

What will survive of us is love – an interview with Cathy Phelan

Daniel Phelan died of bowel cancer on 11 February 2015. He was a writer, publisher, and charity expert. As his wife, the artist Cathy Phelan, says 'Danny was a wordsmith and a powerful, generous, diffident, beautiful man.' Almost a year after his death, Cathy started work on a life-sized papier mâché sculpture of a horse that serves as a powerful memorial to Daniel. The sculpture features in a documentary called 'After Daniel' that Cathy has made with filmmaker Peter Bach. In one of those coincidences that can seem to mark life, Jessica Mitchell had actually met Daniel and Cathy in their home on the day before he died. This was through a previous role Jessica had in organising support services to people with cancer.

Cathy talked with Jessica Mitchell about Daniel's death and the art works she has made in the time since.

Jessica: It dawned on me as I watched the film 'After Daniel' that I had met you and him. It was a visit that stayed in my memory as Daniel was so warm, open and full of life and I was shocked to hear the very next day that he had died.

Cathy: I am so moved that you came to see him and had that connection. I remember at the time being almost annoyed that you turned up because I was so tired. We were having loads of home care which was amazing but if you are the carer you have five sets of nurses a day and you are running up and down stairs trying to make small talk and not really having the energy. It all sounds terribly ungrateful but it is so much better if someone wants to be at home as Danny did.

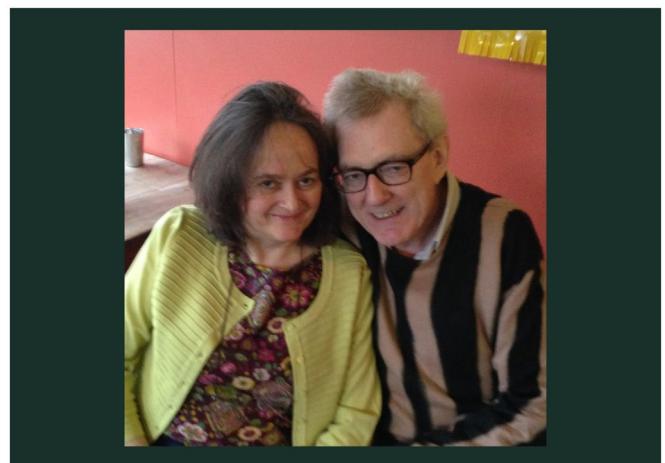
Jessica: When did you know Daniel wasn't going to recover from the cancer?

Cathy: What happened was that he had emergency surgery and I was happy as I thought they had found what they were looking for and it would all be ok. However, Danny, being the pessimist, kept saying that something was wrong as the doctors were just walking by the bed and not saying anything. Finally, one afternoon, the senior doctor and some others just came in and pulled the curtains around Danny's bed. Danny asked 'how long do I have?' and the consultant just told him that he had one month to live. Thank goodness I was there. But, the funny thing was, Danny then just



Daniel was a publisher and social entrepreneur. Through the company he founded - Civil Society Media - he was responsible for introducing a much needed rigour to the reporting and accountability of the charity sector. He founded The Charity Awards in 2000 in order to celebrate excellence and innovation in the sector. He was greatly respected for the intelligence and integrity of all that he produced.

passed out and it was a few months later that I realised he had actually forgotten the diagnosis. We were at a clinic and a doctor told him he was doing so well when they only thought he'd last a month. Danny just said 'what, really?' and I had to tell him yes. He had totally blocked it out. I remember going home after we were told and I didn't know what to do with myself. I started frantically emptying cupboards and clearing things out. When I woke up the next morning I thought, why is all of this stuff on the floor? Then I thought, well he is going to die and I am going to



Cathy says 'This photo is of us in our favourite Indian restaurant in Peckham in December 2014. It was the last time we went out for something to eat as Danny was already struggling with food. Danny and I were together for 23 years. I finally succumbed to his desire to marry me in the last year of his life. We were, in fact, married for just short of 9 months.'



The horse at a screening of the film 'After Daniel'. The film is currently awaiting general release. The Chief Executive of Cruse Bereavement Care, Debbie Kerslake, is on the right, checking out the horse. Photo © Erroll Jones.



Cathy with some of the sculptures she has made since Daniel's death, including 'The Halfway to Heaven Tree'. Photo © Diogo Duarte www.diogo-duarte.com.

have to sell the house and move. It was like I immediately went into survival mode. When it hit Danny that he was dying he said 'I am 57, so is that going to be the age on my gravestone?' He found that difficult to digest but happily he lasted much longer than a month.

Jessica: How was Daniel at the end?

