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Original Citation

Jenkins, Clare (2010) Relative Grief: Interviews About Bereavement. In: Narrative, Memory and Ordinary Lives. University of Huddersfield, Huddersfield, pp. 123-134. ISBN 978-1-86218-090-1

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9 Relative Grief: Interviews About Bereavement

CLARE JENKINS

Introduction

How do people remember bereavement? How do they find and refine the language to express it? And why do they agree to talk publicly about it, for a book and a drama-documentary?

I am an oral historian, a journalist and broadcaster. I am not a therapist or a sociologist. So this paper will not explore the psychological complexities of bereavement. Nor will it set out to offer a textual analysis of people's expressed feelings about the death of a close friend or family member. Instead, it will concentrate on the experience of interviewing people about death and bereavement, the language and imagery they use to express their grief, and how writers may use those experiences as the basis for both fiction and non-fiction.

Over the years, I have interviewed many bereaved people, for oral history projects, newspaper articles and radio programmes. Five years ago, together with my Radio 4 colleague, Judy Merry, I edited a collection of personal testimonies on the subject (*Relative Grief*, published by Jessica Kingsley, 2005).

Our interest stemmed from personal experience. Not unnaturally, both Judy and I have experienced bereavement. My father died 16 years ago of heart failure. Along with other family members, I was there at his bedside when he breathed his last. Three months later, I was with my husband in the hospital watching my mother-in-law die.

These two experiences were so powerful that I wanted to explore further the complexities of what some experts call 'the bereavement process', and which is sometimes interpreted as a clear-cut, linear process. As psychologist Dorothy Rowe said when interviewed for *Relative Grief*:

What [*psychiatrist*] Elisabeth Kübler-Ross had simply noted as observations has now hardened into dogma, and you're supposed to go through these stages like you're doing it properly... We grieve at our own pace and in our own way and that's it.

Six months before the book was published, one of my oldest friends took her own life by jumping from the 18th floor of a tower block. She left behind four children aged between 16 and 23. Her last year had seen her descend into a kind of madness where no-one, it seemed, could reach her – neither family nor friends, therapists nor psychiatrists.

The effect and potential long-term impact of this death on those left behind - myself included - eventually led to *The Minute When Your Life Stops*, a drama-documentary written by Jude Hughes, directed by Nadia Molinari and broadcast on BBC Radio 4 in January 2008. It was later shortlisted for a Mental Health Media Award.

I am basing my observations in this paper on interviews conducted for both the drama-documentary, and for the book. I will identify the interviewees after their quotes solely by their initials and their relationship with the person who has died.

Interviewees

For *Relative Grief*, Judy and I talked to 60 people ranging in age from six to 80, from different backgrounds, and with vastly different experiences of bereavement. These ranged from stillbirth through illness and accident to suicide and murder. There were deaths that had been long predicted and deaths that were cruelly sudden and traumatic. We talked to the sister and mother of a young man killed 18 months earlier, and to a man whose child had been killed in a freak accident half a century ago.

Over many years of interviewing, Judy and I have built up a wide network of contacts from all walks of life. In addition, Judy has worked with bereavement organisations, so could ask them for further contacts who were willing to talk publicly (if sometimes anonymously or pseudonymously) about their experience of bereavement.

Why would they wish to do this? One man, whose wife had been murdered 12 years earlier, spoke for many when he recalled:

It was such an incredibly lonely experience for me, I really needed someone to share the burden with, and there isn't that much literature about it. And it's a subject where a good book or a good programme or whatever can help people.

[JH, husband]

Another man, whose first child was stillborn, robustly explained:

I'll talk openly about it, but a lot of men won't, because it's a woman thing: 'Oh, my wife lost a baby'. I'll say, 'I lost a boy, one of my sons died.' And men should. There is someone out there who'll listen...

[BR, father]

Despite these two examples, it initially proved easier to persuade women to talk openly, 'on the record', than men. Sometimes, a wife would try to persuade her husband to participate, while recognising that he wouldn't.

