

Equal bereavement for same sex partners

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Earlier this year many of us watched on our TV screens pictures from Northern Ireland of a funeral. The funeral of Lyra McKee. Lyra was a 29-year-old journalist at work in Derry when she was shot dead. Her funeral was a public event which took place in Belfast’s Anglican cathedral. Lyra was also a partner, the partner of Sara Canning. Sara was left without the love of her life. At the funeral Sara was surrounded by a loving family, friends, and colleagues from Lyra’s work. Sara’s grief and bereavement were afforded public acknowledgement by family, clergymen and others. This is how it should be. But are all lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) persons supported in their bereavement? I am reminded of my own experience of bereavement since the death in 2013 of my partner, Mervyn.

Mervyn and I were a couple for 25 years. Here’s a photo taken of Mervyn and me in Northern Ireland in December 2005. We’re in a registry office.



Richard (left) and Mervyn.

In the photo I’m actually holding in my hand behind my back our certificate of civil partnership. On the certificate it says couple number one. This wasn’t because the registrar thought us the best couple in all of the council area of North Down. Rather it was because we were the first couple in North Down to register our same sex relationship.

Words matter

Mervyn and I met in Belfast in 1989. I was brought up a Catholic and Mervyn was Protestant so we were what would locally be called a ‘mixed marriage’. Except that in Northern Ireland same sex couples weren’t, and still aren’t, allowed to marry. This didn’t stop me from giving Mervyn a birthday card, with the message on the front.

‘To my husband
The man I love’

I am now a widower. I feel like a widower but in law I am not allowed to call myself a widower. On official forms I am required to tick a box for what is called ‘surviving civil partner’. I don’t really know what a ‘surviving civil partner’ is. Some days in my bereavement I don’t feel very civil. Some days I don’t feel I am even a survivor. But ‘surviving civil partner’ I am called and thus I’m meant to be.

They say there is no escaping death and taxes. So after Mervyn’s death I dutifully completed the form from Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs. The form for inheritance tax. On this form question five asks for marital or civil partnership status. There are boxes:

Married or civil partnership
Widowed or a surviving civil partner

When Mervyn was being buried, or as we say when he was being put ‘six feet under’, he was put in a wooden box. He was put into the same box whether he was gay or heterosexual, civil partnered or married. Yet in my bereavement a distinction is required. Emotionally what’s the difference?

Christmas is a time when I am even more aware of Mervyn’s absence. Perhaps I am more aware of it because, like most same sex couples, we didn’t have any children. Or maybe it is because the envelopes with Christmas cards are no longer addressed to the two of us.

Every December I receive in the post a Christmas card and a gift cheque from Mervyn's former employer. Three days before Christmas 2017, the envelope arrived. On the top of the envelope is a postmark with the words 'Lest we forget'. The envelope has my name on it, in black type. But this year I notice that instead of saying Mr R O'Leary, an additional letter 's' has been inserted by hand in blue pen. I am transformed into a Mrs R O'Leary. Do I look like a Mrs O'Leary? I don't think so, at least not with my beard.

I tear open the envelope. Inside I feel the cheque.



It reads:

Bank of Ireland UK

The sum of £40

Pay Mrs O'Leary

Mrs O'Leary. I am now declared to be Mrs O'Leary. It appears that someone at Mervyn's former employer has decided that Mervyn's bereaved partner just has to be of the opposite sex. A bereaved Mr O'Leary is so unimaginable that they have gone to the trouble of changing my gender.

Would the bank even cash a cheque for me made out to a Mrs O'Leary? I go to the bank and at the counter I pass the cheque to the bank official and ask her to lodge it to my account. The bank official picks up the cheque and starts to type the details into her computer. Then she stops, looks at me and says:

*'This cheque is made out to Mrs O'Leary'
'I know, there is no Mrs O'Leary, I'm Mr O'Leary.'*

I look at her, pleading. I explain to her that I had a same sex partner. I don't want to have to return the cheque for it to be reissued by Mervyn's former employer. The bank official is kind and understanding. She cashes the cheque.

In his last year Mervyn and I had lots of time together as I gave up my employment to become his carer while he was being treated for terminal cancer. In this period we spent evenings snuggled up in bed watching on DVD the

TV series *Six Feet Under*. This is an American drama set in a funeral home. One of its main characters, David, is gay. At the outset David isn't out to his family. When he meets and falls in love with Keith he tries to pretend to his family that they are just 'racquet ball partners'. Oh yeah. But David's sister Claire watches them at their Dad's funeral and works out that they are a couple. Over time David becomes less closeted and eventually starts calling Keith his husband.

