

There are so many words



Thomas Harding

Thomas Harding's 14 year old son Kadian died while cycling in 2012, leaving Thomas, his wife Debora and daughter Sam (then aged 13). The following extracts are taken from *Kadian's Journal*, Harding's moving tribute to his son and exploration of grief.

The last few seconds of Kadian's life keep flashing through my head, like a series of film frames on a continual loop: We are heading down the final slope, Kadian drifts ahead of me, away from me, I see the van speeding from left to right, Kadian is hit and dragged out of sight. The memory has the feel of a 1950s home movie; too much contrast, the sound too crisp, the colours too rich. I see it again and again and again.

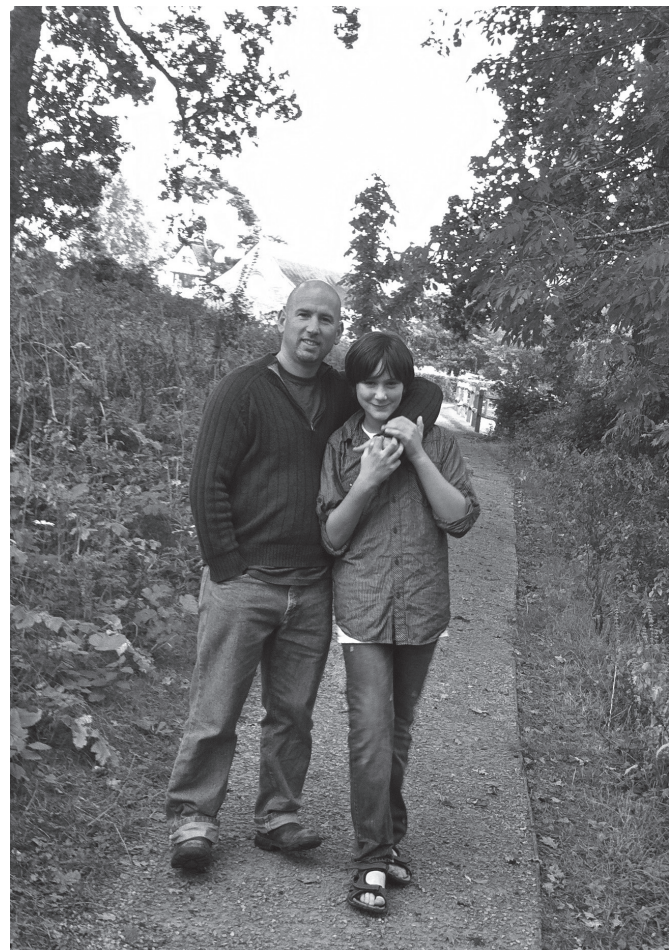
Is this post-traumatic stress disorder? Am I having flashbacks? Or is this just a memory – horrific, shocking – but only a memory? Deb tells me I need help.

A week later I am sitting in front of a therapist. She has a thick Greek accent and is warm and welcoming. She offers me a glass of water. From her window I can see a wide swathe of trees swoosh back and forth in the wind. She expresses her thoughts with elaborate gesticulations. And she talks to me. There are no periods of uncomfortable silence.

I tell her that I don't know why I should continue living, that I have no urge to move forward, that my life has ended, that I am truly broken. She pauses for a moment and then tells me that it is through Sam that I will find meaning. 'Hold on to that thread,' she says. 'Hold on to that thread.'

I am grateful to be in the hands of someone who is confident, someone who will take command of my rudderless ship.

I then tell her about the looped images. She tells me that she is not surprised, that they are symptoms of PTSD, that I am likely to be experiencing both grief and shock. In fact, she says, I look as if I am still in shock. I question her – surely shock only lasts a short while, a few hours at most. I have had shock before – your knees feel weak, your heart races, you feel a little unstable. No, she says, you can feel shock for weeks,



Kadian and Thomas, first day of secondary school, courtesy Harding family

even months. What I had experienced was the worst thing that anyone could experience. I had witnessed the violent death of my child.

As I leave, I pull the therapist's front door behind me, but not all the way. A sign perhaps that I need to come back.

Late into the night, around two or three in the morning, I talk to Deb again about the memory – which I have now titled 'The Final Fifteen Seconds'. The final fifteen seconds, cycling through

the woods, laughing and calling to each other, the descent, Kadian pulling ahead, me not being able to reach out to him, Kadian being hit by the van. Over and over again. Each time making my body shake in terror.

She tells me that she feels a similar pain. She was stranded halfway round the world, sitting at the end of a phone as medics pounded away at her son's chest, trying to bring him back to life.

'I'm glad you were there,' she says, 'it is beautiful that you were there.'

The words make me angry. How could she be glad? How could it be beautiful?

