



Exploring grief with photography



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On 16th January 2011 Joshua Amos Harris Edmonds was tragically killed in a road traffic accident in Vietnam. Josh was 22, and three months into a once-in-a-lifetime journey that would have taken him across the whole of South East Asia. In the four years since his death, Josh's family have continued to remember their son in a number of exciting and innovative ways many of which involve photography. As a filmmaker and a psychological therapist, his parents Jimmy Edmonds and Jane Harris have used their combined disciplines to explore both artistic and therapeutic responses to the grief they now experience. In this article Jane and Jimmy introduce just some of the projects they have been involved with since Josh's death.

Remembering Josh

When our son died we were thrown into a state of confusion that perhaps only bereaved parents will recognise. Strange though it may seem we were also advised by friends and professionals alike, that sooner or later, in order to continue living our own lives in a socially acceptable way, we would need to 'forget' Josh; we would need to get over his death and move on. This never happened. Instead we found ourselves desperately trying to find ways of keeping him in our lives despite the fact that for many this seemed to represent some kind of denial, an impossible fantasy that was bound to end in psychological disaster. For others though (especially his own friends) our insistence that we would (could) never ever let him go clearly meant a truer acknowledgement of their own feelings of grief but it also produced a bond between us all that had not really existed when Josh was alive.

Our website beyondgoodbye.co.uk was designed initially as a memorial site for Josh – a place where friends and family could come to remember – but has now grown to become a resource for many others who grieve for a son or daughter. It houses a

number of film productions, two of particular interest to those affected by the death of a son or daughter. *Beyond Goodbye* documents our attempt to create our own funeral for Josh, and the impact we believe it has for the remainder of a life with grief. *Say Their Name* was made as a promotional video for the bereavement charity The Compassionate Friends, and is the only film available in the UK made especially for bereaved parents by bereaved parents.

Take a look at the website and you will find hundreds of photographs in various galleries and articles. We have made a special point of using photographs not just to recall memories of Josh (of which there are many) but to create new and arresting images as a way of keeping his memory alive.

Released

The first of our projects was *Released*, a book of photographs and writings that document the moment when we took charge of our son's ashes. They were contained in a standard issue green plastic urn labelled with Josh's name, the date, the crematorium number, the funeral director, and the enigmatic notification that

these cremated remains had now been 'released'. The question of exactly what this meant became the starting point for Jimmy's attempt to come to terms with Josh's death as represented by his ashes.

Jimmy writes: 'It seemed to take ages before I could bring myself to record in any way the fact of Joshua's death. But as a film editor by profession and a photographer at heart, I guess I was compelled inevitably to produce something out of this tragedy. In the end I found making this book an important way of coming to terms with our loss.'

'We were already thinking of making some kind of film tribute to Joshua, but this is necessarily a collaborative process, and I did want to speak of Josh in my own way, and on my own. We all have different ways of dealing with grief and there is a moment when this must happen in solitude.'

'In a sense the book is as much a memorial to Josh, as an exploration of photography itself... as I wrote in the book, there is a "chaos of meaning lying at the heart of photography which mirrors almost exactly the confusions I have felt since losing him." I've also long been aware of the intimate possibilities between photography and poetry and I wanted to explore how pictures and words could address some of the many conflicting emotions, images and visions in my mind... and stories too, particularly the story of where Joshua is now.'

Despite the chaos of meaning that Jimmy refers to, these photographs of Josh's ashes represent moments that would be completely lost were it not for photography. More, they are records of a ritual in which the making of a photograph is an integral part. The first part of the book depicts the clouds of dust that were 'released' as Jane transferred our boy's remains into a glass vase. The resulting formations with the sunlight dancing



Released – Ash cloud § 6

though them, seem to present a new metaphor, some might say for a spirit life, others could perhaps glimpse of more stories to be told with and about Josh. A further section of the book is more reflective. These are close ups of the ashes sprinkled over Josh's own photographic image or providing a graphic landscape partially obscuring his smiling face. In one he seems to be playing a kind of hide and seek, inviting us to enter into this new world he has found. Or does he? The living Josh of whom this is a photograph had no idea that his image would be seen in this way, but we now engage with him (eye to eye so to speak) as if he did.

In *Released* Jimmy notes that he has a choice – in the uncertain world we now find ourselves in where 'daily existence has ceased to be self evident', he can find comfort and continuity in the 'spectrum of his photograph' and the illusion of life it represents, or he can confront it in 'the waking of [its] intractable reality'. In the photographs Josh is both alive and dead at the same time.

