

# It's never too late to write an obituary. And so, 44 years later, I have written one for my brother

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Roderick (Rick/Rod) Robert Macpherson with his sister Tamara.

TAMARA VUKUSIC/COURTESY OF FAMILY

*Tamara Macpherson Vukusic is the author of Obittersweet: Life Lessons from Obituaries.*

I became an obituary reader in my early 20s, while working in communications at a veterans' hospital. I was transfixed by the lives and stories of our patients and, when they died, I felt the loss of each of these individuals profoundly. I searched for their obituaries to seek details of their memorial service. I would find myself lost in their life story, feeling gratified when their spirit was captured, scribbling additional details in the margins. And so began a ritual that has spanned almost 30 years and counting.

In the early stages of the pandemic, I couldn't help but remark that the number of pages in The Globe and Mail devoted to death notices roughly doubled. It wasn't just that there were more people dying – there were, of course. But the pieces grew in length, too. At a time when few were able to gather in person to honour a life well-lived, these notices had become both obituary and eulogy.

And yet, many people are not writing an obituary for their lost loved ones. Without the looming deadline of a memorial service, and the necessity of sharing service details, some delay the formidable task so long it falls to the wayside. The e-mails I receive from these family members in mourning are punctuated with disclaimers about the crippling grief that makes picking up a pen impossible. Or it's the necessary conversations that are too uncomfortable to have – with blended families, remarriage or loved ones who have drifted from the family – making an already difficult task even harder.

My response is always the same: "It's never too late to write the obituary."

To those looking for alternatives to writing an obit in the days after a death, my suggestions include placing an obituary on the one-year anniversary of the death, on the next birthday their loved one was to celebrate, on a wedding anniversary or in the month their loved one's favourite flower bloomed. There is never a wrong time.

For my recent book about the life lessons I've learned from three decades of reading the obits, I was in touch with more than 100 people to ask for permission to excerpt a notice they had written. A common thread revealed by those who penned the obit is the important role the act of writing the tribute played in their grief process.

Tanya Miniely published an obituary honouring her Dad on the one-year anniversary of his death. Revisiting his life story before his final years with dementia has helped her family dedicate more time to remembering to him as a father and grandfather, before the caregiving years.

While writing her father's obituary, Lora Lewis asked for input from his friends and co-workers. Getting to know her dad through their eyes allowed her to see him as a whole human, beyond the confines of his role as a father.

Laurel Duquette says that writing her 25-year-old son's obituary was her last act of motherly love toward her darling Nick.

Dana Goodman, who lost her son, Zach, to brain cancer at the age of 13, says her biggest fear is that he will be forgotten. A published obituary, now also archived on the internet, is one way to ensure a lasting record of a life lived.

It was being entrusted with stories like these that led me to finally write an obituary for my big brother Rick, 44 years after his death.

I was in Grade 2 when Rick was found dead in our garage from carbon monoxide poisoning. He was 19. A funeral service was held and a eulogy was read by his high-school football coach, but no obituary was written. My family was paralyzed by our grief. Aside from the occasional reference to Rick's favourite song or food, he was rarely spoken of. Because talking about his life was taboo, I concluded that mention of his death was forbidden.

When he started to feel like a figment of my imagination, indiscernible from the characters I met in Judy Blume books, I began to knit together my memories of him. There was the time he took me to the Shrine Circus with his own money and, after I spilled a box of Lucky Elephant Pink Candy Popcorn all over my shoes trying to see if there was a prize at the bottom, he replaced my box with money intended for our bus ride home. We walked home across Winnipeg instead, holding hands, and when I could no longer walk, he carried me. There was the coveted Easy Bake oven he bought for me with his first paycheque. We used to plant tree saplings together and water them by filling empty Pic-a-Pop bottles found in the garage. I could recall at will the feel of his scratchy beard on my freckled face.

Because these memories never took the shape of words formed on my lips or etched onto paper, they were hard to grab and hold onto. It wasn't until I started to write an obituary for him that he came to life beside me once again, almost half a century later.

I sent an e-mail to each of my sisters explaining my plan, and inviting them to contribute to his obituary. I included a series of open-ended questions to spark their memories. All three sisters were born on the heels of my brother (at one point my parents had four children under the age of five), and then I followed eight years later. They were firmly entrenched in teenage life, and my oldest sister was engaged to be married, when my brother died.

When I broached the topic of writing our brother's obituary, one sister said she felt gut-punched with grief. Another sister responded immediately with a long list of anecdotes that spilled out as if they had been sitting in waiting. There was a looming shame felt for not writing an obituary in the



Roderick Robert Macpherson with his little sister, Tamara Vukusic.

TAMARA VUKUSIC/COURTESY OF FAMILY

days after his death, as if one should be expected to put pen to paper in a thoughtful way during an unfathomable family crisis.

An obituary is often deeply personal and emotionally charged. It is usually written by one person who volunteers (or is volun-told) to take on the task. It's not uncommon for the author to fear or regret missing an important person or detail. The deadline is tight, the word count is limited, and the readership is wide. But still almost every person I have spoken to about an obituary they penned identifies writing and sharing that obituary as a crucial part of grieving.

Roderick Robert Macpherson with his sister Tamara.

TAMARA VUKUSIC/COURTESY OF FAMILY

Even 44 years after his death, writing Rick's obituary was not an easy process. It took more than a month of e-mails and conversations among the four sisters to craft an obituary we were all happy with. I now understand why many people refused to grant permission for an obit to be excerpted in my book.

An impetus for my sisters to contribute to our brother's obituary was to give our kids, and eventually grandkids, the opportunity to know him. After all, he would have been their Uncle Rick.

The fifth and last Macpherson daughter was born three years after Rick died and she deeply appreciated getting to know her brother through our written tribute.

There has been tremendous value in revisiting memories of our brother so that we could create this obituary. Upon reading the final draft, my sisters agreed that bringing the good memories to the forefront helped eclipse the sadness. We all noted that our collective remembering paved the way for us to see that our brother had interests and quirks that we now see in our own children. Grief had been in the way.

An unexpected outcome was how revisiting memories of our brother transcended the miles between us. From Kamloops to Winnipeg to Virginia to South Carolina, it illuminated the shared history, dotted with both tragic and joyous experiences, that bind us. COVID can't touch that.

I mailed our draft of the obituary to my 85-year-old mom with a sticky note that read, "You are not alone in your missing." Ten days later she called me. I was met with a pause as she gathered her voice before she spoke. "Thank you, Tam. I wouldn't change a thing." Her blessing to share the obituary far and wide was granted.

My brother's obituary is printed in the In Memoriam section of today's paper. The Globe and Mail policy is to consider a tribute placed within a year of death as a Death Notice. After a year it is considered an In Memoriam.

I first aimed to place Rick's obituary on Mother's Day as a way to take the torch for my mom and acknowledge, now that I have teenage boys of my own, how epic her grief must have been (and still is). Then I aimed for the June anniversary of his death. Then his birthday in October. I missed all of these self-imposed deadlines, but today, some 44 years, nine months and seven days later, I share the obituary of Roderick (Rick/Rod) Robert Macpherson (1959-1977).

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