

There are no goodbyes

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This is a very personal account of grief and finding life and meaning in the midst of it. It is about the loss of an adult sibling and the impact this had on me, his sister, and how I reconnected with my brother through his loss. It shows that the depth of our bond was significant in how I journeyed through the grief to make new meaning of that bond.

Grief can become disenfranchised over time as the culture we live in unwittingly puts restraints of time and expression of our feelings on the process (Doka, 2001). **This account demonstrates that grief never goes away and that we are forever changed, never to be the same again. That, through its course, grief can shape us into stronger and more resilient people.**

This article was created using knowledge and understanding I gained while I studied for the Higher Diploma in Bereavement Studies at the Irish Hospice Foundation with the Royal College of Irish Surgeons. This increased awareness enabled me to make some sense of what was happening to me and recognise that my reaction, far from being unusual, was in fact normal. Theories about grief and bereavement have all proved to be tools to facilitate me in understanding what was happening to me and guiding me through what I now see as an ongoing journey towards continued personal growth and strength.

My story begins on one very ordinary Summer's day in July 2011. As Joan Didion (2005) expressed in her account of grief *The Year of Magical Thinking* 'Life changed in an instant and was never to be the same again'. Every moment of that Thursday lunchtime remains as vivid as when it first happened. As I was told the devastating news that my brother Alan had died in France, whilst following the Tour de France, I let out a cry of shock and distress saying 'No not my Alan!'

My mind was in a whirl! The shock, disbelief and denial were palpable. For me my world had come to an end and I did not want to continue to live. The person I loved the most was dead and for me life had lost its meaning and purpose. It was so hard to comprehend and believe such a fun loving, hard working family man could be struck down so suddenly.

The sense of disbelief I experienced was unreal. Perhaps they had misidentified him or got names mixed up?

It took weeks for Alan's body to come home and even then I did not see him immediately as he had to have a post-mortem to determine the cause of his death. When I did

see him I felt numb. Even though his body was there I still could not believe this was true!

Despite my anguish I felt a keen sense of duty to be strong for Alan's children. In many ways this negated my grief as they were young and their pain so stark. Expressing my own sorrow and loss was difficult as I did not want to add to their distress. As the years have passed it has become more difficult to communicate my distress to anyone as I felt people expected me to be 'over' it.

My relationship with my brother Alan was based on 51 years of shared history, mutual trust and understanding. Our parents were busy with their occupations, my father having two jobs and my mother working nights. This meant we had limited time with them and on occasions were left to fend alone whilst one worked and the other caught up on just a few hours of sleep. I was less confident than Alan and extremely shy so as a consequence relied heavily on Alan to enable me to feel safe and secure. We of course were not without the usual sibling rivalry but to me the security of having Alan around far outweighed anything else. Therefore, I would question how I could be 'over' someone with whom I had such a strong bond and had known far longer than anyone else.

According to Bowlby (1969), my attachment style would have been one of dependency. Even as a child one of my school reports stated 'Rosemary needs her brother more than he needs her'. What an insightful teacher that was as it has proven to be true for all of my life to date. The bond we shared was innate. We were brother and sister and, come what may, we were in it together. If either of us were in trouble or upset by anyone, including our parents, we would unite together against the opposition, always supporting each other. Memories from my childhood into my teenage years demonstrate how attached I was to Alan. Remembering the time I was at Brownie camp and at the end of visiting day, as my parents and Alan were leaving, I ran down the drive chasing the car, heartbroken because Alan was leaving. This scene was relived again when I was in my forties. Alan had helped me move to Ireland and when the time came for him to return to the UK, I stood in the road sobbing as I watched him drive away.

On another occasion when I went to Guide camp he cycled miles to come and see me. As time progressed through our teenage years, rather than growing apart, our bond became stronger. Almost every evening when we got home from being out, either he or I would sit on the edge



This is an example of one of the decoupage projects I started. This had been a very old box hidden away so I renovated it. Concentrating and being able to create and achieve were powerful in the process of my grief journey.

of the other's bed chatting into the night about all the day's events.

