

Embers of Existence:

Tracing life's spiralled path through smouldering beginnings and glowing legacies

"Too late to leave..."

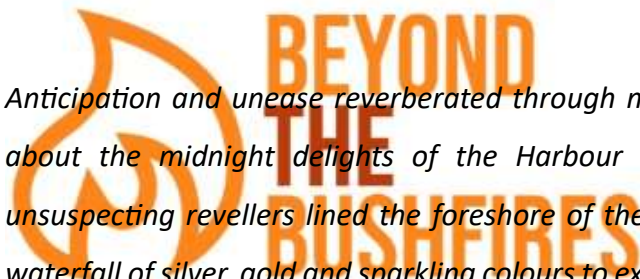
Automated words spilled from the phone line dangling from the wall, seared and scorched like a brand on the hide of my mind, every single second of my waking day. A thick smoke-haze hung low in the sky, coagulated across the troposphere like heavy dampened wool. My world as I knew it, had stopped. The smoke always comes first. Then the sky. Terrifying crimson beauty ripped across the heavens like a Hollywood gown. Milton, Ulludulla, Mogo, Kangaroo Valley, St Georges Basin; the blood red waves of taffeta unfurled toward our home becoming tangled and snared on dense bushland, towns, open grasslands.

Anticipation and unease reverberated through me as my dad's mobile phone buzzed about the midnight delights of the Harbour Bridge fireworks. I watched as 1 million unsuspecting revellers lined the foreshore of the Sydney Harbour, waiting for the glittering waterfall of silver, gold and sparkling colours to explode across the sky. It was to be the biggest firework display yet; a celebration of a new decade.

But another voice leaked through the open window from the radio outside "...extreme heat waves across the South Coast...wildfires sweeping the eastern seaboard"

We had spent the day preparing for a dormant disaster, convinced our hard work would be for nothing, but mum had a feeling, an inner voice of intuition. She knew.

In hindsight I had thought it strange that my dad was home that night; he always worked on the important holidays of the year: New Years, Christmas Day, Boxing Day, Easter. So it wasn't right for him to be home - and that was what scared me - more so than the lingering smell of smoke creeping over the hills.



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Without scaring us, mum had started to quietly pack some things in an overnight bag: birth certificates and insurance papers - tokenistic evidence of our lives.

At 3:25 am on New Year's Day our home phone screamed bloody murder, ringing off the wall as the cold, pre-recorded voice issued from it *"...you are in immediate danger and must act now...it is too late to leave..."*

Mum shook me awake and, in a voice, low with forced calm, told me we needed to go. I packed my bag with absurd care, folding and choosing my favourite clothes, clouded in sleep and denial.

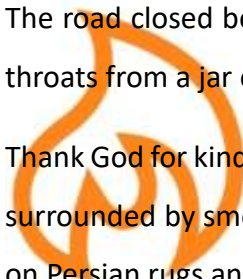
Crammed into our car amongst our closest possessions and smallest animals, we crawled through the swirling obscurity of burning leaves and falling flaming branches. Our house disappeared into the abyss of orange as I sent silent pleas of forgiveness to what we left behind...

The road closed behind us as we pushed through the thick air and we cleaned our charred throats from a jar of water, poured into the shallow lid.

Thank God for kind faces and houses by the ocean. The sun didn't come out that day. We were surrounded by smoke and darkness while we ate toasted sandwiches and trifle, cross-legged on Persian rugs and chequered kitchen tiles..

I guess in the end you start thinking of the beginning. The spiralling wondering and remembering of our lives. It is in safety, years later, that I can stop and reflect on that day when my world ceased to turn and ponder what it's all about. Why do things like this occur? What does it mean? How is it that the green is so much greener after it's blackened? How is it that after the darkness, the sun seems so much brighter? But why do I remember the darkness so clearly?

On that day our lives stopped. And then kept slowly trickling on like the slow drip, drip, drip of water from burnt structures. As time moves on, the drip continues; soothing the scorching memories, making way for new memories; new life. It makes me wonder about life; life after life; life after death. Are our lives as we know them simply an ephemeral state? When does the drip finally stop?



