

Lost and found

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I was a clinical psychologist who worked with R D Laing, I have worked as a family therapist, group facilitator and even grief counsellor, I have meditated in temples, ashrams and churches and monasteries, have undergone shamanic rituals, encounter groups and silent retreats, but nothing prepared me for the depths of what happened when my son died suddenly at the age of 34.

Tim partied hard. But he had been off all alcohol and drugs for six months as he and his wife were planning a family. That night he had gone out and partied as he once could have done with impunity, but his tolerance was gone. He went to bed and never woke up. Tim was generous, gifted, funny and passionate, he was loved by his wife, his family and a wide circle of friends, he was a successful writer and had just sold two of his books to Hollywood – suddenly he was gone.

Death forces us to redefine our relationship with the one who dies

When someone we love dies, their body is buried, burned or fed to vultures. Their touch, their smiles, their voice, these are gone forever from the material realm. We will never eat dinner with them again, nor swap presents at Christmas nor pick up the phone and hear their voice. In the beginning we will find no comfort anywhere because in all directions he or she has gone. And even when we know our love keeps us connected forever, this loss is inconsolable. But the pain of our bereavement forces us to redefine and reconstruct our relationship with the dead person.

The dead may have relocated to within us rather than without, to beyond rather than here, but wherever our beliefs locate them – in our hearts, in heaven, under the earth or in the energy fields of existence – our love will seek to form a new relationship with the one who has died, simply because love will always find new ways in which to express itself. Though this journey is unique for each one of us. We each navigate the dark waters of death differently. As EM Forster wrote: 'Even if there is nothing beyond death, we shall differ in our nothingness.'

One person might have vivid dreams of their loved one, someone else might hear voices, another might see visions, another may gaze into the emptiness and discover themselves differently, another might find new songs to sing and so on. We live our own life and die our own death. Yet, whatever the form



our grief takes, universally the dead are no longer with us in the body. They may be waiting to meet us in another realm, in another place, within or without us, between us or beyond us, but they are not where they were. To find them again we must first let the dead die and completely bury them. This is because we can only re-meet them as they are, not as they were.

One woman I spoke with had kept her daughter's bedroom exactly how it had been on the day she died for seven years. Nothing had been moved or in any way changed from that dreadful day. It was simply too painful for her to let her daughter go into death. She told me, 'But then one day I realised that I had to move on, and so did my daughter. I went in there, opened the windows, cleaned up and gave her clothes away. That night I placed an extra seat at the dinner table and told the family, "we now have a dead daughter who belongs with us in her rightful place – in our lives not in a shrine upstairs." And I began to find her again, as my dead daughter.'

We need to find the dead, not only in death, also in life; else life loses important dimensions of meaning. How and where we find them is up to us.

We are responsible for how the dead live with us

When our individual body dies and decomposes or is burned, all that was connected with our survival dies too. Our fears, our self control, our protective strategies and defence mechanisms, our personal hopes and fears, our intellect and cognitive mind, these all die with the body. Yet we are about more than survival. Our struggles include a search for authenticity, freedom and integrity, we extend beyond purely personal concerns and act with generosity, love and altruism, we create qualities such as laughter, play, creativity, beauty and wisdom. And these qualities live in a multitude of ways – in the hearts and minds of those who loved us, in memories, in the extended mind, in heaven, in transcendental realities beyond space and time, in the living legacies of all who knew us, however we like to describe it. But the dead are no longer persons.

Whatever conflict or struggle we had with them, we now have to resolve within ourselves. Whatever the unfulfilled longing or desire we projected onto them, we now have to seek its resolution within our own heart. We, the living, not the ego-less dead, are responsible for how the dead live with us. We can forget them or we can invite them to live in our hearts. We can consign them to the void of non-being or our lives can become their home. We can turn away and build walls with our grief or we can welcome the dead back into our lives differently. How we journey through death with someone will be as unique and complex as was our relationship with him or her while alive. Death ends a life, but not a relationship. Though the nature of that relationship has to change.