She sees my reaction, and continues. 'If you hadn't been there it would have been worse. We would have wondered, "Did he suffer?" Because you were there we know that he did not. It is beautiful because you were there for his birth, and you were there for his death. If it was going to happen, as a parent, how else would you want it to be?'

The workings of the brain are a mystery to me, no more so than in these days after the accident. Her words are like salve to my soul. A knot in my brain has been unpicked. From this point on 'The Final Fifteen Seconds' stops its incessant cycle. She has given me a tremendous gift. Not only by transforming a moment of iconic horror into one of magic, but she has given me hope that, with a little compassion and insight, my madness might abate.

* * *

Three weeks after Kadian died the parcels start arriving in the mail. Desperate for a road map out of our madness, Deb has ordered a pile of books from Amazon.

For as long as I have known her, Deb has sought mastery of her world through books. There was a time when we had over 10,000 tomes in our house. Books were stacked in wobbly piles on tables, counters, even on the floor. When we moved from the USA back to England we gave most of the books away, Deb promising to relocate her library to her iPad. But with Kadian's death, her need for paper-based products returned, and for this I was thankful. Like her, I needed a road map out of our new-found hell. Surely there was someone out there who could help us.

I start with the best-sellers. Most of these are based on the premise that grief is something that you recover from, that you surmount. They are prescriptive, suggesting that grief is comprised of a series of distinct stages that one must travel through, as if hurdles to jump over in a steeplechase. The most famous book is by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Loss*, in which she lays out five distinct stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance.

None of these books speak to how I feel. They confuse me. They leave me with a deep sense of unease and inner conflict. For how can grief be something that I want to recover from? The concept feels disloyal to Kadian. And if I no longer grieve his loss doesn't that mean that I don't value him, that I don't miss him? As to the 'five stages of loss', I seriously doubt that everyone experiences the same process of grief as if it were some

Newtonian law. I suspect that my experience will be far messier, without neat periods of beginnings and ends.

I plough on with my marathon reading session. I am told time and again that things will 'get better', that I must be patient, that though the pain feels too much now, it will lessen. Angrily, I toss these books aside. The most offensive, I tear into sections and dump in the woodshed behind our house.

Thankfully, there are exceptions to this litany of literary self-help bullshit. Within these few I find not only wisdom, but gentle counsel. I connect with their candour, I am liberated by their brutal honesty, I am guided to calm respite.

In *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Joan Didion describes her life after her husband of forty years dies of a heart attack. 'On most surface levels I seemed rational,' she writes. But not on all levels. Didion, a woman of letters known to be sensible and even-headed, confesses that she sensed, magically, that her husband was still present in her house. Her words reassure me.

I too have, somewhat alarmingly, sensed Kadian. I speak to him in the quiet moments of the morning when I am half asleep and my internal editor has not yet clicked in. I see him in the garden mowing the lawn. I catch a glimpse of him out of the corner of my eye as I eat my cereal in the morning.

I am intrigued by Didion's style. She tells it like it is, recounting her experience with brutal honesty, sprinkling her unvarnished prose with raw facts. For instance, she describes the medical cause of her husband's death in graphic detail, as she does the unsuccessful intervention of the emergency workers. Her writing is objective, detached, clear-sighted, which appeals to me as an investigative journalist and former documentary maker. As I read her book I realise that I too have a thirst for the facts that surround Kadian's death.

I also look at Rabbi Harold Kushner's book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. I read that those who have lost a loved one often feel that they deserve tragedy, that they have it coming, a result of some universal karmic force. This way of thinking can quickly lead to self-loathing, self-abuse and depression. The rabbi writes that the power of condolence is that people gather around you and say, 'This is terrible, but you don't deserve it, you



Kadian with his dog Duke, courtesy Harding family

are a good person.' When I read this I tremble, the knowledge confirming my own thought processes. I feel a profound sense of gratitude for all those who have gathered around us.

In Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*, he describes his experiences as a Jewish prisoner in Auschwitz. I am fascinated to read about his attempt to find meaning in such a hellish situation – is it really possible? Most of all, I am struck by his description of his own mental process, that even as he arrived at the camp he became acutely aware not only of the shouting of the guards, the miserable conditions and the fear tearing at the other prisoners, but also of his own curiosity, and that this impulse to learn and understand, to gain mastery of even the worst situations, provided him with some small comfort. I realise that I have been ashamed of my own curiosity; Frankl gives me permission to observe my own reactions to Kadian's death.

And I gain solace in the writings of the contemporary philosopher Ken Wilber, particularly his *Grace and Grit*, in which he describes the final few months of the life of his wife, Treya. As she lies on her deathbed, the victim of aggressive cancer, she begs him to search for her in the years to come. He reluctantly promises, 'I'll find you, honey, I will . . .' knowing that he is agreeing to the impossible. But, in the months after her death, and this is the part I find helpful, he realises that he has indeed found her. For Treya had extraordinary integrity, honesty and compassion, and every time he meets these characteristics, he knows that he has met the mind and soul of his wife.

