

Finding the gifts in grief



Kathryn Rosenberg BA DipHHB MASW

Education Facilitator

Dorothy House Hospice Care

kathryn.rosenberg@dorothyhouse-hospice.org.uk

Abstract: So many of the conversations had around death and grief focus on the negative. As individuals and as a society our conversations around these sensitive topics are frequently peppered with words that describe and define the experience as a battle or a struggle. We focus on what it takes from us and we rail against the unfairness and injustice of it all. What follows is somewhat of a game of devil's advocate, born out of the author's experience in which she has sought to flip the prevalent narrative on its head and delve in to another, less talked about side of grief – the gifts that often lay hidden amongst the sorrow waiting to be uncovered.

Keywords: death, grief, gifts, growth, meaning

'Sometimes the 'unfinished' are among the most beautiful symphonies' (Frankl 1959)

For someone to whom the written word normally comes so easily, I am painfully aware that no matter how eloquent I try to be in the writing of this that there are no words that can do justice to the true reality of grief, to the experience of watching someone you love die. My intention when I first started writing this article was to talk about the difficulties of losing a sibling but when I sat down to write it something suddenly dawned on me. So many of the stories and literature out there focus on our fears and anxieties around dying, about our negative experiences of grief and death. All of these stories have their place and they all have something valuable to contribute; these stories are important because in their willingness to share their journey honestly, the authors help to bring the realities of grief out of the shadows and in to the light.

Pain, loss, grief, loneliness, confusion, isolation – all of these can form a part of the reality of bereavement, yet it is not the only reality, it is not the only story that deserves to be told. So I have made the choice to tell you a different story that reflects the other side of that reality. It is a story of love and hope, of resilience and growth, of meaning and purpose. It is a story that I hope will highlight that from great despair can come a great hope, that it is possible to grow with, and through, grief and go on to become the people we were born to be.



Kathryn (left) and Janine

Before I do that however, there are a few things that should be mentioned first. Every single one of us is unique and therefore every single one of our journeys will be unique. This journey is very much my own, told very much from my own

perspective and through the unique lens from which I view the world. It is not meant to serve as a blueprint for grief, it is not meant to serve as a yardstick for people to measure their own journey against and then question if they're 'normal' for not grieving in the same way or for feeling the same things. People may read the title and wonder what possible gifts could come from grief. Know that in writing this it is not my intention to paint a Pollyanna picture of grief or to do a disservice or injustice to my own grief or that of others. My intention is purely to share my own perspective on what the journey of grief has been like for me, focusing not so much on the trauma but instead on the gifts that grief has unexpectedly brought in to my life.

Three years ago my sister Janine died from Cystic Fibrosis at the age of 25. We are not separate from the suffering of others, and so part of their pain and suffering becomes our own. Sharing that life experience with someone who is so deeply woven in to the very fabric of your being means that you will bear witness to a rawness and intimacy that will forever change who you are and how you see the world.

I helped care for Janine in the last four months of her life and I was with her when she died. At the age of 31 I have seen and experienced things that many people twice my age have never seen or experienced. That is not a judgment of others but more a way of explaining why growing up I often struggled to relate to my peers whose lives were so very different from my own. How many other 24 year olds sit by their siblings' bedside in the ICU while they recover from a double lung transplant? How many other 28 year olds watch their sibling die? It's certainly not the norm. You grow up, and you grow up fast, you live in an adult world surrounded by adult issues from a young age and no matter how much your parents try to protect you and normalise things (as mine did) it affects you in ways so profound that I often struggle to put it in to words.

Janine and I grew to be incredibly close as we moved in to young adulthood; alongside being a daughter, being a big sister was my most treasured role in life. She was a strong, courageous, determined, funny, intelligent, and creative woman and it was the greatest honour and privilege of my life to call myself her big sister. Her death completely turned my world upside down and the difficulty I faced both before and after her death is an important story to tell, but it is not that story that I want to focus on here. Instead, I want to frame my experience of bereavement around the following quote from Elizabeth Kübler-Ross:

'I am convinced that these experiences with the reality of death have enriched my life more than any other experiences I have ever had.' (Kübler-Ross, 1975)

I believe that the greatest gifts in life are often born out of the most challenging and devastating of circumstances. Those things that are most worthwhile often await us at the end of a road that is difficult to navigate. In the days, weeks, months and years that follow, it can be almost impossible to see them. Yet even on my

darkest of days I felt Janine's presence, her voice whispering to me that while her physical journey on earth was complete, mine was not, that together we still had a lot we needed to do and that in time, when I was ready to receive them, I would find those gifts and use them to make a difference.

As someone who likes to look at the bigger picture, I constantly look back at how the dots have joined up in my past to get me to where I am now. I cannot begin to comprehend where I am or how that person came to be without connecting it to what has come before. I am who I am today precisely because of all those individual moments and experiences that make up my past, and while each has shaped me in to the person I am, none has so dramatically altered the course of my life than the day Janine died.

