



# Eternal Life Letters to Our Two Children

Celebrating the Lives of  
Christopher James Mudge and  
Nicola Levana Mudge



Peter Mudge  
and Gwendoline Wijenberg

## Commendations for *Eternal Life Letters for our Two Children*

We have found the excerpts that we have read from *Eternal Letters* to be thought-provoking yet comforting. We think it is good that there is a mix of theological/spiritual concepts as well as more practical aspects, including examples of your own grief journey. We are particularly pleased that the book acknowledges one of the key issues about grief – that it is individual or personal, and that families can find ways of grieving together. We also believe that *The Compassionate Friends* (TCF) community would be interested in a copy of this book for their library, since it is now regarded as a secular organisation, allowing for an individual's faith or lack of it. Also, in addition to those that have lost children, this could be a good reference for those of faith that work with the bereaved, such as priests, ministers and laity. It is evident to us that what you have written is both cathartic as well as a sharing with others, as each of us remembers and honours our children in heaven.

*Sandra and Rob Spooner-Hart, members of The Compassionate Friends*

As we travelled with Pete Mudge and Gwen Wijenberg through the tragedies of their children's deaths, we felt indebted to them leading the way in taking us into their grief, by the keeping on of naming their experience. Even in their numbness, sheer raw pain and powerlessness they spoke their truth as they grappled with the religious texts of their tradition as it spoke to the unwanted texts of their present lives. They grappled and shook at their religious tradition until something yielded and helped them keep breathing. And they talked about it.

The way of this book is the story of the grapple....past and present...as they live with the absence, and presence, of their beloved children, Nicola and Christopher.

As a book about grief, its uniqueness lies in the writing of a book examined by deep faith formation, emotional and artistic intelligence, honesty and social science, and Pete's experience as a scholar and author. It has brought new eyes to our own grief work.

*Beverley Elliott and Paul Elliott, Friends and ordained Episcopal priests/clergy persons*

Ours is a society that proscribes the expression of grief: It is acceptable only in certain circumstances, in certain places and for a limited time after the event. Simply put, we don't know how to grieve well; nor do we really know how to help each other as we grieve.

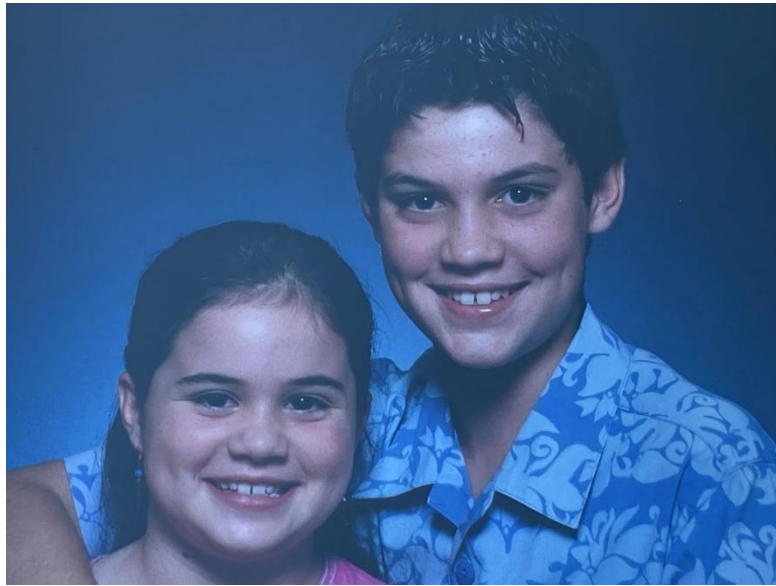
The letters and poems - intimate, heartfelt and sometimes confronting - that Peter and Gwen share with us in this book give us a way to share the grief they have been living with since the death of their children, Nicola and Christopher.

They do more than that, though. They give us an example of a new way of engaging fully with grief and working through it by being open and honest not just with ourselves, but also with those whose death we are grieving.

