

Petrea an angel on earth

Twenty six years ago, Petrea King was told she had three months to live. The former nurse defied the odds and dedicated her life to soothing people's pain and bringing peace of mind to the dying, writes **David Leser**.





Petrea's health diagnosis and personal loss have inspired her to make a difference to the lives of others. "I made a commitment ... I would stay and give whatever support I could," she says.

First of all a declaration. I have known and loved Petrea King for more than 20 years. She landed in my life in 1989, six years after she'd been diagnosed with acute myeloid leukaemia and given three months to live. Even then she was the calmest, most life-affirming and inspirational woman I'd ever met.

She welcomed me into her Sydney home amidst a schedule that would have knocked the wind out of three people, let alone one. There was a group of 12 in her living room, all of them with life-threatening illnesses – cancer, AIDS, leukaemia. They were young, old, middle-aged, some of them with only weeks or days to live. A few had been wheeled or carried into her home; some were barely able to move from the pain and exhaustion they were experiencing.

All they wanted was time – time to hold onto this life, time to come to terms with their unresolved grief, time to spend with their loved ones, time with this remarkable woman and the support group she was offering here.

I will never forget the large, balding woman with the Sophia Loren eyes, who sat on the floor that afternoon talking about her uterine cancer and the secondaries that had crept into her lungs. The doctors had told her there was no cure, that she should try and enjoy Christmas. How to do that? The chemotherapy was a black tide sweeping through her.

Then she told a joke. “There’s this fellow who went to the doctor and the doctor said, ‘I’ve got good news and bad news. The good news is that we knew you had a life-threatening illness, but we didn’t know how long you were going to live and now we’ve found out. You’ve got 24 hours.’ ”

“And the fellow said, ‘What’s the bad news?’ ”

“And the doctor said, ‘Well, we found out yesterday.’ ”

Gales of laughter and for a brief

moment all I could think was, ‘How tender and fragile this life, how full of terrible beauty.’ The woman with the Italian eyes died a few weeks later.

In those early days of Petrea’s work, when she was still being called a “midwife for the dying” (a term she dislikes because “terminal” is for buses, trains and computers, not human beings), she was booked six weeks in advance and seeing up to 200 people a week.

She would visit people in their homes, at Long Bay Gaol, where prisoners with the AIDS virus would confide in her, at the Albion Street Clinic in Sydney with other AIDS sufferers, as well as in hospitals and hospices.

So full was her calendar that when one woman asked for an appointment, Petrea had to tell her she couldn’t see her for three weeks. “But the doctors have only given me four weeks,” the woman said. “All right, I’ll see you on Saturday morning,” Petrea replied.

That was two decades ago. By today’s count, Petrea has probably counselled more than 80,000 Australians and their

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families through the most wretched months, weeks, days and hours of their lives and, often, their deaths.

She has moved in with people – single mothers who were unable to look after their children; families who didn’t know how to cope with saying farewell to their loved ones. On some occasions, people have actually moved into *her* home, into *her* bed – with Petrea moving to the couch.

She has sat with people as they died, held them in her arms, stroked their brows, listened to the quiet conversings of their hearts. So many stories of longing and suffering. So many stories of the pain of mortality.

And she has been able to do this

because she, too, has lived her own long, dark night of the soul.

Petrea King was born in Brisbane in 1951 and left school at the tender age of 13. So quickly had she grown in a year – nearly 23cm – that her knees rotated with such severity they kept dislocating.

For the following three years, she was in and out of hospital on a regular basis in order to have bone cut from her femur and below her knees. That was the only way her knees could be swivelled back into place. Twice she was told by doctors she would never walk again.

After hospital, at the age of 17, she took up a nursing job and it was during this period she was raped. It was her first sexual experience and she was in a back brace at the time.

“I was in a house where there were people I knew,” she says, “and I knew this person who came into the room. I could have called out for help, but I didn’t. I felt, ‘Shh, be quiet and it will

be over soon.’ It was the same kind of feeling I had grown up with. Be quiet. Just don’t rock the boat.”

Petrea’s parents, Rae and Geoff King, 89 and 90 years old respectively, were – and are – delightful, warm-hearted people, but they were part of a generation not prone to voicing their feelings.

They also had much to contend with, besides their younger daughter. Their middle son, Brenden, born 18 months before Petrea, was adorable, but volatile and complex. As his life progressed, he began suffering from crippling depression and this was to absorb much of the family’s emotional energy.

