

## **Road Safety Engagement: *The Sacred Work of Sorrow***

By Wendy Sarkissian

Written for the 2017 World Day of Remembrance for Road Traffic Victims,  
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See: [www. https://worlddayofremembrance.org/](https://worlddayofremembrance.org/)

“The grief we carry is part of the grief of the world.  
Hold it gently. Let it be honoured.”

Jack Kornfield

I am Karl Langheinrich’s widow. I was in the crash that killed my husband on 6 February 2016 on a rural road in New South Wales. I escaped with minor injuries. This is a story of my healing through road safety activism.

From my description of the crash event, attending police officers determined that our car was travelling at 50-60kmh (well below the 80-kmh speed limit), and that it aquaplaned in a pool of water on the road. I believe that Karl’s death resulted directly from the road authority’s decision (following the last crash in 2015 that resulted in two fatalities) not to erect a guardrail on the stretch of road that is winding and dangerous, with inappropriate and dangerous road camber, a deteriorated, rutted road edge, frequent pooling of water and steep embankments. The memorial cross for that 2015 crash (that killed mother Cecilia and fifteen-year-old daughter, Matilda) stands only eight metres from where our car mounted the kerb and tumbled 30 metres over the cliff into a shallow tidal creek. The autopsy report showed that drowning was the sole cause of Karl’s death.

Karl and I have always been activists. Karl’s career as an activist began in a Lutheran orphanage in Bavaria, organizing strikes against poor food quality and living conditions. His adult career involved union activism and membership in the Australian Labor Party. So I could easily evoke “activist Karl” and bless his unique

“Giveaway”: what we alone have come to contribute to life, our reason for being.<sup>1</sup> Before we can exercise our “Giveaway”, we need some basic healing. In the days following Karl’s death, I was in profound shock. I did not cry; I organized things. People took care of me. Then, about three weeks after his death, as the terrible finality of my new circumstances began to dawn on me, I fell apart. I’d managed the burial and the memorial. Now I was sitting on our back deck in a stunned condition, staring at the sky. Howling at the moon. Luckily, I lived in an alternative community famous for its healing arts, so I had no shortage of practitioners, remedies, and massages. And, for some time, while I sorted through my options, I took advantage of them. I had no car so I was dependent on friends. “Self-care” came naturally to me and I benefited greatly from the care I received.

I’d be the first one to advocate self-care after a tragedy, trauma, or loss. It’s essential. Our whole system is so depleted that we *must* take extra efforts to care for ourselves. However, self-care is not the destination for a grieving person; it’s part of the journey. Shortly after Karl’s fatal crash, my conversations with local police revealed that they had been lobbying for years for a guardrail on that stretch on winding road (with a 40-metre drop to the river below). By the time of Karl’s memorial, friends, Kev and Lori, and I agreed that we had to do something about the road. Something to honour Karl.

My initial approach to the local road authority, the Tweed Shire Council, was met with a polite and compassionate response from the General Manager. However, all that changed when I asked to make a Victim Impact Statement to the Council’s road traffic staff. A junior manager, an engineer, took over communication and our relationship rapidly deteriorated in favour of risk management. What had begun as an “information session” to raise staff awareness flourished into full-blown activism after I received the junior manager’s email:

“... whilst the proposed victim impact statements are very important, I am concerned this part of the meeting might cause distress to yourself and Council staff. As you would appreciate, Council has an obligation to ensure the workplace health and safety of its officers.... Council’s preference is that you provide written statements beforehand and these can be considered outside of the meeting.”

Later emails demanded that I restrict my remarks to “the circumstances of the crash” and not to the impacts I had experienced. That misuse of risk management fuelled our fires and soon our campaign was in full swing.

I felt Karl’s presence – heard him encouraging me. On the day before our meeting with Council, Karl and I had this conversation:

**W:** “I heard you say ‘go for it’ for tomorrow’s meeting at Tweed Shire Council. So I am making my signature applesauce muffins today to take to them. I want them to know that we are talking about you – a real person – and God’s most beautiful and treasured being. I am taking a framed the photo of you to show them how beautiful you are....

**K:** “After that meeting, none of these people will ever look at so-called ‘statistics’ the same way again. I refuse to be a ‘statistic’. I will never be a statistic....”

I delivered my Victim Impact Statement (minus the impacts) and Lori (who had promised nothing to anyone) explained the impacts in detail. Lori, Kev and I were appalled that no staff member had even visited the crash site, although it was only 12 kilometres from their office. When they convened the Traffic Committee to discuss the crash, no police attended (although several attended the crash site). They had no photographs of the crash site, yet steadfastly refused to countenance any explanation other than “drive error and “speed”.

