



Holding the dead in our hearts and lives

Jimmy Edmonds, with Jane Harris, describe their search for answers to their questions about the why and how of grieving

In 2011, we got the news that our son, Josh, aged 22, had died in a road accident while travelling in Vietnam. Our world fell apart. His death marked a massive turning point in our lives. We now inhabit two parallel universes, separated by the day he died. Time in one universe continues as before, minute by minute, day by day, year by year. But in the other, it is always 11.15 in the morning on Sunday 16 January 2011.

Looking back now, I remember desperately wanting to hold on to the pain and the horror of the moment we heard that Josh had been killed. A void had appeared at the very core of my being and I needed to feel something, anything,

that would tell me that, although he was gone, Josh was still very much a part of my life. Above all, I remember being very afraid that sooner or later, I and others would forget him.

I never realised how much his death changed me. To others, my grief looked like depression, and I was shocked by my own reaction, by the anger and bitterness I felt towards a friend's well-meant suggestion that Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing might help. 'Do not pathologise my grief!' I screamed.

Social anxieties about death and bereavement are magnified when a child dies. Many parents become isolated from

their communities, feared by their friends and ignored by professionals. Soon after Josh died, we found The Compassionate Friends (TCF), a worldwide charity that offers peer-to-peer support to bereaved parents and siblings, and for whom we produced a short promotional video, 'Say Their Name'.

Then came the idea for a more ambitious film project. We started by asking ourselves why, in a world where death will always make front-page news, real-life conversations about death, dying and bereavement are so problematic. We figured that, with our combined skills - filmmaker (me) and psychotherapist (Jane) - as well as our



LEFT TO RIGHT: (CLOCKWISE FROM MAIN PICTURE) KELLY ANGLIN'S SON JORDAN DIED IN 2014; DENISE MARTINEZ'S SON JESSE DIED IN 2014; MARGARET JACKSON'S SON RICHARD DIED IN 2010

learning since Josh died, we could perhaps give a voice to others struggling with both the death of their child and with social expectations of how they should grieve.

We conceived the project as a journey - a return to Vietnam, a road trip across the US and a flight down to Mexico to film preparations for the Day of the Dead. We liked the idea that the journey could be a metaphor for our own progress through grief, in that we now felt strong enough to undertake such a project, filming as we went. In particular, we wanted to explore the notion of 'continuing bonds' and the ways through which bereaved parents in other countries are maintaining a relationship

with their dead child. We were curious to discover if bereaved parents in Mexico, for example, with its annual celebrations for the Day of the Dead, were helped by what we perceived as a more open approach to death. Essentially, we wanted to learn some basic answers to questions about why we grieve, how we grieve, and why we are afraid of people who grieve.

Sharing stories

By the end of our trip, we had met and filmed with 13 different families and interviewed two leading academics in the field of trauma, loss and bereavement.

Common threads soon emerged. Possibly the most significant was the importance of sharing stories as a validation of feelings that are as unexpected as they are overwhelming. These stories would provide the substance of our documentary, which we had decided would be unmediated by expert opinion. Voices of grief are stronger for being heard directly from those who know it first-hand. But, as part of our research and as a way for us to gain an overall theoretical perspective, we were guided to Dr Katherine Shear of Columbia University and Professor Bob Neimeyer at the University of Memphis. Both these US-based academics have an understanding of grief as a unique experience for each person (just as our love is unique), but with commonalities in that grief is an immediate as well as an ongoing response to the fractured relationship with the deceased.

In grief we discover, often surprisingly, that the people we attach to, the people we love most deeply, have affected us in ways that we don't always realise. Shear and Neimeyer also suggest that these strong, satisfying and mutually rewarding relationships have a fundamental impact on our sense of self - on who we are as independent, autonomous and social beings. Put plainly, the people we love

define who we are, so when we lose them, we become confused about our selves and feel disoriented and lost. I know this from the experience of losing Josh. In the emotional chaos that followed his death, what stood out was the fact that not only had Josh lost his life but I had lost my role and my rewards as his father. Neimeyer sees grief as a kind of coping mechanism by which we try to manage this 'attachment insecurity'. As well as mourning a death, grief is about having to deal with the rupture in our sense of who we are and discovering who we have now become. Grief is our way of sidestepping insanity.

There is a madness in grief that can be very frightening, but nearly all the bereaved parents we met spoke of consciously facing up to their fears. They talked of 'walking through the fire', of 'leaning into the grief' or of not shying away from whatever emotions the day threw at them. 'Good, bad or indifferent,' a mother from California told us, 'I just needed to suck it up buttercup and deal with it.'