During her childhood and adolescence, Petrea had often felt responsible for ►



her brother's wellbeing, suppressing her own considerable needs in the process.

"Brenden told me before he was 10 years old that he knew he would take his own life before he was 30," she tells me now during a long interview in Sydney.

And he did, although he waited until he was 32 and living in Nepal to end his life. Just when the family thought Brenden had attained some kind of peace, they received a phone call from Kathmandu saying he was dead.

In the years prior to his death, after working as a nurse, Petrea had drifted from one job to the other, finding employment first as a roustabout in New Zealand, then as a boundary rider in Western Queensland, then with Winston Churchill's family in England, cataloguing his library and letters.

Yet she'd become so crippled with arthritis that in her early 20s she enrolled in a naturopathy course to see if this could improve her condition. That's when she met her husband, Leo. The marriage lasted nearly eight years, produced two children, Simon and Kate, but ended not long after Petrea's brother took his life.

Then, in September 1983, 18 months after Brenden's suicide and six months after her marriage had crumbled, Petrea was handed her own death sentence. Doctors in America diagnosed an acute form of leukaemia and told her she would not make Christmas.

"My first reaction was one of relief," she says now, almost 27 years to the day since that dreadful pronouncement.

"I was so weary of struggling to maintain the façade that everything was okay when it wasn't. But that relief only lasted five seconds because my children were so young [seven and four] and I had a profound sense that I hadn't lived the life I had come to live.

"It was a life that wasn't authentic, that looked good from the outside, but didn't feel good because, on the inside, I was so full of self-recrimination and judgement."

Petrea went back to Australia to be with her family and to make plans to die. She prepared tapes for her children and letters for them to read after she was



gone. She then arranged her own funeral, packed a suitcase and went to Assisi in Italy, to a monastery a few kilometres outside the town. There, in a cave where St Francis had once spent time in deep prayer, she began meditating 18 hours a day. That's where her cancer went into remission.

"When I first got there, I began to weep and I couldn't stop for weeks," she says.

"I didn't want to do those things so I wouldn't die. I just wanted to live. I can't say that's why I'm alive now, although I suspect that spiritual transformation of a major significance has an effect on us physically."

"There were tears for Brenden, tears for myself, tears for life and 'Why does it have to hurt so much to be human?'"

"And I think these are the things that really break you open to what really matters. They break us open to compassion, to some small wisdom. They break us open to the knowledge that there is only this moment."

To this day, Petrea has no idea why she survived. Yes, she meditated and changed her diet, and began to address all the unacknowledged traumas of her life. Yet she has known thousands of people who did similar work and still died. That's not why she did what she did.

"I didn't want to do those things so I

wouldn't die," she tells me. "I just wanted to live – and whether that was for weeks or months or years, so be it. I can't say that's why I'm alive now, although I suspect that spiritual transformation of any major significance has an effect on us physically."

When Petrea King went into remission, her doctors told her the reprieve would not last long, that her remission was only

temporary. She decided to focus her energy on working as a naturopath and meditation teacher with other people similarly living at the edge of life.

Within days of each other, two clients came to see her, one with breast cancer, the other with AIDS. Both of them had been told by their doctors they, too, would not see Christmas. "I felt I had met fellow travellers in the transit lounge," she recalls.

Then a nine-year-old boy, Charlie Zylberberg, entered her life. He was to become her first great teacher.

Charlie had rhabdomyosarcoma, a soft tissue sarcoma which had spread to his prostate and was causing excruciating >

pain. His parents and siblings were beyond grief and horror over his suffering, despite the heavy doses of morphine he was receiving.

Petrea was due to return to America to work with Dr Jerry Jampolsky, a psychiatrist specialising in children with life-threatening illnesses, but on the day of her departure she decided to remain with Charlie. She moved in with the family.

“Normally, in life,” she says, “we avoid situations where we feel really vulnerable and unable to offer solutions. But I made a commitment – and I think it was a major turning point in my life – that even though I didn’t have any solutions or advice, I would stay and give whatever support I could.

