

# The alchemy of words

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Samantha Gray's baby son Ben, one of twin boys, died shortly after his birth. Here she describes how writing helped her following his death. The article was inspired by Jane Moss's report in a previous issue of *Bereavement Care* (Moss, 2010) on the therapeutic benefits of a writing workshop for bereaved people.

On 20 May 2009, my new-born son Ben died. He was one of twin boys. Grief isn't new to me. My father died when I was 27 and I lost my mother to vascular dementia two years before becoming pregnant with the twins. Ben's death was different: it came as an awful climax to a decade punctuated by loss, and catalysed an intensely painful and confusing period of grief.

The death of a twin child isn't half a loss, and having a healthy baby to care for doesn't compensate for losing one. Yes, I have felt overwhelming love, joy and gratitude for my surviving son, but these feelings have existed together with sorrow; they haven't eclipsed it. At best, the death of one baby alongside the survival of another creates a fragile sort of equilibrium.

Ben's death was unexpected. A twin pregnancy is notoriously risky but mine progressed to full-term without complications. Everything had been fine up to the final stages of labour. I was fully dilated when the midwife realised that Ben had become lodged in a 'brow position', a rare presentation that made a natural birth impossible. I was taken into theatre for an emergency caesarean but Ben suffered a massive brain haemorrhage as the surgeon delivered him. He died in his father's arms three days later.

Within less than a week I had to process two births and a death. Small wonder that I felt shocked, confused, angry, guilty – a whole mess of conflicting emotions and thoughts that swung from one extreme to the next, intensified by hormonal fluctuations and the sheer exhaustion of dealing with a new-born baby. These feelings were underpinned by the constant ache of longing for the child I had lost. I felt out of control.

Guilt pervaded my thoughts constantly: how could I feel joy in Ben's twin brother Rio when Ben was gone? What was my grief doing to my other children? My sons had lost their brother, my partner had lost his son – I couldn't help feeling responsible for all this, even though rationally I knew I wasn't.

For as long as I can remember, I have instinctively turned to writing and reading in times of trouble, like a cat who seeks out the warm spot where the hot water pipes are. Words, for me, have always been a comfort.



I have written this article to chart how, in this period of distress and emotional confusion, writing at times failed me and at others provided an invaluable source of support. My relationship with words since Ben died has been erratic. At certain points I have no more wanted to pick up a pen than to host a dinner party. At other times putting pen to paper has been the single thing that has got me through the day. Looking back over the past 18 months, I have come to realise that the ways in which writing has helped me have been multi-dimensional: it has fulfilled a different therapeutic function as my experience of grief has changed.

Grieving for Ben while caring for Rio is the hardest thing I've ever had to do. Words haven't taken away the pain, but on some days they have helped me to manage it. I hope that my experience will be useful to practitioners who are using writing therapeutically to help bereaved people.

## Journaling

At first, and for many days following Ben's death, I felt completely detached and numb. I observed the emotional outpourings of family and friends from a sealed off bubble. I felt isolated and alone. Rio needed to be fed and cared for, as did my two elder sons, Joe and Frankie. I functioned automatically, but could still wonder when Ben's death would hit home. At this point I first attempted journaling.

This consisted of recording my thoughts and feelings in a notebook. The entries were sporadic: sometimes I wouldn't write for a few days, sometimes I would make several entries in the space of a few hours.

I thought that writing about it might help me accept the reality of what had happened to me. I was wrong. This diary extract, written while I was still in hospital, about a week after Ben's death, reflects my frustration with the writing process.

'How do you document the worst days of your life? Or why? What do I do with these feelings? Will putting the pain into words, giving it a shape, somehow diminish it? If I write it, will it be real? I'm so tired, so sad, it builds and builds but there's nowhere to let it out. We lost our baby ...'

Perhaps the shock I experienced in the beginning was nature's protection; it allowed me to look after my other children and continue to function when there wasn't the option to go to pieces. Possibly this inability to gain any benefit from journaling was also a form of instinctive self-preservation: rationally I might have been able to think that journaling could help; emotionally my brain needed time to accept what had happened before it could try to find relief in writing about it.

