



Melanie's GIFT

All the kings and queens in the bible
They could not turn back time
So what chance have I of a miracle
In this life of mine?

Oh let me start today again
I only want one day
One lousy day, that's all
Of every day that's been before
Since time began
I know my prayer's in vain
But for a second I'll pretend
That I can start today again

Paul Kelly
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by Gary Jewson

A year ago we were watching the film *Ray*, about the life story of Ray Charles, the blind blues/gospel singer. One of his songs is *I can't stop loving you*. One of the chorus lines goes: *They say that time, Heals a broken heart, But time has stood still, Since we have been apart.*

The performance of *Hair* that Friday night was fantastic! Melanie played the role of Cinnamon and we enjoyed the performance very much. For the last number the performers invited members of the audience to join them on stage to dance with them. Melanie invited an older lady up and they danced together. Melanie

moved so beautifully, with pure joy written all over her face.

The final performance on the Saturday night was a huge success. Mel arrived home the next day absolutely exhausted. The rehearsal schedule and the performances had been very demanding and had taken their toll. She had a shower and put

her pyjamas on, curled up on my knees in front of the fire and went to sleep. André wanted to take a photo but we were out of film.

My parents were at our place for tea. Libb was cooking soup and baking bread in the breadmaker when the power went off. We lit candles, transferred the soup to the top of the

wood-heater, wrapped the dough from the breadmaker in foil and put it into the coals.

Melanie and her younger sister Ashlee had so much to talk about after the busy weekend; they just yapped and yapped. We sat together for a candle-lit dinner. We laughed, joked, and talked a lot about the kids when they were little. Even after the power came back on, we decided to leave the lights out because the meal looked much better by candlelight. It was a perfect ending to a perfect weekend.

It was the last night the five of us would share together.

On Monday night Libb was cooking pastie for tea and Ashlee was at Rock Eisteddfod rehearsal at her school in Geelong. At 6.30 Melanie phoned to say she was leaving a friend's place and would be home in fifteen minutes. At 7.00 we tried to call her but got no answer. By 7.30 we knew something was wrong. I got in the car and drove along the highway, praying she would be okay. But somehow I think I knew ...

Then I saw the flashing lights of police cars.

At about 11.00 pm a police officer came to give us Melanie's belongings. He assured us that she had done everything she could to avoid the oncoming vehicle, which was on the wrong side of the road. She had run her car completely off the road attempting to avoid the collision, but the other driver had swerved to the right, hitting Melanie's car at high speed.

That night all of us, now only four, huddled together on the floor in the family room. Our friend Rob prayed with us and then we tried to sleep. But how could we sleep? How could we live?

Tuesday dawned, and our plum tree burst into flower. Libb remembers looking at that tree and seeing something beautiful in the midst of our unspeakable pain and sorrow. By mid-morning visitors began to arrive and our letterbox was already full of cards. We survived those first few days on the love and support of our family and friends, who overwhelmed us with love, flowers, cards and phone calls.

How can we put into words our grief? Literature from The Compassionate Friends (a worldwide

table, sharing a meal, laughing, talking (and crying) with people who love you. The morning after Mel's death Libb said that if we are to get through this awful sorrow, we have to surround ourselves with people who love us and who are prepared to listen to us pour out our grief over and over again.

The sadness of not having Mel with us runs so deep. We have lost not only this beautiful person with whom we had shared wonderful experiences but also the future we would share with her: birthdays, boyfriends, career, wedding day and babies. We feel shortchanged by life. I wish there were words that were strong enough or descriptive enough to reflect the depth of sadness and the ache in our hearts. We know we will see Mel again in heaven, and although there is comfort in this, the despair of not having her with us now is unbearable.

Where does our Christian faith fit into the immense sorrow of losing Melanie? Our faith helps us to make sense of the world in which we live and gives us hope when everything else fails.

Time hasn't healed the broken hearts of those who loved her. But even in their grief they've made sure that Melanie's gift of love lives on



It's far worse than a nightmare. You wake up from a nightmare and breathe a sigh of relief that it wasn't real. But this was real, and we wanted with all our hearts to turn the clock back or, in the words of Paul Kelly, to 'start today again'.

group of bereaved parents supporting each other) describes every day following the death of a child as either 'terrible' or 'not quite so terrible'. Not long before Mel was killed Libb had read that the most important factor in the healing of pain is sitting around a

A short time after Mel's funeral we received a letter from the father of one of her friends. Part of it read: 'Mel's death has ignited thoughts of faith in the minds of so many that would not have ordinarily thought about faith and eternal life'.

In the longest, sleepless nights—and there are many—we feel the presence of Jesus reassuring us and enfolding us in his arms. Holy communion has a whole new meaning for us, as we are reminded that we commune not only with Christ but also with the whole company of heaven: past, present and future saints. It is comforting to know that Melanie stands beside Jesus, who stands beside us as we share his body and blood during communion.