In *Six Feet Under* David and Keith are both quite religious. They even met in a gay-friendly church. David is an Anglican. He is invited to be a deacon in his local Anglican church. But when David comes out as gay at his church they ask him to resign.

Like David, my Mervyn is a Christian. Shortly before he died, Mervyn spent some time in a hospice. At the hospice the staff directed me to the chaplain for pastoral care. I delayed a day before I approached the chaplain's office but when I enter the office the chaplain greets me with a smile. I tell the chaplain straight out that I feel married to Mervyn.

The chaplain replies, 'I'm struggling with this issue'.

I say, 'My partner is dying, I don't have time to wait for you to work through your struggle'. The chaplain answers back, 'I'm not judgemental'. Taking a deep breath I speak calmly and clearly, 'If you cannot fully affirm same-sex relationships then I think that you are being judgemental'.

I told Mervyn about this incident and informed the chaplain politely, 'We only want to be supported by a chaplain who affirms us as a couple. So we don't require your services'.

After I left the chaplain's office I didn't know who to turn to. I phoned my sister in England.

A few days later the chaplain attempted to gain entry into Mervyn's room. I reminded the chaplain that we did not require their services. The chaplain was not deterred. My sister, who had joined me from England, had to physically block the chaplain from entering Mervyn's room. Nevertheless, I did agree to accept from the chaplain a small wooden cross which they wished to place in Mervyn's hand. After the chaplain had gone, I went back into Mervyn's room. I did not tell him about the altercation. I lifted up his weak hand. Into his palm I gently placed the wooden cross.

Following Mervyn's death I met with the hospice to discuss aspects of Mervyn's end-of-life care. Afterwards I wrote to them as follows:

12th September 2014

You may recall that in our meeting I mentioned that during Mervyn's in-hospice care a hospice chaplain did not meet our expectations as a couple of appropriate pastoral care. This was a distressing experience. At the time the hospice chaplain who said, 'I'm struggling with the issue', invited me to resume the conversation at a later date, for our mutual benefit, and I said that I would try to do so, when I felt strong enough to return to the matter. I propose to contact the chaplain in 2015.

Best wishes

Richard O'Leary

After Mervyn's death, the hospice offered me access to a bereavement support group at their premises. I declined. Nor did I ever contact the chaplain. It felt too painful to revisit the experience. Indeed the leadership of my own denomination, the Church of Ireland, does not affirm same sex couples. Increasingly I felt that any contact with 'The Church' was making my bereavement feel worse. But where else does one turn?

One day I picked up a leaflet from Cruse Bereavement Care. On the leaflet I read the following text.

'The death of someone we love is likely to be the most distressing experience we will ever face. When someone dies, a relationship is lost, a process of change begins and we move towards a new and largely unknown situation.'

Those words described exactly how I felt. I thought about contacting Cruse. There was even a Cruse office in my local area in Northern Ireland – the council area of North Down. However, I noticed that there was nothing on the Cruse leaflet that signalled to me that Cruse would be sensitive to the particular needs of someone who is LGBT. There was no statement along the lines of 'We welcome and support all people irrespective of sexual orientation'. Even on the Cruse website, when I read their published stories, I didn't find stories of LGBT bereavement. I wasn't reassured that my engagement with Cruse might not be problematic – as it had been with the Church. I needed support in my bereavement, but I did not turn to Cruse.

Five years after Mervyn's death and I still had not accessed bereavement care services. During this period I was active in the campaigns in the Republic of Ireland and in Northern Ireland for equal marriage. I spoke in public about my life as a partnered gay man but I did not speak in public about my experiences of bereavement.

Then one day, more than five years after Mervyn's death, something happened. Cruse Bereavement Care found me. I received this email.

1st February 2019

Dear Richard

Your name was passed to me through John O'Docherty at Rainbow.

My name is Suzanne Quinn. I am responsible for the planning and delivery of our 60th anniversary conference this year on 4th and 5th July in Birmingham.

John suggested you would possibly be willing to facilitate a workshop on your experience of accessing care from an LGBT perspective.

Could you let me know?

Kindest regards

Suzanne Quinn
Cruse Bereavement Care

Over that weekend I thought about this request. I questioned whether I was emotionally robust enough to speak in public about my experiences of bereavement. I decided I would phone Suzanne Quinn of Cruse and if I felt that she was LGBT affirming, I would proceed, but if not I would decline.

