

## A DEAD GOOD REMINDER



by Nigel Latta

I recently found myself contemplating death. Not death of people in general, but my own death. I was in a small cemetery in South Otago, working on an episode of *Beyond the Darklands*, and as the crew were busying themselves doing technical things that I don't understand, I went for a stroll ...

What struck me as I walked around was that there were an awful lot of Lattas buried in that cemetery. I hail from down that way, and it seems the Lattas had been dying there for quite some time, at all different ages, and for all different reasons.

It started off just being kind of interesting, but then became a serious assault on my core belief that I would buck the trend and live forever. In fact, it became increasingly clear to me that the Latta family genes didn't seem to point so much

towards immortality as they did to generally dying – just like everyone else.

Most of us spend most of our time in a state of constant denial of the reality of death. We agonise for hours over office politics. We spend days, weeks or even years not talking to people we love because of some fallout, some slight. We don't call our mum because we're busy and we think she'll always be there. She won't. We put off that trip to Paris, or Perth or Patagonia because we think those places will always be there. They will. We won't.

The one time we all think about death is when it intrudes on our lives in ways we simply can't ignore – when we lose someone we love. Amidst the grief and the terrible loss, there's also a fleeting moment when we gain some perspective on our lives. We stop and look with clear eyes at how far we've come and how far we might have left to go.

We take stock, we evaluate.

**A** PhD student and his wife, who worked with Elizabeth Kubler-Ross (one of the pioneers in



writing about death and dying), decided they would live as if they had just one year left. It was, from all accounts, an astounding year. It wasn't bleak or depressing, but rich and full. In fact, when their year came to an end, despite the fact they didn't actually die (which I'm sure was very nice), they felt quite sad. They were worried that living like normal people would mean they would lose that richness. Largely, they did.

As I was walking around the cemetery, I thought about all of that. There I was, for instance, spending two days away from my family – two days I'd never get back. Was that the best use of those two days? I hadn't called my mum in a while. I probably didn't tell my wife as much as I should how important she is to me, how she gives my life shape and structure and purpose. All these things I thought about.

Then I got back on a plane, flew home, and the competing demands of modern life blurred all of that focus in just a day or so.

So I don't have any magic answers on this one – only questions, which I ask as much for my own benefit as yours. If today was your last day, how would you fill it? Or if this was your last month, your last year, your last 50 years, how would you fill that time? And then how do you keep that answer in your head and use it as your compass to navigate your way down to that place and time?

If you figure that lot out ... let me know. ❁

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