

The art of remembering



Harriet Frazer

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Memorials are tributes to those we have loved and lost. Sophie, my step-daughter, took her own life at the age of 26. Here I describe some of the events leading up to her death which explain why it was so important to our family that she have a unique memorial that would properly

celebrate her life. This proved much more difficult than we had imagined and I subsequently set up an organisation to help others in a similar situation.

In August 1964 Kate and Sophie's mother, Jan, died from a wasp sting. They were on holiday in Turkey, having a picnic in an olive grove by the sea. As she lay dying the twins, aged five, were sent by Jan's boyfriend to run for help, to look for a couple that had walked past sometime before. They could not find anyone and they saw their mother die. It took five days before the twins were flown home to London to live with me (their stepmother, then aged 21) their father, Tim, and our baby daughter.

Tim and I had met the year before when he and Jan were in the process of divorce and soon after I became pregnant. I had not met Jan and Tim had never spoken to me about her. If he had to refer to her he would call her 'the twins' mother', never using her name. He and Jan still had a very strong relationship which I found very difficult. He felt it was disloyal to talk to me about her. For this reason, and because I had never known her, I could not talk about Jan with the twins, and Tim found it too painful to do so.

Even so, the twins would describe to each other in front of us what Jan had looked like as she was dying. Sophie would make terrible noises each night, like an animal in pain. She would talk about what she was feeling and about her headaches and tummy aches. I tried to be like their mother (a painter), to do artistic things with them; we made collages, they drew and painted a lot. I tried to make things feel safe

for them, but we desperately needed outside help. At that time there seemed to be very little information available and I would not have known how to look for it.

EDITOR'S NOTE

There is a literal truth in the idea that the dead 'live on' in the memories of those who knew and valued them. Memorials keep alive such memories and can do much to help bereaved people to find a new place in their hearts and minds for those who have died. They also provide the survivors with an opportunity to express their continued recognition of the value of the person who is gone and, at times, to express sentiments that they may not have put into words during that person's lifetime. In other words, they help us to make restitution to the dead for things said or not said which we may now regret.

Sadly, the powers that regulate the erection of such monuments do not always understand their true significance. For fear of causing offence they impose a strict set of rules on all memorials to the dead. The result is the dull uniformity of most cemeteries, echoing the 'little boxes' in which many people are condemned to spend their lives. Harriet Frazer's organisation, *Memorials by Artists*, provides opportunities to create memorials that are both personal and aesthetically pleasing, enhancing the beauty of any cemetery or other public place. In this paper, she describes how this came about and, in doing so, demonstrates clearly why memorials are so important.

When the twins were about nine they had to move schools and Sophie began to suffer from school phobia. She used to run away, not only from school but also from our home in Islington, to her maternal grandparents in Golders Green. We had to lock the front door from the inside and she would pace up and down like a caged tiger, making animal noises again and biting her thumb. We did not know what to do and Tim would not hear of her or Kate seeing a psychotherapist.

We moved to Italy in 1970 when the twins were 11, wanting to start a new life. Sophie loved Italy and had times of being relatively happy, but she continued to suffer often from depression and anxiety. Everything about her always felt fragile. On our return to England, ten year later, things really started to go downhill. Sophie had attempted suicide on two previous occasions but in 1985, despite several years of therapy, she finally succeeded.

Inevitably, her death was an indescribable shock to our whole family. My overwhelming feeling was that she must be buried somewhere peaceful in the country and have a beautiful memorial. She had been an extraordinary and wonderful person and I wanted somehow to make up to her in death for what I could not do for her in life. She wanted me to be her mother, something I was not, and I felt that I had failed her.

THE QUEST FOR A MEMORIAL

Sophie was buried in Salle churchyard, North Norfolk. We did not embark on the memorial for a while – we needed time – but a few months later the project became my mission. I found myself faced by brick wall after brick wall.

At first it seemed very simple: a brilliant sculptor friend, Phelan Black, who knew and loved Sophie, had wonderful ideas for her headstone. Out of politeness we let the vicar know what our plans were, but they were vetoed. We discovered there are strict rules and regulations for churchyard (and cemetery) memorials regarding size, wording and pictorial symbolism or imagery. For instance, we wanted four lines from one of Sophie's poems but were told that the diocese of Norwich would only allow 'well-known hymnal words or words from scripture'.