Finding a home for grief

What we observed, and what Shear and Neimeyer believe, is that, while emotions in the immediate aftermath of the loss are extremely raw and will dominate everyday life, grief is a gradual, long-term process of accepting a new reality. It's about learning what it means that a loved one is gone - the finality of their absence. But it is also about trying to find ways of maintaining a relationship with them - of envisioning new ways of having a meaningful life without them. It's about finding ways to love them and care for them without their physical presence.

Adapting to loss requires that we 'reinvent ourselves', say Shear and Neimeyer. This is particularly true for bereaved parents, who will need to identify specific interests and activities that will help them to somehow continue a relationship with their child. ►

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Everybody grieves differently, in their own way and in their own time, but if we are to continue functioning as social and creative beings, they say, we need to 'find a home for grief' where it is accepted and honoured.

This is not easy. It is said that grief is the form love takes when someone dies - but for Margaret Jackson, a mother from Maryland, the question arises: where does that love go if you are a single mum and you've lost your only child? 'I had this field of love,' she told us, 'with nowhere for it to go.'

One answer to this is to put your energies into doing 'good work'. So many of the families we met had founded charities in their child's name - for Margaret, it is RJ Smiles; for Gayle Rose in Memphis, it's Team Max, and for Scarlett Lewis, the mother of one of the victims of the Sandy Hook school shooting, it's The Jesse Lewis Choose Love Foundation - although this is more of a movement, dedicated to empowering young children with 'social and emotional learning'.

Grief forces surprising emotional as well as practical choices. Scarlett has chosen forgiveness - although forgiving is not forgetting, she reminded us. While not in any way forgetting or condoning what the shooter did at her son's school, she needed to forgive him if she was to 'survive and not drown in bitterness and anger'.

We are fundamentally changed as a result of our child's death - this we heard over and over again. But society is resistant to understanding this change, and many of our interviewees discovered that surmounting social expectations of how they should grieve was an arduous and lonely task. People would deliberately avoid Kim, whose daughter died many years ago. 'You don't want to go down that aisle,' they would whisper, 'she's going to talk about her.' They would challenge why she had so many pictures of her daughter around the house. Kim had trouble adapting to the new Kim and re-presenting herself in public - in finding a 'home for her grief' - and she freely admitted that maybe it was her own fault for blaming others for not caring enough and for being too angry to allow others into her grief.

Grief, it turns out, ricochets in all directions. Kim's sister Tracey recalled huge arguments in the family. 'I screamed out at one point, "Just because your kid died that doesn't make you Queen over everyone else - the rest of us don't have to bow down and take your shit just because your kid's dead."'



JIMMY AND JANE LEAVE PHOTOS OF JOSH FOR PEOPLE TO DISCOVER - MARKERS OF HIS ALWAYS BEING WITH THEM

Owning the pain of grief is a common theme, especially among bereaved parents. 'My grief is sacred,' Denise Martinez said. Her son, Jesse, had died less than a year before we visited: 'When you've lost your child, that's the most primal, private place for a mom and I don't allow a lot of people to see that pain because it's mine.' I recognise this sentiment; I too have hidden my grief from others, comforting myself with the thought that only I know how I loved Josh and only I know how I really grieve for him. This is a major tension, I think, in the way we are expected to behave in the aftermath of tragedy - wanting to hold on to the intimacy of our feelings while at the same time desperately needing them to be recognised and known.

Continuing bonds

We had travelled away from home partly to escape the social difficulties of trying to find a home for our grief. As Jane observes in the film, 'Everyone we met seemed to struggle with the same question: how to fit in. It was comfortable for other people if you were quiet and didn't ask questions and didn't express your grief. But we had all discovered it wasn't healthy, it wasn't good for us, the bereaved parents.'

This idea emerged in our conversations with Katherine Shear, who heads up the Centre for Complicated Grief at Columbus University in New York. Complicated grief is not without controversy in that many believe that the label turns grief into a sickness that can be cured. But Shear rejects any comparison with mental illness. Kim, who spent 10 years in a state of more or less constant mourning, anxiety and agitation, was not, Shear would argue, depressed. For many bereaved parents, she says, the struggle to accept a child's death can be complicated

by a previous history of unhealthy, unsafe or dysfunctional relationships. Neimeyer goes further: 'Complicated grief,' he argues, 'is a social phenomenon; it's not something that is intrapsychic, something that's just within us. It's also around us in the way the world responds to our loss.' Culturally, grief is complicated, whether the culture demands dry eyes and a stiff upper lip when we need a safe place to dissolve into tearfulness, or the reverse, when tears are expected but not felt to be necessary by the bereaved. The question for a bereaved parent, says Neimeyer, is how to maintain that sense of connection with their child and to have that connection validated by the world around them. 'How do I not only hold them in memory and in my heart but weave them into conversations with others?' It's that repeated telling of stories and having them heard that

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is so difficult in a world that urges us to move on. But this will be absolutely necessary if we are to confirm the reality of our child's death, and at the same time give ourselves the space and a renewed confidence to keep them as a continued presence in our lives.