“I realised then that Charlie had his hand held and his brow stroked, but never actually got cuddled anymore because of the tubes and the pain. So we sat him forward in bed and I straddled

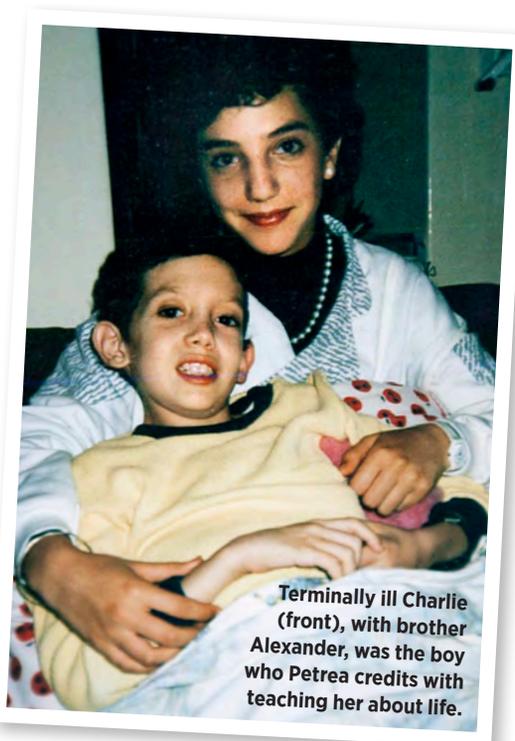
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the bed. And from then until the day he died, a couple of weeks later in his brother Alexander’s arms, 24 hours a day, someone was in bed with him.

“I used to sit in bed with him at night so his family could sleep and he had a nurse as well, and the family used to take turns during the day.

“So instead of the mother disappearing to draw up the morphine and the father disappearing because he couldn’t stand seeing his beloved son in so much pain, the brother and sister not knowing what to do and disappearing, and Charlie going down with his pain, we found tools and skills so we could work through that situation.

“I used to hold both his hands and look into his eyes, and we would breathe through the pain. It didn’t change the pain, it didn’t make it go away, but it made it so we participated in it.



Terminally ill Charlie (front), with brother Alexander, was the boy who Petrea credits with teaching her about life.

“His father had been very resistant to being in the bed with his son because it was so hard to be so close to so much pain, and yet he finally got in the bed. Just to see him hold his son and cry, and

be with his son ... okay, it’s very painful, but it’s getting to the very essence of what being human is about.”

Charlie’s father, Norman Zylberberg, has said publicly that Petrea King changed everything for him and his family. “She brought peace and helped me cope better with the agony. We couldn’t have done it without her.”

In 1989, Petrea King set up a registered charity, the Quest For Life Foundation, to further the work she had started four years earlier. (And for the purposes of disclosure, this writer served as the board’s secretary for three years.)

In 1998, the foundation purchased the Quest For Life Foundation in Bundanoon, in the Southern Highlands of NSW,

as a retreat centre for support groups and one-on-one counselling.

In this bucolic setting, tens of thousands of Australians have come over the past 12 years to deal with their illnesses, depression, relationship breakdowns and a myriad other calamities bearing down on their lives.

What they have found – and find to this day – is a support system of facilitators, counsellors, massage therapists, naturopaths, all working to help them with their healing.

Petrea’s over-arching message (see box overleaf) has been that peace is definitely possible, regardless of the external circumstances we are facing.

“Peace is not a passive, wishy-washy state of acceptance,” she says. “It is a state of being in which we feel able to embrace every moment, regardless of its challenges, with a quiet mind and open, compassionate heart.

“But there is right timing in this. People need to weep about what has happened to them, to rail and scream, and talk and write about it until they get to that place where they say, ‘Yes, that did happen to me, but that’s it. Something has to change and it’s me. I can’t change the outer circumstances. I can’t change the disaster, the drama, the divorce, the diagnosis, the death, the drought, the debt, the despair ...’

“I call them the ‘Ds’ ... but when I bump into one of them it challenges me more deeply to come into my spirit than anything ever has previously.

“And you finally get to a place where you want peace more than anything – peace more than being right, or hanging onto righteous indignation, peace more than a cure, peace more than blame.”

Petrea King lives in Bundanoon with her adored companion, Wendie Batho, whom Petrea first came to know in 1985. Wendie had come to a support group with her then partner, Kay, who was sick with breast cancer. Thanks to Petrea, Kay was able to die seven years later with more peace than she’d ever known during most of her lifetime. ➤

“Before she died,” Wendie tells *The Weekly*, “she said to me, ‘After you are over the worst of this, I want you to go and fluff Petrea up,’ and so I organised to go out for dinner with Petrea and to buy her several cases of wine. That was how we connected.”