Cathy: He was very happy to see people. He was giving me instructions, giving people at work instructions. He was terribly intelligent, work was his life, and he was on it right until the last. Virtually until end there wasn't any mental deterioration. A friend also came the day you did and he was talking about the news. I mean, it's your last day on the planet and you are meeting new people and having conversations with them. How wonderful is that? It's magnificent.

He didn't really take a downturn until the last 24 hours. I think there may have been some development in the disease. I don't know; I don't really need to know. Some of his clinicians came in and wanted to discuss with me what

had happened and I said to them that I didn't really need to know. His body was weak and just gave in, in the end.

Jessica: Were you with him?

Cathy: It was when I wasn't in the room which I was very annoyed about. I had gone downstairs. It was half past nine in the morning and I was folding tea towels. I mean, can you imagine a more ridiculous thing to be doing? I suddenly got a sense of urgency and I thought what am I doing? Why am I folding tea towels when there is someone very, very ill upstairs? So I came rushing upstairs and I couldn't see him breathing and I thought, he isn't breathing. But, he was in one of those hospital beds and they are very soft and you can't tell sometimes. I thought to myself - is he breathing, isn't he breathing? I held his hand, tried to take his pulse, couldn't feel his pulse and then I thought, pulses can be very weak. I was just staring and staring at him and I thought he's really not breathing. But he was warm so he must've just died I think.

Then I was very upset that I was not there. I have talked to a number of practitioners and therapists since then who have said that people often seem to like to die on their own. Sometimes you get whole families coming into the room and then they go out to get coffee and the person dies then. I was terribly annoyed and upset at first that I wasn't there but I am not anymore.

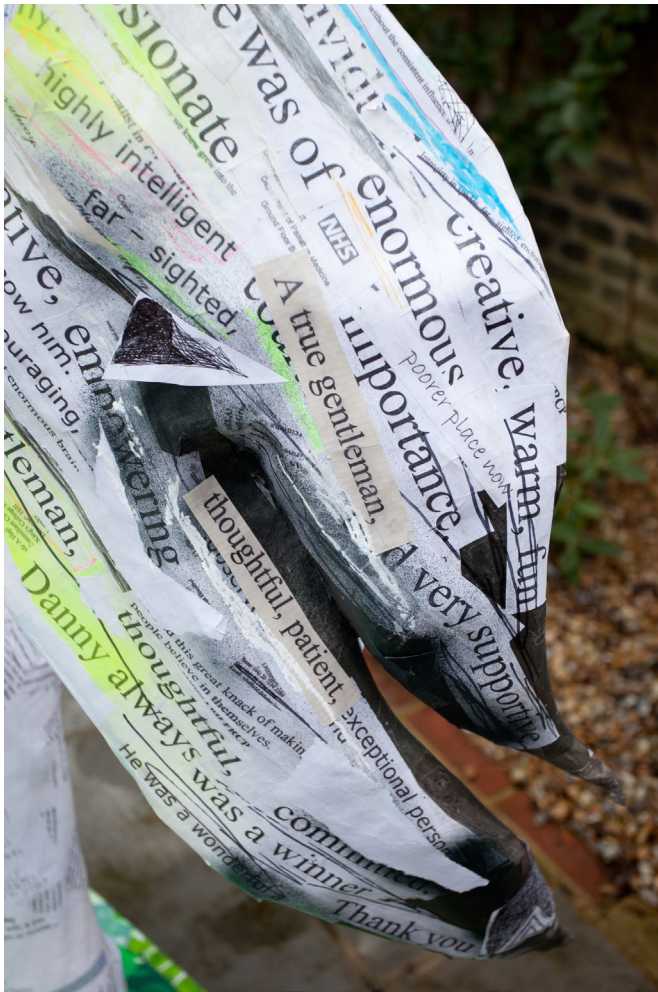
Jessica: How was your last year together after he was diagnosed with cancer?

Cathy: We had loads of time together in that last year. I just cared for him all the time. We talked about things and I always said 'we' such as, 'we are doing chemo'. He quickly adopted that. As much as possible, I did not want him to feel alone in this; although obviously we are all alone. So I just adopted that word 'we' and he adopted it as well and it seemed to make him feel less alone by using it. The semantics of how we dealt with it were important and useful.