Phelan then moved to Italy so I began looking for a good monumental mason. I thought I could just explain the sort of thing



Welsh slate stone with painted letters, designed and carved by John Neilson *Photo by John Neilson*

we were looking for: a well designed, hand-carved headstone using our own ideas. I began to make enquiries, telephoning, visiting, looking at brochures, and discovered that masons' catalogues are virtually the same from one end of the country to the other, their showrooms stiff with formal flower arrangements and shiny black granite and white marble headstones lined up along the carpet. It appeared to be impossible to find anyone who understood that we wanted something different, something unique. On top of this, no one seemed interested in helping with the many decisions involved: what words to use; how to say what we wanted to say; what stone to have; what carving and so on.

The turning point

One day, staying with friends, I was shown a beautiful memorial to a gardener with a carving of a spade and a robin, modern but exquisitely made, and I knew Sophie would have loved it. I eventually discovered its creator, Simon Verity, and went to visit him. This experience was a turning point. Sitting sharing a cup of coffee in his homely kitchen, he asked me to talk about my step-daughter and any thoughts I had about her stone. There was no question of hurry; Simon really listened, gave me ideas and yet was totally sensitive to the situation. Together we built on our family's original ideas and I left feeling a great weight had flown off me.

I discussed everything again with my family, who up to then had not shown great interest in the memorial, and came up with definite plans so the first drawing could be made. The design was based on our lives in

Italy – the vineyards, olive groves, and even tiny cypress trees – and on the dove of peace. Also Sophie loved wine, so the large bunches of grapes had extra significance, a sort of secret message which she would have loved and laughed about.

One year later Sophie's stone went up (see photo on p36). The whole process was deeply therapeutic, particularly for me because I was 'in charge' of the project, but also for Kate who became very involved. We visited Simon when the design had been drawn out on to the stone and Kate, herself an artist, was able to make some changes.

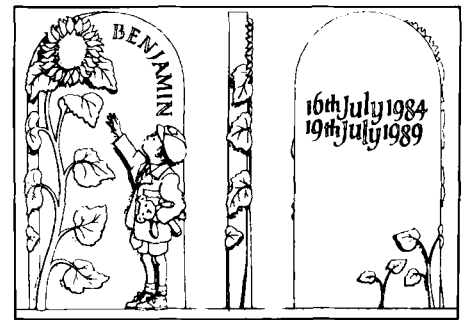
MEMORIALS BY ARTISTS

Throughout that year, I had kept thinking that I could not be the only person who wanted a unique memorial. Suddenly the thought came to me that I could produce an illustrated booklet to guide people through the whole commissioning process and build up a register of lettercutters and carvers who design individual memorials. Memorials by Artists evolved from this and has been operating for almost eleven years now. In that time we have completed just over 1,000 memorials, introducing clients to suitable artists, overseeing each commission, and also acting as a general advisory service.

A high proportion of the bereaved who come to us have lost a child. Sometimes couples visit us here, either alone or bringing their other children with them. It can often help a couple to talk over their ideas with a third person – the memorial can be an extremely emotive issue and violent feelings may emerge. Almost always a solution can be found which accommodates everyone's ideas (with some compromises made). Clients can ring at any time to discuss ideas, ask questions or just talk about the person they have lost.



Tom drew the 'S' carved on his brother's headstone; above is Sam's own signature cut into the slate. Design and carving by Mark Evans. *Photo by Jo Winter*



Plans and finished stone for Benjamin Pouncey who drowned, aged five. His mother, Liza, wrote to the designer and carver, Gary Breeze, 'Thank you for allowing me to show the world that my son was beautiful.' This memorial took nine years to complete because the clients needed time between each stage in the process to deal with their grief. *Photo by Gary Breeze*

One of the most important things is to allow plenty of time. Ideally people should wait at least six months, if not a year or more before beginning the commissioning process and be prepared to pause between stages until they feel ready to continue. In the beginning they often want the stone up by a certain anniversary, but in the end it needs to take its own time and several years is not uncommon.

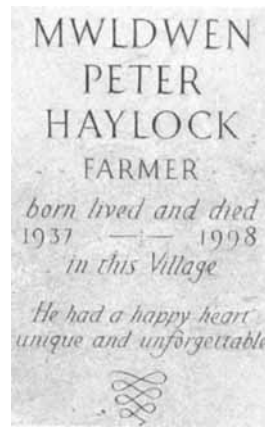
Once we have some idea of what is wanted, we introduce the client to the most suitable artist, ideally working as near as possible to the client's home, and they then arrange a meeting to discuss ideas. We often suggest that children are involved with the memorial too. Apart from contributing ideas, they can also help with the drawing on the stone or, indeed, the carving (even just the odd chip or two), or they may write or draw something on the section of the stone that is to go below ground, kisses or a secret message of some sort.