As we struggled to deal with our loss we looked for ways in which something good could possibly come out of the tragedy of Mel's death. We decided to raise funds for a place that had been close to Mel's heart—the Port Vila Central Hospital in Vanuatu.

In January 2003 Melanie and Libb spent two weeks working at the hospital. Mel fell in love with the indigenous people, the Ni-Vanuatu. She was touched by their happiness and contentment, despite their lack of the most basic facilities. Mel and her mother were amazed and saddened by the poor healthcare and educational facilities in the Port Vila

was a time for filling our heads with something positive as we watched all those beautiful people pay tribute to someone they loved the best way they knew how—by performing.

Proceeds from *A Gift*, together with funds raised before and after it (in total \$32,000) were earmarked for the Port Vila hospital. For a number of years the hospital community had wanted a chapel and they suggested to us that the money could be used for this purpose. They told us that it would be used by everyone in the Port Vila community as a multi-purpose space for worship, prayer, education, counselling, gathering, celebration and mourning. Currently, when people come to the hospital to visit their loved ones they can meet only in corridors or under walkways that are sheltered from the rain and hot sun.

Some of Mel's friends and our friends wanted a hands-on involvement in the project. So, in September 47 friends and family (including three of Melanie's elderly grandparents and a great-aunt) travelled to Port Vila to help build the Melanie Jewson Memorial Chapel.

In Port Vila, the project's supervisor, Tom Whipp, had gained permission to use the hospital grounds, drawn up plans and recruited volunteer and paid labour from many different parts of the community. Together we are erecting a beautiful chapel. It features a large butterfly mosaic on the floor just in front of the altar, the same butterfly design moulded in blue glass just above the entrance doors and a lectern designed and built out of local timber by me, André and Mel's godfather, Mario Pinti.

It was dedicated on Sunday 24

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community. They promised each other that after they returned to Australia they would try to do something to help the Ni-Vanuatu people.

After Mel's death our family and friends set about planning a concert to raise funds to do just that. It was to be called simply *A Gift*. A year after the accident that took Mel's life, 200 singers and dancers (all of whom had some involvement in her life) performed on the stage of the beautiful Costa Hall before a capacity audience of 1400. Every one of the 30 or more acts had been chosen for its connection to Mel or her family. For us, *A Gift*



September, just over two years after Melanie's death. It was a day of great excitement, mixed of course with the grief of our loss. It was also a time of healing for our family as we were able to share some of Melanie's love with so many others.

The hospital's chief executive officer and staff provided a beautiful cultural lunch for all the Australian volunteers. She presented us with a woven mat (an important item in Ni-Vanuatu culture) and a hand-carved canoe to encourage us to return. The female members of the family were presented with an island dress. All these gifts were strong symbols of acceptance and belonging to this warm and welcoming Ni-Vanuatu people.

[The support of our family and friends] reminds me of the scene in *The Lord of the Rings* where Frodo and Sam are climbing Mount Doom. With the destination in sight Frodo falls exhausted under the burden of the ring and cries, 'It's such a heavy weight to carry'. With tears in his eyes, Sam says, 'I can't carry it for you, Mr Frodo, but I can carry you'.

Over 200 people attended the dedication service, which was led by Pastor Tim Edwards, a friend from Geelong. It was a deeply moving celebration of Melanie's life and an amazingly memorable ceremony by which to hand over the gift of the chapel to the people of Port Vila.

The unfinished chapel had been beautifully decorated with palm branches and flowers. We are expecting that it will be completed early next year.

For Libb, André, Ashlee and me the last two years have been a heart-breaking journey of sorrow, a long and desolate valley of tears. And yet, at the same time, we have been upheld and overwhelmed over and over again by the generosity of our family and friends, who have sustained us with their visits, phone calls, prayers, hugs, their

willingness to listen to our story, and their laughter and tears.

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Since we lost Melanie we have heard wonderful stories of hope in the midst of sadness. We have seen and heard of broken relationships healed, families strengthened, lives restored and redirected, and for this we are thankful. We have also felt empathy towards and gained strength from other families who have endured the loss of a child and sibling. We urge you to reach out to families like this. Share with them a listening ear and help them to carry their lifelong burden.

Hebrews 11:1 says, 'To have faith is to be sure of the things we hope for and to be certain of the things we cannot see'. We can't see our Mel, but through faith we have hope, and we are sure we will be with her again in heaven. We are left with the enduring legacy of Melanie's life: her faith, her hope and her love. ■

Gary Jewson is the principal of St John's Lutheran Primary School, Geelong. He and Libby, André and Ashlee are members of Our Redeemer congregation, North Geelong.

Opposite: In , Melanie (centre) with sister Ashlee, mum Libby, dad Gary and brother André

Top: Taking a break from their labours, Gary, Ashlee, André and Libby outside the hospital chapel they are helping to build in Port Vila

Centre: Chapel dedication on 24 September

Left: Butterfly mosaic in front of the altar



The Compassionate Friends—
www.thecompassionatefriends.org.au/TCFAustralia.htm