BEYOND
THE
BUSHFIRES

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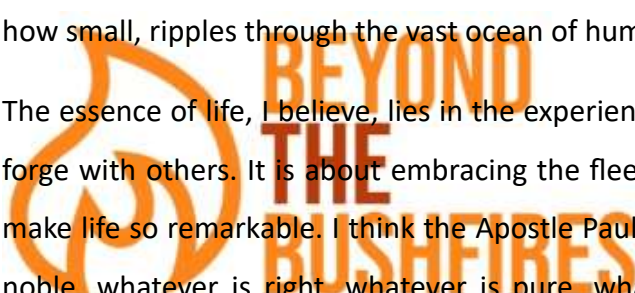
For answers to these questions, we often contemplate religious practice. It always seemed to me that faith was simply a restrictive and punitive vice by which our every move is measured and judged. Moreover, my feverish imagination amalgamated all religions into the same parameters of bizarre ceremonial practices, violent images and ardent indoctrinations. However, I was perhaps ignorant to the beauty of faith once separated from the material, superfluous many seek from the tangibility of scriptures and extraneous rules created by humankind. The religious affiliation in 2021, was split nearly in half: almost 44% of Australians follow the Christian faith or practice its ideals, while nearly 39% of people indicated no religious beliefs. I fall amongst those who do not actively practice a faith; however I believe that regardless of age, heritage, race or lifestyle, there remains a connection to a higher spirituality or code of morality by which we live or aspire to.

At the heart of every religion, there is a common thread of life after death. The Buddhist faith believes life after death is a continuum, that consciousness continues after death through rebirth and the journey of enlightenment. The Sikh faith views death as a natural process, where the soul lives on after the physical body deteriorates. The Christian faith proclaims all sin is forgiven upon repentance and everlasting life in heaven is awarded to those who follow Christ. But perhaps there is not one true answer about life after death, and it is not the answers which are wrong, but the question. Instead of questioning what lies beyond death, we must answer our own call to life. I would venture as far as to say that a careful life is a worse fate than death. So travel a new highway. Tell that person you love them. Stay up until sunrise. For when a door is closed, there is always an open window through which our call to life beckons. The 'carpe diem' mindset has remained unchanged for over 200 years, as Roman Emperor, *Marcus Aurelius*, ruler of the Nerva-Antonine Dynasty said, "It is not death that one should fear, but...never beginning to live". A dedicated Stoic, Aurelius followed the eudaimonic philosophy, which, unlike many religions, does not exist as a means of obsessing over righteousness or purity of death. Rather, it is the pursuit of self-mastery, perseverance and wisdom: something one uses to live a fulfilled life, as opposed to an esoteric field of academic inquiry or pathway to salvation.

They say a picture can paint a thousand words, so I present you with a ubiquitous symbol: a simple spiral representing life. The beginning of a life, a mere spec - growing outwards in concentric circles: never touching but always parallel. There is no pressure of the “full circle” concept as the lifelines never cross, just slowly emerging outwards and expanding through our experiences. When a life is lived, the line stops - leaving an invisible anchor to its beginning - from any point of ‘completion’, connection can be made to the origin. Such is the way with our lives, no matter our experiences or lives lived, we remember our beginning. Beginnings and endings are not so similar as to be interchangeable, yet they are not so different as to be completely separated. Life is effervescent and transient through which we gain rich experience of love, loss, adversity, compassion, humility and integrity. Such is life.

I believe life extends beyond our individual selves. It is about the impact we have on others and the mark we leave on the world. Acts of kindness, compassion and empathy reverberate through time, influencing lives long after we are gone. The legacy we leave behind, no matter how small, ripples through the vast ocean of human existence.

The essence of life, I believe, lies in the experiences we accumulate and the connections we forge with others. It is about embracing the fleeting moments of joy, love and wonder that make life so remarkable. I think the Apostle Paul said it best: “Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable - if anything is excellent or praiseworthy - think about such things”. (Philippians 4:8) So I ask you now, what do you think? What is your legacy? After all, we are only human.



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