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THE GOOD GRIEF PROJECT

WCMT REPORT

BY

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A journey to the USA and Mexico in search of
another way of grieving

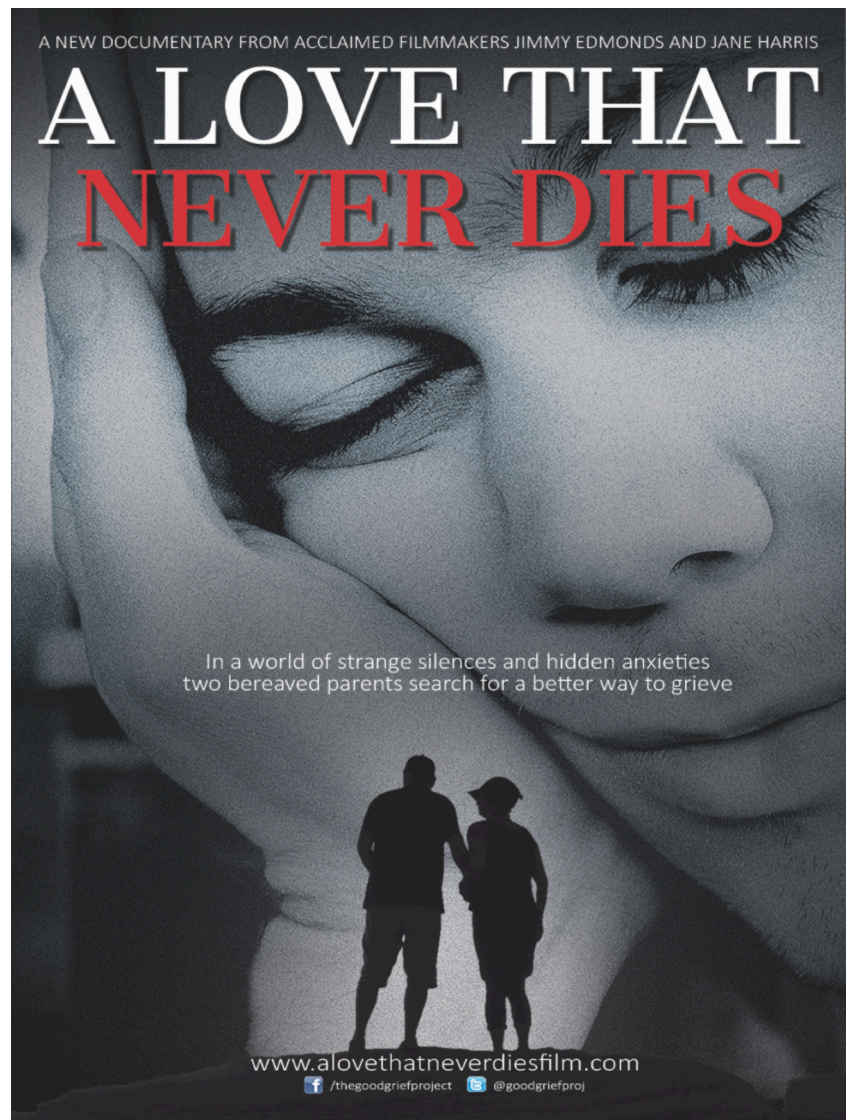
THE GOOD GRIEF PROJECT

is proud to announce the completion of

A LOVE THAT NEVER DIES

a 75 minute feature documentary

**Scheduled for public release
Spring 2018**





THE BACK STORY

*Grief is the form
 love takes when
 someone dies*

I am 65 and a documentary film editor. Over the last 25 years or so I have cut over 100 titles for TV broadcasters in the UK, Europe and the USA. I have won awards (including a BAFTA and an RTS) and worked on a huge variety of subject matter – from an inside look at the Pakistani legal system to child abuse in English public schools; from films about heroin addiction, purity balls and posh hotels to a series on the history of soul music. I have seen the world from many different angles if only from the darkened space of an edit suite.

Then in 2011 we got the news that my 22 year old son Josh died in a road accident in Vietnam and that world fell apart. His death marked a massive turning point in my life – which now consists of two parallel universes separated by the day he died. Time in the one universe continues as before, minute by minute, day by day, year by year. But in the other it is always 11.15 in the morning Sunday 16th January 2011.

