

# An inconvenient grief

**Jill Tunstall with  
Ruth Worgan**

How is a divorced wife meant to feel when her ex-husband dies? In this article, originally published in the *Guardian* newspaper, Ruth Worgan describes to Jill Tunstall her bewilderment at her emotional response when the man she had divorced many years previously 'came back into her life' in tragic circumstances, and how she learned to acknowledge and share with her new husband the depth of her grief and loss. Colin Murray Parkes offers a brief commentary on the phenomenon of post-divorce bereavement.

One Saturday in September 2006, Devon and Cornwall police phoned me to say a yacht had been found off Mullion Cove in Cornwall, with the engine running. On board were a man's passport, wallet and personal possessions. My name was in the back of the passport as the emergency contact.

I had been divorced from its owner for four years. My ex-husband, David, had just fulfilled a lifelong dream of buying a yacht and was planning to sail around the coast of Britain. Now he had seemingly disappeared.

The following days were agonising. I hoped not to have to tell our two children, Suzanna and Peter, anything, hoping that he had simply got into trouble and would turn up somewhere, somehow. But within a few days the local press got hold of the news, and with David's photograph on the front of the paper, I had no choice. Then, 10 days later, a body was washed up that fitted David's description. It took a further three days for David's body to be positively identified by his fingerprints.

Suddenly I was in completely uncharted waters: how is an ex-wife meant to feel when her ex-husband dies? It was a lonely place and became lonelier and more isolated as my emotions grew more bewildering.

My first thoughts were mainly practical ones. David's widowed mother was grief-stricken and felt unable to arrange the funeral so I offered to do it. He had led a semi-nomadic existence since our divorce, with long spells working abroad. Suddenly, I was in the best position to organise the funeral as I knew more of his friends and contacts. I was also the closest person

to him who — apparently — was the least emotionally affected by his death.

It was a strange time, speaking to friends I had had no contact with since our divorce, and it was like raking through my former life. Although we had stayed in touch, things had been fairly acrimonious. Now it seemed strange to be writing down all the best aspects of David when I didn't feel entirely positive towards him. I was also happily remarried and did wonder whether I was really the right person to write his eulogy. But there was nobody else.

We had met in 1990 when I was a nurse and David had just come out of the army. We both loved the outdoors and within a couple of years had married, settling in North Wales running a mountaineering business.

The following year, Suzanna was born, followed by Peter three years later. In 1996, David was offered a job as a landmine action adviser, which inevitably led to him spending time abroad and away from home. We divorced in 2002, and when David moved to work abroad we gradually saw less of him.

It bothered me that he wasn't seeing much of the children and I also worried about the dangers involved in his work — he spent time in Iraq in 2004–05 and had been in Afghanistan and other landmine strewn areas of the world.

I suppose I had always worried that he might be injured or killed through his work, and wondered how that might affect all of us. Now it had happened, so much closer to home, and here I was, writing his eulogy. With his landmines work, David had improved the lives of so many people and, as I wrote about his life, I felt sorry that the marriage hadn't been a similar success.

There was no gut-wrenching grief, just a feeling of sadness and I really believed that that would be it emotionally.

But when I took time off work to handle the arrangements, I began to feel so resentful at what I saw as a very 'inconvenient interruption' in my life. My subsequent feelings of guilt became wrapped up with upset and anger and at times all three were swirling round at the same time.

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Ruth Worgan – 'I was in uncharted waters'

## Commentary

Those who are familiar with grief know that attachments are seldom pure and never simple: they are unique, irreplaceable and indissoluble.

The biological function of attachments is to provide security for both the attached couple and their children. Sadly, there are many attachments that do nothing of the kind. In such cases it may be quite reasonable for a couple to attempt to undo the attachment, write off the relationship and start again.

Divorce is a social ritual that seems to promise just that: an opportunity to wipe the slate clean, cancel all plans and pretend the attachment never happened. But attachments cannot be 'written off'. Divorces, like all separations, are painful, and the fact that they may also bring to an end a period of disappointment, mutual torment and misery does not negate the fact that divorce is a time of loss as well as gain.

Klass's notion of 'continuing bonds' to those to whom we are attached (Klass, Silverman & Nickman, 1996) recognises the fact that when we lose someone 'out there', we do not lose them 'in here'. Grief is the process whereby we gradually discover what remains and find a new place for the one who is gone. In most cases it is the happy memories that cause the most pain at first, because they bring home the reality of our loss, but over time these very memories become our treasure, the ground of our contentment. But few relationships are without ambivalence and continuing bonds can torment as well as give us nostalgic pleasure.