He simply won't talk about it. I wish he would, but he won't. So we hardly ever mention his [*their son's*] name. Which is very, very difficult. It's as though he never existed. [VC, mother]

Another man, talking about the death of two close male friends, explained:

I think men take it in different ways. There are some guys who don't talk about their emotions very easily and certainly don't talk about their emotions about death so easily. Women will expose themselves much more. I think, in a macho world, men feel they shouldn't expose themselves. [SK, friend]

This was aptly demonstrated when I approached a male friend and colleague whose three-year-old son had died of an inherited medical condition. He was initially very resistant to the idea of being interviewed, explaining:

I'm not actually sure what, if anything, I've got to say. I know that must sound odd but I've never sorted out what I think, and I think you need something moderately articulate - not totally raw stuff such as you might give a psychotherapist. [TW, father]

He continued:

I've never really talked about this with anyone, actually. It's to do with, in general, the difference in kinds of friendships that women have compared to the friendships men have. Or maybe I just imagine women would find it easier to talk, but I certainly haven't...Maybe I've just taken the excuse of being a man to avoid talking about it. I don't know. [ibid]

Eventually he agreed to the interview. But before it could take place, he wrote to say that he would have to withdraw as his wife was angry that *she* had not been approached. Not surprisingly, she did not view my pragmatic excuse – that we had enough women and needed more men – as adequate.

So I arranged to interview her on the same day, though separately from her husband. This interview, like most, though not all, of the ones we conducted, was one-to-one, taped, and took place in the interviewee's own home. As we talked, I apologised for my insensitivity in initially excluding her, and asked about her feelings at not being invited to share her experiences:

That was something to do with a feeling that the approach to him and not me meant we represented categories of people, and in this bit of my life I don't want

to be a category, A Mother. It felt like my feelings weren't of the same value... There's this ambivalence of wanting to be seen and known, and wanting to be private about things. So having made my point about, how come she wants to talk to you and not me - the actual prospect of talking about it wasn't that comfortable for me. So it's a complex kind of reaction. [RW, mother]

In the event, the two different but linked perspectives of one death added another dimension to our study of grief. As she wrote afterwards, having seen both edited interviews before publication:

It seems to me that the two accounts make more sense than either one would on its own - and the huge differences between them might convey something of the vast gulf of loneliness and non-communication that can happen within families in these kinds of situations. [ibid]

The theme of communication and non-communication is central to the experiences included in the book. While grief can bring people together, it can also drive them apart. We discovered that a mother may weep down the phone to friends while her husband locks himself in his study for hours at a time. A parent may grieve in private, away from other children, to protect them, while a child may try to behave normally, to avoid further distress to a parent. A widow might see her grief as more important than that of her in-laws, or vice versa. As one woman widowed in her 30s said:

I sometimes felt that they thought they were suffering more than I was... I felt they were more into comparing grief than I was... This is a common thing amongst people who are young widows. The in-laws think they're the chief mourners at the funeral, but in fact you all are. We're all grieving. [CC, wife]

Another woman's twin brother died suddenly in 1972, when they were both 22. Thirty-five years later, she remembered taking a phone call the day after he died at her parents' house from a friend who hadn't heard the news.

She said, 'How's Richard?' And I said: 'Er, I'll ring you back'. And I put the phone down and went down the village to a phone box to ring her from there and tell her. [In front of my parents] it was an untouchable subject.

Reviewing *Relative Grief*, Claire Rayner, the former 'agony aunt', talked about how real death - unlike the fictionalised version - remains taboo:

Death, real death, that is, has become an undiscussable subject. There is a lot of pretend death in our television, film and cartoon entertainment, but we never really believe it will happen to us and those we love. We don't prepare ourselves properly for the possibility, and when it does happen, don't understand our own

feelings which can range, as the authors point out, from obvious sadness to anger and hatred aimed at the very person who died, because we are so upset by it.

The Interview Process

What is the process of interviewing people about such a sensitive subject? Are any questions out of bounds? How should an interviewer react in the face of raw grief? What is the impact upon both the interviewee and the interviewer – and the latter’s responsibilities?

Initial contact with potential contributors was either by letter, email or by phone. We wrote letters and emails to those we did not know, often people in the public eye; emails to those we had already met professionally; emails and phone calls to those we knew personally.

