

A grief displayed

Jacqui Parkinson

Textile artist

Devon

Jacqui Parkinson is a textile artist whose work is inspired by her Christian faith. In 2010 she toured an unusual exhibition entitled *Good Grief?* – a collection of antique hankies sewn, threaded and beaded to give personal expression through the medium of stitching to her own grief following the death of her husband.

My first husband, Rob Frost, was a Methodist minister. As a minister's wife I was no stranger to death and funerals. I was used to trying to console people in sadness and grief. But I wasn't prepared for the knock-out blow when Rob died of cancer in 2007. Like so many bereaved people, I felt wounded, physically and emotionally; I felt as though I had lost my identity and all sense of direction in my life. Moreover, personal circumstances forced me to move to Devon from my home of more than 20 years in London. Rob and I had spent many holidays in Devon, but I knew hardly anyone, and this added to my sense of isolation. People I met in the community were friendly but didn't know how to deal with this recently widowed stranger.

It was a bleak and very lonely time. I took up running, partly to obliterate my thoughts and partly to try to feel energised about something. I had never run before and certainly never saw myself as a runner.

As I ran, I started to develop ideas about how the words coming into my head might form part of some artwork that could be an outlet for my grief.

The previous year, for no particular reason, I had started to collect antique handkerchiefs. Using them gave me a sense of sharing my grieving with other people from earlier generations. Maybe the hankies had been used by someone like me who was mourning the loss of her husband, weeping for a son lost in war or crying for a dead mother.

The idea came to me of using these hankies as a canvas. I started stitching on the hankies, and built up a set of very varied pieces. I found that working on the handkerchiefs was very therapeutic, cathartic and contemplative. I stitched away in total silence, and that seemed to help the grieving process.

Stitching through the tears that I imagined I was sharing with people of past generations made me feel much less isolated. The repetitive action of pulling threads through fabric and the focus on tiny details – the intricate beading and couched threads – all played a part.

I didn't plan each piece; I just stitched intuitively, choosing a dark stone here or a red bead there and sewing them on



as my mood took me. I had some of the hankies printed with photographs of a remembered landscape or an important image. My Christian faith has always formed the basis of my textiles, and my work often includes words. I'd think of odd phrases that resonated with my loneliness, and words from the bible that reflected my sadness, and stitch them in. Titles of songs that came back to me also found their way into thread.

Poems also came into my head when I was running or as I rested on a bench where Rob and I used to sit together. I'd scribble them down when I got home and, later, I'd take pen and paper with me. I don't normally write creatively. It was a therapeutic, not a creative, activity. They are the raw thoughts of a recently bereaved widow. The only other times when I have written poems were also low points in my life – when my mother left home when I was 14, and one period when my marriage had hit a difficult patch.

Gradually, individual hankies took on themes: for example, one on death, one on sorrow, one on the future. Looking back, I'm astounded to realise that none of the hankies reflected guilt or anger, although of course I experienced these feelings as I lived through my grief and sadness.

By 2007 I found myself with a set of 15 handkerchiefs – not polished pieces of art for display, but the raw ramblings of my grief – a record of my personal journey.

An exhibition

I didn't originally intend the handkerchiefs to be for public display, as they were so personal. But several friends convinced me that they could reach out to a wider audience. It was strange paradox:

used as I am to putting my work on display, I've never before literally exhibited my innermost feelings.

The Deo Gloria Trust kindly provided funding, resulting in the exhibition Good Grief?, which started touring cathedrals in England in 2010.

I display the hankies stretched on aluminium frames. This provides a contrast with the soft materials and represents a metaphor for the grief experience – the sense of being stretched out in every direction and exposed to all to see.

To the bereaved person, grief is very personal, the pain is unique, yet many of the emotions and thoughts are universal. Many visitors have been moved by the exhibition, and many seem to find it expresses their grief. 'This shows people how I really feel,' wrote one visitor. 'I sometimes think I'm alone with all my feelings: thank you for showing me that I'm not,' wrote another.

Interestingly, exhibiting the pieces helped me to establish a distance from my own grief. My sadness was shared. My struggles

in my darkest times with identity, loss, personality and faith, aired publicly in the exhibition, have proved to be those of many others.

I am also working on two books: one for fellow bereaved people that draws on the hankies and other artwork as well as my poems, and one to accompany the exhibition. My hope is that the exhibition and the books will provide encouragement to others, perhaps reduce isolation, and invite people to join my journey, however briefly, before they continue on their own. ■

Visit www.good-grief.co.uk for information about where Jacqui's exhibition is currently showing and the books.

You can find out more about Jacqui's textile work at www.jacqui-textile.com

The Good Grief book is available to Bereavement Care readers, price £10 or 2 copies for £16, post free. Details at www.good-grief.co.uk.