*Noel Kapernick*

Commendation from Person 1

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The authors and his company acknowledge the Darug nation and its individual Burramattagal and Toongagal clans as the Traditional Custodians of the land that we live and work on. We are committed to the journey towards Recognition, Equality, Justice and Reconciliation as detailed in *The Uluru Statement from the Heart or Makarata*. Refer to: <https://ulurustatement.org/the-statement>

Cover, front matter and body of text designed by Snap Printing.

Written, edited and privately published by Peter Mudge and Gwendoline Wijenberg. In memory of our dearest and talented son and daughter Chris Mudge (1992-2020) and Nicola Mudge (1996-2006).

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The eBook version of this publication will be listed for sale after January 2023. Orders for both the eBook and paperback print copy can be sent directly to: [pjpmudge@gmail.com](mailto:pjpmudge@gmail.com) A percentage of profits will be sent to various Cancer Treatment organisations including LifeHouse.

Mudge, Peter & Wijenberg, Gwendoline. *Eternal Life Letters to my Two Children*. Baulkham Hills, NSW: Snap Printing, 2022.

Cover image: A digitally modified image that fuses time and space. It combines two pictures with Nicola's image added from an earlier photo. This is our full 'family' that I hope will celebrate The Great Banquet after all our lifetimes are completed on earth. From left to right: Chris (d.2020), Jess, Nicola (d.2006), Peter and Gwen. For us, this is what 'Heaven' will look like. Reworked image by Camera House © P. Mudge 2021.

Cover icon: This icon was developed by my talented son Chris Mudge. I completed the original sketch and manipulated it via Word imaging. Similar to our family grief experience, it shows a person crossing the Coal River, Richmond, near Richmond Gaol, where my maternal great-great-grandfather, George Phelps, was transported from England and imprisoned as a convict, from 1844 and then across Tasmania until 1852. The Richmond Bridge can be seen in the background. The 'TC' on the front of the tinny stands for 'Threshold Concept/Crossing'. The tinny is half size and looks like it has been sawn off. This too reflects our grief journey and its many, painful crossings.

**Dedication** – To our creative and dearly missed son Christopher James Philip Mudge (1992-2020) and our beautiful, talented and light-filled daughter Nicola Levana Elizabeth Mudge (1996-2006)

**Introductory Note from the authors:** Up until 2004, we were proud parents of a small and active family of two children. In that year, tragedy struck when our daughter Nicola was diagnosed with a brain tumour. After two years of stressful treatment, she died in 2006 just short of her tenth birthday. With the family thinking that the worst was over, our son Christopher then contracted the same type of tumour in 2013, which then returned and claimed his life in 2020. He had just turned twenty-eight.

Many books have been written on the topics of grief, loss, and the psychological and sociological changes that accompany them. When we looked at our extensive thanatology collection (books on those topics), Gwen and I came to realise that our own grief journey was somewhat unique and under-reported. Many families had not lost all their children in the same way as us. In addition, many of those same books had recorded the story of their tragedy but not written directly to their children.

This book adopts a different approach by recording the stories of Chris and Nicola, and writing 'letters from the heart' to them. It also faces the physical death of children head on, and contains letters to others who have reflected on suffering, death and grief over the centuries, such as the biblical Job, C. S. Lewis, Walter Brueggemann and Alexandra Kennedy. Finally, the book also incorporates haiku and letters written by Gwen, and a helpful Q & A section in its final pages. It is designed to accompany and assist suffering and grieving families on similar journeys to ours.

We dedicate *Eternal Life Letters* to our families and spiritual ancestors and to the many known and unknown people who are walking on this path of death and grief with us and have supported us. Thank you to all who have assisted in any way.

*By the same author*

Peter's most recent works are: *Living Spirituality: Series 1* (2019); *Series 2* (2020); and *Series 3* (2021).

He has co-authored: *Living Religion (6<sup>th</sup> and previous Editions) 2021*; *Out of the Desert (Books One to Four, Years 7-10) 1997 to 2000*.