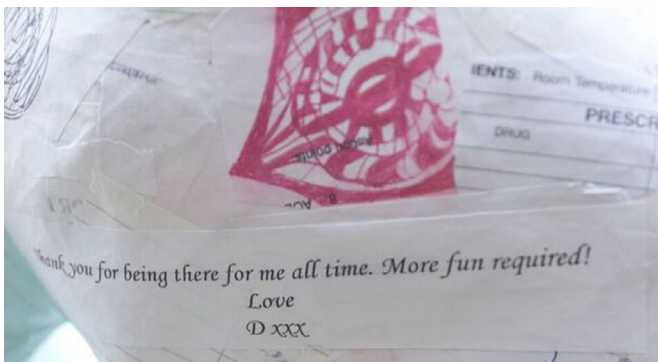
That year together was incredibly important. He used to tell me a lot that he loved me and I know why. He wanted to instil it in me; it was like a mantra the way he said it. He constantly thought about other people, that's the way he was. He wasn't a saint, he could be very controlling and irritating, but he was one of those individuals who always felt happier if he was giving to other people. I was lucky enough to be married to someone like that.

Jessica: Did he talk about how you'd be after he died?

Cathy: No, no he didn't; it's funny. He was quite possessive, you know. It wasn't like those Hollywood films where someone says 'darling fall in love again soon, you

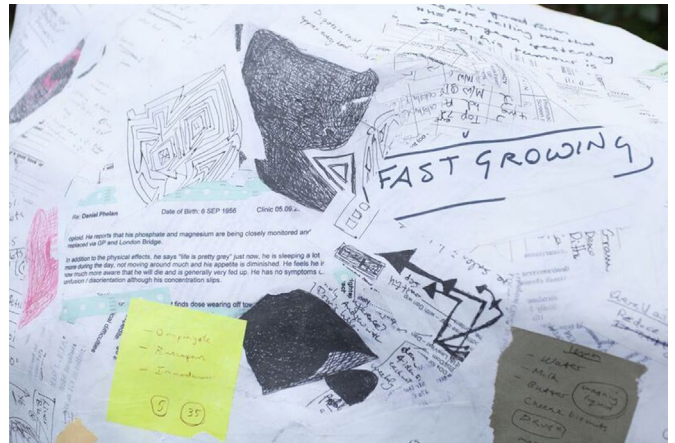


The tail of the horse represents power - with articles, letters and quotes from Daniel's career and colleagues. Photo © Diogo Duarte www.diogo-duarte.com.



Daniel was famous for his doodles and the horse includes several of these. Photo © Diogo Duarte www.diogo-duarte.com.

have my blessing'. There was none of that but he wanted to support me. He was always so supportive of my artistic career and he always wanted me to do that. We moved into this house not too long ago and every time he went into hospital I decorated another room. He really wanted to be here and he spent the latter part of his life in this room. He died just there – we had a hospital bed and it is nice and light. It's quite a good place to end one's life I think.



This area of the horse has personal cards Daniel sent and received as well as shopping lists. You can see a bit of a report from a therapist where he quotes Daniel as saying how grey everything was at the moment. Photo © Diogo Duarte www.diogo-duarte.com.

He did say something once that makes me upset now. He looked over at me and said 'You are going to make this house beautiful and fill it full of art and I won't be here to see it.' So he said things like that which is about as emotional as he got. But that was charged with emotion, almost like he was willing me to do that. I was never in any doubt about what he wanted me to do. It was to carry on with my art, and by doing that I would be fulfilling something for him and me as well.

Jessica: And have you?

Cathy: Danny was given a one month prognosis but ended up doing 13 months. He was tough. I say to people that it was a beautiful year together. We were joined in that last year. I didn't want him to do this alone so I did very little art in that year. I did occasionally nip into my studio and I'd think, how am I going to cope when he is not here? I had no idea, but being in the studio gave me a clue because, even if I was only there for a couple of hours, it was amazing how I could escape into my own world and sense of pleasure even in those terrible times. I could enjoy putting red on yellow. Whatever was happening didn't take away the joy I felt and I thought wow, this has given me a clue as to how I am going to cope.

But, in the year after he died, I had so much to do; there is so much communication and administration after someone dies. Danny also had a publishing company and I took over running that even though I had told him I didn't want to. That was another thing he did on purpose because he just knew the best thing for me would be to be busy. After he died, I could have sold it but I didn't want to. I'd walk into his offices and feel him and that was the most comforting place I could be. That first year after he died was just extraordinary and it was amazing what we all achieved, but I didn't really do any art.

He died in February and it was just before the next Christmas when I felt like my head was going to explode. It was sort of compacting, like crushed full of emotion. It felt too dense and so I did what artists do, we expose ourselves. I am not a particularly autobiographical artist but I felt it was imperative to make something about what I had been through.

