

# After life

Mallika Krishnamurthy

**My father died recently. So recently that when I find myself writing that phrase I feel disbelief, sadness, awe, fear and nausea among other sensations too ephemeral to name.**

I have read about the stages of grief, even been on a course on grieving years ago when I worked as a crisis worker. I have never felt anything quite like this, some sensations are familiar, echoes of other experiences, but there seems to be a realignment that happens with the death of a parent that has shifted worlds. There are reflections on my father's life, how gently he lived and the grace with which he died. There is this hyper real starkness which lays bare my own life and forces me to examine the currents that flow through it. There is a rewiring of my sense of human life and our mortality.

As a creative person living in this country for 38 years the time has come to make some difficult choices. I grew up in Aotearoa in the 70s which were a time of assimilation and we didn't expect anyone to understand anything of what we came from and the prevailing winds of culture here certainly did not expect to do anything other than blow their way. We could keep up or disappear.

There were only one or two other families of our South Indian tradition here when we arrived. For a time I was convinced that our language was a secret spoken only between us. When the next family arrived, knocked at our door and greeted us in our own language I was convinced that they were magicians and mind readers.

Some of the implications of growing up as such a small minority are only recently dawning on me. I have intellectually known that people may look at me, see me as different from them and have expectations of me based on their assumptions which may not match who I think I am. This may

sound rudimentary, however the masks of assimilation have been so firmly attached to my psyche that I have been unaware of their subtle impacts on my own thinking and behaviour. All my life I have expected to meet each individual and automatically read how to put them at ease, to speak like them, to see which of their behaviours I must adopt in order to be accepted and to ensure that I guard my own integrity and respect for my own culture and family because I don't expect anyone else to. I thought that everybody did this all the time and perhaps they do and are as unaware of it as I have been. I, of course, don't always achieve this seamless interface with society and at various points in my life my mind and body have surrendered to chaos and retreated in an attempt to work out what is going on. I had not realized until recently, that throughout my life as a migrant in this country various doors have been closed to me so imperceptibly that I did not even realize there was a door there to be opened.

My question again is: Does this happen to everyone and are our only real differences our awareness of what is happening? There are people who walk out of their house and expect everything to be familiar and happen within a certain set of rules. There are margins of difference which we can ignore, override or assume that our point of view is right and shared by "the good", "the moral" and "the mainstream". In my experience, like quantum particles, these concepts move as soon as you get close to them. You realize that everyone around you is navigating their own private universe and participating in the collective illusion of "good", "moral" and "mainstream" according to a complex matrix of

awareness, choices, expectations and limitations that are their own and those of the society around them.

I have found fiction and dance powerful ways to explore layers of identity and societal interface. My father was one of my navigators, someone who held a cultural compass and helped me to formulate questions. I would have shown him this article for astute and honest criticism. I dedicated my first novel "Six Yards of Silk" to my father and my mother. I would not have allowed its publication if they had not seen some value in it. It is not our story, it is the story of a family who could have lived alongside us, facing some of the same issues of identity and society that we did. I am lucky that my father was the biggest fan and champion of "Six Yards of Silk" in the world.

He was of course much more than that. He was an academic, a political scientist who taught at Victoria University from 1968 till his retirement in 1992. To me he was an inspiration, my spiritual guide, my mentor, my teacher, my friend. He was my constant in a world of chaos. Trying to imagine my life without him is like trying to imagine the ocean with no ocean floor, or a river with no riverbanks and no river bed. It doesn't make sense. My father made sense. He was an optimist, gentle, stubborn and resilient. He helped me to make sense. His sense of social justice underpinned his spirituality, his loving non-attachment, his pragmatism and his politics. He was a learned man, a philosopher, a humble scholar. He cared deeply about people and how we treat each other. He was genuinely happy within himself and found fun and laughter in every day events. He was curious, always questioning, and he would gently refine any questions put to him because, as all good teachers know, the quality and accuracy of the question is more important than any temporary answers we find. Any good answer to a good question will lead to a better question.

All my life he taught me to honour what I love, do what I love and allow the rest to fall into place. I'm still learning how to do that. I'm doing my best. He lived quietly amidst the noise and haste. He was my still place, my oasis. I'm very grateful to have spent time with him while I could, to have listened to his stories and heard his laughter which still resonates through my sons. These are things that matter.

So what do I do now? The ocean still has an ocean floor. Rivers still run and have their riverbanks and river beds. I look inside myself and find that I am still here. I look at my mother and see that she is still here doing her best to remake a life after 45 years of marriage. I look at my husband and sons whom my father celebrated and loved. I look around and see my wider family and friends living around the world, we are all still here. So ...I want to honour those whom I love and do the things that matter, allowing the rest to fall into its own place and happen by itself.

My life is still full of questions. My father is teaching me still.

**Mallika Krishnamurthy** was born in Kerala, India and came to New Zealand with her family in 1968. She has a degree in French language and literature and speaks French, Italian and Tamil as well as English. She has worked as a teacher of children with special needs, ESOL and dance, been a crisis worker with people who had been raped or sexually assaulted, worked with people who were long term unemployed, been a careers adviser and community recreation programmer. She has a lifelong passion for dance and has been a performer, dance teacher and arts administrator. Her first novel "Six Yards of Silk" is published by Steele Roberts ([steelersoberts.co.nz](http://steelersoberts.co.nz)) and available from good bookshops everywhere!