is something after death. At the same time

he had no anger towards God. His acceptance was growing. We made another appointment.

When we next met he told me he was receiving palliative care as there was nothing further that could be done. I asked him did they give him a time limit. He replied, “a matter of weeks”. The deterioration of the physical body was apparent but he was still taking notes and making plans. He wanted to do things. Clearly, these were limited because of his condition. However, knowing V as I did, I asked him would he like to write something? Would he like to write letters to his children letting them know what he found to be valuable in his life and what he would like for them as they grow up and meet the world?

Would he like to write what he has learned from his illness so that it might help others not be fearful if in a similar situation some day? He was busy writing. All this time I was there, holding myself and V in a place that I can only describe as loving and divine. I was hoping for divine inspiration. I stayed completely present to V and the situation. I felt completely in tune with him. Totally connected. I remembered a quote from *The Tibetan Art of Living*, that dying people feel love intensely when it is directed towards them. Love creates an immediate connection which reassures the dying person they are protected. On a personal

note, I feel this is such an important piece, as how else would we like anybody in our care to make their departure from this world.

He described the wonderful care he received from the medical profession and from his partner and family and described the love from his partner as “priceless”. He also said at this stage there was no need to worry saying, “What is the point?”

A lesson we could all do well to remember.

He described how he had felt such empathy from friends since they had received this news. He was surprised because people he had worked with had told him how they had felt about working with him. In fact, he was quite surprised at their kindness. I asked him would he have believed that people could show so much love. He replied, in normal circumstances, no. I said that these people love you, are showing you love in different ways because this is what people do when their family member or friend has been dealt such news. I added that over the years he has “mattered” to me too. I meant this.

I wondered how we were going to end. So I asked, “What about us?” He said, “I think we have come full circle.” I agreed. So how would this therapeutic relationship end? I said, “I am not going to say goodbye.” I asked him to give me a moment to consider what I might say. There was silence. Then he spoke. “Margaret, this work with you has been life-changing for me. You have been more of a friend than a therapist to me over the years.” I was blown away. He said this with such strength in his voice. I was not expecting that and I thanked him.

The divine love that was experienced really touched me and his bravery and strength in the teeth of adversity. I feel I learned a lot from this relationship.

I again said to V, “I will not say goodbye.”

The reason I did not want to say goodbye is my belief that somehow it is not really a “goodbye”. From my early days in school we were told that death is not the end. The body decays but the Spirit lives on. With death the relationship changes, it does not end. In The Apostles’ Creed it talks of the Resurrection of the body and life everlasting. At some level I take this not just as psychological optimism but rather something that makes real living sense. And the bond lives on.

I joined my hands in prayer and said, “I give you all my blessings. All my blessings.” He said “Goodbye.” I said, “God Bless” I looked at him and he said, “God Bless,” with a big smile on his face.


Shortly after our last meeting I was informed that V had died peacefully in the arms of those who loved him. I offered my sympathies and complimented them on their care of V.

Later, I found myself getting really upset and I wondered what is it about this man? The divine love that was experienced really touched me and his bravery and strength in the teeth of adversity. I feel I learned a lot from this relationship. V had mattered to me from early on as I felt he was

struggling, he always mattered and as he began to find more meaning in his life he ultimately mattered in his own life.

He approached death with courage and fearlessness, accepting finally that this is how it is for him.

It was an open, honest relationship and I cared for him to the end. It was a sacred and a spiritual encounter. This indeed has been a most wonderful privilege for which I am very grateful. Somehow I feel that this special encounter with V will always be a reference point in my life and will not be forgotten. Such is the importance of our work as therapists.

Thank you V. 

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Note: Details have been changed to protect client confidentiality.

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