There is nothing natural about the death of a child – of whatever age.

A child is not supposed to die before his or her parents.

Approx 6000 young people under 24 die in the UK every year leaving anything up to 50,000 newly bereaved parents, siblings and grandparents.

To become one of that number is not something I would ever have predicted... tragedies like this happen only to other people. I had not known this kind of grief before. Yes, my father had died, very good friends had died, but nothing prepared me for the trauma and the despair occasioned by my son's death. I

was now on a steep learning curve on one of life's cruelest lessons. How did I know that I would be riding uncontrolled waves of conflicting emotions that I would want to hide from the rest of the world.

In the beginning I remember desperately wanting to hold onto the pain and the horror of the moment we heard that Josh had been killed. I was afraid of the numbness that accompanied incomprehension. A void had appeared at the very core of my being and I needed to feel something... anything that would tell me that although he was gone, Josh was still very much a part of my life. Above all I remember being very afraid that sooner or later that I and others would forget him.

And I never realized how much his death had changed me. To others my grief looked like depression and I was shocked by my own reaction, by the anger and bitterness I felt towards a friend's well meant observation that a certain therapy EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing) might help.

"Do not pathologise my grief!" I screamed.



THE PROJECT



Social anxieties about death and bereavement are magnified when a child dies and many parents become isolated from their communities, feared by their friends and ignored by professionals.

There are charities in this country that provide limited support for bereaved parents like us but mostly there is no official recognition of the emotional or

practical needs of these families for whom ongoing social and health consequences can be high. One such charity is **THE COMPASSIONATE FRIENDS**, a peer to peer network of bereaved parents and siblings to whom my partner and I turned in the year following Josh's death. We quickly became very involved with TCF and by the end of our second year had made a short promotional film for them - **SAY THEIR NAME** – an appeal to friends and relatives of the bereaved not to shy away from talking about a child who has died for fear of causing further upset.

Producing SAY THEIR NAME was one of the first practical and public projects we engaged with after Josh's death. For us it was an important step in our attempts to accommodate our loss, to recognize that some good could come from our grief. Many people (parents in particular) will want to try and recoup some meaning to their lives after tragedy and the shock of our son's death certainly spurred us to do something useful for others as way of processing our feelings. As people who knew their way round film production, it was only natural that we should try to express our grief with the medium we know best and we immediately started thinking of other ways in which we could convey to the world what it means to grieve.

We started by asking ourselves why in a world where death will always make front page news, real life conversations about death, dying and bereavement are so problematic. And we wondered if we could make a film that told the story of grief not as an anthropological exercise but as a more subjective intervention into a discussion we had now found ourselves a part of.

My partner (and Josh's mum) is a psychotherapist and we figured that our combined skills as well as our experiences since Josh died would enable us to record and represent the bereaved with an empathy that other filmmakers might lack - that we could perhaps give a voice to those finding themselves struggling both with the death of their child and with social expectations on how they should grieve.

The opportunity afforded by a grant from the WCMT was hugely welcome and an important step towards helping us towards our goal.

We coined the phrase THE GOOD GRIEF PROJECT with the idea of travelling in honour of Josh (he was on his travels when he died) although our main objective was always to produce a documentary that would shed light on how grieving for a child is so different from other types of grief. WCMT would cover the travel expenses for one of us with the rest of the costs being crowd funded. We also received a generous grant from another bereavement charity The Jessica Mathers Trust.



Our journey was planned as a road trip across the USA coupled with a flight down to Mexico to film preparations for the Day of the Dead. Contemporary models for understanding grief differ from older theories based on the expectation to 'move on', to leave the deceased behind or risk an endless cycle of depression and melancholia. While the healing and therapeutic value of these new ideas have some currency in this country, we had a sense that they are more nuanced in the USA and we wanted to find out how the way they manifest can inform and improve the support given to bereaved parents in the UK. In Mexico of course there is a very different attitude towards the death with annual celebrations in which "las muertos" are invited back into the land of the living. We were curious to discover if bereaved parents were helped by what we perceived as a more open approach to conversations about death, dying and bereavement. In particular we wanted to explore the notion of 'continuing bonds' and the ways by which bereaved parents in both countries are maintaining a relationship with their dead child.

