



Celebrating life in the face of death

Jessica Mitchell

Managing Editor, *Bereavement Care*
jessica.mitchell@cruse.org.uk

More than 480,000 people die each year in England and yet many people still find it difficult to talk about dying and bereavement. Dying Matters was set up in 2009 by the National Council for Palliative Care¹ charity as a coalition of organisations that aims to help people start those conversations. In this article, Jessica Mitchell finds out more about their 2017 photography competition 'Celebrating life in the face of death'.

One of the key aspects of the Coalition's mission is to get people talking more openly so that dying, death and bereavement eventually come to be seen as natural parts of the life cycle. For Dying Matters, the best way to get the type of support and care services people need and want is to make sure everyone feels able to have an input into how services are created. According to Miranda Ryan, coordinator of the photography competition, 'Often if we try to approach people to talk about these subjects, they bury their head in their hands and turn away as they find it too difficult. We wanted to create a different way of engaging people. In each picture there are a 1,000 stories and we wanted to involve people and get them into discussions via this imagery'.

The competition took entries from both professional and amateur photographers. The Coalition decided that it was important to open out the competition as widely as possible to get away from stereotypical images of around death, dying and bereavement. There was no single, overall winner. 12 photographs out of all the entries were selected to be put forward into a booklet and exhibition that is currently on tour around the UK. We include seven of the images along



My sister died at a hospice aged 14. Ten years later, my goddaughter, who's named after her visited the hospice. My sister Rachael lived with cancer for eleven years after being diagnosed with a brain tumour aged four. Growing up, having a blind sister with learning difficulties felt as normal as anything. Towards the end of my sister's life, our family were supported by Children's Hospice South West at their hospice in North Devon; it felt like a second home. Nearly 11 years after Rachael died, we revisit the hospice every year for a Remembering Day. On our most recent visit, my two year old goddaughter came with us for the first time. She showed interest and engagement in the hospice and people. My sister's memory lives on through my goddaughter's middle name. (Photo 'Pensive' by Sam Lyne.)

1 Two of the UK's largest end of life charities, Hospice UK and the National Council for Palliative Care, merged on July 1. The new organisation will be known as Hospice UK.



Tools stand idle in my father's workshop. He was always busy mending and crafting for family members and neighbours when they needed help. My father could often be seen hurrying back and forth to his workshop to mend, create or fix a problem. The day I ventured in, after he had died, I photographed some of his lifetime collection of usefulness. Nails in jam jars, labelled in his distinctive handwriting, screwdriver handles glowing by the light from the window assuring me that they too had been part of his life. Now the tools are gradually being moved on, to charities, friends and family so that they can continue to be used. But a sense of my father will always exist in his workshop, from the door, painted in many layers over the years, to the smell of the ingrained oil and creosote within. As my parents have both now passed away I have used photography to collect visual memories of their home and garden. The personal choices I make are all informed by my childhood recollections and experiences of the place and reflections of my parents as they grew older. (Photo by Louise Williams.)

with thoughts of the photographers about what moved them to take the pictures. The final entries were chosen by judges who considered concept, originality, composition, inspiration for others and their impact going forward. Each image ultimately had to stand alone without the need for words to go with it.

Competition judge and celebrated photographer Rankin said 'Art is a different way of seeing and talking about things we'd rather not discuss. The challenge of this competition was to look at the reality of death for all us, and then to celebrate the life we have. We all carry cameras with us these days, so I hoped people would bring all their imagination, joys, fears and creativity to this. I hoped to be astonished by the responses and I was'.

Overseeing the competition impacted on organisers and judges, all of whom had their own experiences of bereavement. There were hundreds of entries and so each day brought new and challenging images to respond to. Judges and organisers also talked at length with many of those who were planning to submit images. There were some difficult decisions to be taken as some of the images submitted were not able to be taken forward to the final shortlist. According to Miranda Ryan, 'We know that it was cathartic for many people to submit images and we got wonderful, heartfelt pictures but some just dealt with too sensitive an issue. For example, we decided that we just could not show any images of the bodies of deceased people. We always intended for the final exhibition to go on show and to be seen as widely as possible and so we need to start the dialogue at a place that feels safe for people of all ages and cultures'.

Dying Matters recognises that death and bereavement are challenging topics. However, organisers hope that the exhibition will empower people to put their end of life plans in place so they can get on with living their lives to the full, and that those who are bereaved will feel more



The stark reality of being left alone, portrayed in the bedroom of the one left behind. I work in a sheltered housing scheme, where several residents were widowed. I was struck by the presence of their partners, which was still apparent in their apartments, such as 'my husband's chair' or 'my wife's cabinet'. The starkest was the bedroom where the emptiness of the half of the double bed and the absence of objects on the bedside table highlighted the loss of a partner against the messier, busier side of the bed for those left behind. (Photo by Zana Saunders.)

able to ask for the support they need in the knowledge that death and bereavement are something everyone goes through. The 12 photos can be viewed at <https://www.dyingmatters.org/page/photography-exhibition> where information about hiring the photos for travelling exhibitions can also be found. ■



This photograph shows my late grandmother and my grandfather. They were married for over 60 years and were very much in love. The image is for me a reminder of the love my grandparents had for each other throughout their marriage and it's one of my favourite photographs I've ever taken. It was a candid moment whilst we chatted at their home. They were very much in love and even in their nineties they were always holding hands. (Photo by Miriam Winsor.)



Two old friends meet again after a long time. Joking and drinking together they remember not what they have lost but what they still have. I lived for 10 months among the Wana people of Morowali, Indonesia, and was fascinated by their ability to laugh at pain and to transform an inevitable tragedy into an opportunity to celebrate life and reaffirm the *kasintuwu* (sense of community). Among the Wana, funerals are a playful occasion to stay together and to cope with loss and grief following the tradition. During the two days of the funeral, hundreds of Wana gather to live, eat, joke, sing and celebrate together under the same roof. Laughing and drinking are the key elements of this attempt to oppose the negative emotions related to the death of a friend or relative. (Photo by Giorgio Scalici.)



A hidden box of treasured memories found when clearing grandad's room. My grandad was a very quiet man, who didn't say much but was a kind and constant companion to my gran. He wasn't emotional or affectionate, and kept a reserve about himself leaving my gran to do all the kisses and cuddles. She died before him, and when he passed away, I found this tiny suitcase on top of his wardrobe. Inside was a collection of old photographs, postcards, army service letters and certificates. It was clearly his box of memories that he had collected and kept safe. This collection represented his life and those people who were dear to him. The collection included a postcard I had sent them both when I was 7 years old. I never knew he had kept it. (Photo by Zana Saunders.)



One of the remaining 52 bedrooms of the Franciscaines orphanage, built to house children of fishermen lost at sea. It sits empty now, destined to be demolished to make way for a new cultural centre. Gulls circle, dropping shells onto the building and scattering them in its rooms. They say that sea gulls take on the souls of lost sailors. The sea haunts the building, touching it even today. I wonder if men long drowned seek to populate that building with the signs of their unanswered grief. The gull as a vector for desire, for woe, for absence. When the air is especially salty, and the birds' cries rise in a crescendo, the shells vibrate with a discernible hum, and the dried flowers left by children long departed force their perfume into the air anew. I felt it there. And so, we are folded back into the past once more. (Photo by Lynda Laird.)