

An accident and its aftermath



Richard Todd

Richard Todd

Retired Naval Officer and Businessman

My first recollection after the accident was of total blackness with a small spot of light far away in front of me, like looking down a long tunnel. I seemed to move towards it and as I did so the spot of light increased in size and then I was out of the blackness. I was conscious again. I was in a stationary car, at night, on a road in Dorset.

It was a Sunday evening in December 1965 and I had been driving home to Weymouth with my wife, Joy, beside me in the front and the children in the back. I was 32 at the time, Joy was 35, Julie was seven and Diccon three.

As I came to, I saw Joy lying in the seat beside me, still and silent. She had no injuries that I could see. I turned to look for the children but there was nothing behind the front seats at all, just open road. The car looked as if it had been cut in half with a knife. No wreckage, no wheels, no children. Nothing!

I seemed to be unhurt. As I got out of the car, the realisation of what had happened hit me and I screamed out into the sky like a hurt animal: 'O God, no!' Then shock took over and I became completely calm and business-like. I asked where the children were and someone pointed to the field beside the road. The rear seats of the car, the rear wheels and back of the car, and the children were about 10 yards away on the grass. I walked over in the dark and found Julie lying there. There wasn't enough light so I couldn't see her face. I picked her up in my arms and then found Diccon. I picked him up too but couldn't hold them both. My left side hurt and Diccon fell out of my arms on to the ground. From the way he fell and the way they both felt, I just knew they were dead, even though they did not have any visible injuries or bleeding.

I put Julie down on the ground and went back to the car. Joy still appeared to be unharmed, apart from a slight trickle of blood from her nose. I said to someone that at least that was a hopeful sign as dead people didn't bleed. I didn't try to pick her up or to hold her.

I don't remember anything else except this matter-of-fact calmness.

EDITOR'S NOTE

All of us who drive a car must have dreaded the possibility that we shall be involved in a fatal accident. This nightmare came true when the car which Richard Todd was driving came into collision with two other vehicles as a result of which his wife and two children were killed.

In this paper he describes how he coped with this psychological trauma and subsequently recovered. His early decision to remarry and his insistence on looking forward rather than back seems at variance with the widely held assumption that the 'work of grieving' should cause us to delay making plans until we are through the worst of our grief. But planning did not prevent Richard Todd from grieving and his story seems to confirm the view that 'grief work' is not simply a matter of expressing emotions; it includes a cognitive, thinking component as well. Alongside the need to cry and to search for the dead there is a parallel need to move forward to a life without them.

When the ambulance came I was put in it, but before we left I said to someone to look out for our dog, Poochie, which had also been in the car with us.

At the hospital I was left on my own while they waited to X-ray me. That was the worst part, being alone in that silent room, not knowing whether Joy and the children were alive or dead, with no one to speak to or hold my hand. It seemed like ages until the sister came in and said, 'I'm afraid they're all dead.'

I phoned my sister and spoke to my brother-in-law quite calmly and rationally saying, 'I'm afraid there's been an accident and Joy and the children are dead.' I told him I was all right but that I had a meeting at the Admiralty the following morning, so would he please tell them that I wouldn't be able to make it.

Almost immediately after the accident and while still in hospital I

had this powerful and passionate determination to get married again and to have another family. This urge motivated almost every major decision I took for the next five years and drove my social life.

I remember how easy it was to cry as the enormity of the loss hit home. I remember the comfort provided by the two nurses who looked after me for the three days I was in hospital, but sadly have forgotten their names. I remember the need to take Communion in bed in hospital. And I remember what was almost the unkindest cut of all.

Poochie had survived the accident in her position under Joy's seat, but when the ambulance men took Joy out of the car, Poochie ran out in terror and was promptly run over and killed by another car in her own little fatal accident. That just wasn't necessary.

Thank God I was never ever bitter or angry about the accident. No one was to blame. No one was drunk or behaved stupidly or drove badly. The whole incident was just one of those things, pure accident.

I am not sure if it was just after the funeral, or had happened previously, but I burnt all the letters I had received from Joy during the last sea job I had. In any event I did not have a single letter from her to keep. Was this perhaps just as well?

Many months later, on a perfect English summer's day my sister, Penny, and I went to the crematorium to pick up the ashes. It is very surprising how small an urn is needed for the ashes of three people. We drove to a place where Joy and I used to walk and take the children for picnics. A chalk stream flows there through unspoilt water meadows in a lovely little valley below the Downs and Old Winchester Hill. I left my sister in

the car and walked down there on my own with their ashes, which I scattered in that stream of ours and over the meadows nearby. That is where I think of them and that is where I see them if I am there. It is better than any grave.