Then into adulthood after I left home he and his girlfriend would visit me every Sunday to chat and watch movies. When I suffered depression in my twenties, despite being unable to fully comprehend what was happening to me, Alan stood by me and supported me through thick and thin.

Alan was always my source of wise counsel and known within the family as 'Mr Fix It'. When he died I felt my anchor and security had gone, leaving me alone with no immediate family. The feeling of needing him still exists and I find myself communicating with him through writing and sensing his responses. For me, the intense bond with my sibling needs no real explanation - we shared so much life experience - but, sometimes it feels that others struggle to see this bond as important as other bonds such as parent with child or husband with wife.

In his writing Bowlby (1969) discussed searching and yearning behaviours for absent attachment figures and this was what I experienced. I visited places where Alan, in the past, would have been found but was continually disappointed not to find him there.

Making connections with him was what I sought and I did this by buying his favourite Lynx aftershave to remind me of his body scent. I also obtained a plastic, rather uncharming Homer Simpson and placed it with my 'nice'

ornaments. Alan had done this with his wife's ornaments and for me it was a symbolic way of keeping his wicked sense of humour in my life.

I bought the movie 'Evil Roy Slade', a DVD we all used to watch every Sunday for months at Alan's request. It was so silly that it had always left me 'creased up' with laughter. As I dared to watch it again the memories and sadness flooded in, but with them came the humour that comforted me as it made him feel present. This links with how Klass, Silverman & Nickman (1996) write of our continuing bonds, which I was making in a bid to stay connected to the person I trusted most.

The disbelief persisted through the following years and I began sending messages to Alan via FaceBook as a way of probing the darkness in an attempt to get a response. Didion (2005) expressed similar irrational thinking in her book. 'The Year of Magical Thinking'.

Making sense of the inexplicable is time consuming and exhausting but over the years since Alan's death this has been my challenge. Thomas Harding (2015) in his article 'There are so many words' expressed this sense of life's meaninglessness as he processed the death of his son. He found hope in the words of his therapist who stated that through his son's death he would find meaning. These words resonated with me as I began to realise that I too could find meaning and purpose because of Alan and through him. That he could still be of huge significance to to who I am and was is so reassuring. He could still be part of my life and have a positive influence over it. Just because he wasn't here physically didn't mean he wasn't present with me.

I had worked in palliative care for some years and as a consequence had worked closely with the dying and bereaved. I had faced the deaths of my parents but none of these events prepared me for the loss of Alan. The word I found to describe my feelings at this time was 'horror'. I was surprised by such a strong reaction as I had witnessed so much death, which up to then I had considered a sad but natural experience. This was different. My very existence felt invaded by the startling dark horror of death. Death had visited my doorstep leaving behind this unrelenting odium that felt both cruel and terrifying. I became fearful of falling asleep in case I would not wake up or, worse still, dream Alan was still alive and then wake to the reality of his death. As human beings we seek to find meaning and make sense of the insensible.

In trying to make sense of Alan's loss I asked myself questions. Why him and not me? Surely it would have made more sense to be me? I was unfit and had no dependants or partner. This was followed by feelings of anger towards him for not heeding my advice to see his GP when he had chest pain and not taking care of his 'precious' self. Feeling cheated of not facing old age together, at not having my main support in life but, more importantly, not being able to

Dear Alan...

Sweet dreams are made by you,
I want you to know what is really true,
You travelled the world and the seven seas,
But you wouldn't find in any of these,
The love we have for you dear Bruv.
But from your new home up above
You watch as Rosie, Hayley, Sean
Speak to you Alan even though you've gone
'Cos in our hearts you are here with our memories fresh
Of a great brother and father, you were always the best.

As you're loving 'wee' sister I've composed a nice rhyme
Just to express the wonderful time
I spent in your company for more than half of my life,
You were so easy going and never caused strife
The good times we had makes me glad - and I think
If I listed each one I would run out of ink!
You had a generous spirit and were always so wise
You'd climb any mountain regardless of size
I still can't believe you climbed Kilimanjaro
You lived for today never tomorrow.

