

The gift of unconditional love survives even death



RICHARD MARLES

My father died a year ago. My mentor was gone. Since childhood, Dad had been the repository of my achievement, the person I could tell what I'd done, knowing it would be received with a purty of good will.

He felt the pain of my failure. He delighted in my success. Being with Dad was to feel unconditional love. Now that sustenance had gone. It was the last step in growing up I had to face.

When my sisters and our families cleaned out my parents' house, I expected the manual labour but not the emotional journey. As I sorted through my father's bedroom, every item loomed large. The last book he read was on his bedside table. Who was I to pack it away, never to be seen again? Together, every piece of paper, every trinket, every item of clothing represented a thousand decisions about what part of Dad would stay and what would be discarded forever.

Photos emerged of me as a boy. A naïve message I'd left for Dad when I was seven that he'd kept. My sisters, too, found relics of their childhood.

We smiled and laughed and cried together. The sweet reminiscence of youth came over us like a warm breeze. And yet this intoxicating passage back to our

childhood was paid for with pain. I was saturated with emotion and I wanted it all to be done.

Then I struck gold. Buried deep at the bottom of a cupboard was a cardboard tube. Inside it, perfectly preserved, was the most ornate certificate acknowledging that in 1915, my grandmother had completed the required tests to obtain a Performer's Certificate of the Royal Academy of Music.

This was a link to a longer line of ancestry. My grandmother's certificate must have survived the cleaning out of multiple houses. People before me, my generational family, knew this item was for keeping. Now it was for me to secure.

More than 100 years after it was issued, the certificate is now framed

in my sister's house, proudly hanging above the piano my grandmother was given for her 21st birthday.

Later that day, I wrestled with a small bookshelf. As I shuffled it away from the wall, I saw a post card which had slipped behind it on the floor. My Dad's unmistakable writing was on its back. I read it.

It was a birthday card written to my mother, who was struggling with dementia: short and filled with love. It thanked her for the adventures they'd shared together over a 60-year marriage and offered the hope that the journey still had some time to run.

Wrapped in the pain of watching his soulmate transition to another place, here was a private intimate embrace of the person who had defined my father's life.

This card had hidden itself from view. It was not mine to read. And yet the words I saw gave me a privileged peek into the purest expression of love that I am ever

likely to witness. I was so grateful.

A year later after Dad's death, I'm beginning to appreciate how profound this juncture in life has been. When my time comes, I suspect I'll be able to divide my life into the moments before and after this event.

Dad's passing has changed my relationship with my siblings. It is much deeper. The reference point of my life, the remaining people who have seen it from the start, are my sisters. We talk more. We cherish our company. Together, we have navigated upheaval and dealt with big decisions so well. It would make Dad very happy.

As I search for the spirit of my father, my gaze turns to the next

generation: eight grandchildren who are an enduring legacy.

Here, optimism abounds. The bursting potential of lives at their beginning gives comfort that Dad remains embodied in great people who will achieve good things. I think he knew that all along.

While the pain of the last year hasn't gone, a new perspective has arrived. Family is a concept beyond the individual. In knowing you belong, the past can give way to the future and the comfort of unconditional love remains.

Through my children, my father is still here and an existence beyond myself is imaginable.

As my youngest smiles at me, the future looks bright.

RICHARD MARLES IS THE FEDERAL MEMBER FOR CORIO AND SHADOW DEFENCE MINISTER