After these early, failed attempts at journaling, I put my notebook away, choosing to read instead. Getting lost in fiction seemed a much gentler activity at that time. I was too shell-shocked for expressive writing and it was some weeks before I felt the impulse to revisit my journal.

I picked up my notebook and pen again at a point when the shock of Ben's death began to dissipate, a few months after he died. My journal was a lifeline during this period: it was as though writing supported me as I began to feel again. In expressing myself I felt that I was beginning to move through the grieving process, rather than be stuck in it. This diary entry was made several weeks after Ben's death, following his funeral. It was an extremely painful period and I survived it, in part, because of the outlet that writing provided.

'A woman on the street grimaced and covered her face when she saw the tiny coffin in the hearse. Feel like Ben's death has made lepers of us. This grief is like a big blister – feel I want to burst it, to let some of the hurt drain away but it keeps growing. Pain in my throat, aching in my chest. Am I being punished for some crime I can't remember committing? How can I feel joy for Rio when Ben is gone? Sadness is like a constant ache, then guilt explodes. What have I done wrong? Maybe we didn't deserve to have both of them ...'

Another way in which the journaling was particularly beneficial was in helping me to manage post-traumatic stress. This manifested itself partly in recurring nightmares that also leaked into my waking hours. I experienced Ben's death, especially in the beginning, as a very physical loss and my dreams reflected this: I repeatedly dreamed of a hooded man cutting off my arms and

legs. During the day, I would have flashbacks from my time in hospital, of Ben's face as he fought for breath.

I didn't see a counsellor straight away. I didn't have time, so a notebook and pen were my only means to get these repetitious images and memories onto paper and out of my head. It seemed helpful just to narrate what had happened; somehow writing about it was like turning down the volume on my thoughts.

'On the Friday morning I was holding Ben and he had a fit, it was horrible ... The staff couldn't believe he was still alive. He was getting further and further away from us, on his own journey ... They moved us to the maternity ward. We were put in a tiny room overlooking a grey courtyard, there were bars on the windows. The room was cluttered with people and the babies' cribs ...'

Recording my thoughts and feelings also helped give me a sense of control. It was as though, by articulating my thoughts and emotions on paper, I was able to distance myself from them so they had less hold over me. I think also that reliving the scenes of Ben's short life in this way was my way of facing his death, of accepting he was gone.

'Ben had another fit as a nurse tested Rio's hearing. She asked if I wanted Ben's ears to be tested too, said that the hearing is often the last thing to go. We all knew there was no point. I told her to leave him. Rio was crying and my stomach throbbed. I felt angry and desperate and close to the edge ...'

Losing Ben had triggered older hurts and in writing about them I made some startling and insightful connections and discoveries. By this time, around four months after his death, I was seeing a counsellor. Journaling now began to produce flashes of clarity that enabled me to make some positive and important changes in my life. I realised I had been burying feelings about my mum's illness and death that had come to the surface in the midst of my grief for Ben. Journaling was really useful at this point – with the support of my counsellor, it helped me to understand that it was okay to be angry and to express that emotion.

'... I'm feeling like it's okay to put my own needs first. Some anger is starting to come out towards mum – it's always been there but now I'm beginning to understand why. I've never acknowledged that I had any resentment, had to push down feelings because of her illness. Ben dying has exploded it all out of me, but I think it needed to come out. Think I'm getting better at expressing my anger, being more assertive ...'

A few months into counselling, I went through a sort of healing crisis – an intense period where my mind was working overtime. Ben's death had made me see everything differently; it was as though I was shedding skins. A sense of urgency fuelled my writing at this point. Journaling became much more spontaneous and chaotic. Ironically, in order to attain a sense of control, I

seemed to need to relinquish it. When I look back at my writing from that time, I notice that it's a random mix of description, observations and feelings – a kind of stream of consciousness. I wrote the following during a holiday in Spain around nine months after Ben's death.

