Articulating Grief

Roy Ridgway

Mary Stott once talked about the need to have the pattern of grief charted. One of the things I have learned,' she wrote after the death of her husband, 'is that we who have words can articulate grief for those who have not, and that to have grief spelt out, its pattern charted, is something we all obscurely need.

For both my wife and myself one of the most harrowing experiences of our lives was the death of our 29-year-old son, Tony, who suffered from cystic fibrosis. It was the most difficult thing I had ever done when on the day after he died I sat down at my desk and wrote about what happened. There had to be some meaning to his death. There had to be words to give it a sense of something accomplished or completed, a sense of dignity about his death, or a sense of rightness.

I clawed my way through my despair, fighting every inch of the way, through weeks and months of depression, wondering why it had had happened as it did. But there was nothing I could think of that comforted me, nothing made me feel better about his death apart from the writing itself. It was the writing that was important. Giving expression to my grief was what helped me most of all. It did not get rid of the pain, but it gave me a sense of worth. Death has a way of belittling you. Writing restores your faith in yourself.

The days went by and at first it was a nothingness. Then a picture began to take shape. It was the suddenness of Tony's

Roy Ridgway is a medical journalist and founder of Integrated Health, a charity promoting holistic approaches to health. He lives in Hampshire.

death that at first seemed so meaningless and cruel.

September 11th 1984

Penny, our daughter, rang to say that Tony was back in hospital. I was more annoyed than worried about this. He hated hospital, but had to go every six months or so for what the consultant described as 'a wash and brush up'.

However, this latest visit was different, and completely unexpected. Suddenly he had taken ill in the night. The diary tells the whole tragic story, the way a junior doctor said, 'We believe he has a minute hole in the lung caused by coughing. We are not giving him any treatment. It will probably clear up in a few days.' And then a Sister ringing to say she's worried about him; he's been taken to intensive care. She fetched a doctor to explain. 'There's a red patch on his lung. We were wrong about the original diagnosis. We believe it may be subcutaneous emphysema. We're giving him antibiotics intravenously.'

'When shall I ring again?' I asked the doctor.

'We'll ring you if Tony gets any worse. Otherwise ring us in the morning.'

I decided if the hospital hadn't rung me by 2 a.m. I would ring them. I had the irrational thought that somehow this would stop the worst from happening.

But my magic didn't work. When I rang the Sister, she said 'The doctor is with Tony now. Hold on. I'll get him.' The doctor said, in so many words, that Tony was dying. 'If you want to see him you must come now.'

I can't think of any crueller words that anyone could say to a parent and, as I read them again in my diary seven years later, the despair of that moment comes back to me. Was I right to describe that moment so vividly in my diary? But I don't want to forget. I'd much rather face up to the worst that has happened than invent stories about the past, because I am sure that only in the real world, where there are no neat and tidy answers, will we find something worth living for — or dying for!

There are things about Tony's death that I still find difficult to talk about because the experience was of an intimate nature, and I'm afraid of betraying what feels like a confidence entrusted in me. For instance, I had a remarkable experience at the moment when Tony died in the intensive care ward in Brompton Hospital. The life support system had been switched off and I felt utterly helpless and miserable. I had been at the bedside of other relatives when they were dying and had also seen many young men die of their ghastly wounds when I worked in a field hospital during the Second World War. I was no stranger to death.

But watching my own son die was quite different and felt totally unacceptable. Then, as I sat with him holding his hand, something strange happened. It is difficult to write about because words somehow take something away from the experience, but I saw what I perceived to be a brilliant white light filling the room. Tony lay there with his head thrown back against a heap of pillows, and all around him was this light. I didn't understand it at the time — I thought perhaps it was subjective and had been induced by stress — but I believe now that I was sharing the reality of Tony's death with him, experiencing what some people who have suffered from cardiac arrest have de-

scribed after being brought back to life. They speak of seeing a light of indescribable brilliance, and experiencing sensations of utmost joy and peace.