You were obsessed with your cycling and loved a long run
We really did envy your great sense of fun
You were always around with your sage-like advice
You'd do anything for us and you wouldn't think twice.
Do you remember the small hours when most folk were in bed
The four of us stayed up and played Cluedo instead
You rewrote the rules of our favourite game
So now I'm afraid Cluedo's never the same
You claimed that Miss Scarlet murdered old Sergeant Grey
But we believed most things you had to say.

Your Monopoly game full of wheeling and dealing
Was so competitively played it left us reeling
Your antics and wit made us all laugh out loud
It was one of your talents - you made us so proud.
Apart from your humour - you took the biscuit
'Cos when things went all wrong you became Mr Fix-It!
And your generous nature was a joy to behold
You bought Hayley make-up without being told
There's not many daughters who get up to the till
Then find out their Dad will settle the bill.

As for Sean he'd a Dad who was such a good friend
When you both went on hols he didn't want them to end.
Friday nights I confess were a great time for me
You would give Samson some treats and share half your tea,
We'd discuss special moments that we shared from our past,
I wanted these moments to last and to last.
We would cover all topics and especially the ones
The fabulous hols we had in the sun
America, Cyprus - then wonderful Kos
I looked at your face and then I would pause.

It was time for a giggle
and I felt such a fool
As you remembered the slippery steps to the pool
I was scared that the water might be too cold
But as usual you dived - you were always so bold.
You'd dive into most things, you were never afraid
These are things that I miss, you were always so brave.
You were also a star,
When you played killer squash
You'd show your opponent who was really the boss.

Sunday nights were amazing
When the fridge we would raid
Then we'd all settle down to watch Evil Roy Slade
We'd watch the same one till we all knew the words
Not once did we think it was the least bit absurd.
You said bald was beautiful
Well you certainly were
You were always so handsome you didn't need hair.
Inside your heart you held a beautiful soul
There's nobody else can take over your role.



My poem and photographic tribute to my brother Alan.

say goodbye. How unfair life felt! In my professional role I had been with so many people as they died but when it came to *my* most important person I was robbed of this privilege. I was not only feeling cheated and angry for myself, but also because I felt my dear brother was cheated of so much.

Friends would comment, in an attempt to make sense of what had happened 'That's the way to go, quick, no lingering or suffering'. Such empty words but, as I knew Alan so well, they also rang true. He had always declared he would not want to be disabled or a dependant patient.

This seemingly endless journey of grief had only just begun and was never to end. Nor did I want it to because

it was all I had left of my brother. However, in the process, I have found connections with Alan. I am not the same as I was and will never be. I have found a resilience that surprises me. In the midst of the devastation I have sought an outlet for my grief through creativity. I have learnt to bake and with another's help made a tribute to Alan in the form of a poem and photography.

Finding creative ways of expression through writing, and also contributing to the tribute of Alan became a means to sustain me. Decoupage and baking have been outlets to create and bring about items that were 'dead' more alive. These activities have helped to bring meaning

and have provided an outlet for personal growth. To be able to use the ordinary to create and give to others enables me to keep going, hoping that I leave part of me with each creation.

As a natural part of what has happened I appreciate my extended family and close friends even more. I enjoy and encompass their differences. In many ways I perceive the world differently and allow the simple things of everyday life to enhance how I feel. My continued challenge is to live a life that portrays all Alan gave me in the way of love, trust and forgiveness. These are elements I want to nurture and use in my contact with others. I can truly say that because of Alan I carry on and continue to grow.

What I have found is that the belief he had in me has become part of me and as I journey on I feel him deep within my being.

As Gandhi (1869-1948) quoted 'There are no goodbyes for us. Wherever you are, you will always be in my heart'.

In the *Song of Songs* (Peterson, 2005) states 'Love never dies'. Beyond the grave Alan's love still touches me. I hear his words and they sustain me as I move forward with this journey without his physical presence. In his children, in those who are generous, wise, kind and funny I see aspects that so characterised him and keep him close to me. ■

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