In being present in that moment I was given a gift that very few people my age are given – an awareness of my own mortality, for which I am incredibly grateful. It might not sound like an earth-shattering insight; after all, we all know we're going to die right? Yes, on some level we all know it, the logical part of our brain grasps the concept of the life cycle, of birth and death, and yet on a much deeper level we fear it. We fear the loss of control, the fact that everything we work so hard for will one day die with us, we fear how it might happen, we fear not just the loss of our own life but the loss of the lives of those we love, and that fear panics us. We're okay with watching death on the big and small screens, far removed from the reality of our own lives, after all, that's entertainment. But when it comes to having to apply the concept to ourselves and those we love, we struggle. And so we don't talk about it. Most of us rush through life, constantly chasing things – money, possessions, people, 'things', 'stuff' – we produce, we accrue, we exist, but the big question is do we actually live? Before Janine died had I been asked that question I would have no doubt scrunched my face up with a slightly bemused and puzzled expression on my face and said well of course I do! As it turns out I would have been wrong because what I thought was living was actually existing and there is a big difference.

So whether I liked it or not, Janine's death ripped off the sunglasses I had been unknowingly wearing for the first 28 years of my life and shoved in my face the reality of life and death. Each day I am grateful for the fact that they were ripped off at 28 and not 88 or worse still, never. I remember driving home from work one day not long after Janine died and watching the most magnificent sunset I had ever seen – I know for a fact that there had been many such lovely sunsets in my life before that one but I cannot describe a single one of those to you like I could this one, because while I had glanced at them I didn't actually see them. I remember two weeks after Janine died, sitting on the sand at one of her favourite beaches with my parents watching a little red ladybug on my towel and thinking about how long it had been since I had seen one – how I often noticed them when I was a kid and then how they just seemed to disappear. Turns out it was my childhood ability to be present and really see things that disappeared, not the ladybugs.

I notice all of these things now, all the things that I never gave more than a fleeting glance to in the past as I rushed through life, always anxious to get to the next stage, never fully appreciating where I was or stopping to enjoy it. The world provides us with so many gifts that we never stop to enjoy because we're too busy and I think our souls really suffer for that – I know mine did. The world is so hectic, life is so busy, our bodies crave the connection to the natural environment that so many of us have lost. Not only do I notice things now but I actually stop to enjoy them, conscious that they may not come again, grateful that I am alive to experience them. There is a stillness and calmness in me that was never there before, a genuine joy and contentment, a deep appreciation and love of life, an ability to just *be*. If that is not one of the greatest gifts in the world then I don't know what is.

Janine's death was a choice-less event in my life over which I had no control but what I do have control over is how I choose to move forward. I believe with all my heart that we can grow through our pain and suffering and become better people for it. I'm not going to lie – this is not an overnight journey but what I will say is this: grief has given me so much more than it has taken from me. I value and appreciate life more, I'm grateful for what I have, for the people that love me and who I love, for the very blessed and rich life that I'm privileged to lead.

That's not to say there isn't sadness and days when my heart aches because I miss Janine so much, days when I tear up even thinking about her and when it physically hurts to not be able to hug her and to hear her laugh. I have days when I feel utterly distressed by the fact that each new person that comes in to my life doesn't know her, and in not knowing her there is a huge part of me they can never really know or understand. That has been, and always will be, my biggest battle – that feeling of frustration of not being understood, that feeling that people don't know who I really am.

I attribute a large part of who I am, who I am becoming, who I will be and the things that I will go on to do, to Janine. I am grateful that when she died, all the qualities that she possessed that I didn't, somehow managed to make their way from her soul in to mine. Janine's death has provided me not just with a deeper understanding about life in general but with a framework from which to really explore the meaning of my own life. I have grown through this experience and become a much stronger and more resilient person than I ever thought I could be.

We are all going to die, there will be no exceptions to this, and if life plays out in the order it's meant to I will be faced with

this situation many times over. While I will be no less devastated next time around I no longer fear what I now know can be an opportunity. My heart aches for the people who are given the message by society that they need to quickly glue the pieces of their broken hearts back together again and make themselves whole. Grief is the price we pay for loving another human being so completely; the cracks that it leaves in our hearts are what allow the light to shine in, why would we want to hide that? There is a beauty and a strength that comes from this kind of vulnerability and in my opinion the world needs more of it, not less. I see Janine everyday in the world around me, I feel her walking beside me and so I know that nothing dies forever. A part of me died and went with her, just as a part of her remains with me, out of which new things grow. I know she will always be a part of me and I will forever feel her strength when I need it the most. Our story together is not yet finished and that is a beautiful gift to hold on to.

'We must never forget that we may also find meaning in life even when confronted with a hopeless situation, when facing a fate that cannot be changed. For what then matters is to bear witness to the uniquely human potential at its best, which is to transform a personal tragedy in to a triumph, to turn one's predicament into human achievement. When we are no longer able to change a situation....we are challenged to change ourselves.' (Frankl, 1959) ■

Kathryn Rosenberg moved to England from New Zealand in 2014 and has been working as an Education Facilitator at Dorothy House Hospice for the past year. Before that she worked as a social worker and Manager of the Family Support Team at Totara Hospice in Auckland. She completed her Masters in Social Work in 2012 and is the editor of the sibling newsletter for The Compassionate Friends.

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not reflect the views, opinions, or position of Dorothy House.

Frankl V (1959). *Man's search for meaning*. Quoted on Good Reads (Internet). Available from: https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/2782.Viktor_E_Frankl [accessed 20 November 2014].

Kübler-Ross E (1975). *Death: The Final Stage of Life*. New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc. 125.