

Remembering on a birthday

Bill Bytheway

BSc PhD

Visiting research fellow

Open University

Bill Bytheway was 14 when his older brother Ian died following a sports accident at school. Last year, more than 50 years after the event, when Ian would have been 70, he suddenly thought he would try to contact his brother's school friends and contemporaries. Here he describes the responses from some of these friends and reflects on why he decided, after all these years, to revisit his brother's death.

My brother Ian died on Tuesday 23 October 1956, following an accident on the previous Saturday while playing rugby for his school. He was 17, I was 14 and my younger brother, Andrew, was 12. Before discussing the experience of this loss, here are a few basic facts. At the time we were living in York and our mother was working as a part-time supply teacher. Our father was working in Nigeria, as he had done since before Ian's birth, returning home for a few weeks every 12 to 18 months.

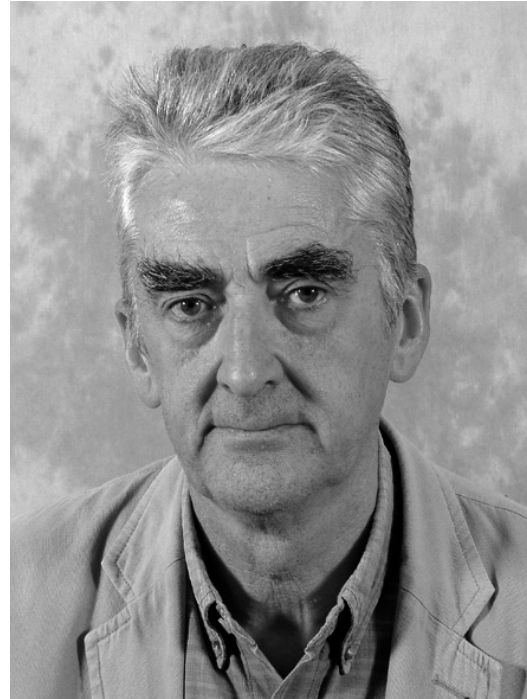
I was a spectator and saw the accident; it seemed no more than 'a bang on the head'. Ian was taken home but, the following day, he was transferred to a hospital in Leeds, where he died two days later. I believe Ian's body was cremated but I have no knowledge of any funeral ceremony, or of any commemorative plaque or stone. The school held a memorial service and I attended this with my parents (Dad had flown home). Andrew remembers being looked after by friends that day.

We got on with our lives. I, and then Andrew, went to university in London, and we both married within two or three years of graduating and didn't return to York. Dad died in 1982 and Mum died in 1995. Andrew emigrated to Cape Town two or three years later, where he now lives.

Those are facts. We are not a family that indulges in reminiscence, anniversaries and celebrations. We have photo albums and we preserve some memorabilia. Mum, for example, valued the letters the family had received between the wars from her younger brother, who was shearing sheep and looking for gold in Australia, and she arranged for these to be archived at the University of New South Wales. But, apart from two or three small framed photos, there was no similar effort to preserve mementoes of Ian and his life.

I have difficulty remembering the birthdays of my six grandchildren, but those of Mum and Dad, Ian and Andrew are etched on my brain. When, for example, meetings are arranged for those dates, I invariably think of them as 'their birthdays'. Even so, I have never felt the need to mark in any significant way the anniversaries of births and deaths.

Over the last seven years I have undertaken research on the relationship between age and birthdays, using the Mass-Observation



Bill Bytheway – revisiting his brother's death

Archive at the University of Sussex. In 2002, MO writers were invited to write about the significance of birthdays for themselves and their families. Much of what they wrote was about cards, gifts and birthdays, but I was surprised to encounter some moving accounts of how people experience and mark the birthdays of people who have died. Here are two contrasting examples:

'In general I feel that marking the birthdays of those who have died is not a very healthy practice. It is better to move on and to live in the present. A friend at school had had an older sister, hardly known to her, who had died some 6 years previously, and whose birthday was still observed by her mother. She felt less important to her mother because of the constant focus on the dead sister.' (P2546)

'I celebrated my 50th birthday at my sister's home in Pennsylvania USA, which was a memorable event but my 60th is the birthday I cherish most. I didn't know that it would be the last birthday our youngest son would be with us. He died five months later. His birthday was on March 10th, which was Mother's Day this year. We always take flowers to the Crematorium and sing softly "Happy Birthday". In our memory he'll always be 29 years old.' (S1534)

Shared memories

Last year, 2009, as Ian's birthday approached in January, there was a moment when I realised that it would have been (was?) his 70th. I spoke to Andrew on the phone and found myself floating the idea that I might send a letter to the York local newspaper, inviting people who remembered Ian or the accident to get in touch.

I was surprised and extremely touched by the response. Within the first week or two, I received 11 letters, most of them handwritten and all but one from men who had been pupils of the school at that time. Some of these correspondents indicated that they had heard about my letter through the grapevine, suggesting that the memory of Ian's tragic accident had become a link between them. Their vivid memories fitted with my recollections. For example, one said it seemed to be an 'innocuous incident'; that the week that followed was 'awful', and that Ian's death 'cast a cloud over the whole school'. Two explained that Ian was only an acquaintance, but it was evident in how they ended their letters that my invitation had stirred their memories:

'I hope this letter helps a little. Writing it has reminded me of your brother and what a great lad he was.'