I wonder, can this be a way forward, a way to keep Kadian close even though he is gone? Though it sounds simple on paper, in practice this feels like a stretch. How can I hold him fast if I know he is dead? Shall I hope to overcome grief, as the self-help gurus have suggested? Will the pain subside over time?

* * *

Kadian's death hasn't changed any of my relationships, it has just made them clearer. The people I already felt comfortable with, I still feel comfortable with. It doesn't matter what they do or say, only that they are here, with me. While others, whose company I have previously found awkward, can utter no words of solace, can perform no acts that will make me feel loved or secure. I have learned, and it has taken a while to discover this, a lot of heartache, that it is best to avoid these people altogether.

Such thinking may sound judgemental, ugly, even toxic. Surprisingly, and embarrassingly, a large amount of my time after the accident has been spent caught up in this type of analysis, cataloguing my behaviour as well as the behaviour of those around me. Who called to share their condolences? Who did not? Did people say 'Kadian passed away' or 'Kadian died', or resist naming the tragedy at all?

I have also become obsessed with words: the many nuances and meanings of phrases and expressions, the tone in which they are delivered. Since Kadian's death, I have become fascinated by what people say to us. I am an aficionado of grief expressions. Perhaps it is my way of taking control of a situation in which I have lost all control. The most common are stock phrases which actually pop up when you search the Internet for 'things you

should say to people who are grieving'. These include: 'I am so sorry for your loss', 'my condolences', and 'if there is anything we can do . . .'

But the one that is most often repeated, the one which I hate the most, is 'There are no words . . .' This drives me nuts. There are so many words. Like 'Our world is broken', or 'How is it possible to keep living?', or 'Kadian was the most beautiful boy', or 'Why the fuck is this happening to us?'

Oddly, the same words can be uttered by different people with opposite effects: some reassure, while others offend. I can never quite figure this out.

* * *

What is the correct word for what I am experiencing? Is it grief, sadness, trauma, bewilderment? And what am I? I am a parent who has lost his child. I am bereaved, I am in mourning. Each of these words I tease over, allowing my mind to explore their nooks and crannies, tasting how they sound, how they feel. None is perfect.

A child who has lost his parents is an orphan. A husband or wife who has lost their partner, a widower or widow. I ask those close to me if they know of a word that describes me. No, they say, surprised.

Is it too awful to describe? And if so, what does that mean? I decide to find a name. I go online and quickly discover some examples. In Hebrew, *horeh sh'khol* means 'parent who loses a child', and the Diyari, an Australian indigenous tribe, have the phrase *ngama mirka*, which means 'woman whose child has died' (*ngama* = breast/milk, *mirka* = hole). Yet these do not feel right to me. They are compound words. I need something more specific. I establish some rules: I am looking for a single word meaning 'parent who has lost a child' or 'parent whose child has died'.

I reach out further. I ask a translator, but she cannot think of a word. An expert in Eastern European languages tells me the same.

There are websites dedicated to this discussion; I find a couple of articles and even a book: *When There Are No Words*.

One academic proposes that we invent a word. She suggests *violmah*, which in Sanskrit means 'against the natural order'. But I don't know if a made-up word can carry enough significance.

Some people suggest that perhaps there are no words to describe a parent losing their child in any European language because child mortality is now so rare. But these languages were spoken when infant mortality was common. Two hundred thousand children died in Britain in 1905 alone. In France, Spain, Russia, Germany the numbers are similar. And yet none of these languages has a word.

Now a little obsessed, I begin to contact professors who specialise in exotic languages. Through chat rooms and blogs I locate some ethnologists who study in South-East Asia. Yet none of them knows of a word. I reach out to anthropologists who study remote peoples such as the !Kung in the Kalahari Desert, the Yanomami in Brazil, the Masai in Kenya. Again no words.

Then I am lucky. I discover three groups who do indeed have an appropriate word. In the Putjarra language, spoken by many of

the indigenous people who live in the Australian Western Desert, the word *kampu* means 'bereaved parent', and can be used for either the mother or the father. In the Kurna language, which is spoken by an indigenous group who live in the Adelaide Plains in South Australia, the word *murdanyi* refers to 'mother whose child has died', and *wikarnti* means 'father whose children are dead'. In the Chichewa language, which is spoken in Zambia and Malawi, the word *ofedwa* describes a bereaved parent.

I now have three words to describe myself, words that are actually used by people somewhere in the world today: *kampu*, *ofedwa* and *wikarnti*. I chose *kampu*, because it starts with the same two letters as Kadian's name.

I am a *kampu*. It feels strange, foreign, but isn't that exactly the point?