James Showers, the funeral director who helped with the funeral, says he literally gasped when he saw these photographs – 'treating them with such delicacy, as beauty not as leftovers'.



Released – All that remains

Grief is hard grinding work, but the photographs in *Released* confront the reality of that grief in a truly unique way. The very fact of photographing these ashes may seem sacrilegious to some, and the way in which Jimmy has spread them over close ups of Josh's image are heavy with complicated emotions. But they also show how it is possible to move away from the intensity of such loss and to create a lighter space where a continuing relationship with the deceased can grow and develop.

Making it real – death and photography

Josh's younger sister Rosa has also used her photography to explore what his death has meant for her. Just 18 at the time of Josh's death, she spent much of her time on a Foundation Art Course creating a body of work concerned almost entirely with the themes of photography and death. In one essay, *Making it real – death and photography* she posits the challenging question of how far is the very act of taking someone's

photograph a subconscious attempt 'to protect ourselves for when that person dies'? Are we in that moment of recording our loved one's image assuaging our own fears of death by anticipating its use as a memorial?

'After my brother's death', she writes, 'we as a family collected all the pictures of Josh that we could – a hugely important part of our efforts to come to terms with our loss; these were of course all pictures of Josh alive. Overnight, they had all become memorial photographs – each snapshot becoming more poignant – and over time these "found" images of Joshua have gained even more significance being used over and over again: at the funeral, parties, memorial days, and given to people as gifts. The image below, for example, is a photo that has gained a kind of iconic status. Josh first used it as his business card, but now it's become a memento for people to put in their wallets and on their walls to remember him by.'



Josh's Business Card

In her final project *In Absentia*, an exhibition of photographs and sound recordings, Rosa continued this theme as an exploration into the shared experience of loss. She asked family and friends to hold one of Joshua's personal belongings and has then crudely cut it out of the photograph. On the opposite wall a three metre long photograph depicts all these objects, displaced if you like but collected together as a kind of memory bank. Notable in this work is the absence of a single image of her brother, an extraordinarily strong statement that not only makes her loss very real, but by placing her audience in the middle of this void between memory and loss, she is in effect bringing them (and us) together in a collective act of contemplation, not so much about what we have lost, but more about how we can accept our common grief as our new reality.

Psychotherapist, Fiona Rodman (author of *Sifting for gold – mourning and transformation*) observes 'a damaging emphasis in our culture on mourning as primarily an isolated, individual and finite process, ending in the cutting of the bond and "moving on". For me', she writes, 'what Rosa achieved in her brave expression of her loss ... bore out my own experience and findings. These are that in mourning we ongoingly need others. We need to communicate, not be shut away in an isolated process. Far from cutting our bond we need to nurture and transform it. This is not

a denial that the relationship with our dead loved one will never be the same again but that we need to build this relationship in a new way and that we fundamentally need others in order to be able to do this.'



In Absentia – Rosa Harris Edmonds

These ideas of a 'continuing bond' and a 'shared grief' inform much of our current work. We believe that the hard work of grief is best rewarded through acts of making things, of finding ways to interpret and record one's continuing relationship with the deceased. As Jane writes: 'Bereavement and loss are transformative experiences and as such are extremely fertile ground for creative expression whether this ties in with an attempt to challenge the silence that often accompanies death, or a purely personal catharsis.'

Exploring grief with photography

Many bereaved parents are of course doing things to remember their child all the time, from small daily rituals to starting charities and running marathons; and new technologies allow us to record these and share on social media sites. Photography proves to be one of the most accessible ways of remembering and sharing. At last year's gathering of The Compassionate Friends (TCF), we road tested *Exploring grief with photography*, a new workshop we wrote and designed to introduce participants to 'the art of looking at and the art of making photographs as a way of maintaining an ongoing relationship with a deceased loved one'.

Jimmy writes: 'On Saturday 11th October 2014 Jane and I had an opportunity to share our joint skills in photography and therapy. We ran a photography workshop for bereaved parents and siblings – *Exploring grief with photography*. Our two disciplines seemed to gel together seamlessly and the first part of the course went well – the participants split into groups and shared the photos they brought along. We had a good turnout



In Absentia – Rosa Harris Edmonds

– two 90 minute sessions both completely full – most with very little practical experience of making photographs but all with a huge number of stories and memories to share. The room buzzed with emotion. Both therapy and photography are ways in which to seek beyond the surface layers and discover hidden emotions. And while photography can have a more tangible result they are both very much processes in which everyday realities can be tested and revealed anew. At least this was the approach we hoped to explore.

