

# The Decisions That Make Us

**By Lindy Schneider**

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## The decision That Make Us

*'If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away.'* Thoreau

*'And when the earth shall claim your limbs, then shall you truly dance.'* Gibran

It was an unlikely relationship.  
But he drummed, and I danced.  
I asked him to teach me a rhythm called '*beledi*'.  
He taught me about life, and he taught me about death;  
the endless circles and cycles that punctuate our being here;  
the rhythms of nature and the ravages of time.  
endings and beginnings entwined.

It is not the eyes nor even the heart that holds tears; it is the entire body – each pore, each cell, each minute wrinkle. Skin, bone and gristle all remember; all hold you present in the absence.

Paul Hansen was an environmentalist before anyone had even heard of a carbon footprint. I think Paul and philosopher HD Thoreau would have seen eye to eye, though Warburton and Walden are oceans and eras away from one another. Thoreau said, 'I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived'. Paul did the same. He deliberately asked the hardest questions of himself and made difficult choices. There was no pretence; he knew as Thoreau did that 'most of the luxuries and many of the so-called comforts of life are not only not dispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind'. I wish I had that sort of innate wisdom.

I met him by the Yarra River. He was drumming.

He taught me the heartbeat of music and suddenly he was there. '*Tuk, tuk, dum, dum*', he would call on his drum and then wait for me to follow. He said, 'How you play is how you live'. When Paul drummed, a community gathered. His music made your eyes shine, and your body dance until you felt breathless and complete.

With a chainsaw and a chisel he carved me a drum base from a lump of blackwood he dragged from the river. A shaved goat skin stretches taut over the drum's circular frame and its surface glimmers like a full moon. For me, he has carved a circle into the honeyed wood, a symbol of birth, death and rebirth. When I pay him, he immediately sets off to buy Emma a coat.

I much prefer big dogs to little ones, but Emma managed to infiltrate my life as much as Paul. He took the tiny chihuahua everywhere, tucked under his jacket in a brightly patterned baby sling. We went to the cinema together. M Night Shyamalan's *The Village* didn't appeal to Emma much but she loved *iRobot*. I begged to differ.

You could not find Paul's house unless he took you there. He had no address. For me, a woman with city sensibilities, he was an oddity. High on a hilltop in a small clearing among the native bushland, he had built his own three metre square dwelling. It was a simple mud brick room with small fireplace in a sixty-litre drum and one window. Tealight candles flickered in the alcoves of the rough interior walls and books nestled on makeshift shelves at the end of the platform bed. In summer, he slept in a hammock outside. Over the years he added a lean-to for a kitchen, and an outdoor bathtub among the trees with a fire pit underneath to heat his bath water. Luxury came in the form of a hand built wood-fired pizza oven and a fresh picked basket of vegetables from his garden. He had no bills but lived in modest abundance.

Unplugged from the gaping grid of consumerism, educated by life, Paul had chosen to ignore many of the conventions we think are so necessary for everyday life and he'd been that way for as long as anyone could remember. He was the most content person I had ever met.

This pared back approach to living sustained Paul through his first bout of cancer at the age of thirty-five. It held him when cancer returned a few years later. He knew the virtues of an organic diet and meditation and lived with great faith that he alone could beat the beast inside him. At times when radiotherapy and chemotherapy did intervene, his solitude brought him peace. He grew more wheatgrass to juice in his 1940s bench-top mincer and let nature ease his nausea and his fears.

At times he spoke to me with the brutal honesty of the older brother that I never had. I hated him for it. He was hard on people and hard on himself. We grumped at one another and resisted our terrible truths until the next day, when he would arrive unannounced for a bath or a meal. Despite having several cars in various states of restoration, I could always tell it was him coming the minute he turned into my street. By the time he pulled into the steepest end of the driveway that no one else dared to use, I would have a place set at the table.

When I first met Paul I was alone. When Tex came into my life, the two men soon became friends, sharing a passion for cars and a mutual respect for grease and each other. When my babies were born, Paul held them with the tenderness of a new father. He understood children but was adamant 'dads need to be around'. He never let his heart go to a woman once he was sick, choosing instead to embrace an elevated place of loving all. But, I think he was truly sad too. I know I was.

Tex called Paul the 'freedom fighter'. Paul grew a dark beard, wore cargo pants and carried his principles with pride. He'd been without a front tooth for years after knocking it out in a skateboard mishap; he didn't care.

