

Into the mystic

A friend's death leaves Julie Clarke wondering how non-believers will cope with decline and departure.

She was a painter, a bohemian beauty of the '60s, a filmmaker, costume designer, poet, mother of three, walnut farmer and an ex-captain of the Mount Tomah Fire Brigade. After she was diagnosed with breast cancer, she painted vivid images of the experiences that followed; a self-portrait capturing her shock as she looks at her mastectomy in a mirror; the steely sadness in her face as her son helps to shave off her hair to pre-empt its falling out during chemotherapy. Clem was so fierce and strong, it seemed impossible to us that anything could have killed her before she was well past 100.

While she was ill, Clem and I had skirted several times around discussions of the "D" word. Once, when her cancer still seemed controllable, I asked a group of friends sitting around her couch-side, "So what religion are you going to convert to when facing death? (Some of our once-wild circle have become Tibetan Buddhists, although one precocious friend, Gary, who was doing Buddhism 40 years ago, is now a Church of England vicar.) "Nothing," everyone chorused. "I'm going to be myself," they said.

"Do you want to be buried or cremated?" I asked Martin. "Stuffed," he said. "And you?"

"Well, I'm definitely going to heaven," I replied. "I want to be cremated and my ashes poured over a coral reef, to be eaten by tropical fish."

Clem said: "I believe in the compost theory of death."

But weeks later as she became sicker and could hardly walk, she said, "No one seems to want to talk about death." And later still, as though testing the waters for my reaction, "I've been wondering what it might be like to die."

I tried to put a good spin on death. I quoted Eckhart Tolle – "Death is not the opposite of life, death is the opposite of birth" – and the Hindu concept that "the ocean refuses no river" as an inclusive although vague clue as to what might lie ahead. And I said something like, "Whatever happens, you have three children and a grandchild, you have so many friends who adore you and you've done a thousand paintings. Life should be measured by depth, not length."

"I'll tell you what I don't want," said Clem. "I don't want Gary praying over my dead body."

After the hospital, the hospice across the road was so mellow. No one was here to be cured, just to be given comfort, and it was there, in the briefest hiatus between family vigils, that Clem slipped away. With most of her hair fallen out again, she had looked, said one ex-husband, like a Mohawk chieftain.

On the day of her funeral in the Blue Mountains, all the cherry blossoms were in bloom and a breeze blew millions of petals around in spirals, like snow flurries.

It was to be a Quaker funeral, a family tradition. In the crowded chapel, Clem's

up his guitar, faced her coffin, and launched into a song he had written for her. (In 1966, the not-then Reverend Gary, a celebrated protest singer, had supported Bob Dylan on his Australian tour.) The song he had written was not in any way a prayer, as it was addressed to Clem rather than to God, but the gist of it was that he knew that she had now seen the glory of the Lord. In their ongoing discussion of metaphysics, he got the last word, and Clem would have been amused by his loyalty to both herself and the Anglican God that had changed his life.



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children invited us to speak about her if we wished. At first this was unnerving, having no one at all in charge. There were muffled sniffs in the silence, with everyone concentrating on the flower-draped coffin – bright pink, orange and purple. Someone stood and began, "She loved colour . . .", and spontaneously the ceremony unfolded, but in retrospect it had a clear and complete form as though it had been meticulously planned.

After each person spoke there were short, intense silences before the next person began. A conservative Anglican fireman expressed admiration for Clem's valour and leadership, others discussed her paintings, or what she was wearing on that first day at art school when the admiring boys spotted her (navy turtleneck, red skirt, black tights).

When the Reverend Gary stood to pay his respects, a lot of us were thinking about Clem's wish not to be prayed over and how he'd adhere to this. He picked

Later, all the friends, this motley drift of old hippies, and our full-grown children in whose faces our lost beauty is recycled, milled around the house full of paintings of Clem and by Clem and then sat in the long grass in her garden drinking wine and eating sandwiches.

Needing solitude, I walked into her bedroom, painted bright yellow. The fluoro Mexican bedcover, the eccentric doll collection, her painting of a tractor, the prescription painkillers, the silk kimono, her old warm socks; nothing had changed since that morning when the ambulance had come to take her back to the hospice. I thought of her saying, "I've been wondering what it might be like to die", and I wondered what it had been like for her.

My mother and many of her spiritual friends believe that death is just like passing through a curtain, behind which you sit around with your karmic

collective, discuss what you've learned so far, and plan your next life around the lessons that are upcoming on the agenda, as you slowly work your way to enlightenment. It's like the hard slog of a university degree, and the lessons become harder the further you advance; that's how Mum has been able to accept her partial paralysis after a stroke. I suppose this is what Cardinal George Pell calls neo-paganism, but it certainly helps to keep these elders cheery and motivated throughout the awful challenges of physical deterioration.

We baby-boomers are now at an age where the gatherings at the funeral chapel – around the unconventionally decorated coffins of our dearest, wildest old friends – are going to become increasingly regular events. Some of us, to the irritation of all, will break through to become Viagra-fuelled centenarians, but others will have to face the "D" word, the only thing we expected less to happen to us than middle age.

Us lot, we have shared a past, nothing noble like our parents' generation, which had a Depression and a World War. We had a time when it seemed that the whole world was desperately in need of our brilliant new ideas. Those innocent moments (or months or years) of cannabis communion. Psychedelic discoveries when we thought we were dancing into a new universe or were privy to spiritual epiphanies. There were the campfires in the deserts, the intrepid travels to the earth's far-flung corners. At least you could say we were adventurous.

We'll need some of that camaraderie as one by one we face our final trip. I try to think about the wisest words to help me deal with the declines and departures that lie ahead. "As long as we stick together, we can get through anything," Mum used to say when life got difficult.

In Clem's bright yellow bedroom, dead flowers in the vase, her presence was as strong as the vivid colours she gathered around her. "I was wondering what it might be like to die . . ."

As it must be, it was a solitary journey, but two things we know she was sure about before she left: that her last exhibition, which opened on the day of her funeral, was her best ever, and that she was appreciated, respected and loved by hundreds of friends. ■
Clemency Browne 1943-2003.