To be in the company of these two women today is to be handed one of life’s true blessings. In their presence, you feel the power of love, humour, courage, intelligence and bottomless empathy. It is a rare gift they bestow on the world, made all the more precious by the enormous and growing challenges of today’s modern world.

Death confronts us at every turn, whether we choose to avert our gaze or not. Heart-breaking deaths, shocking deaths, angry deaths, reckless deaths; ugly, confronting deaths, chance deaths, accidental deaths, high-speed, out-of-control deaths, defiant deaths, premature deaths, long-overdue deaths, surrendering, gracious, accepting, sublime, fearless deaths.

For the first few years of her counselling practice, Petrea thought her own heart would break in the face of so much unbearable tragedy. Part of it was her “survivor’s guilt” – why had she lived when others hadn’t? – part of it was exhaustion, part of it was simply the appalling spectacle of human suffering.

Over time, however, she has come to see how deeply all of us suffer – through abuse, trauma, loss, divorce, separation, loneliness, illness – and that part of the healing lies in giving voice to these unhealed emotions and by finding new ways of nurturing the mind, body and spirit. (See box, right.)

Petrea has helped thousands of Australians to do so. Some have come to realise that it was perhaps these misdirected priorities or unresolved issues that caused the cancer in the first place. Others, of course, died railing at the dying light. Many others, however, just like Petrea, ended up defying the best-laid medical predictions about their life expectancy.

“You don’t need a life-threatening disease,” she says, “but it helps to really

FINDING PEACE IN DEATH

If you or a loved one are facing death, then, according to Petrea King, the following may be helpful.

- We might not be able to change the facts of a situation, but we can regain control over our response. It is fine to have feelings of “Why me?”, “It’s not fair”, “I don’t want to die” or “I don’t want this person to die”, and to weep the tears or express the sadness, helplessness or anger. Yet if we’re to experience peace, we will need to accept what is happening so that we can respond in ways that address the needs of our body, mind and spirit.
- Peace through meditation, visualisation techniques, a healthy diet and counselling is definitely possible.
- A life-threatening illness offers an opportunity to look at the relationships we’ve entered, the roles we’ve played, the attitudes we’ve clung to, the stresses we’ve accumulated, the anger, guilt and blame we’ve harboured, to see if our priorities might need changing or to heal past wounds.
- Recognising the purpose of human existence is to relinquish everything that has become “second nature” to us, by revealing to ourselves what is our “first nature”.

“It is our second nature,” Petrea says, “to go into whatever the patterns of the past might be – ‘I am no good, no one really loves me, my value lies in what I do not who I am’ – and serious challenges in life, such as diagnosis, death, divorce, drought, debt, despair [the ‘Ds’] confront us with the opportunity to let go of these patterns and discover a deeper, more eternal, more authentic part of ourselves.”

clarify your priorities, your goals and what’s important in your life.”

Many in her support groups have said a similar thing – that they would rather their disease go away, but that

they wouldn’t want to lose what they’d learnt by having it.

In recent times, Petrea King has been honoured with the Centenary Medal and the Advance Australia Award for services to the community. For each of the past seven years, she has also been a nominee for Australian of the Year.

More than a decade ago, she was celebrated before the nation on the Nine Network’s *This Is Your Life* program by, among others, Dame Elisabeth Murdoch, herself one of our more remarkable women. Dame Elisabeth described Petrea as “one of the most inspiring human beings I have ever had the joy of knowing ... a light in the lives of thousands”.

Johnny Warren, Australia’s former Socceroos captain who died of lung cancer six years ago, was also on the show to pay tribute to Petrea as “an absolute angel”. Actress Ruth Cracknell’s daughter, Anna, described how Petrea had sat by her mother’s bed until the day she died in 2002.

“Her face would light up when Petrea came into the room,” she said. (Ruth Cracknell was the Quest For Life Foundation’s patron for many years.)

So many hearts salved, so much joy, strength, consolation and wisdom given by this extraordinary woman. As another prominent Australian said to her not long after he was diagnosed with a life-threatening illness, “I have arranged to take my own life, but be damned if I will die before I’ve learnt to live.”

Petrea King helped him do both. She helped him find the joy for living and the peace to finally let go. The peace that passes all understanding. ■

*Petrea King has written numerous best-selling books, including *Your Life Matters* and *Sometimes Hearts Have To Break*. Her teachings on meditation and healing are also available on CD. You can access these or contact Petrea King’s Quest For Life Foundation on 1300 941 488, or visit www.questforlife.com.au or through www.facebook.com/petreaking.*

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