I had a notion to create a memorial for him. I am a painter but I had the urge to make a sculpture, a large one. I have a feeling that, in the back of my mind, I saw that large man shrinking into something smaller and there was something about creating a large thing to fill a room to compensate for that. He was my hero, my Prince Charming and so I started thinking of a figure on horseback, about those statues of generals in Trafalgar Square, that kind of classic genre of memorial. I thought to myself, yes, go for that, but I didn't want to recreate his body. I thought that would be troublesome. So, I thought, go for a horse because Danny has left us but his horse is still here. I started with whatever I had in my studio. It was Christmas Eve and there was a pile of wood, like those struts you use for carpets, the evil ones with tacks on. I knew I could try to make a frame with those. They seemed a bit like a metaphor for Danny as those spindly bits of carpet stuff were like his limbs in end. Getting Danny to stand up, trying to give him strength was a bit like giving this thing strength and power.

Jessica: Tell me more about how you actually made the horse – it's full of memories from that last year isn't it?

Cathy: I knew I was going to make this out of paper because that seemed appropriate for a publisher and also that the horse was going to be in movement. I wanted it to be a fusion of the strong horse and something about the fragility of that last year. I always knew the final bit was going to be notes from that last year. I have always found shopping lists and things that people leave behind fascinating. I think back to when I was a child and my grandad died. I found his shopping list with his own little abbreviations. I was always interested in that sort of ephemera. When I knew Danny was dying everything became very precious to me, so I kept everything. It all sat in bags for a year but I had the notion that I might make something of it.

The horse is a funny balance of aesthetics and a kind of verbal narrative. Different sections of the horse concentrate on different things. One area includes strange sort of shopping lists that say things like buy onions, chocolate, morphine. Another section has his doodles, as Danny was famous for his doodles. It has excerpts from my diary but not his as I didn't have permission from him to use his diary. Danny was on intravenous food in the end and anyone who knows me knows that nursing is not my strong

point so the head of the horse has all these lists of instructions from the nurse about how to use and prepare the food, the type of apron to use, and how to put the sterile gloves on. Another area is personal cards that he sent and received and one bit includes something from a therapist who came to assess his mental state and wrote a report. You can see he asked Danny how he was feeling and Danny just said that everything was very grey at the moment.

I read that and I try to put myself in Danny's shoes. How would I feel if I was dying? I don't know. He was very pragmatic, sorting everything out for everyone else and that was his way of coping, that was how he stayed brave. Maybe he didn't think about dying very much. I would have liked to know how he felt more but maybe that was the biggest hint I got. The tail is power – with quotes from his career and colleagues. I've had a lovely letter from a friend of Danny's describing the horse as being like him – powerful, yet diffident, strong but fragile. There was something diffident about Danny – he was like a trusty, noble steed. The funny thing is, I am not horsey person so it's quite offbeat for me to make this thing.

I feel like Danny and I made that horse together. It's almost like a medium for some force that was coming out. It was almost the easiest thing I had ever done.

Jessica: How did the film 'After Daniel' come about?

Cathy: A friend of mine is married to the filmmaker Peter Bach and she thought he would be interested in my work. He came to see me and we easily fell into a way of working. He visited every Monday morning to watch me making the horse and we did that for about 7 or 8 weeks. I thought the sculpture would take a year but it all happened so quickly. I had it finished by Valentine's Day just after the first anniversary of his death.

The filming was sort of a semi-therapeutic context. I was aware of that. I have had psychotherapy and I sort of used it like that. I would remember things I wanted to say to Peter during the week. I had a lot to say to him, there was a lot of dense feeling in my head that I hadn't got out.

Jessica: Why was that Cathy?

Cathy: It wasn't that I didn't speak to people about it. I did, it's just that people expect you to grieve in a certain way and I don't think I did that in a way some expected me to. I am not someone to sit around with tissues feeling sorry for myself. That is not a judgement, I am just saying how I deal with things. I deal with problems by throwing myself into work. This immersion is good but it has its downfalls as I just get exhausted. I knew my way of getting things out

would be making something as I am an artist. If you are a runner you run; for me this was the obvious project.

I have to say after completion, at the end of that tense 7 or 8 week period, my head did feel less dense. When you see that horse, you can see how my thoughts had been transmuted into that. What is good is that I can revisit the horse and it brings back totally everything from that last year, all that happened – happy, sad, tragic, heroic. It's all manifested there. I don't have to carry that around with me, I put it over there. I am terrifically, terrifically fond of this horse and I am not fond of all the art I have made. I go up to him and pat and touch him. I think that he encourages this, people want to touch the sculpture.

Jessica: What next for this sculpture and your art work?