Memorials by Artists was granted charitable status last year and a company formed for the commissioning side of our work (ie introducing clients to artists). The main objective of the charity is 'to promote for the public benefit the arts and crafts associated with memorials'. We have produced an advisory booklet (*Memorials by Artists**) intended as a guide for anyone wanting to commission an individual memorial, with a list of addresses and 52 photographs of recent work, and plan to give talks and slide shows around the country on the therapeutic value of memorials.

We also hope to establish a permanent exhibition of memorials, following the success of 'The Art of Remembering' exhibition (and accompanying book* of the same title) last year. The stones have a significance which is very powerful and many people said they came away feeling inspired and comforted. We think it important that passers-by also be moved, that they stop for a moment and wonder about the dead person.

Clients tell us that the process of finding a design and a form of words which properly reflect their feelings is very rewarding; most have a feeling of completion and many, a deep sense of peace and relief. Julie Haylock described what the creation of a memorial stone for her husband had meant to her:

[It] is the last thing you can organise for anyone, and I have found the whole process soothing and gratifying. The finished stone reflects exactly what I wanted to say. All the soul searching,



Detail of the lettering on the black stone designed and carved by John Green

heart wrenching, tear jerking experienced whilst looking for the right words – all worth while. I found the temptation was to say too much but in the end the simple statement, 'He had a happy heart, unique and unforgettable', completely encapsulates everything I had written down on reams of paper, trying to say everything that I felt needed to be said. In years to

come, people will stand and look at that stone thinking, 'There lies a happy farmer', and to influence the thinking of people who never knew Mel has been my goal.

There is absolutely no doubt that the whole process of commissioning a memorial can help the bereaved enormously. **BC**

*Both can be purchased from Memorials by Artists, Snape Priory, Saxmundham, Suffolk IP17 1SA. **T:** 01728 688934; **F:** 01728 688411. A free illustrated leaflet is also available



Secret Stones: an informal memorial made from a split boulder by Celia Kilner. 'Whatever we were to each other, that we still are.' Photo by Oliver Riviere

Disenfranchised grief



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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 and reactions are often complicated. It is important to recognise and try to meet the needs of those whose grief is not acknowledged by society, whatever the emotional or financial costs.

In all of the following vignettes, some one has experienced a significant loss and, as a result of that loss, each is experiencing grief. Yet that grief is unacknowledged by others – it is disenfranchised.

- When Rita's best friend, Marsha, died, everyone asked Rita how Marsha's husband and children were dealing with her death. Rita's sense of loss was significant as well. Yet no one asked Rita about her grief.
- Tom, a young adult with developmental disabilities, experienced the death of his mother. But his siblings decided not to bring

him to the funeral. 'It would only upset him,' they reasoned.

- Carmen no longer feels she knows how to answer the question 'how many children do you have?' since her son committed suicide. She resents questions about the details, as well as the inevitable sense of pity or, even worse, a perception that somehow she or her family are to blame.
- After the divorce of his parents, Marcus began to act out at school. His parents were bewildered by the counsellor's remark that Marcus might be grieving. 'He sees his dad

whenever he wants,' Marcus' mother replied, 'it's not like he is dead.'

The concept of disenfranchised grief recognises that societies have sets of norms – in effect, 'grieving rules' – that attempt to specify who, when, where, how, how long, and for whom people should grieve. These grieving rules may be codified as personnel policies. For example, a worker may be allowed a week off for the death of a spouse or child, three days for the loss of a parent or sibling. Such policies reflect the fact that each society defines who has a legitimate right to grieve, and these rights correspond to relationships, primarily familial, that are socially recognised and sanctioned.

However these grieving rules may not correspond to the nature of attachments, the sense of loss, or the feelings of survivors and hence their grief is disenfranchised. In our society this may occur for a number of reasons, some of which are now discussed

EDITOR'S NOTE

Counsellors and members of the caring professions are often the only people who know of, and are in a position to help, those whose grief is hidden or unacknowledged. Ken Doka here summarises the main findings from his important book, *Disenfranchised Grief* which found a name for the unnamed grievers whose sufferers need our special understanding and care.