

The healing power of nature

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Caroline Jay founded and runs the Seeds of Hope Children's Garden, a charity which aims to promote the use of nature in helping children manage loss.

One summer's evening some years ago, I was a healthy, happy, young woman, 34 weeks pregnant, eagerly expecting the arrival of my first child. I had just returned from an NCT class when I began to feel unwell. I thought it must be something I had eaten. After an uncomfortable night unable to move far from the bathroom, I rang the midwife. Labour was far from my mind but she said I should go to the hospital just in case.

'I'm sure they'll just check you over and send you home again,' she said.

I was put on a monitor and told that I had a high temperature which had brought on labour. They would give me something to bring down my temperature, stop what I was amazed to find out were contractions, and send me home for another week or two. Within minutes however everything changed. They considered it unsafe to stop labour but they reassured me that the baby was fine, big for the dates they said. I would be giving birth that day! My husband dashed home for overnight things and some nappies. I was just getting my head around the unexpected imminent arrival when all hell broke loose. Suddenly everyone was talking over my bed as if I wasn't there. 'Take off your jewellery.' 'Sign this consent form please.' 'Your baby's in distress.' 'You need an emergency caesarean.' 'I'm just going to pass this catheter!'

The next thing I knew, I was struggling to come round from the effects of a general anaesthetic and trying to take in what the hazy doctor's face above me was saying.

'I'm very sorry your baby's dead. You had a little girl. Do you want to see her?'

Barely able to lift my arms to cradle Laura, our stillborn daughter, I was left in a partitioned-off corner of the postnatal ward next door to the Delivery Suite. I spent that first night listening to the cries of babies being born. To get to the toilet, I had to run the gauntlet of the rows of mothers with their newborn babies by their sides. Somebody asked if I would like to organise my daughter's funeral or if I'd like the hospital to do it. Eventually I was allowed home, still none the wiser as to what had gone so terribly wrong so very suddenly.

In the days and weeks that followed, I found myself completely out of balance. My hospital notes said I was a mother but I had no child. The supermarket, the streets (when I was able to venture out into them), even the newspapers, in fact the



whole world seemed suddenly full of babies and heavily pregnant women. The pain of grief was palpable. I had been given a one-way ticket into a world where childbirth was no longer natural, where babies died, a world in which there were no guarantees that I would ever become a mother.

But I was lucky enough to get pregnant again. When it happened, the subsequent nine months and the birth of my second daughter were not easy. Even when Zoe was born healthy and thriving, part of me was still waiting for disaster to strike again. Far from making everything magically alright, a healthy baby highlighted everything I'd lost. Perhaps Zoe picked up on my anxieties. What calmed us both was walking in the woods. I found contact with Nature and the outside world immensely healing and grounding at a time when my world was still upside down and the threat of loss was still so imminent.

Three years later, Zoe's brother Sam was born. As they both grew, they began to ask questions about their big sister. How did she die? Why did she die? Where was she? Would she come back? Questions like 'Where's heaven and how do I get there?' are never going to be easy to answer. By this time I had trained as a Cruse Bereavement Volunteer and was running a SANDS (Stillbirth & Neonatal Death charity) group supporting other families when a baby had died. Many of them were also struggling with how best to explain what had happened to their other children and how to help them manage their feelings of loss. Death is a big subject to handle and a difficult concept to explain! The huge range of emotions we may feel when grieving for any loss are not easy to manage – for children or for adults.

