

Preface

It is Christmas Eve, 2009. There is steam rising from the hot bubbling outdoor Jacuzzi, swirling as it meets the cold air. Snow is falling heavily, disappearing immediately where it falls onto the bubbling water, and plastering the tops of our heads and our shoulders. I am in the hot tub opposite Geordie, my partner of 16 years. There is a layer of white all around where snow has fallen for several days, blanketing the ground and trees, and muffling the sounds of nature. The temperature is about 3 °C, although we are blissfully steaming in the hot tub. All that is missing is a glass of bubbly.

We look at each other and smile, raise imaginary glasses and silently clink them together, imagining how the falling snow would melt in our drinks. We make a point of marking this moment—that we are in this magical setting where cold meets hot, with snow falling on us. We reflect on our lives—the choices we have made, the experiences we have had that year, and many years previously. We consider the following year—future adventures, unknown freedom. We rejoice at our relationship—16 years of joy, fun, friendship and sharing. Lastly, and with seriousness, we praise our good health which allows us to fully experience our lives with few restrictions. We smile as the snow continues to fall around us, feeling so happy together and incredibly lucky.

It is funny how moments like these seem to take on a huge significance, and are remembered in such detail when they later become recognised as turning points in our lives. That time certainly turned out to be a turning point for us. Just 2 weeks later I am sitting on a vinyl chair in a hospital, wearing a plastic apron, gloves and a mask on my face. I am watching over Geordie as he lies asleep in his bed in a single isolation room. The speed at which his body was succumbing to a life-threatening infection is frightening. I watch with relief as he breathes slowly in and out, sweating profusely and seemingly temporarily free from the pain that has consumed him for the previous 2 weeks. My thoughts return to that hot tub moment where we commented on our good health. Did we jinx our health by saying those things? How could our life circumstances have changed so rapidly? Earlier that day we had spoken to the hospital consultant, who had sensitively tried to prepare us for the reality of Geordie not being able to fight off the severe

pneumonia he had developed, with fluid building up around his heart and lungs and many other complications. It was so sudden and unexpected, and so far outside my life experience that it was as though I was an observer in a re-enactment of my own life. But it was real. I was there. This was happening. The only thing that would help Geordie now was time for his body to win the fight against the infection.

After a month in hospital Geordie was finally able to return home, frail and in pain, but at least out of danger. There were further set-backs and several more emergency hospital admissions, but he continued gradually to make progress. After 6 months he was able to make a slow return to work. After 1 year he was much improved, working full time, although still easily fatigued. Now, after 2 years, life has almost returned to how it was before. We again savour those moments where we feel happy together and incredibly lucky. But we are older, wiser and more aware of the fragility of life. I knew this already, working as a psychologist in a hospital with children with life-limiting conditions. But it is only when these things happen to you that you are sharply reminded of the fragility of life. You then learn to appreciate things in a way that you have not done previously.

During Geordie's recovery I was repeatedly drawn to photographs of our many travel adventures, related to our years of eclipse chasing. I began to realise how important these eclipse adventures had been, and how experiencing each and every total eclipse had helped me appreciate life. I was already aware that my eclipse chasing was a first-rate antidote for the emotionally demanding work I was engaged in, working in a hospital with children with life-limited conditions. There is an emotional cost to this work—you can become desensitised to emotions as a way of protecting yourself from any distress you experience. Eclipse chasing during this time had become a way of ensuring that I reconnected with my emotions, with my life, with the world.

Each eclipse was a celebration of life, and a reminder that life is precious and wonderful. And ultimately life ends. We have one chance at it, and we ought not waste any moment as there will be a time where those moments no longer exist. Geordie's illness made me really appreciate how a total solar eclipse is a reminder of our lives. A total eclipse lasts only a few minutes, but we are mesmerised, awestruck, and aware of every second. It is also precious and wonderful. And then it is over. A total eclipse is a perfect metaphor for life.

Having developed a deeper understanding of what eclipses mean for me, I wanted to understand more about the experience. Why is totality so powerful? How does it affect people? Do other eclipse chasers think about eclipses in the same way I do?

In my academic research I have expertise in doing phenomenological research, which aims to understand how people make sense of their experiences. My research programme has focused upon health and illness. I wanted to use this phenomenological approach to understand more about the experience of totality. I had fantasised for years about researching how people experience total eclipses

and now seemed like the perfect time. I was very much encouraged by those around me – my colleagues, friends and other eclipse chasers.

This is the story of the genesis of this book. The important message of the book is this—life is precious. Spend your time with those you love, doing what you love to do. And make sure you experience a total eclipse, at least once in your life.

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