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'It's a lonely place when no-one wants to talk about dying', he says one day as we dig in a fresh layer of compost to his vegetable patch. The summer breeze signals the year is turning to 2004.

'So your cancer is back, is it?' I say.

'Bugger isn't it.'

'What happens now?'

'I'm thinking of making a documentary of me beating it one more time so that others can be encouraged too', he says. 'Third time lucky'.

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It was easy to disappoint Paul. He had high expectations of people he masked as belligerence. He had no time for messing about, so his words were sharp and direct. When he wanted you to wake up, he was relentless. He lived an abrasive, yet sometimes paradoxical, truth and left you shuddering, trying to keep pace. Not many dare to have an honest friend like him.

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'This chemo is GREAT', he says rolling up his sleeve to show me where the catheter is taped onto his bony upper arm. 'It's some French drug, experimental, I'm really lucky to be on it', he says. He takes off his beanie to show me how much hair he still has. 'I'm eating like a pig', he says.

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Sometimes I forgot how ill he was. I would especially forget when he went paragliding. Late on a Saturday afternoon in Autumn 2008, I received a text message with a string of indecipherable letters and numbers. Tex and I were about to delete it thinking it was a virus when it occurred to us that they could be GPS coordinates. We rang the number back and Paul answered. He said, 'My battery is about to go flat,

my morphine is wearing off and I can't access my medication'. He had been caught in a random updraft while paragliding off Mt Donna Buang and become stuck in a tree. Apparently, trees are a great way to break a fall, but this one had stranded him sixty-five metres off the ground, high in the dense foliage of the forest canopy. It took the rescue efforts of thirty men over six hours to get him down and the whole time he worried about Emma. She flew everywhere with him in a tiny harness he had fashioned for her. At one stage she had managed to slip free of her harness and he had put her life before his own to save her. He emerged from the forest just before midnight, cold and in much pain but unscathed. That night he made the evening news.

Flying inspired Paul's fight to survive. *Yarra Mail* journalist Kath Gannaway wrote, 'Flying gave him the drive to keep going'. She quotes him as saying, 'It is the most pure form of free flight, the one that gets you closest to the experience of soaring like an eagle'. TV program *Animal Planet* bought his story. Paul donated the money he was paid for the story to the local State Emergency Services (SES) team that had rescued him and his little dog.

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He went to live, to die, in Whyalla with his mother Bea in March 2010. Before he leaves, he tells me that 'permaculture should be taught in every school'.

Emma dies.

He holds on.

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One soft crescent moon night in August an email arrives in my inbox. I am about to leave for a ten-day health retreat in Queensland.

*'Hi Lindy. I hope to be leaving my body soon and I just want to thank you for your friendship and for introducing me to your man, Tex, with an open heart, as he has been a true and good friend to me. I wish I could have done more for you while I had the chance. Unfortunately I wasted my life chasing ego fulfillment rather than following my true purpose which was to help heal the world. I am sad that I realised my purpose in life too late. I hope you and Tex continue to love each other and guide your beautiful children so that they and others of their generation can lead Humanity out of the darkness of our present*

*selfish state of awareness and into the future of the common good that lies ahead. I thank all that is good in this world, specifically those people who get up every day with love in their heart and goodwill to everyone. Goodbye Lindy, Love always, Paul.'* *email 14/8/10*

It feels like his final goodbye although we had long ago agreed there was no point in goodbyes. I go to the health retreat frozen in my despair, shut inside the waiting.

We skype every second day and we read from Gibran's *The Prophet*. I play Almitra and ask 'Speak to us of ...' He finds sustenance each day in the words.

*'For what is it to die but to stand naked in the wind and melt in the sun?  
And what is it to cease breathing but to free the breath from its restless tides,  
that it may rise and expand and seek God unencumbered?'*

*Gibran*

Days linger. Something shifts in him and he seems to find his feet in two worlds. He becomes ethereal, almost. A reverence eases the tensions from his face. He no longer sits awkwardly, adjusting his seat every few minutes as the pain increases. I see him but he has his eyes focused on something very beautiful beyond his life. When he speaks he is his own prophet. His words are clear and imbued with crystalline wisdom. All I can say is 'I love you'.

For two nights he hovers like this and then, he is back.

A procedure is scheduled for the next day. He is to have spinal injections to block the nerves and the transmission of pain. He will lose any last control he has over his bowel. For five years, and after much resistance, he has had a colostomy bag, but he had retained a little of his function and control. The promise of pain relief is a small moment of hope, but the nerve injection will take away any last shred of sensation. Now, his quiet acceptance of this final indignity is as inevitable as his death. But it works; he is elated. We all are.

