

## Director tackles death and dying in new film

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**Love in Our Own Time** is a documentary film that illustrates the three key stages in life – birth, love and death. This documentary exposes the lives of ordinary Australians and explores how we deal with these three different aspects in life and pauses to question the lives we lead. ehospice caught up with the director Tom Murray to speak about his latest film.

In the last decade and a half I have been making films all over the world – from Europe to West Africa to South East Asia to remote Arnhem Land in Australia. But I hadn't made a film in my own community. Commuting between Sydney and Arnhem Land at the time my grandparents were dying made me aware of major cultural differences relating to this end of life period. So, I decided this could be a strong subject for a film about my own community.

*“The major difference seems to me to be that death is not seen as a rupture from ‘life’, but as a part of life.”*

**As a filmmaker, is this the first time you've decided to tackle the subject of death and dying for a film?**

Yes, and no.

Yes in the sense that I made a film in Arnhem Land about an Aboriginal warrior named Dhakiyarr (the film was called *Dhakiyarr vs the King*). He had been murdered by police in the 1930s and seventy

years later his Aboriginal family wanted to find out what happened to him. It was a reconciliation-murder-mystery. That film had death all around it - Dhakiyarr's death, the death of a policeman that precipitated Dhakiyarr's own death, and the death of a young Yolngu man (a great grandson to Dhakiyarr) that happened while we were filming. We filmed the young man's funeral, and this funeral ceremony was included in the film as a surrogate for the kind of funeral Dhakiyarr had never been given (because he'd been 'vanished' by the police).

But I had never before made a film specifically about death and dying.

**What was your experience of palliative care prior to the making of this film?**

Not much really. I had watched my grandparents die slowly in nursing homes but I couldn't say I had any real concept of palliative care at that time.

**Did the making of the film have an effect on you personally?**

Yes. Before making the film I had a tremendous fear of death and lived with a reasonably strong dose of the 'immortality complex' that is a widespread phenomenon in contemporary life.

Then, while making the film, I saw half a dozen people die and a similar amount being born (the film is about how love manifests at both birth and death, and how these defining life moments are similar and different). This certainly had a powerful impact on me. I was struck anew by the incredibly finite time we have between these two moments: birth and death. A younger version of myself would have struggled with that idea as more of a cliché than a profound truth.

**Have you changed your perception of death in any way?**

Yes. I am much less fearful of death than before. There is a scene in the film where a man called Wally King describes his experience of coming back from the dead, so to speak. He'd been a police prosecutor in rural NSW and so he'd had a long career as a professional talker, but he'd been so close to death for the previous three weeks that I'd hardly heard a word from him. He was now so close to death that his family had been called to his bedside and the vigil around him had been going for a few days - each day with the likely expectation that it would be his last.

Anyway, he suddenly got a life spark back in him and started to talk. I was filming someone else but what I began to hear him say sounded so amazing that I quickly went over to him with the camera. He was talking about his love for his wife and about how he'd been so close to death that he was no longer scared of facing it. He said that he'd never been a man of faith but that he was now filled with what he described as 'hope'. Hearing him speak so eloquently about his hope for the future, which was a hope for death, had a powerful impact on me. It certainly reduced my fear of death. Wally's speech is also a very moving scene in the film.

**You spent some time working with Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory, can you tell us a bit of your experiences up there and how they dealt with death and dying in contrast to the western philosophy?**

I have worked for over a decade on a number of films in collaboration with the Yolngu people of North East Arnhem Land. As a result of the terrible mortality rates, I have experienced a great many deaths up there. I suppose the greatest difference between how we culturally deal with death is that for the Yolngu it is very much a part of life. Death is experienced in the community, the body is kept within the community for a long period of time, and funerals are held over a number of days where people mourn and celebrate the deceased.

Another important ceremony is often held just prior to a person dying, and during this ceremony many songs are performed in order to celebrate the life of the person. There is also an obligation on behalf of the dying person to transfer key social, ceremonial and local knowledge before they die. This seems to me to be a very profound period of exchange, celebration and death preparation that we could do well to consider in our society.

The major difference seems to me to be that death is not seen as a rupture from 'life', but as a part of life.

**Do you have plans for the future in terms of making more films about palliative care and dying?**

Not at the moment. I am currently working on a film about colonial soldiers from Australia and the Pacific, and their experience of being POWs in WWI.

However I certainly look forward to people's reactions to this film. By the feedback we have had, it is the sort of film that provokes a great deal of discussion and contemplation about life, death and dying!

*For a full synopsis of the film, or for additional information about Tom or Love in Our Own Time, click [here](#).*

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