‘We asked everyone who signed up to the sessions to bring along at least three photos of their child, pictures that have a particular resonance or evoke a special memory. In the small groups we formed, words spilled out and across the room in a veritable hubbub, a cacophony even, of voices all trying to describe their feelings, all trying to convey their emotions. But at the same time the mere act of vocalising our thoughts, of telling the narrative seemed to get in the way of really connecting with these photos and the child within. In a sense words were failing us.

‘At this point then we asked people to remain in groups but to sit quietly and merely observe their images, together and in silence. In the hush that followed Jane used her “mindfulness” techniques, encouraging us to stay in the moment however difficult the feelings, to try and lose a sense of time and to find a connection with our child that is “now” and something more than just memory. It was extraordinary, as the words disappeared and the emotions took over, hands felt for another to hold, an arm went around another’s shoulder, tears began to form and frankly, I was stunned.

‘Photographs of course are always memories – they are always of the past; of something that has already happened. You cannot take a photo of the future. But while they are always of the past, they are also always in the present. And like memory their meaning or the meaning they have for us can evolve with time, sometimes radically and overnight. We recognised this in the photos we had brought of our children ... innocent snapshots that have now become overloaded with longing and painful fantasies of what might have been.

‘There are two aspects to this business of exploring grief with photography. There are the photos we already have of our child who is now dead. Photos that were taken in all innocence of what the future might bring, now portals to our memories holding us close to a life that once was, both ours and theirs. And there are the images that we can now make – post tragedy – of the lives we now inhabit, both ours and theirs (do they not live on within us?).

‘Further into the session we asked the participants to choose just the one picture in order to “reframe” it in a way that will bring it more into the present. Our purpose was to experiment with ways in which we can keep an on going relationship with our child by employing one of memory’s most valuable assistants –

the photographic image. People divided into pairs and together attempted to create a photograph that reflected some of these concerns. In a way what we were trying to do is to weld together the past and the present – the past with all its longings and the present full of our current desires – and in so doing rebuild our sense of a future. As all bereaved parents will know, when your child dies, you are immediately thrown into a world in which the future has very little meaning. But in this act of re-photographing our child’s image we began to see some real therapeutic possibilities in the way we can continue our relationship with her/him with less pain. With the photographs we now made we could forgo the “what if’s” in favour of the “might be’s”. We might even imagine a time when we can look upon their face and smile again and know there are more photos to come many of which we haven’t even dreamed about – yet.’

We took a version of our workshop to the Cruse Bereavement Care Conference in July 2015.



Exploring Grief with Photography workshop



Exploring Grief with Photography workshop – Deb Taylor

Some of the parent's thoughts and feedback ...

'I have been so sad that we have no new photographs of (our child) and now I feel I can put all our pictures into a new context'

'looking at my picture of (my child) was so hard ... I have always thought I was so totally rubbish at photography and not really interested in it but it has inspired me to do more in the future'

'... maybe the tears are necessary and maybe they feed the creative process ..'

Visual metaphors

In the TCF workshops we were concentrating on re-photographing an already existing image but there are so many more ways of photographing our grief. We also accept that for some the image of their child still holds too many painful reminders or that they might want to focus on a more abstract sense of their grief. Grief after all is such a complex range of emotions that finding words to describe them often seems to result in cliché or just seem very ordinary, and nothing like what we are truly experiencing.

And this is where making new photographs can help to play a part. We can learn to express our thoughts and feelings in a language that is not so literally tied-bound. By finding the visual metaphors that are in a way unique to us and that express our grief, ours and ours alone, we can interpret our feelings and our experiences in our own way. In a way this is our route to honesty, something others are bound to recognise. We may also find that despite the very solidity of a photograph (this did actually happen – this person did actually exist) the language of photography is very fluid, that photos in themselves hold no particular meaning outside of the way they are viewed. But isn't that a bit like grief anyway – a constant slipping and sliding of feelings and emotions around a central fact – our child has died. ■

About the authors

Jane is a Senior Accredited Individual and Couples Therapist and Supervisor with The British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy. Jimmy is a BAFTA award winning documentary editor and has now cut over a hundred films for the BBC, Channel 4 and other broadcasters. Together they produced *Say Their Name* for the Compassionate Friends as well as *Gerry's Legacy* for Alzheimer's Society and have recently received a substantial funding from the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust and the Jessica Mathers Trust to produce *Good Grief*, a documentary project in the USA and Mexico.

Jane is a Trustee for The Compassionate Friends and a member of National Council for Palliative Care People in Partnership Group as well as a Dying Matters Bereavement Champion and Jimmy is a contact for TCF.

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