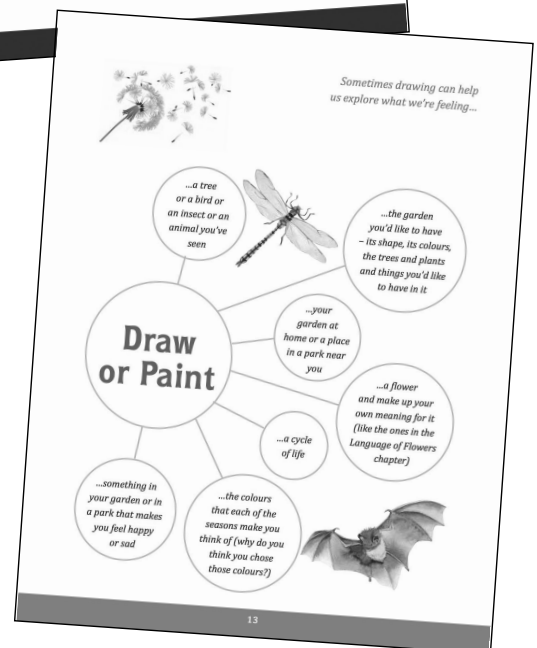
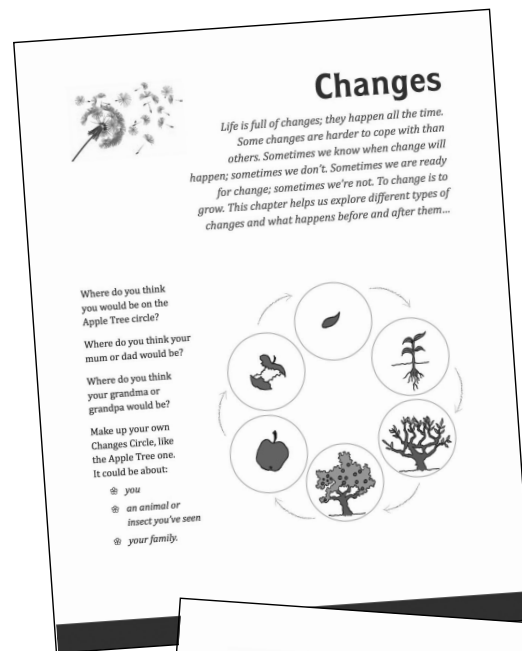
It is a natural instinct to want to protect our children from pain, physical or emotional, but I knew that this can lead to confusion. I knew that children fare better when given honest information.

I began to think of ways to help me talk to my children about death and dying and found myself turning again to Nature and the outside world for help. I realised so much in Nature echoes the changes that happen in life. None of us can live life without change. All change implies loss and new beginnings – and this is a pattern repeated over and over in Nature. I began to think of activities to encourage my children to get outside and get exploring.

How amazing to see frogspawn turn into tadpoles that then turn into frogs! Or a grub become a caterpillar that disappears into a chrysalis out of which bursts a butterfly! Lifecycles in Nature can help us understand that change and loss are part of a natural order. 'Death is a part of life is a part of death is a part of life is ...' and so on as the circle turns. A seed becomes a plant that becomes a flower that becomes a fruit that contains the seed from which a new plant will grow.

It was during this time that my children's primary school headteacher invited me to follow in the footsteps of a policeman, a fireman, a doctor and other 'professional carers' and come into school to talk about my work with bereaved families. The children (including my own) were all aged between 5 and 7, all sat cross legged on the floor. Once I'd carefully explained what I did, I asked if any of them had someone they loved who had died. Nearly 200 small hands shot up into the air. For some it was a pet, for some a grandparent, for some a baby sibling, for some a parent, an uncle or an aunt. The assembly had to be extended and I stayed afterwards to enable each child to tell me about their experience. I returned over the next weeks to do some follow-up work with the children using activities that I continued to devise around Nature and her cycles of life. We made a giant Memory and Loss Tree. We drew round leaves on coloured paper and cut them out. The children wrote down their loss on a leaf and then they wrote down a happy memory on another and we stuck them to the tree.

Over the years I kept adding to my growing collection of activities and observations of ways in which Nature can help us, adults and children, in dark times. I set up a charity to establish the Seeds of Hope Children's Garden, designed around the four seasons with a circular path that runs through them all; a garden that families and schools could visit in times of loss. One such school contacted me to ask if I could help as a little boy in Year 6 had died very suddenly. The staff were distraught and worried about appearing upset in front of the children. I shared with them how I felt in the weeks and months after Laura's death, how I found it helpful to link that very dark time with the seasons and the darkness of winter. It helped me to consider that each season is important in the flow of life. Seeds need to be in the dark to germinate. From the dark of winter we can appreciate the light of spring and all the new growth that that implies. We discussed activities for the children based around feelings and seasons. We also found examples in nature of the lives of living things being



cut short for different reasons. Armed with a range of activities to do with the children, the staff arranged to take the whole school to visit the Garden – but they could just as easily have taken them to any park or open space.

Laura would have been 27 years old in 2014, the year that the *Seeds of Hope Bereavement & Loss Activity Book* was published. The aim of all the activities in the book is to provide structure for and clarify the grief process for a child allowing them to see the natural process of the cycle of life in Nature. I hope the *Seeds of Hope Bereavement & Loss Activity Book* will empower children to explore their feelings in ways they can understand – by drawing, playing, exploring and above all having fun. If the book proves to be helpful to any young child struggling with loss of any kind, then it will be a fitting tribute to Laura, her brother and sister, and all the bereaved children who have shared their experiences with me.

A review of *The Seeds of Hope Bereavement & Loss Activity Book* is on p34 of this issue of the journal.

Jay C, Dale UJ (illus) (2014). *Seeds of Hope Bereavement and Loss Activity Book*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.