Ruth Worgan's honesty and willingness to expose her private thoughts to public scrutiny is a generous gift to us all. As she has discovered, there is no proper way to grieve. We all enter uncharted waters when we lose someone we love. When David died, his death (literally) brought home the paradox that he still existed in the hearts and minds of those who loved him. To Ruth he was 'back in my life'.

For most of us the public rituals of funerals and eulogies provide a meaningful context for our grief

and give us the illusion that we are not alone. For others they can be an ordeal that we dread.

Ruth, with characteristic fortitude, for the sake of her mother-in-law and her children, grasped the nettle and even found it in her heart to praise the man she had divorced. Small wonder that she felt confused and that her tough-minded decision to put her own feelings on hold postponed but did not solve her problems.

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## There is no proper way to grieve. We all enter uncharted waters when we lose someone we love

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There followed a period of cognitive and emotional searching as Ruth began the process of changing her assumptive world to include both of the men in her life. She mentions two turning points. Her decision to attend the inquest opened the door to pain, as she must have known it would. The image of David drowning stirred her compassion and triggered genuine grief for the man she had lost. But it was the second turning point that enabled her to find a new assumptive world.

Up to that moment she had tried to protect her new husband Adrian from the implications of her continuing relationship with David, as if it were a guilty secret. In doing so she was depriving him of the opportunity to share a part of herself. When, at last, she cried for her first husband in the arms of her second, she was admitting Adrian into the family that always had and always would include David. In our internal worlds, nothing and nobody is wasted.

### Colin Murray Parkes

Klass D, Silverman PR, Nickman S (eds) (1996). *Continuing bonds: new understandings of grief*. London/Washington DC: Taylor & Francis.

Somehow, it seemed inappropriate for me to grieve over the man I had divorced four years ago. I began to worry about what my husband, Adrian, would feel about my being so involved in the funeral, and any reaction I had to David's death, especially grief. I just didn't know how I was 'supposed' to feel. Adrian was supportive but I kept many of my feelings from him because I feared it might damage our marriage in some way. That left me feeling vulnerable and anxious that things were piling up into something potentially unmanageable.

Much of what upset me at this time was to do with the impact on the children. I felt that this was an 'OK

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## I didn't want the man I had divorced to be 'back in my life' in any way, even in his death

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grief' to have, a mother would naturally feel upset for her children losing their father.

Most people would ask how the children were, or say how sad it was for them, but apart from close friends and family, few recognised how difficult it was for me. In fact, I often imagined people thinking I would be happy that David was dead. And there was a nagging sense in the back of my mind that, had the marriage turned out well, this might never have happened. He might still have been alive.

I did feel a sense of guilt at times at how David's life had turned out, and the possible part I had played and I wondered if my children might blame me. I also felt somehow separated from them, that they were experiencing a huge, traumatic experience that wasn't the same for me. I worried they might feel I couldn't possibly understand what they were going through.

It was around this time that I went into counselling and finally asked, how was I supposed to feel about

my ex-husband's death? It was a relief to hear that however I was feeling was OK as there is no map to any kind of grief and that it was perfectly normal not to be able to share it all with my husband. But I still didn't really fully realise that this was actually my own grief. Then, in April this year, I travelled to Cornwall to attend the inquest. I didn't have to be there but felt I needed to for the children's sake.

It was after listening to how David had died after falling from the boat in stormy waters that it finally hit me. I began to realise that this wasn't just some kind of grief by proxy for the children's loss; it was my own very real grief at having lost someone who had been important to me. I finally realised I'd been bereaved. It wasn't just about the children and David's mother and sister, it was about me too. This was real grief for a real loss — my loss.

For six months I had plodded on, believing I 'shouldn't' feel this bad because it was 'only my ex-husband' who had died, so much so I even sometimes wished something 'really bad' would happen so I would have a real reason or 'excuse' to feel the way I did.

I just couldn't acknowledge the real impact David's death had had on me, partly as I didn't want to upset other people, especially Adrian, and because I didn't want to be upset myself.

I didn't want my life to be changed or affected and I didn't want the man I had divorced to be 'back in my life' in any way, even in his death.

But life happens and no one can control the way things turn out. And I quickly discovered that once I acknowledged my own grief, other people did too. I remember one afternoon, just lying on the bed sobbing and Adrian just lying with me, just being with me in my grief. It was a real turning point.

I know that the death of someone with whom you have had a difficult relationship can be harder to deal with, and the grief reaction more complex. But I could never have known how hard, how complex and how confusing until I experienced it myself. ■