COPING WITH EMOTIONS

What were the main emotional effects in those early months? There was the feeling of utter devastation at the loss of everything I loved, and this led to periods of deep depression when I wondered what was the point of going on. There was the compulsive need to talk to people about the accident and how it was affecting me. I simply had to get it out of my system and that was my way of doing it. Tears came often in gasping, wrenching sobs. As time went on, I would think that I was becoming less vulnerable to the chance remark that somehow sliced straight through my armour and brought unexpected tears. Each time it happened I would think that I had now covered that chink, and then someone would say the most innocuous thing and the sobs would come again. The other main effect was the need for company in general and female company in particular. That was very positive as it kept me socially busy and involved with people.

It was lucky that my whole focus of attention was forward-looking and constructive. I had no cause for bitterness, guilt or anger, and these never affected me. The accident could have been far worse, in that Joy or the children could have been terribly maimed or mentally damaged. The break was clean and total and it seemed better that they hadn't suffered. Looking back on it, I suppose the most valuable factor in my recovery process was the determination to remarry and have another family. This gave a positive purpose to my life, which it might otherwise have lacked, and dominated everything I did.

Nowadays people who suffer catastrophic tragedy or are involved in horrific accidents are given advice and counselling as to how they might expect their emotions to react. I was given no such advice. At the time, one was expected to cope as best as one could with the help of one's family and friends.

When people suffer any major emotional shock, be it battle stress, divorce, sudden death in the family, or other equally sudden events, one of the worst things is not knowing if one is coping. Too often people feel that because they can't 'keep a stiff upper lip' they are being weak. Most of us have never experienced these events before, so when our emotions turn upside down and we suddenly break down in tears, or feel guilt, or suffer serious depression, we think that we're not up to it, and that in itself is a very frightening worry.

Looking back on it I suppose the most valuable factor in my recovery process was the determination to remarry and have another family.

One of the most valuable lessons that I have learned from this tragedy is the knowledge that, because most of us are ordinary, everyday people, our emotions and reactions, though unique in our experience, are nevertheless the feelings and reactions of countless others in similar circumstances. These emotions can be frighteningly powerful and our natural reactions often run counter to the way many of us have been taught to 'grin and bear it'. I believe there is great comfort in knowing that our behaviour in the circumstances is probably quite normal.

My social life

I started going to parties and taking girls out a very short time after the accident. There were two main reasons for this. I needed to be with other people as much as possible, and if I was to remarry and start another family I had to get out and about. I never felt the slightest guilt about this, although some no doubt felt that I 'should have shown more respect for the dead'. I knew inside me that there was no disrespect for my family. They had been greatly loved and were missed terribly, but life goes on and I needed company.

I was never in danger of marrying for the sake of it, because, unlike someone who is involved in a

divorce, I had been lucky in having a very happy marriage and so was confident in my ability to choose the right person the second time around. It took five years to find that person, and she proved to be the first person to whom I became really attached without wondering, 'Is this going to be the one?'

One of the things that I most appreciated was those friends who always had open house to me either on my own or with any girl I might bring down. In their homes I could be completely relaxed and at ease, always the hallmark of real friends. Their kindness, patience and tolerance of my comings and goings helped enormously. They also suffered for many months hearing me talking about the accident. That was something I just had to do over and over again. It takes a very understanding person to listen well and to shoulder the emotional dramas of a friend over an extended period.

It was at least two years before I could reasonably say that I was back to normal, and there were many occasions during that time when I thought I had recovered only to find that the effects had still not worked themselves out.

The survival instinct

In my experience, when we suffer intense emotional or physical stress we very rarely react out of character. We often seek advice but this is usually to obtain confirmation of what we are already doing or intend to do. I believe it is most unusual for a human in extreme circumstances to base their actions and behaviour on grounds of reason or logic if these run counter to their character. After the accident, many people told me how brave I was and how they could never have coped in the way I did. But I wasn't being brave. I just reacted entirely in character, and it so happened that my character was able to deal with that tragedy in a very positive way. If my family had required years of patient nursing, or if I had received incapacitating physical injuries, I am not at all confident that I would have coped well.

I believe it helped that I am a realist. I can accept life as it is, and in general I don't look back. I am also somewhat self-centred and this helped in those circumstances when I had no one else to worry about.