Paul plans a springtime trip home to his mountains to complete 'things', to feel another season on his face. He wants to have a pizza night at 'his place' with friends. We don't say anything because we know it's a last hurrah. We all bring 'something to put on top' and we feast on delicious wood fired pizzas that seem to take just seconds to cook. I roll out the dough with an old wine bottle. Paul proudly opens his homegrown tomato *passata*. By eight o'clock his pain is so severe he cannot stand. The Ketamine pump dangling from his belt helps him smile through it, but it takes two

days for him to get the real pain under control again. He uses the walking stick every day now.

He goes back to Whyalla intending to return to Warburton for another visit in late November. The steroids puff his cheeks out and he looks healthier than I have seen him in years.

*'I am having difficulty with pain management again, but don't be too concerned, we're not talking about intense pain, just chronic pain at a level that prevents sleep. I get a little loopy after a few days of not sleeping and that's where I'm at now, I just need to review my meds and find something that works better for me. I will have to have another round of spinal injections and the sooner the better, it's just bad timing with my trip supposed to start on Saturday. I don't know if I'm going to make it, the next few days will tell...'*

*Paul*

*email 3/11/10*

Again Paul comes but only lasts a few days before the pain drives him back to his mother's. He is still waiting for the second round of spinal injections, looking forward to them. He is still confounding the doctors at Adelaide Hospital. They cannot believe how well he is still functioning cognitively. The painkillers are so strong now, but even opiates at maximum intake can do little for the relief of nerve pain. The interns gather to view the man who looks so good on the outside in disbelief of what the scans reveal on the inside. Now the tumour in his bowel extends right up into his stomach cavity. Cancer has made its unwelcome way into his bladder, his liver, his lungs, his kidneys. He has so many secondaries they don't even bother to discuss treating them.

Finally, there is a space on the theatre list for him to be given the spinal injections. The last few days of pain have depleted his resources, but he still has hope.

This time the injections have no effect.

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An email arrives for me at 5.53pm on the evening of 8 December 2010.

It simply says, 'thinking of you'.

I don't see it until after my children are in bed.

It is late ...

already too late.



His pain is too much.

He ends his life with quiet dignity just after the new Moon. He had researched the way on the internet and had found a simple solution that had kept him going whenever the pain overwhelmed him. It strengthened him knowing that one day he could take all 'this' into his own hands and, in a few breaths, offer his life up. At midnight I go to his Facebook page wondering, needing, one last word from him. Silence. I write 'travel well, my dear friend'.

I don't go to Paul's funeral. He has insisted that it is too expensive for his friends to travel interstate and 'no one needs to stand around weeping for him'. 'Just a cheap pine box. Don't go wasting money on metal handles, just get the plastic ones', he says to his mum. His dad Michael tells me the story of his cremation. Only family members attend – his mother, his father, a brother, two sisters, partners. The funeral director sends them outside after the service to watch the sky. She tells them that 'usually you don't see any smoke from a cremation, it being 1000 degrees the body all but evaporates instantly'. But it might be different with Paul, 'his body being so full of chemicals', she says. As they stand together, they witness him as a stream of smoky haze filtering gently up into the sky.

Half of his ashes are scattered across the bay near his last home in Whyalla. Bea carries the rest in a small urn, and wears a pinch of him in a locket around her neck. She wears the locket for the first time when the family go to dinner to celebrate Paul's birthday, two days before Christmas. The man who didn't think he'd make forty would have turned forty-five. She writes on his Facebook page:

*Each friend represents a world in us, a world possibly not born until they arrive,  
and it is only by this meeting that a new world is born. Anais Nin  
For your loved and loving friends.*

*Bea, mother and friend 12/12/10*

A few weeks later we gather in Warburton – family and friends, Paul's community – to plant a Satsuma plum tree in memorial of him. His mother has chosen a terraced garden near his home, a place that looks out over the valley and harbours birdlife and plants that he has tended over his years. When I arrive she is already weeping. The heaving sobs of a mother burying her child are different from other kinds of crying. They cannot be explained away or soothed. They are enough to pull you inside out, to tear at your flesh for the unfairness of it all.