We were also at a moment in our own grief that we both now felt strong enough to undertake such a journey involving as it would all the emotional and practical challenges of filming as we went. We had previously visited the site where Josh had died in Vietnam and we now had a sense that continuing to travel and by meeting with others in similar and different cultures we would be able to put our grief into a wider perspective. We also liked the idea that our journey could be a metaphor for our own grief – as we travelled so we would grow in confidence and in our renewed love of life.

Josh had been gone four years by the time we flew out to New York in August 2015 and in that period we had 'lost' a number of close friends who couldn't understand why we hadn't found closure or somehow put his death behind us.

So as well as a 'research' trip, our



journey was also planned as an escape route from some of these uncomfortable conversations, as well as awkward silences that were inhibiting our grief.

What did we want to learn? Some basic questions really about we grieve, how we grieve and why are we afraid of those who do grieve?

TRAVELLING TO LEARN

'We don't learn how to mourn at our mother's knee'

Su Chard – Funeral celebrant

that is when those conversations take place between the bereaved themselves.

Conversations about death, dying and bereavement are difficult in our society and these are made more difficult when it is a son or daughter that has died. Except

"We have made some of the best friends we wished we'd never met" - you hear this often from members of The Compassionate Friends and it was TCF in the USA who were most instrumental in helping us to find the families who were willing to tell and to share their story.

With their assistance we had received 60 expressions of interest from bereaved parents all over the states and four from Mexico. Reducing this number down was a humbling task. In order to make sure we had a representative range of experiences of grief, including cause of death, age at death and length of bereavement we had made a shortlist of 12 with whom we then skyped before we left.

But that short list didn't get much shorter. By the time we had covered the 5000 miles from New York to San Francisco, visited 21 states and recorded 80 hours of footage, we had met and filmed with 11 different families and interviewed two leading academics in the field of trauma loss and bereavement. In Mexico we covered two stories but these also included their involvement with Renacer (which means reborn) a charity similar to The Compassionate Friends.



Kim Garrison - remembering Jessie died 2000 aged 18 (Gainesville, Georgia)

Common threads soon emerged. Possibly the most significant was the importance of sharing stories as a validation of feelings that are as unexpected as they are overwhelming. Parents and siblings became troubled by their own response to grief as well as the more predictable reactions from others – I’m not doing this right, I should be over it by now, a father afraid to show his emotions. In a sense the bereaved were self censoring but the mere telling of a story, how the child died, what they were like, how much they were loved and how much they are missed – a story that is told over and over again to anyone who will listen, without judgement and without prejudice- to someone who knows – this, they found, is the way to normalize those feelings.

People spoke of a huge range of emotions. Sadness yes, a terrible emptiness, a sense that life had lost all purpose, but then there were feelings of guilt (if only I had not driven down to the store that day) and shame (I wasn’t there for her when she needed me), shame for not fitting in (you don’t look like the mother of a drug addict) and shame for being happy again (how can I laugh when my child has died) as well as anger, bitterness and a palpable sense of injustice.



Kelly Anglin – remembering Jordan died 2014 aged 14 (Farmington New Mexico)

Many would put on a **mask** – a mother of a victim at the Sandy Hook Elementary school shooting told us she had become ‘quite a good actor’, even with the parents of other children murdered that day.

Others would use **pretence** as a coping mechanism – even though he died some years ago a mother from Memphis would still call her son down for dinner. In New Mexico we filmed in the room of a young boy, undisturbed just as it was the day he died. “We keep the door closed because it still smells like him”.

Guilt and self blame hung over this family like a dark cloud – their boy had died while playing around with his father’s gun – and they wondered whether their marriage could survive.

A mother from Georgia told us how she was rescued from her own suicide attempt by a (timely) call from her surviving child - ‘his voice brought me back’ - only to find solace with alcohol.