He has written 50+ journal articles, the most recent being: 'This Changes Everything': The COVID-19 Pandemic – An Opportunity for Cultivating a Fresh Approach to Spirituality? (*Australasian Catholic Record*, 2021); 'God has breathed into us the breath of life' – Jewish and Christian approaches to breathing meditation in an Australian context (*Practical Theology*, 2019); and 'Re-souling daily life' – Towards a restored spirituality of the Sabbath as a cure for "societal madness" (*International Journal of Children's Spirituality*, 2018).

He has also contributed chapters to numerous collections including: *Assessment in Theological Education (forthcoming, 2022)*, *God's Exemplary Graduates (2021)*, *Justice, Mercy, and Well-Being (2020)*; *Moving from Theory to Practice: Religious Educators in the Classroom (2019)*; *Wondering about God Together (2017)*; *The Routledge International Handbook of Education, Religion and Values (2013)*; and the *Springer International Handbook of Education for Spirituality, Care and Wellbeing (2009)*.

Finally, he has self-published a two-part convict family history on his mother's side in 2019: *The 'Conduct Record' and Life and History of George Phelps (1818-1864)*; as well as a longer history for each side of his family tree, all stored in the Mitchell Library, Sydney, NSW: *A History of the Mudge Family – 1300ff (2002)*; and *A History of the Phelps Family – 1800ff (2002)*.



Chris and Nicola in happier times before two brain tumours afflicted our family. Dinner at 'Pearls on the Beach', 3 December 2001. This was a special, even sacred, place for our then full family during holidays at Pearl Beach, NSW. © 2021 P. Mudge.

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Up until 2004, we were proud parents of a small and active family of two children. In that year, tragedy struck when our daughter Nicola was diagnosed with a brain tumour. After two years of stressful treatment she died in 2006, just short of her tenth birthday. With our family thinking that the worst was over, our son Christopher then contracted the same type of tumour in 2013, which then returned and claimed his life in 2020. He had just turned twenty-eight.

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*'When you lose someone you love, your soul moves to another "place". This "place" is shared only by others who have also lost someone they love. You know they're "there" by the look in their eyes when they tell you how sorry they are for your loss. They have travelled the "journey"...To the observer, your life is carrying on. Inside, however, those who have been "there" know you're still on a journey for a time. You think it must be time for you to "come back" now, and for short periods you do. Then some thing, some place, some song sends you on the "journey" again'.*

*(Barb Kerr, What Death Has Taught Me, in Jack Canfield & Mark Victor Hansen. (2003). 'Chicken Soup for the Grieving Soul' (Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications), pp.218-219.*



Peter Mudge (BADipEd, DTheol, Honorary Research Associate, Sydney College of Divinity) is the proud father of Christopher (d.2020) and Nicola Mudge (d. 2006). During his career, Peter has taught in Catholic schools, as part of a retreat team, and worked in four Catholic education offices in two States, including two country dioceses. He then worked for seven years as a Senior Lecturer in Religious Education and Spirituality. Over the last five years he has worked as a consultant and online lecturer, and as a 'critical friend' for senior leaders in spiritual formation and religious education. He has also been preparing a series of ZOOM presentations on selected chapters from his books *Living Spirituality, Series 1, 2 and 3*. More recently, he has been preparing this *Eternal Life Letters* volume and writing poetry as well as his own immediate family history (1958 to the present). His hobbies include reading spiritual classics and non-fiction, creating art in his home studio, post-COVID travelling, and enjoying the company of family and friends.



Gwendoline Wijenberg is a secondary school teacher who specialises in religious education and HSC *Studies of Religion*. She is the loving mother of Christopher and Nicola Mudge. She has contributed haiku and letters to this collection of *Eternal Life Letters*. Her hobbies include reading, scrap booking and walking. She has rediscovered a love of sewing with her mentor Irene, with whom she shares enriching discussions, accompanied by tears and laughter. Being creative in this way makes her feel alive.



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