When Tim died I was overcome with grief, yet also had a strong sense that he was with me at times. I would hear him telling me he was fine, that all was well and there was nothing to worry about. I felt him come and sit next to me. I had vivid dreams in which we met and hugged and talked. But I wanted more than this. I wanted to know who was this Tim and what was happening to him. I wanted to know where he was and in what form. I wanted proof that my sense of Tim was somehow real and not all in my own head. Though it might have been I just wanted him back.

Before I could find Tim again as he is, I had to let go the Tim that was. I had to stare right into the sun that is death without blinking and see that the Tim I knew in the body, with his dimpled smile, his flat cap, and his passion for hip hop and reggae, this Tim is no more. All of that Tim dissolved when his body died. This is the inconsolable loss and irreparable heartbreak. Yet each time I let my grief wash over me, the catharsis was healing and I felt the past release me. When I wept over Tim's cold body in the morgue, I sensed my body was beginning to let his body go. I had to let go his future, my hopes, my future, his birthdays, Christmas, grandchildren... so many things. I had to face that there would be no more summer holidays together, no more conversations over dinner, no more playing poker with him into the night. I deleted his last message



to me on my phone, put the last photo of him into the album of his life, gave away the sheepskin boots I had bought him for his birthday and so on and so on, each time this was accompanied by another wave of loss in the longest good-bye of my life. But something else was also happening.

When I cried over memories and because there would be no more such times together, I felt I was letting go of the past and bringing our love into the present. Each time I let go of an aspect of his life, my love for Tim was released from where it had been held in memories of the past or locked into hopes for the future, and arrived more potently in the present. And this is where I found Tim again. Our new relationship was forged in the present because he is with me not in time, not in the 3-dimensional space of matter, he is here, deep in this moment.

Whoever we love shares in our being-ness

While we are alive, the dead live on in us. We are their living legacy. George Eliot wrote: 'Our dead are never dead to us until we have forgotten them.' Yet when people we love die, we *never* forget them. They live in us. They become us. They *are* us. When people say they think every day about someone who has died, they do not mean they consciously apply their thoughts to remembering specific things that happened; they are saying this person lives on in them. The dead do not live with us in a projected future or back in the past; they have left the dimension

of time and live with us only in the here and now. And to bring all our love to the present we have to first let them completely die. That is where the heartbreak lies.

The terrible and wonderful task of creating a new relationship with the dead lies with the living because the living are still moving, breathing, working, doing; the dead are dead, they simply are. Just as one day we will be too. This task is terrible because it involves staring into the dark void of death. It is wonderful because we encounter dimensions of the same mystery that gave birth to us. Whether we describe death as a journey to heaven where angels lead us into paradise or a dark flight down into oblivion, the living create such myths, the dead simply inhabit them.

The languages and symbols we use in our search for what we have lost, for the transformed connection, for the meaning of death and therefore life, can take many forms. These range from descriptions of spirit worlds, heavens, saints, gods and demons, to memories, projections, internalised objects, and transferences, to quantum energy fields, black holes and dark energy, to inconsolable loss, heartbreak and grief. When Tim died I needed the myths and psycho-spiritual narratives of a range of cultures and traditions to help me. And each supported me in a different way.

For a long time I was obsessed to discover what was real, which myth or description of death was true, until I realised this is not the issue. What I was seeking was not in the narrative or myth; it was in my search, in my struggle, in my heart. I no longer care what beliefs or language a person uses to find again their relationship with a person who has died, that is not the point, the relationship is, the love is. And love never dies. Fear dies, separation dies, desire dies, the ego dies, the individual body dies, but love does not die. Love lives on beyond death.

When someone we love dies, we all discover, in the end, that love is greater than death. Through the unbearable anguish of loss we let go of the dead as they were in life and come to realise that even death does not break the interconnectedness we have with them. We discover that people, animals, projects, communities, ideals, art, enquiry, justice, whatever we have loved, these all share in our being-ness. And even death does not change this. Death can change many things, but not the interconnectedness of love. Death ends lives but not relationships. The dead become part of who we are and enrich our being-ness through their presence in our lives.

