

Letters To The Dead

My first job in Melbourne gave me power over life and death.

Working in the Victorian Taxi Directorate (VTD), part of my duties involved updating the member database of the Multi-Purpose Taxi Programme. This programme provides half priced taxis to those who, for reasons of disability or frailty, cannot use public transport.

In late October, the VTD wrote to the 180,000 (mostly elderly) Victorians who are members of the programme. Along with two lovely English girls called Nicki and Jessica, both in their early twenties, I was hired to help with the deluge of responses.

Amidst the thousands of returned envelopes, there was an unremitting stream marked “deceased.” Each one I received required me to bring up that member’s details on my monitor so that I could then “decease” him/her on the system. Making it official.

Soon the order of keystrokes necessary to perform this function became automatic – a reflex action so unthinking, I found myself deceasing people still alive. But thanks to the power of technology, I could also resurrect them - before anyone could learn of their changed status.

In my brief time in the VTD, I deceased hundreds of people – my only contact with each person was recording their death. Every record I opened fascinated me – from the little information each contained, a hazy pen-picture of the individual it once belonged to began to form.

Many were immigrants – Italian, Greek, Russian, Turkish, from everywhere really. Each time I came across a Kathleen, a Paddy, a Brigit or a Niall I could not help but think of how different it must have been for my compatriots, trying to make a home in Australia four or five decades ago.

Often it was by telephone that I was informed of a member’s passing away, normally by a relative. Some were matter of fact and business like in how they told me, others jovial, some viewed their loss as a form of release. But the ones I remember most are the husbands and wives, their grief still raw, probably lonely and confused, working out how to face the world now that the person with whom they shared forty, fifty or sixty years of marriage is gone forever.

Glancing at each person’s file, I tried to guess the reasons they were members of the programme. Most were almost certainly unable to use public transport because age had atrophied their limbs or claimed one or more of their senses. Others, though, would have lived their entire lives with a severe disability - seventy years of blindness, mental health problems or being unable to walk.

I wondered if those members that also had VA (Veterans’ Affairs) Goldcards were on the programme because they had lost limbs in World War Two – carrying the physical scars of that war for every day of the second half of the last century.

Many of the returned letters were from addresses that had been previously been hostels catering for older people. Apparently, changes in State regulations had recently forced large numbers to close, which made me think – *where did all the residents go to?*

Some stories were more vivid than others. I stopped as if winded when confronted with the sheer despair described by a few handwritten words added to one returned letter – “Mr [name] passed away.....He destroyed his taxi card along with all his personal papers, driving license and VA Goldcard in a fit of anger a few weeks before he went into hospice care.”

Impotent rage and hopelessness – an unimaginably bleak way to face one’s life end.

The despair captured in that brief note was echoed in a number of the conversations I had on the phone with current members of the programme. The letters they received from the VTD in October carried unwelcome news - a \$16.50 charge was being introduced for the taxi card and a cap was to be placed on how much any one individual could use it. This caused a lot of upset, anxiety and anger.

Nicki, Jess and I were the people expected to help deal with it.

I talked to hundreds of people over the space of a few days. I actually enjoyed most of these conversations - average length 2 minutes 45 seconds according to the software monitoring my performance - reserving a special fondness for one octogenarian woman, sharp as a tack, who spoke with the most beautiful Scottish accent, unrefined from half a century or more of living Down Under.

The genuine distress of some I spoke provided a window on the desperate poverty and isolation endured by those who simply couldn’t afford to get old. I found it sobering to see how a paltry charge of \$16.50 caused such severe worry and how for some it posed a real threat to face to face contact with other human beings.

One woman used the card to travel the long distance between her house and the nursing home where her husband was being cared for. The frequency of her travel would put her well above the new cap on use of the card. She asked me how she was going to afford to see her husband. I didn’t know the answer.

Jessica and Nicki got a lot of calls from people enquiring if their VA Goldcard would exempt them from the \$16.50 charge (it didn’t). I remember them getting exasperated from fielding the same question again and again. This was only human – but also illustrated how any sense of how those VA Goldcards are earned has been so forgotten, that with my own generation any appreciation is almost entirely absent.

I’ve never gone to war, never held a gun and never witnessed anyone have their flesh and bones and blood scrambled in a fury of fire and metal. So I can’t truly empathize with someone who has been a soldier far from home with his entire biological and psychological complexity reduced to a simple binary equation – kill or be killed, be a one or a zero.

I realize that to a large extent I've been protected from that knowledge due to traumas and sacrifices undergone nearly sixty years ago by some of the people I spoke with on the phone -telling them that yes the \$16.50 applied to them.

Talking with people from a nation and a generation whose understanding of the lasting scars of war far surpasses my own was a privilege. Like most men my age in the rich world I'm not asked to kill or be killed for the security of my community. Instead I pay taxes so that other people can do it for me.

This causes me to concur with an observation of Noam Chomsky's in *Understanding Power*, which I am currently reading. He claims that opposing the Draft was a huge strategic blunder for the peace movement.

I found the claims and counter-claims from proponents and opponents of the recent Iraq war confusing. The deep divisions very evident here in Australia, a country which committed troops to the Iraq conflict, indicate that I am not alone in being on unsure ground. But for all the passion and confusion over the war debate, for most of us it remains an abstraction – something fought by people we don't know in a land we may never visit.

I can't help but conclude that this makes it easier for political leaders to wage war. If rich countries fought their wars not with professional armies of the poor but with randomly selected citizens of every class, I suspect that the voting population would demand a somewhat higher burden of proof.

As it is of course, many who pressed hardest for the recent wars (and who are pressing for more to come) have neither personal experience of armed conflict nor the likelihood of someone they love being asked to fight them. That doesn't mean their conclusions are necessarily wrong – but it is disconcertingly easy to be brave with strangers' lives.

My last day in the VTD was, appropriately enough, Remembrance Day. We observed a minutes silence in our building. Though brief, my time in the VTD was good for my memory. Being schooled in Ireland, I have perhaps been taught to forget. I grew up enjoying freedoms defended for me sixty years ago by Yanks, Brits, Aussies and many others – including thousands of Irish men whose bravery is still largely forgotten and unacknowledged by me and my compatriots.

It was good, thousands of miles from home, to be given one minute in which I could say thank-you.