Probably our most delightful activism involved our contribution to the 2016 World Day of Remembrance for Road Traffic Victims (17 November). Lori and I held a media event in the Uki pub near the crash site to raise awareness that three people had died there and the road had not been repaired. A couple from the local community attended. The woman was the driver of the second vehicle involved in a fatal crash in the same location, where six people were injured, including five children. After the speeches, we drove down Kyogle Road and friends attached a huge poster of Karl to a tree near the crash site. It read, “My name is Karl. I died here. Please slow down.” And I made another speech by the roadside, begging the municipality to use more

sophisticated road planning approaches.<sup>2</sup> Not all our road-safety activism was media-based. I wrote a lengthy request to the Coroner, detailing weaknesses in road safety protocols, management, and physical design issues and requested a coronial inquiry into Karl's death. I wrote to several local politicians asking for support for the inquest and they, in turn, lobbied the Minister. While the Coroner ultimately refused my request, I was grateful that he did fully investigate. And we prepared two academic articles detailing safety concerns with the road.<sup>3</sup> These articles highlighted the importance of giving road trauma victims opportunities to advocate for more action to improve road safety and identified the systemic fatal injury factors through a safe system lens, arguing that road authority complacency was the real killer in Karl's case. I was also responsible for three hard-hitting articles in the local press about safety problems with Kyogle Road.<sup>4</sup>

My continuing pressure on Tweed Shire Council to upgrade the road resulted in federal blackspot funding; over one million Australian dollars will be spent to repair the road. That work is currently in the planning phase and must be completed by 30 June 2018. Guardrails will be installed. I have told the General Manger of Tweed Shire that we're watching. We want the federal funds spent for the purpose they were allocated.

And, while we have had many victories, I'm sure that Lori and Kev would agree that the greatest was getting Wendy "out and about". What the road safety managers at the Tweed Shire Council will never understand about my "annoying" advocacy is that the powerful force of the grief that Wendy, Kev and Lori feel is much stronger than their road, their "risk-management" strategies, or their budgets. In speaking truth to power and shedding tears for Karl, we are "drinking the tears of the Earth" (as Francis Weller puts it<sup>5</sup>). We are expressing our grief with dignity.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Hone, 2017: 186, citing Rachel Remen's blog: <http://www.rachelremen.com/walking-the-path/> (19 August 2015)

<sup>2</sup> A video by Nicholas Curthoys of our media event, speeches and erecting our poster on the tree is at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=twLJIQKmrqA&list=UUd5iOe8S31kLhSqvcx-5BA&index=4>

<sup>3</sup> See: Mooren, L. & Sarkissian, W. (2017). "We need a louder road safety voice." *World Transport Policy and Practice*, 22(4): 83-95. Retrieved from: <http://worldtransportjournal.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/27th-Feb-opt.pdf> ; Mooren, L. with Sarkissian, W. (2017). "Tragic failure of a road system: an Australian example." *Journal of the Australasian College of Road Safety*, 28(1): 58-63. Retrieved from <http://acrs.org.au/journals/february-2017-vol-28-no-1/>

<sup>4</sup> "Widow begs council to improve road safety," *Gold Coast Bulletin*, 14 November 2016. <http://www.goldcoastbulletin.com.au/news/traffic-reports/tweed-shire-council-black-spot-funding-bittersweet-for-widow-of-man-killed-at-notorious-kyogle-rd-corner/news-story/cc0b701f0d57320dc049fc68024a57a8>

Dwayne Grant, "Tweed Shire Council: Widow calls for inquest to address council 'weaknesses' on Uki road safety," *Gold Coast Bulletin* 29 March 2017. <http://www.goldcoastbulletin.com.au/news/council/tweed-shire-council-widow-calls-for-inquest-to-address-council-weaknesses-on-uki-road-safety/news-story/6006c58ec5740a148b8a7c7b61b33109>

Dwayne Grant, "Tweed Shire Council black spot funding 'bittersweet' for widow of man killed at notorious Kyogle Rd corner," *Gold Coast Bulletin*, June 14, 2017 <http://www.goldcoastbulletin.com.au/news/traffic-reports/tweed-shire-council-black-spot-funding-bittersweet-for-widow-of-man-killed-at-notorious-kyogle-rd-corner/news-story/cc0b701f0d57320dc049fc68024a57a8>

<sup>5</sup> Weller, F. "Drinking the Tears of the Earth": [http://riteofpassagejourneys.org/resources/for-participants/drinking-the-tears-of-the-world-grief-as-deep-activism/at\\_download/file](http://riteofpassagejourneys.org/resources/for-participants/drinking-the-tears-of-the-world-grief-as-deep-activism/at_download/file)