

The Time of Her Life - by Lesley McIntyre

I had been working as a photographer for some years preceding the birth of my first and only child, Molly, on October the 19th 1984. And although I had been monitored throughout my pregnancy nothing had indicated that I was carrying a baby who would present such profoundly worrying symptoms at her birth. Within a very short time I realised that continuing my career as I had planned would not be possible. My time from that day on was dominated by caring for my child and enabling her to have the best possible life that I was able to facilitate.

I would have been denying the blindingly obvious if I had not acknowledged that my child's life expectancy was very precarious. A muscle biopsy had revealed an abnormality in the formation of her muscles and the initial prognosis was incredibly bleak. In time I found a way of living with this uncertainty and Molly and I lived one day at a time and in the present moment. Every day that we had together felt like a reprieve to me and the irony is that her constantly tenuous grasp on existence gave our life together an extraordinary intensity.

But as she approached puberty I could see that she was becoming increasingly emaciated. I nursed her at home through the last months of her life with paediatric nursing back-up and respite care. Molly died in her own bed on January 8th 1999. She was only fourteen years old.

Although I had been living with the inevitability of my child pre-deceasing me for all of those fourteen years – nothing prepared me for the enormity of my sense of loss. Although no death is the same – each is unique – I would say that the additional factor that I was very conscious of after her death, which was related to her level of dependency upon me, was the realisation that we had been mutually dependent - ours had been a symbiotic relationship in many ways. She was utterly dependent on me to facilitate her life and I effectively gave up my career to look after her needs. Molly was both my child and my job – so at her death I lost my *raison-d'être*.

Fortunately, my social worker gave me the telephone numbers of organisations that offer support to bereaved parents. In the weeks following her death I made contact with both The Compassionate Friends and The Child Death Helpline. I remember talking to a volunteer who suggested that I create a special photo album with all my pictures of Molly. She told me that many parents found this a helpful activity after the death of their child.

This suggestion lead me to re-engage with photography and, encouraged by my close friends, I started to work in my darkroom again. I had taken photographs throughout Molly's life but because of the demands that parenting my child had required of my time and energy, I only processed my negatives occasionally. I had hardly made any contact sheets or prints. It proved to be an extraordinary experience printing images that I had never seen before. Initially I made 700 proof prints and I gave them to someone who had only met Molly once and who at that moment in time barely knew me. I wanted an objective opinion about the pictures that I had been working on.

After some months I received the following comment. "I do think you have in your hands a real and deeply affecting set of pictures of an extraordinary person in a whole world – the conjunction of your skills as a maker of images and your and Molly's life is quite possibly unique and gives to me an access and understanding that I will always treasure". This gave me the confidence to proceed. Slowly, as I worked, the edit revealed itself to me. All the phases of a life were there - the beginning, the middle bits and the end – just like any other life of whatever duration.

A dear friend and photographer recommended that I arrange to show the pictures to Mark Holborn at Jonathan Cape. Our first meeting was in 2002 and I remember that Mark barely said anything as he carefully looked at each image. In time, the major obstacle that we faced was how to *sell* the book to the marketing department. He asked me to give him something in writing that he could present at a finance meeting. I effectively handed him what eventually became the introduction to the book – THE TIME OF HER LIFE - which was published in 2004. In the same year the book was published by Contrasto in Rome. The title turned into – IL TEMPO DI UNA VITA. All the images from the book will be exhibited in Udine, near Trieste, in March 2008.

Lesley McIntyre now volunteers at the Child Death Helpline.

The Time of Her Life by Lesley McIntyre (ISBN 0 224 07254 4) is published by Jonathon Cape, visit www.randomhouse.co.uk for more information.

The Child Death Helpline - is a helpline for anyone affected by the death of a child of any age, from prebirth to adult, under any circumstances, however recently or long ago.

Call Freephone on 0800 282 986

Open Mon – Fri 10am to 1pm
Wed afternoons 1pm to 4pm
Evenings (all days) 7pm to 10pm

The Compassionate Friends has a helpline service that provides support for bereaved parents and their families who have lost a child. The Compassionate Friends also offer support, advice and information to other relatives, friends and professionals who are helping the family.

Call 0845 123 2304

Open - Everyday between 10am and 4pm and 6.30pm and 10.30pm