Death can be described as a transformation from matter to energy, actuality to potential, time to eternity, form to spirit, doing to being, existence to oblivion... yet however we describe it, although our relationship with the one who dies continues, it has to change. Our connection with the dead is not merely a passive fact; it is a dynamic relationship.

After Tim died I had many vivid dreams in which we met and talked about his death, my grief and the nature of death itself. I learned many things about death from these mysterious dreams, but after a year we said our final goodbye and the

dreams ended. Even though our love remained, he had gone. Except it was not the end.

It was his birthday four years after his death. I was heartbroken all over again at the loss of him in the world. That night I had a lone vivid dream.

Martin, my husband and Tim's stepfather, and I are moving out of a house to go on a journey. We are carrying bags and as we emerge from the basement to leave we have no hands free to turn on the light at the bottom of the stairs. Suddenly Tim's hand stretches over my shoulder and turns on the light for us. I turn in surprise and there he is, smiling, very close to me right on my shoulder. I am utterly delighted to see him. No tears this time just sheer happiness to see him again. And I see in his face the innocent happiness of Tim as a child and the mature wisdom of the man. All of Tim is here. 'And I am as close as close can be,' he tells me.

I wake up and yes, he is as close as close can be.

Even death cannot destroy love

As soon as I heard Tim was dead I knew my old life was over and that I would never get over his death. And I won't. And I don't want to. I had to integrate this devastating loss into my life. It takes a long time to discover that although the person has died, the relationship we had with them does not die – it transforms. Anyone we have loved shares in our being-ness, and we can never lose that. Through our grief we find a new way of being with them in our hearts. But first we have to let them go in the longest goodbye of them all. This is the inconsolable loss. But as Washington Irving wrote: 'There is a sacredness in tears. They speak more eloquently than ten thousand tongues. They are messengers of overwhelming grief... and unspeakable love.' I had to grieve this irreplaceable, irretrievable and inconsolable loss in its fullness, because only then could I turn around and find Tim again in a new way, in my heart, in life.

When Tim died I made a vow to him that I would take care of his wife – and I did. We are very close. Five years later she is with another lovely man and has a beautiful baby. Tim, my dead son, her dead husband, is now part of all our lives, including hers, including her new partner's. Not of course as a person, as a form of love. We might personify his presence as a spirit, or an angel, or we might describe this presence as an energy field or vibration, but really we are speaking of our love. Fortunately Jo's new partner understands this and has also opened his heart to me. I had imagined that I would discreetly fade away when her new partner arrived, even more when their baby was born, but they have insisted Martin and I are part of their family. And of course I am delighted to have a beautiful little grandchild given to me. The love has grown through what was the most dreadful loss.

First we have to weep the inconsolable tears of those who have lost what they love so much. Then we discover we have not lost the love we had with that person, it is always with us. This

love is the great discovery in death. We find the love in which we find ourselves, each other, and all that we have ever loved. Or perhaps it is the love that finds us.

When someone we love dies, often we want to die ourselves because we think that is the only way to be with them again. But as long as we are alive we will find them in life, not in death. Where are the dead? They are waiting to be found in our hearts. They are waiting for us in the singing of birds, the wind in the pines and moonlight on water. They visit us in our dreams, flashes of memory and ritual anniversaries. The dead are wherever we are. We meet the dead here and now, because this is where we all are. Just as they are waiting to meet us in our death when we too will become part of the eternal belonging

beyond all duality. That re-meeting may not be as you and me, us and them, he and she, and more a vast communion beyond even the duality of being and non-being, yet in the eternal now, outside time, we are as close as close can be with those we love for eternity.

Anne Geraghty's son, Tim Guest, was author of the best-selling memoir, *My life in orange*. Her book, *Death, the last god: A modern book of the dead*, describes her journey through her grief and also her exploration of the meaning of death in our modern world. This article is an edited extract from *Death, the last god* published by O-Books in November 2014.

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