When I picked up the phone to call Suzanne I was nervous. At the outset I told Suzanne that it was five years since Mervyn had died and that I still feel bereaved. Suzanne seemed to understand. When I told her that the only way that I felt I could contribute to the UK conference was to simply stand up and tell my story, Suzanne said I could present whatever way was most comfortable for me. Suzanne mentioned that Cruse NI had accessed LGBT awareness training from the Belfast Rainbow organisation – something I had not known. Suzanne was even attached to my local Cruse branch in North Down. When I put down the phone I felt great relief. I wish I had contacted Cruse five years earlier and spoken with someone like Suzanne.

The journal *Bereavement Care* invited me to write a personal piece based on the talk I would give at the Cruse conference. This is the text of that talk. I had never previously read the journal *Bereavement Care* and the invitation to contribute prompted me to search online back issues. On the journal's website I typed in the search term 'LGBT'.

This is what I found. The first hit was for an article published in 2016 called 'Wish me luck as you wave me

goodbye'. The author Rachel Dixey (2016) lives in England and is writing three years after the death in 2011 of her partner Irene. Rachel and Irene had been together for 33 years. Rachel writes:

'The spaces minorities occupy can be lonely ones. There are many people who know I've lost my life-partner but don't think of me as a 'widow'. They cannot think of us as being just the same as them.' (Dixey 2016)

Delving deeper into the journal I come upon another article. The article is by Kenneth Doka (1999) and it is called 'Disenfranchised grief'. Doka writes:

'Disenfranchised grief can be defined as the grief experienced by those who incur a loss that is not, or cannot be, openly acknowledged, publicly mourned or socially supported. Isolated in bereavement, it can be much more difficult to mourn...' (1999).

The subject of 'Disenfranchised Grief' is also discussed by Katherine Cox in an edited book (2011) called *Death, Dying and Social Differences*. Cox asks, 'What is the impact of unsupported bereavement?' She answers:

'People in same-sex relationships may struggle both to have their grief recognised and to recognise their own grief, particularly if their relationship was not validated by others both publicly and privately. Disenfranchised grief can reduce the level of support available to the bereaved partner or loved ones and make it harder to access the usual sources of support during an already isolating time.' (2011, p194)

At last, more than five years into my bereavement, I am beginning to make sense of it. My experiences as a bereaved same-sex partner are not unique to me or to Northern Ireland. I recall the office worker at my partner's employer who felt the need to convert me from a Mr to a Mrs, the chaplain at the hospice and other Christians who were unable to affirm our relationship, the members of my family who did not acknowledge my grief. I now understand that it is the behaviour of others in society that has disenfranchised me of my grief and contributed to making my bereavement worse.

What is to be done to support LGBT persons in our bereavement? LGBT persons arrive at bereavement with

back-stories. Many of our lives, including my own, have been marked by criminalisation (until 1993 in Republic of Ireland), alienation from our families, involuntary migration, discrimination and prejudice. Equal bereavement recognises that the feelings of grief experienced by LGBT and same sex couples are no less than that of anyone else. However, the behaviour of others can disenfranchise our grief. Service providers need to be aware of this. Among the responses they can make are:

- Produce literature which visibly signals that they are LGBT affirming.
- Include LGBT in the stories about bereavement that they post on their websites.
- Recognise that the usual support from religious personnel and organisations is often not available to LGBT bereaved.
- If your organisation does not include 5–10% of clients who are LGBT, ask why not?

Like Lyra McKee's funeral, Mervyn's funeral was a public event, but without the cameras and the scrutiny. At Mervyn's funeral I was supported by some of my family. My dad was too old to attend. He did not acknowledge that I had lost my partner. The funeral service was held in our local Anglican Church of Ireland parish church. I believe it was the first funeral in my parish church for an openly gay man and certainly the first for a same-sex couple. The local Church of Ireland Bishop was present. The Bishop is on record as saying 'the fact that somebody was by their inclination gay would not in any way be a bar to anything in the Church. Inclination is neither here nor there. The issue is whether they are practising and that would be a bar' (2008). The Bishop did not communicate to me his condolences on my bereavement.

LGBT persons who practice love are not yet afforded equality in marriage. Not all LGBT persons will get married, but we will all experience death. It is said that we are all equal in death. My experience is that even in death and bereavement we are not all treated equally. It's time for equal bereavement. ■

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Dixey, R. (2016). Wish me luck as you wave me goodbye. *Bereavement Care*, 35(3), 92–93.

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