LONG-TERM REACTIONS

It is now 29 years since the accident. I remarried in 1970 and now have two daughters of 18 and 20 and we are, I think, a very happy family. On my dressing table I still have photographs of Joy, Julie and Diccon. One or two friends have asked my wife, Gina, how she puts up with them. She replies that they are a part of my past and are no threat to the present. My affections are not split between Joy and her, and she is no more jealous of them than she would be if I had photos of my parents there.

For a long time after the accident, when talking to people about Joy and Gina, I would find that I sometimes used the name Joy when talking of Gina, or Gina when talking of Joy. It still happens occasionally even now. It was if the brain has a little pigeon-hole labelled 'Wife' with two names in it and hasn't quite learned which one to use on which occasion with certainty!

In the years immediately after the accident I would occasionally have dreams in which Joy figured. The interesting thing is that in each dream the situation in which she appeared made her more and more 'distant', or unobtainable, and the circumstances harder for us to be together than the previous ones. Again it was as if the mind was working out in its own way that she was no longer there. The interval between dreams lengthened and the distance between us in each dream increased until they came to an end.

I don't know to what extent this is a result of the accident or a natural aspect of growing older, but I find that my emotions are much closer to the surface than they used to be. I find that romantically moving scenes, and images of cruelty, unkindness or similar suffering, particularly of children, cause tears to flow very easily. I cry far more easily than anyone else in the family. I believe this is at least partially due to the accident because I believe that those who have experienced the pain of bereavement or other tragedy can more easily imagine that same pain in others.

But there is one very powerful and positive, lasting result of that tragedy. Having lost everything once, I now appreciate to an intense degree that which I now have. It is difficult for others to accept that I appreciate

my wife, and children, and family life more than they do, but I suspect that all those who have lost something very dear to them – be it health, happiness or their freedom – appreciate those things much more when they get them back. I am also more tolerant and understanding of others in their troubles and have more self confidence. I am not one of those who believe that their tragedy was 'the will of God'. It was an

accident, no more, no less. But I am the better for it, and as I value my family more than anything else, it is possible that they too have benefited from those experiences and will be well placed to bring up happy families of their own. My family is what I wish to be judged by in this life, not wealth, position or possession. I think I have been enormously lucky since that terrible evening 29 years ago in Dorset.

CENTRES FOR BEREAVEMENT RESEARCH

Utrecht Centre for Bereavement Research and Intervention

The Centre was founded in 1992 at the University of Utrecht in The Netherlands with the general aim of furthering the scientific study of bereavement and disseminating knowledge to the applied field. Core members are Margaret Stroebe, Jan van den Bout, Wolfgang Stroebe and Henk Schut. Specific goals include:

- Building up a research programme at the University based on a cognitive stress perspective following Lazarus and Folkman, and specifically to test predictions from the Dual Process Model of Coping with Loss developed at the Centre (described in the Report on the International Conference on Grief and Bereavement in Contemporary Society, *Bereavement Care*, 1994; 3: 32).
- Applying research results to society through the team's well-established connections with professional societies and national associations.
- Furthering the worldwide exchange of results with other bereavement researchers by setting up an International Network of Bereavement Researchers and Professionals. This will include a directory of researchers, reference sources, newsletter, organisation meetings and establishment of international collaboration and is an interim step towards establishing a Society of Bereavement Researchers, as none already exists.

An International Board of Consultants, scientists working in the bereavement/trauma area, has been established to give advice on the research programme, act as international representatives on the Network and explore the possibilities of collaborative research. These include

Colin Murray Parkes of the University of London (senior consultant); Robert Hansson of the University of Tulsa, USA; Dale Lund of the University of Utah, USA; James Pennebaker of the Southern Methodist University of Dallas, USA; Beverley Raphael, University of Queensland, Australia; and Bernard Rimé of the University of Louvain la Neuve, Belgium.

Research plans

Work is continuing on two longitudinal data sets, the Utrecht and Tübingen Studies of Bereavement, comparing the two data sets and presenting the results at conferences and in scientific journals.

Three new empirical studies are in progress:

- The Diary Study: an examination of the effects of communication of grief experiences of widows and widowers through the use of diaries. The study tests the theoretical model and a new bereavement coping scale, both of which have been developed by members of the Centre.
- The Family Grief Study: a study of interactive patterns of coping in bereaved parents, which also tests aspects of the theoretical model and coping scale. A pilot investigation involving interviews with a number of bereaved parents (both partners) has been completed.
- The Myths about Bereavement Study: an empirical study of assumptions held by researchers, health-care professionals and laypersons (including the bereaved) about coping with loss.

Further details, including a list of the Centre's publications, are available from the University of Utrecht, Department of Psychology, PO Box 80.140, 3508 TC Utrecht, The Netherlands.