* * *

I receive a text message from my agent. A national newspaper wants me to write a tribute to Kadian.

My first reaction is I'm too tired to do this, I just need a break. But then I realise what a gift this could be, after the brutal intrusion of the coroner and his court.

Each time I speak about Kadian, his life, his death, it gives me a sense of control, release, engagement. Whenever I remain silent, I feel withdrawn, madder, out of control. I know we will be opening ourselves up to further scrutiny – we have not yet begun to recover from the inquest – and from my time as a journalist I know that we will be making ourselves vulnerable by interacting with the national media. Yet it feels right, and, with Debora and Sam's blessing, I write an article of fourteen hundred words.

The editor I am working with is sensitive and compassionate. He even allows me to make last-minute changes well past the deadline as I try to get Kadian's tribute just right.

Around midnight the night before publication I go online to see if the article has been posted yet. It has. I see the headline:

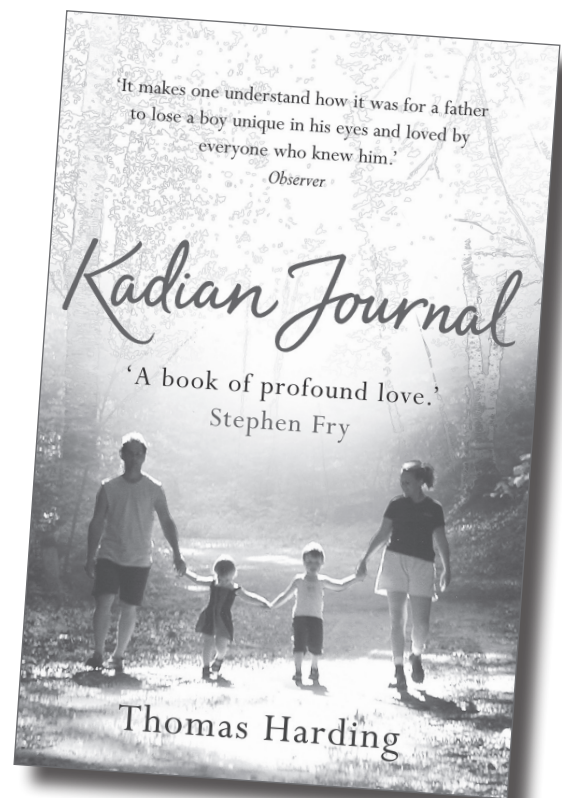
I SAW MY BEAUTIFUL BOY ON THE ROAD. HE WASN'T MOVING.

I am shocked to my core. And angry that the newspaper is doing this to me. To us. I know Deb will be very upset by the headline. I call the news desk and explain my concern, that this article was meant to be a tribute, that the headline is gratuitous, focusing on his death, not the life well lived. The man who takes my call says that he will see what he can do, perhaps the online version could be changed, but it is too late for the printed papers which have already been sent to the shops.

In the days that follow I think about my reaction. The sub-editors had simply taken a line from my article, and made it into a headline. Why was I so upset? Certainly, the paper had done nothing wrong.

I realise that seeing the headline was like being told that Kadian was dead, for the very first time. Seeing it was not partial surprise, new information piled on top of old. It was fresh, sudden, startling – as if I knew that he was alive, and then that he was not.

This makes me understand that when people talk about acceptance as being one of the stages of grief they don't have



it quite right, at least for me. For me, there are many points of acceptance. Let's say 200, for the sake of argument. By the time I came to write the article I had perhaps experienced twenty such points: seeing Kadian on the road, telling Deb, the ambulance man informing me that he was officially dead, telling Sam, seeing him in the hospital, the death certificate, the burial, and so on. Each one was like being told for the first time. Each one, an instance of revelation, shock and then acceptance. And I realise that I probably have many more of these instances to go, say another 180. I won't fully accept his death until I have endured each one. Perhaps this will never happen.

* * *

I would not be surprised if one day I woke up and he was back. Where have you been? I would ask. Oh, away, he would say.

I would be so glad. We would hug, and laugh, and share stories. Soon I would be cooking him a meal, and he would be telling me some goofy joke, or teasing me about my bald head, or telling me about some gadget or other.

And I would stare at him, in love with him, loved by him, just wanting a few more seconds with my beautiful boy.

And as I write this, I hold on to him, not wanting to let him go, not wanting to feel the loss, to feel him slide from my grasp, which I know I must, and then, too soon, he's gone.

Kadian's Journal is published by William Heinemann, and the extracts are published here with permission of the publisher. For more information about Kadian, and the projects set up in his memory, please visit www.kadianharding.com

You can listen to an interview with the author about *Kadian Journal* at <http://penguinblog.co.uk/2015/04/24/audio-extract-kadian-journal/>