Those who agreed to participate did so for what they saw as a useful addition to discussions about bereavement. They understood the value of sharing their experiences with people who either were, or might at some future point be, in a similar situation; it was the value of having a book of testimonies not just about a death, but about coping strategies for bereavement.

Nonetheless, people were understandably nervous at the prospect of ‘opening the box’ again on their grief and pain. I use this analogy because of the way two of our interviewees described the early days of their loss. One, the mother of a young man who committed suicide, said:

In the early days, I sometimes had to shut his death into an imaginary box and I couldn’t lift the lid for quite a while, then perhaps I’d lift it a little bit and close it again. [VC, mother]

This mother was one of seven people interviewed for the drama- documentary, *The Minute When Your Life Stops*, and contacted through the organisation Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide (previously known as SOBS). As with *Relative Grief*, I wished to explore the impact such a death can have on an individual and on a family; how people ‘come to terms’ with it; why they decide to speak out about it, in this case for a medium (radio drama) that was going to weave short clips of their interviews in and out of a fictional narrative, adding reflective fiction to their raw fact.

One woman, whose husband had committed suicide, said simply:

I felt I was the only person in the world this had happened to. [GB, wife]

A mother, whose son had taken his own life, agreed:

When it happened to us, I didn't know where to turn. I felt so alone. Eventually, after a long, long time, I found a support group. Just being able to talk to other people who'd been through the same thing brought some comfort. We need to know that other people really do know how we feel. So getting this taboo subject out into the open in whatever way we can is so very important. [CB, mother]

Are any questions out of bounds when conducting an interview of this nature? The sensitivity of the subject naturally requires sensitivity on the part of the interviewee; to ask difficult questions sympathetically, to recognise when someone does not wish to answer; to stop recording when emotions are too raw. And there were moments of very raw emotion – a father bursting into tears over the memory of a casual remark made about his dying son's "beautiful blue eyes", a woman sobbing over the sudden deaths of her father, sister and mother, a mother breaking down at the thought that her son never would come back through the door calling, "Hello, Mum!"

In such circumstances, all the interviewer can do is quietly and, hopefully, compassionately, wait for the wave of grief to pass.

The Language of Death and Bereavement

Another powerful aspect of discussing bereavement is the way people construct a narrative based on snapshots frozen in time, and use familiar domestic imagery – a patio door, a brick wall, a smashed glass - to describe the immediate impact they felt when learning of the death (particularly the sudden death) of a loved one.

It was like I'd hit a brick wall. I was walking along one path and I can describe the shock, feeling as though I'd walked into a glass door. If you've ever walked into a patio door – and suddenly you now have to turn into a different direction, but you can't go down that path. During that night I knew that I'd got two choices: I could either give in to the whole thing or I had to get up the next day and face it.

[KH, wife]

The way he died overshadows his life. I think, you know, when people kept saying to me, you've got your memories - my memories completely went that day when he died...It's like a big black cloud has covered all your previous life and it's called suicide.

[AW, wife]

I remember going skiing once with some friends and one friend cut her leg open on the ski. The back of her leg was just like a piece of beef. That's how I felt after my mother died – like a piece of raw meat. I just felt so exposed. [BM, daughter]

Similar imagery is also sometimes used to describe the bereavement process, the ‘coming to terms’ with the reality of death.

The analogy would be like a door or a window where you could open the door to the horror and see the horror, and then shut the door very, very quickly, and then cry. Be allowed to grieve a bit. Just a little, little bit. Just to go, ‘Christ Almighty! She’s dead!’ Cry and then shut it again and block. Then over the years one would be able to open the door for a little bit longer next time, have the same amount of hurt and shut the door again. And slowly, slowly, slowly you would open it until you were actually able as an adult to leave the door open and allow the full finality of the horror in. [TB, son of a woman who took her own life when he was 13]

Sometimes the analogy is physical:

It’s like having a stroke... And you have to take small steps, a day at a time – and more often than not it’s one step forward, two back. [GB, wife]

It’s frightening. You really feel you’re losing your mind. One day I put my shoes in the fridge and went to pieces because I couldn’t find them. In the end, my friend found them. I thought I was going mad. [DC, wife]

