



To Rakiura and Beyond

By Sandra Turner

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<torakiuraandbeyond.com>

Reviewed by Ali Begg

For me, *To Rakiura and Beyond* began as a sensory experience. This slim 99 page paperback looks good and feels good with its colourful cover and silky, high quality pages. Short chapters with poetic or descriptive titles are sprinkled with poems and italicised quotes in large print. A great warm up. Soon I was immersed in Sandra Turner's cancer journey, her experiences of living with cancer rather than battling it. I was in tears at times and full of wonder at the strength of the life force in others. It was an honour to share this author's well written story, in which she has opened her life to others. The book is especially aimed at those living with cancer, and their families and friends, but as a reflection on what is important and how to live well when life throws a curler, its appeal is much wider.

To Rakiura and Beyond is not a psychodrama book as such but it is written by a psychodramatist, and one who is a member of the Australian and New Zealand Psychodrama Association (ANZPA) at that. Concepts that psychodramatists relate to are visible despite their skilled translation into everyday language. Sandra is the protagonist and director of her own life drama while enabling others to be auxiliaries and protagonists as well. Relationships are central. The author displays an ability to maintain a positive relationship with self, which enables her to manage experiences that none of us would choose. She is able to reverse roles with those around her, family, friends, clients, other patients and even a woman walking down the other side of the road. She shows compassion and understanding for health professionals who at times let her down. Few have the ability to express their experiences with the clarity and poetry that Sandra exhibits as she concretises her unfolding journey in words. Poignant vignettes are spiced with metaphor. She demonstrates her ability to live in the not always pleasant here and now reality and still maintain hope. Healing does not necessarily mean cure, nor recovery require the absence of disease.

After an introduction, Part One provides details that are particular to the author but that convey the universal. The reader is taken through the shocking first three weeks, the immediate crisis of diagnosis, how to manage work, feelings of unreality, the responses of those around her, the poems written for her and

the changing diagnosis. Then there is the Medical Day Unit and chemotherapy, a bone marrow biopsy, “an unpleasant little number”, as well as the management of those who want to help or think they have the answer. Choosing companions for the journey “to Rakiura and beyond” is a challenge to be faced. The title’s meaning comes with the reading. There is also surprising understanding and help from “the mouse”, coping with vulnerability, a new perspective on funeral notices, links to the past through the story of her grandmother’s “Daphne Odura” and to the future as the author faces grief with her daughter. Life is thrown into clear relief when under threat.

The second part of the book addresses the impact of the illness on professional life. The question “How are you?” from a client takes on new dimensions. Sandra addresses many of the dilemmas that arise regarding the continuation of much loved work as psychotherapist, supervisor and trainer in the face of a life threatening illness. Questions emerge. How to decide when one is well enough, or not well enough, to work? Which new clients should be taken on when the future is unreliable, and what to tell them? These ethical dilemmas are not easy and are relevant for anyone working with people in therapeutic relationships. I found Sandra’s exploration of this area refreshing and helpful for situations I face at times in my work as a doctor.

Part Three, titled Facing Jerusalem addresses mortality and spirituality, inevitable concerns when living close to death. What about prayer? What to do on the ‘bucket list’? The book’s final section summarises advice for living well, in which the author’s hard won wisdom is set out in 18 clear points designed to help others through their journeys. There are questions as well as advice and no avoidance of the reality of suffering.

Throughout *To Rakiura and Beyond* Sandra Turner manages to convey a great deal with a few carefully chosen words and examples. She acts as a guide for others who enter similar territory. And we all enter that territory at some stage as we or those close to us face medical intervention and life threatening illnesses. I highly recommend this book to anyone interested in exploring the deeper issues of life that living with cancer brings to light.

Ali Begg is a Christchurch based psychodramatist, family doctor and medical educator with a special interest in cancer, particularly the work of Ian Gawler. Her mother and sister died of cancer and through her work Ali has been involved with many people living with cancer. Ali can be contacted at <abegg@cyberxpress.co.nz>.