Tom plays the violin. In the last months of Paul's life he decided he would learn another instrument. Tom, a professional violinist and friend, offers to teach him violin

via skype. Today, Tom plays a simple song that carries us in our grief and in our blessings.

*'Farewell to you and the youth I have spent with you. It was but yesterday we met in a dream. You have sung to me in my aloneness, and I of your longings have built a tower in the sky.'* Gibran

He is gone.

The community goes to Paul's favourite Warburton restaurant *Wild Thyme*. We dance and drum and share our memories. A slide show of Paul's life is projected onto a screen in the corner of the beer garden. I cannot watch it because my sobs threaten to take me into madness.

Writing to each other helped Paul and I navigate the murky end-of-life waters. Words fell to a page to form a kind of ballast, a way of making sense of the pain. 'How can I do more for you' became 'How can I write more' when it was clear nothing else could be done. Perhaps all I was trying to say was 'don't leave'. What I couldn't tell Paul, I told a mutual friend who lived too far away to see him one last time.

*'I am doing okay about Paul. The tears still well but they are each a droplet of a beautiful memory rather than the grief that swept through me on hearing the news of his passing. I spoke to Bea at length soon after he died and that made it more real. For all the months and years we have had to prepare for this, it was still a shock. I knew he was low and terribly bereft when the nerve block injection didn't help his pain and I know that he wanted to die with peace and dignity, so my heart is overwhelmed with respect for his bravery and choices. I also know that we have had the most depth in our relationship over the past months and we talked many times about dying and living – so I feel very complete that all our words were spoken – we said all we needed to say. The last time we were together he came here and we had endless cups of tea on the balcony just talking. He asked for my 'famous dhal, darl' and had a bowl of that - it was all so normal in a way, except I could see how painful life was for him in a physical sense. We also had a chance to go to the 350.org event and drum together which was an emotional time but a perfect return of the circle to how we first met.*

*I went to a sweat lodge on Sunday night and let Mother Earth accept the tears of my body as a mark of respect for Paul – to let him go and honour our*

*connection in Spirit. It was a profound experience and like you describe I felt his presence. He kept tapping me on the left shoulder, urging me to speak his name into the darkness.*

*I still expect him to call or his name to pop up in my inbox. He last emailed me on Wednesday night saying 'thinking of you'. It was just an hour or two before he passed so I feel blessed that he thought of me and feel this eternal sense of protection from him. He is there.*

*I hope your heart is easing, I know that our love for Paul has bought much to our lives and know that he will be ever present in each drum beat, every time we dance.*

*Much love to you sweet sister, Lindy'*

*email to Radha, 20/12/10*

Everything has changed and nothing has changed. Grief knows this better than I. Time is irrelevant. How is it possible someone can be here one minute and gone the next?

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In mid June 2011, Paul's mother Bea calls me. She is in town and has something for my children. She says to me, 'I feel as if I have absorbed him, like osmosis or something'.

That night I tuck my children into bed under handmade patchwork quilts. I embroider Paul's name in the corner of each quilt. I fold them so his name is against their sweet cheeks so that he might whisper his wisdom to them in their dreams.

*'In the depth of your hope and desires lies your silent knowledge of the beyond;  
And like seeds dreaming beneath the snow your heart dreams of spring.  
Trust the dream, for in them is hidden the gate to eternity.'*                      *Gibran*

I tell Bea I am writing. She says, 'He wouldn't want a sad story'. I buy her a copy of *The Prophet* rich with illustrations. Paul would have loved it. I mark all the pages he memorised.

Now, everything touches me. I feel tears welling every time life makes herself visible and I feel this as Paul's constant presence. He is there in my every triumph and my every tragedy, present in that moment when the soul is in freefall, felt in that urgent second when a glider's wing catches the upstream. His message is not that we 'fight cancer' or 'stand for our right to choose how we die' but is resident in the simplicity of the words 'keep it real'.

Cancer was never on Paul's radar, even when he knew his was terminal. Dying is not 'what people talk about', our unrealised fear of our own mortality an uneasy companion to our spiritual truth.

Yet, I could board a plane right now and in a few hours be among people who hear a different beat.

A place where a man,  
realising the season of his life,  
simply walks out,  
unencumbered,  
into the desert ...

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*'But now our sleep has fled and our dream is over, and it is no longer dawn.  
And if our hands should meet in another dream we shall build another tower in  
the sky.'*

*Gibran*

*'Shall I not have intelligence with the earth? Am I not partly leaves and  
vegetable mould myself?'*

*Thoreau*

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