We are wired for attachment and the great majority of world cultures throughout history and across the planet acknowledge this in their spiritual traditions and community practices - practices that honour these connections even after death. But the western world, almost uniquely, has de-emphasised this continuing bond to the point of almost banishing it. The successful transition from grief back to normal life is accomplished, we are told, only when you have moved on, let go or found closure. Shortly after Josh died, a psychotherapist friend of mine even suggested that, sooner or later, I would have to forget him if I was to regain the composure and the equilibrium necessary to continue living. But, seven years later, here we are, functioning very nicely thank you, and yet Josh is still clearly very much a part of our lives.

Neither Jane nor I hold any particular religious or spiritual beliefs, but faith plays a significant role in both the US and Mexico, where more than 80% of their populations believe in God and, by inference, an afterlife. In homes we visited we commonly saw pictures of children as angels or in the arms of the Lord. But what we also discovered was that many of these bereaved families were inventing (sometimes by borrowing ideas from other cultures) their own, more personal ways of commemorating their loss. Dan and Kelly, parents of Jordan Anglin, leave small pebbles with their son's name painted on them in places where they can be found by who knows who. In leaving these stones in places for others to find, his parents are openly marking an ongoing relationship with their son. We too leave photos of Josh for people to discover - markers of his always being with us, although it's our own recording of the event with a photograph that perhaps provides a more substantial and longer-lasting impact on the story of our grief.

Denise keeps her son's ashes in a mason jar in the headboard of her bed 'so that he's close to us when we're sleeping at night'. The Martinez family (more of a motorbiking clan, really) rode out on the day Jesse would have been 18 to throw his ashes into the Grand Canyon, at a spot he'd visited with his Dad in

the year before he died. We had done precisely the same with Josh's ashes a few days earlier.

In Mexico, there are many different practices and histories of the Day of the Dead, with Catholic and modernist interpretations superimposed on indigenous beliefs, but they all feed an imagination that truly allows for a continuing relationship with the deceased and for a grief that is open and rewarding. Neimeyer says: 'If we think of grief not as a process of saying goodbye but as a process of saying hello again - "How do I recover the relationship in a form that is sustainable now? How do I reopen the doors closed by the loss? How do I continue a sense of communication beyond the grave?" - then we have a different paradigm for grieving and maybe for growing through loss.'

In making our film, our first and last impulse was to gather stories that would produce a documentary in which we could represent a version of what it means to grieve. Necessarily anecdotal and with no claim to be representative, these are personal stories that, collected together into one narrative, we hope provide insight to the fears and hopes of all bereaved parents (at least those in the western world). This is important, both to substantiate the experience of people traumatised by the death of their child and also to help people who care for the bereaved either as professionals or as friends.

In the first two years after Josh's death, I didn't want to hear about anybody else's grief. Josh was my son and too special to be shared with anyone else. Seven years down the line, and with a completed feature documentary just released to the public, I now feel very different. I have come to realise that mine is not such a unique grief, that everybody grieves in one way or another for something or other. What made my life worth living again was ditching the fear that Josh would disappear into some anonymous congregation of dead people, and that I have a choice as to what I do with my memories; that he still resides as a vibrant part of my imaginings; that he is still very much a part of the story of my life. ■

Jimmy and Jane's journey to the US and Mexico was part funded with a grant from the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust. *A Love That Never Dies* is now on limited cinema release. For details of screenings nationwide, visit <https://alovethatneverdiesfilm.com/#screenings>

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Jimmy Edmonds and Jane Harris
About the authors

Jimmy is a British film editor who has cut a number of award-winning documentaries, including *Chosen* for Channel 4, which won the BAFTA for Best Single Documentary in 2009. In 2006 he directed his own film, *Breaking the Silence*, for BBC OneLife - an account of the effect on his family of years of silence around the sexual abuse he and his brothers suffered at their boarding school and church. He is now co-director of Beyond Goodbye Media with Jane Harris.

Jane Harris studied film in the early 1980s, and from 1985 worked in film distribution promoting films made by women at Circles distribution in London's East End. In 1988, she began her training as a psychological therapist. After 30 years in private practice, she has now returned to filmmaking with Jimmy and together they produce films for the charity sector, including *Gery's Legacy* (for Alzheimer's Society, 2013) and *Say Their Name* (for The Compassionate Friends, 2014). In 2017, they founded The Good Grief Project.