

Grief as a meaningful journey

Ian Llewellyn-Nash



Over the past couple of months, I have had the pleasure and privilege of sharing with my students at the University of Worcester, the challenges of one of the Modules I lead – Loss, Death and Bereavement. I guess the first challenge is the title!

Over this period of time, as a group we have looked at the issues surrounding grief and loss. The Module does tend to focus on the issue of death, but it would be wrong to think of loss only in those terms. Life in the 21st Century seems like a precarious balance between what we have and what we could lose through a whole realm of everyday occurrences- injury, ill-health, unemployment, relationships, debt, dignity, and self worth. All these represent to us the challenges of loss.

A stark reality of life in this wonderful world of ours is this- we can send men into outer space, we can watch them watching

us through the windows in the space shuttle as it orbits the planet we call home- but, we still haven’t cracked this thing called death! At the end of one of my sessions with my students , I said to them all - “ Guys, I would really love to be able now to give each of you a little box as a present- inside the box you will find the answer to this death issue; but I can’t do it!”. Each of us will face this final frontier, so I guess we should have a good way of approaching this event.

I’d like to explore a number of areas together in the remainder of this article. However, as a starting point- I wish to make clear that over the years I have worked as a clinical nurse within a specialist area, I have observed the death, loss and grief of a whole array of people. Whilst they all responded to their loss in different ways, a common factor that emerged was the pain, the personal

sum up the experience of grief. However, let’s go on a journey and explore other ways of engaging our grief.....

A friend sat down with me over the weekend and shared his own story of how he had travelled to Ireland and found himself having to fully engage in taking a lead role in preparing his family for the expected death of his father. His father had been in and out of hospital over a number of months, but these episodes were just light interludes before the final stage.

Why do we wait?

As he recalled the story, he got to a point at which sitting down with his mother afterwards, she said to him, that she would love to be sent off in that way- so joyous, so meaningful and involving all in the event. As he recounted tales of how the funeral was arranged with music, choirs, visitors and his own memorial talk, it begged a question in myself: Why do we wait until this time to tell people how much we care and think about them!?

During times of grief we engage in often cathartic times of remembering the loved one departed by recalling accounts of their life and how good, kind, strong, brave maybe even strange that they were. Stories emerge of times and incidents when an action here, a kind word there, a gracious disposition made this individual stand out for us. Often, a sad aspect of our grief is our own self-loathing when we recall, that the loved one never knew how much we cared, how much we enjoyed their company, their daft ways, their strange habits- because, well, because that was who they were and no one could take their place.

Taking into consideration that death can be expected and it can catch us unawares and suddenly knock on our door- can I encourage you starting today to actually let people know how much you care about them, how much you think about them- make birthdays, for example an opportunity to simply celebrate the individuals who make up your life and bless them with the knowledge that they are appreciated.

Remorse or Rejoice

I mentioned above the word, ‘celebrate’. For many, the challenge of our grief is linked to the culture in which we have grown up and find ourselves immersed in. For many of us, we are British and well, we just don’t do it do we? You know! The “S” word, not to mention the “L” word either. Culturally we find it difficult to smile and laugh when confronted by the burden of death. Living



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on a multi-ethnic housing estate, I have welcomed the variety of colour and noise that accompanies weddings within these families. A few weeks ago, I could not drive up one road as it was covered with dancing, singing, drum playing wedding guests- but it was fantastic to see the celebration of life. Death is tragic, it hurts, it has a pain at its core- but I think we have something to learn from other cultures in how they celebrate the life that has just died. It’s not about denying that death has occurred, it’s not about being glib, but it is about extending the verbal affirmation that we should give to people whilst they are alive (see above) and then authentically affirm them when they are departed. Our stiff upper lip so often gets in the way of authentic relationships. Accept the pain of loss, but celebrate the life lived and the memories built- built all the more effectively if we affirm each other whilst we still live!

Another 60 seconds!!!

As my students know, I get a lot of stimulation and insight from a number of meaningful television programmes and films. Recently, I have started watching a weekly programme, and, well, to be honest it’s a bit like the first edition of Heroes- you either like it, or hate it- but don’t even try to explain it! The programme I am currently intrigued by is Pushing Daisies with Anna Friel (that’s reason enough to watch it anyway!). A potted history would be – young boy discovers he can bring the dead (animal or human) back to life by a single touch. If he touches them again they then die again. He can touch one thing and it can continue living only if something else dies in its place! This is important because the dead bodies that he touches will die again anyway after 60 seconds have passed. Often each programme is built around this extra 60 seconds a person has to live again-As a final thought then; what if you had another 60 seconds ...what would you do.....Do it now!!

Noah's Ark Trust

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Worcester: Tel 01905 745735 Hereford: Tel 01432 264555
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Noah's Ark reaches out...

A charity that started in 1998, Noah's Ark Trust was set up to support children and young people through what may seem like their darkest moments:-

A parent whom they thought would be there for them all their lives. Nothing can compare with such loss. Indeed their darkest hour...or that's how it feels at the time - until they make the Noah's Ark journey.

The Pain of Loss...

Coming to terms with loss is difficult enough for an adult...but for a child or a young person it must be unimaginable...until they meet the friends of Noah's Ark. A team of trained staff and volunteers will support them through their grief and help them on the road to recovery using a range of one to one support and the adventure weekend. Noah's Ark is free to families in Herefordshire and Worcestershire. The service can be accessed through referrals from professionals or directly by bereaved families.

Caring and Sharing Day

Friday 13th June 2008
Join us at the Guildhall, Worcester or plan your own event

Why not help us to raise money by:

- Sharing a cake at work
- Sharing a film at home
- Sharing a story at school

These are just a few ideas of ways you can get involved