My diary tells the story of what happened afterwards, in every detail, every small and big thing that affected me. Collecting his belongings from the hospital — a parcel was thrown at me containing his clothes, some money, a book he was reading. Registering the death — 'he was very young,' said the registrar. And then the Quaker-style funeral in which the family formed a circle and talked about him, quoting from some of his favourite books, reading poetry and even telling amusing anecdotes about him. It was quite an inspiring service. It was autumn and we piled the top of his coffin with leaves and cones from Kew Gardens where he had often walked.

Every day in my diary tells a different story.

Wednesday, September 26th

A dream. I'm standing on the parapet of a bridge. It has a childhood feeling about it. I am innocent, puzzled, curious, trying to understand what is happening to me. But I'm not a child. I have a glass of wine in my hand ready to toast someone. There's a tram, like one I remember as a child (in Borough Road, Birkenhead) coming towards me and I'm afraid it's going to knock me down. I move back into a sort of lay-by. The tram has no passenger compartment. There's a driver's cab in front linked directly to the cab at the rear. The tram comes forward, wobbles, then goes back. There's no driver.

I was brought up on Freud and learnt a lot about the workings of the unconscious mind from his *Interpretation of Dreams*. My dream was obvious to me. It was about life and death. What it was saying was, 'There's no-one there. No recognisable image of anyone, no personality. The tram arriving with no-one in it, no driver and no passengers, and returning with no-one there to celebrate, no-one to toast, is our condition at the beginning and end. The wobble is life.'

The way Tony died was really very characteristic of him. He got out of the business of living without hanging around at the end. He suddenly stepped out, opened a door, and disappeared.

What do these words, which helped me through my grief, do for me now? There are hundreds of them. Pages and pages of them. I went on writing about Tony for more than a year. My wife also kept a book of memories and that was a considerable help to her.

The pain never really goes away. Whenever I re-read my diary the pain comes back. But it is more bearable now in the sense that it doesn't stay around.

There are lots of things I remember about Tony that are not at all painful. In fact, just the reverse. I feel a certain pride in the fact that he was a very special person to a lot of people. Everyone who knew him remembers him in a very positive way, as someone who gave them a spiritual nudge and forced them to think of the things that mattered most in life. He lived a very full life. I keep telling myself that. But he lived with death throughout his life, and I think it was this that made him such a special person.

My diary tells a story of an unbearable loss. It was total darkness at first. But as my wife and I talked our way through our

bereavement, and wrote about what happened to us from day to day, we gradually came out of the darkness.

In writing about the pain, I was searching for meanings — for insights that would illuminate everything. It never happens quite like that of course; but, looking back now, I can see that it is the articulation of grief, and feelings brought out into the open, that make the whole experience something really remarkable and illuminating, forcing us to think of things that Tony was mostly concerned about in his life and which made him such an unusual person.

After Tony died a consultant at Brompton Hospital explained to me in detail what had happened. Although he was suffering from a life-threatening disease, his death at that particular time had been totally unexpected, even to the consultant who had known him since he was a child. He was struck down by a bug which got into the blood stream through a lesion in the intestines, which at a postmortem was found to be cancer of the ileum — a rare condition in someone so young, the order of incidence being one in two million. The toxaemia spread rapidly. It seemed so cruel at first but now, in retrospect, seems a merciful thing. If by some miracle he had survived, Tony's condition would have deteriorated and his death would have been much more harrowing and painful both to him and us. I can almost agree with a friend, Christopher Woodward, a well-known spiritual healer, who said Tony's time had come — it was God's will.

After explaining the medical facts about Tony's death, the consultant said, 'I am now going to ask you a philosophical question. Do you think Tony achieved in his short lifetime much more than a lot of people do, in terms of personality, in seventy or eighty years?'

I said 'yes', I was absolutely sure of that. He had such clarity of vision. He was so mature, so perceptive.

'It's not unusual,' the consultant said with the flicker of a smile. 'One asks oneself, is this the result of adversity? But I don't think it is. It's fundamental. That's why I feel so privileged.'

His words trailed away. I knew from his wife how devoted he was to his young cystic fibrosis patients. And yes, it was a privilege to have had Tony as a son. You don't see any meaning when you're writing the story; the meanings and patterns come later. And I'm still learning from what I wrote and creating new patterns because the past keeps changing as I change.