Cathy: I will never sell the horse, it wasn't made for that. I would like it to go travelling. We have shown the film and horse was there and they worked well together. I had the horse covered before the film and then I uncovered it. It was almost like a holy relic, it becomes like a shrine. I have made some other sculpture pieces since that are about mourning so once the floodgates were open lots of creativity came out. I have one life-sized one of a woman on a pulpit, it is about giving the widow a voice. You can put it on – put your arms through the sleeves of her dress and talk from the pulpit - it has wheels and can move. I have made *The Halfway to Heaven Tree*. I think we are all halfway to Heaven, that is something to feel good about. I have one I love called *More Fun Required*. Those are the words on the last note Danny gave me. A box of chocolates arrived for me on Valentine's Day, a few days after he died, and the note had those words on it. I have got ideas for lots more.

I have been amazingly released from ego by all of this. I feel like I am channelling something much more profound than seeking approval. I mean I really don't care what people think about these sculptures because it's irrelevant, they just are.

Jessica: Is it only sculptures you are making?

Cathy: Yes, it's something about creating a physical entity in a room, something people can't ignore. What shape my grieving will take place going forward who knows. I hate all these linear descriptions, moving on, going forward, getting over it. These are in common use but I don't think it's anything like that. Why would I want to get over loving Danny? The pain of the grief is almost the price of the love. Having said that, I don't want to sink into morbidity, but for me grief is about accommodating the loss and learning how to manage the pain when I feel it. I think I am getting better at doing that but that is not moving on. No relationship is perfect and while in a relationship with someone



Cathy has made a sculpture which is about giving the widow a voice. The doll fits into the piece as the widow but the sculpture can also be worn by a woman who wants to give voice to her feelings. Photos © Diogo Duarte www.diogo-duarte.com.

there's always a chance to develop and improve and deal with problems. When they are gone, that is all over, that is how it is. Danny and I fully expected to grow old together and now that is not going to happen so there is that side of things. I am young, 53, and it would be strange if I don't have another relationship but part of me thinks I could escape into Danny world. I can inhabit Danny world but I flip in and out. It is a place I like but it's about getting the balance right. In the early days if I didn't have enough time in Danny world I felt bad.

For example, this Christmas I wanted to be alone. I have a lot of friends and they invited me for the day. But, I decided I would feel more alone in a busy house. What I did was go to the cemetery where Danny is buried to think about him. If I cried so what. The pressure to not be on your own is so strong; it scares people to leave you alone. You've got to build up your own rituals for these occasions. I don't drive so I walked to the cemetery, about an hour and a half, it was like a pilgrimage. Strangely, I enjoy going to the cemetery. Danny, bless him, he wanted to be buried. I think he wanted to give people a place to visit if they needed to, again he was thinking of others.

One of the first things I have to do this year is to get him a gravestone. I am not looking forward to that but I am glad that I have left it as long as I did as I have come up with the words that I want to put on the stone. 'What will survive of us is love' – it is from a Philip Larkin poem. That's a beautiful thing isn't it? Anyone visiting can be embraced in that sentence and it is so true. I was thinking

this morning that the great thing is, love does survive. Hate and annoyance goes away but actually there is great comfort that love keeps on giving. I was going to put 'His greatest pleasure was giving to others' but that is such a clumsy sentence. He was such a wordsmith that he wouldn't want a clumsy sentence on his gravestone.

Jessica: Has Daniel dying changed your ideas about death?

Cathy: In a funny sort of way I have lost my innocence about mortality, so I am a sadder and also happier person for it. When I am sad, I am sadder, when happy, happier. Also, because he died at a young age I feel I have got to live for him. It's just not good enough to be sitting around. On one of the sunny days just after he died I thought to myself that he didn't have the privilege to go out there, so you go. It has been a kick up the backside; I mean that in a blossoming way. I do feel the privilege of life and I can't take it for granted. The way our society deals with death can be quite isolating. If I were living in a different sort of community I could be wearing something that denotes mourning. Sometimes I think about people just walking down the street and someone could have died yet there is no outward sign and I wouldn't know about it. It puts death outside our experience and it shouldn't be as death is a very important stage of life. It is through embracing death that you will get much better fulfilment in life. It is the finiteness of life that will help you to define what you value; yet all the time we pretend we are immortal. Danny's death has given me a greater ability to enjoy my life which is really quite tragic but true. ■



The Halfway to Heaven Tree with a female and a male bird 'representing' Cathy and Daniel. Photo © Diogo Duarte www.diogo-duarte.com.



Cathy and the horse in the garden of her and Daniel's house. Photo © Diogo Duarte www.diogo-duarte.com.