And sometimes an unfamiliar, terrifying simile is used – or a combination of domestic and apocalyptic. This would seem to be particularly the case when the death is by suicide or murder, as the following quotes demonstrate:

It’s like the atomic bomb’s gone off. Your world, your mind, your life - everything’s been blown to pieces, and it’s just a matter of trying to fight your way through these waves of grief and emotion. You’re just catapulted into this other world, and you’ve just to start to rebuild everything back up... [GB, wife of a man who took his own life]

It’s like you’ve been hit by a thunderbolt, or that you’ve just dropped a glass. It’s splintered into a million pieces, and it’s that absolute devastation that you do feel and you do go into total shock... Then gradually, over years and years – and it’s not a daily or a weekly thing, it’s a second thing – little bits of you come back and the glass is rebuilt, but it never will be rebuilt because there’s a massive part of me that’s not there, and that was [my husband]. [AW, wife of a man who took his own life]

It was like being at the centre of an atomic explosion. These waves of emotion going through you. It’s like dropping some massive stone in a pond and seeing the ripples go out. And actually that pond is the size of your life. And as you get further from the epicentre, time-wise, the ripples get less. But it doesn’t mean that they’ve gone. They’re always there. [JH, whose wife was murdered]

Some people, particularly those with an academic background, might use literary references to try and explain the inexplicable, to give voice to ‘the silent scream’:

I went round and it was my father-in-law, and he said, ‘I’m really sorry, son. It’s your father. He’s dead’ ... I said, ‘How did he do it? Was it pills?’ Hoping it was pills. And he said, ‘No, he hanged himself.’ That shocked me. I rocked back, and I sort of took it like a punch. Even now – it’s like that painting, *The Scream* by Munch - that frozen expression. Somewhere inside me is that frozen scream of disbelief. [JM, son]

Shakespeare got it right at the end of *King Lear*. I suddenly realised what it was like to be in a Shakespearian tragedy... You see those things on the stage and suddenly you’re part of it - it was monstrous. [JH, husband whose wife was murdered]

I think her death in my head is terribly like the death that starts off Camus’s *The Outsider*. Just randomly, someone gets killed. And I think it just destroys - for me, it destroyed the world order.... [ibid]

Then there is, if you like, the language of the paranormal. The belief that the essence of person who has died lingers on after death as a comfort to those left behind. Again, people struggled to describe this, and often found the appropriate metaphor within the sphere of domesticity.

I felt her presence. It was almost like a warmth... like being wrapped in a warm blanket. I’m sure people will say, oh, that’s the mind taking over. But it felt like she was there, wrapping me in a warm blanket and helping me to get through all these things. [CD, sister]

Then after the funeral, she went. She came back again three months later, when we were on holiday in Italy...This is in an Italian kitchen in September, and it was jolly hot, and I felt she was there. I was almost frightened to turn round because I felt she’d be there, so strongly. [ibid]

I’ve been sat on that seat - I sometimes fall asleep on it with a dog on my knee - and Bill didn’t like you to sleep like that. He’d say, get to bed if you’re tired. And I’ve opened my eyes and heard this door go, and I looked up - whether I was dreaming or not, I don’t know, but I was wide awake, I think - and he was just walking out of here. I thought he’d got knarky about me falling asleep, so I went out and I’m halfway upstairs and I thought, Bill’s not here....And it’s like he said in his note, ‘I shall always watch over you’. [MB, whose husband took his own life]

My father came to me on two occasions, and each time he was young, and he had all his blond hair and his vivid blue eyes, and there was a big smile on his face, and the wind was blowing in his hair. He was very young, and he was very happy. But there was a row of trees that separated us, a lovely avenue of trees, and there was dappled sunlight coming through. We were walking in parallel, and I had this sense of really needing to go to him, but he kept on waving me away. He was waving at me, but at the same time he was telling me to go back. But it was very tempting, because the other side looked much sunnier and a good place to be.

[RL, daughter, recalling when she herself was dangerously ill]

[Have you ever felt her presence?] Yes, yes, I have. The most striking moment was - obviously I needed to find child care for the children, and it was quite a struggle finding a nanny. And the night I thought I'd found someone, I was driving back through Oxford, and I'd swear she cycled past me. And that image stayed with me for days.