'Salt air sweetened by Spanish flowers – flashes of reds, pinks, purples, oranges. Surreal brightness ... Rio is asleep, my throat's sore ... I'm angry with the doctors, with the system, with everyone ... "You've got your boys" – that's like saying you've got food when you need to drink ... stillness here amplifies the sounds of thoughts, makes you realise how overcrowded your head is. Now the rain patters – smattering of sadness against closed windows ...'

## Words ... have sustained and supported me through the hardest time of my life

The expressive writing was for me the most therapeutic – when I just let the words spill out onto the page. My writing reflected my thoughts and feelings: messy, contradictory, often nonsensical and unpunctuated – allowing myself to go to pieces on the page seemed to help me to keep it together for my family.

### Creative writing

Creative writing helped me in a completely different way. My engagement with the creative process began around six months after Ben died. I felt as though I had reached a point where I was exhausted by my own search for answers. I felt suffocated by the intensity of my feelings. Grieving is exhausting and sometimes we have to switch off from it. For me, creative writing was a way to do this. It was also a breakthrough in that feeling able to write creatively reminded me that I could be happy for a while.

My creative writing was very different to journaling. It allowed me to escape, to lose myself in another reality.

At first, because my confidence and energy was low, the prospect of starting something new felt too hard, so I went back to a short story I had drafted before my pregnancy. The concentration that editing required was a refreshing distraction and, as I became absorbed in the mechanics of punctuation and grammar, the focus of my attention moved away from the problems I was facing.

Immersing myself in the dilemma of a fictional character was very therapeutic for me at that point. Even though she wasn't real, for the time I was telling the character's story I was able to empathise with her problems, her motivations and her needs. This forced me out of my self-absorption: I was connecting in a very real way to life outside of my own reality – even though this life was entirely fictional.

The main character in the story was a prostitute, trying to escape a spiralling addiction and to leave behind the man who was exploiting her. Her situation was very different from my own but there were parallels in our mutual desire for change and in the growing optimism we seemed both to be experiencing.

'One more job and she can go home. Just one, that's all. She knows with a sudden clarity this will be the last ... A gentle rain falls as the patterns of her existence become clear ... here and now a different future begins to crystallise, the freshness of rain brings new and real hope.'

The connection I was able to forge with this character seemed to ease my feelings of isolation. It was these first tentative steps back to creativity that showed me I could still experience the pleasure of using my imagination. I've found solace many times since then in writing both poetry and prose. Sometimes this writing has been sparked by my own experiences; often it is completely unconnected to them.

### Conclusion

I believe whole-heartedly in the healing power of words, even though there were times after losing Ben when all I could do was to feel the pain of my loss. I would urge anyone experiencing a loss to give writing a try.

The therapeutic value of writing is increasingly recognised, and there is a growing body of literature that explores the theory and practice, and outcomes – including Jane Moss's article in a recent issue of *Bereavement Care* (Moss, 2010), which prompted this article.

The usefulness of bereavement interventions that use writing may well vary from person to person. I believe that timing is crucial and that the most appropriate writing to use will be inextricably linked to an individual's evolving experience of grief. For me, in the early days of shock, writing in any form wasn't helpful. Expressive writing became increasingly therapeutic as I began to face and work through my feelings, and poetry and prose have been more beneficial as I have been able to become more reflective.

I will never get over losing my child, and cannot at this point envisage an end to the grieving journey. But I know there are many things that have and will continue to nourish and support me through it: the love of my partner, family and friends, music, sunshine, a great counsellor – and words.

Words have led me to clarity when I could find no meaning, and allowed me to experience the joy inherent in the creative process when I believed myself incapable of happiness. In this way they have sustained and supported me through the hardest time of my life. ■

Moss J (2010). *Sunflowers on the road to NASA: writing in bereavement*. *Bereavement Care* 29(2) 24–29.