'I am afraid I can't tell you a lot but am glad that I have had the opportunity of remembering a gentle man.'

One of the correspondents was my age and he wrote: 'We probably did not know how to deal with you afterwards when you returned to school! I too can recall being uncertain as to what was expected

of me. I remember for example, lying in bed and wondering if I was supposed to imagine Ian coming through the door.

Two of Ian's friends, Michael and Alan, wrote to me at length. I have a school photograph and they are in it, along with Ian and I. It is strange, looking at it, to realise that in 2009 they were 70-year-old men. What they wrote about Ian fitted in with my own fond memories, and it has been good to know that Ian has remained more than just a distant memory for other people. Michael lives in America and said that when he visits York he meets up with Alan and 'Ian's name is always one that is first mentioned'. He described his memories of the accident: first, his regret that he had opted not to watch the game, and then what he did when he heard about the accident.

'I went to see him that evening, but your mother said that it would probably be better that I wait and visit Ian the following day. Of course, when I arrived on Sunday, Ian had already been transferred to Leeds.'

The following day he had evening classes in Leeds and afterwards:

'I went to see him, but imagining his bandaged and tubed head I stayed outside the emergency wing for nearly an hour but could not summon the courage to enter: a second major regret.'

His long letter described other regrets and he commented on the fact that he had only met Ian in 1953 when he changed schools, 'so it was a very short time we had in which to develop such a close friendship'. His parents and our mother had been friends and he



Ian Bytheway – 'It has been good to know that Ian has remained more than just a distant memory for other people'

wrote: 'I believe Ian's passing affected your mother very deeply. She gave me the photo of Ian, a copy I have enclosed with this letter, shortly after the memorial service for him.'

Unlike Michael, Alan left school at 16 and remained in York. His letter included many self-deprecatory reflections: 'Whatever he [Ian] turned his hand to, he seemed to be good at, which was rather a sickener to we average mortals!' Despite this, Ian 'was the kind of guy who it was impossible to imagine that anyone could dislike or take exception to in any way, being completely laid back and easy going, yet a firm friend'. Alan had also experienced a similar loss:

'I can strongly empathise with you and your family's grief at the time, and indeed for ever afterwards, as I lost my younger brother at an early age, although he did have 20 years longer than Ian.'

His generous letter ended very positively:

'I hope the years have been kind to you, and indeed that they continue to be so, and I send my very best wishes to you and yours. Although poignant it has been good to put down these brief memories of your brother and my good friend, Ian. Yours etc. Alan.'

Filling in the gaps

Now, several months after my letter prompted these responses, I am uncertain as to how to describe my experience of this distant bereavement and its consequences. At a rather trite level, it could be claimed that I have effectively suppressed my grief for 50 years and that it is only now, towards the end of a full life, that I feel able to address it. My instinct is to dispute this explanation. Rather, I'm a pragmatist: fatal accidents happen all the time; Ian was unlucky; you can't bring him back; you've just got to get on with it.

One immediate impact of our loss was that Andrew and I no longer squabbled when seeking his attention and approval. Despite lacking any real talent or enthusiasm for the game, I continued to play rugby. I remember my last game. Because I knew it would be my last, I played with uncharacteristic frenzy and ended up not only with a blooded nose but with the firm knowledge that I would never again step onto a rugby field. I left the school feeling similarly disenchanting: I've not been tempted to retain or regain any links with the place.

An anonymous reader of a draft of this paper questioned my claim that I have not been suppressing my grief: might my decision to place the advert in the York newspaper be an example of 'reflecting on a life in later years and wanting to fill in some of the gaps in the narrative'? I have tried to understand what I have done

(and am doing) and I'm sure that it is related to having arrived in 'my later years'. If nothing else, I do want my grandchildren to know something about their Great-Uncle Ian.

More generally, in this age of the internet and documented family histories, I didn't want Ian to remain 'a mystery', little more than a name and a couple of dates. But, regarding suppressed grief, perhaps I should not be too confident in 'my instinct'; perhaps I have always needed to take time to reconnect with Ian's life and the impact that his loss may have had on me over the intervening years.

The same reader also asked if this 'review of my childhood bereavement' could have been possible while my parents were alive. This is a very searching question; the simple answer is 'no'. Arguably, in claiming to be a pragmatist who gets on with life, I was simply echoing the kind of things I know my mother would have said. She valued history and historical evidence – hence her interest in her brother's letters from Australia. But I have occasionally described her as someone who 'did not approve of death'. If she ever spoke of Ian in her later years, it was as if he was someone who happened to be dead rather than someone we all continued to miss. My father? Well that's another story. Had he not died before my mother, who knows what exchanges we might have had.

In adult life, I have periodically told friends and acquaintances about Ian and the accident. Generally speaking, this has proved to be a conversation stopper and constructing answers to the questions that sometimes follow has never been easy. At the time of his death, Ian had a girlfriend who kept in touch with my mother for some time after. But she moved away from York and eventually the Christmas

Perhaps I have always needed to take time to reconnect with Ian's life and the impact that his loss may have had on me over the intervening years

cards stopped coming. I remembered her name, however, and from time to time wondered about tracing her. It has seemed that she would be the only person who could offer me a different perspective on Ian: different memories and stories to those I share with Andrew. It never occurred to me that there might be other boys at the school who would share our bereavement, nor that it would be possible to reconnect with them more than half a century later. ■