[JH, husband]

This same man went on to speak movingly about the lasting, DNA-style imprint of the memory of his wife:

I can remember most of - it's not a picture, it's a feeling of her smile - and it's that smile. Because to remember a smile is a bit like remembering the grin of the Cheshire Cat - it doesn't work. There's a whole kind of hinterland to that smile which is not visual, it's not tactile, I don't know what it is. And the memory is in there. It's a curious moment really, trying to realise what exactly that memory consists of. It's the memory of a smile, which is pretty intangible, really, but it's locked in my system.

[ibid]

Identity

Another aspect of the struggle to deal with bereavement is one's changing role - from wife to widow, husband to widower, child to orphan, mother to motherless.

Again, I leave it to some of our interviewees to express this struggle:

In London, I felt slightly stigmatised. You know, you go down the corridor and you can see people looking at you - and that's my perception, not their perception.... So I might as well have had 'JH, Victim' all over me. And yes, it's weird, because I don't want to be labelled as 'victim', and for 98 per cent of the time, I don't think I have that at all.

[ibid]

I don't always like admitting to people that I'm a widow because you look at the shock on people's faces... I was 36 at the time with a baby in my arms and people are completely shocked by it, so now I often introduce myself as "I'm on my own

with the children.” People always assume it’s a divorce or that you’ve chosen to be single. [KH, wife]

I made a decision, a positive decision, in the early days that I would never ever deny that we had him, because we had him for 27 years. So if people ask, I always say we had two sons but we lost one.... But I know that, round here, we’ll always be known as “that couple whose son killed himself”. [VC, mother]

The hardest part is knowing that, not just has he lost his life, but we’ve lost our future as well. Because he was our only child, so we’ll never be grandparents. [SP, mother]

The Interviewees’ Response

I have already explained that, for many of our interviewees – both for the book and for the drama-documentary – agreeing to ‘open the box’ on their bereavement was a brave and emotionally charged decision. In most cases, we interviewed people on their own. In a few cases – usually husbands and wives, though also two friends whose husbands had died in a similar manner - they asked if they could be interviewed together, for support and also for prompting.

It was not uncommon for people during the interviews to say, “I’ve never said this before...I’ve never told anyone this before... I’ve never thought of this before...”

Journalists and broadcasters rarely revisit interviewees afterwards to discover how the interview affected them. We usually only find this out during a post-interview conversation, or if they contact us afterwards.

In the case of the drama-documentary, I received the following emails after broadcast:

I think it needed listening to more than once to get the full impact. You all did a very good job with a very difficult subject.... It showed that the BBC are not afraid of tackling difficult/taboo subjects. [VC, mother]

[My husband] and I listened to the broadcast and it wasn’t easy or comfortable as it included so many personal memories, but we appreciated the sensitive approach. The characters expressed, so well, the impact that suicide has on each individual family member and upon ordinary and everyday lives. The play did not gloss over the pain or the struggle to maintain some form of family cohesiveness. This poignant production must have evoked tears and smiles for many people.

[GO, mother]

Where *Relative Grief* was concerned, the interviews were transcribed and edited, then returned to the interviewee for approval or amendment. Only when they were satisfied with the result did the chapter go to the publisher.

Afterwards, the sister and mother of a young man (Z) shot dead in a northern city, wrote to say they felt they had moved on significantly from the time of the interview. I had noticed when I visited them that there appeared to be (though both women denied this) a shrine to Z in the living-room – a mantelpiece on which was a poem about death, and above which was his photograph. In the hearth were two gold vases which, I discovered towards the end of my visit, contained his ashes.

Six months later, the older woman wrote to tell me she had completely redecorated her house, including the living-room:

Maybe this is a cleansing process [*she wrote*]. It now does not look like the house where Z used to come.

And, after reading the book, her daughter wrote:

You should do a follow-up now because, when I read what I'd said, it felt like a totally different person. I've moved on so much. It's amazing to see the growth and how far I've come. I can see where I was, but I'm somewhere else now.

[EB, sister]

Acknowledgement

I am incalculably indebted to all those who have been prepared to share their experiences of bereavement.

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