These stories would provide the real substance of our documentary which we had decided would be unmediated by expert opinion. But we also wanted to try and put them into some kind of overall theoretical framework for any literature that we would be producing to accompany the film. And this led us to leading academics in the field of trauma and loss. Dr Katherine Shear (Columbia University) and Prof. Bob Neimeyer (University of Memphis) both base their work on an understanding of grief as a unique experience for each of us (just like our love is unique) but it has commonalities in that grief is an immediate response to the fracture in what psychologists refer to as the attachment relationship we have with a person.

Neimeyer and Shear would elaborate. As humans we are biologically predisposed all through our lives to find and maintain attachment relationships and consequently (and inevitably) to respond to their loss. In grief we discover, often surprisingly, that the people we attach to, the people we love most deeply, have affected us in ways that we know as well as in ways we don't know. Shear and Neimeyer also suggest that these strong, satisfying and mutually rewarding relationships have a fundamental impact on our sense of self, on who we are as independent and autonomous beings. Put plainly, they say, **the people we love define who we are so that when we lose them we become confused about our very selves, disoriented and lost.** I know this from the experience of losing my son Josh. In the emotional chaos that followed his death what stood out was the fact that not only had Josh lost his life but that I had lost my role and my rewards as his father. Neimeyer sees grief as a kind of coping mechanism by which we try to manage this 'attachment insecurity'. As well mourning a death, grief is about having to deal with the rupture in the sense of our own selves – of who we have now become. **Grief is our way of sidestepping insanity.**



Gayle Rose – remembering Max died 2009 aged 19 (Memphis Tennessee)

There is a madness in grief that can be very frightening but nearly all our contributors spoke of consciously facing up to their fears. They talked of 'walking through the fire', of 'leaning into the grief' or of not shying away from whatever emotions the day threw at them. "Good, bad or indifferent," a mother from California told us 'I just needed to suck it up buttercup and deal with it'.

On our journey across the US we met parents that had been bereaved between 10 months and 15 years, yet they all spoke of their dead children with an intensity that seemed to defy any time span. What we observed and what Shear and Neimeyer confirmed was that while emotions in the immediate aftermath of the loss are extremely raw and will dominate everyday life, grief is a **gradual process of adapting to a new reality**. Significantly though there is no specific timescale that can be usefully quantified to annotate the stages of grief. Everybody grieves differently. But what is necessary for us to continue as functioning as social and creative beings is to 'find a home for grief' and a home where it is accepted and honoured. This of course creates a number of difficulties.



*Margaret Jackson
remembering Richard died 2010 aged 20
(Fort Washington Maryland)*

Firstly there is a process of learning what it means that a loved one is gone – the finality of their absence and the consequences of having to find a new kind of relationship with her or him - of envisioning new ways of having a meaningful life without them – or with them but without their physical presence.

Grief we have learnt is the form love takes when someone dies – but Margaret Jackson, a mother from Maryland asked where does that love go if you are a single mum and you've lost your only child? "I had this field of love" she declared "with nowhere for it to go."

Adapting to loss requires that we "reinvent ourselves" say Shear and Neimeyer. This is particularly true for bereaved parents who will need to identify specific interests and

values that will help them to somehow continue a relationship with their child, and to consciously turn these into feasible activities. Margaret found a place for her love in charitable work. Her son had the biggest smile she told us and after he died she created RJ Smiles Inc, a non-profit that provides support for people in difficulty or hardship. It's nothing more than a box of goodies – some small luxury like a visit to a beauty parlour, or a trip to the fun fair – but it comes with a smile and a signal of hope for the future.

Team Max is another community support programme - founded in Memphis by Gayle Rose. Whilst handing out groceries in the food bank she was asked whose picture it was on her T shirt. "That's my son Max - he died in 2009" she said. "Come here babe," the woman replied as she gave her a hug. "I lost one too. And in that moment" Gayle told us, "instead of serving her, she served me"

Grief forces surprising emotional as well as practical choices. Scarlett Lewis (the Sandy Hook mother) has chosen forgiveness. While not in any way forgetting or condoning what the shooter did at the elementary school she would need to forgive him, she told

us “if she was to survive and not drown in bitterness and anger” (though as she reminded us emphatically “forgiving is not forgetting”). She too has founded a charity in her son’s name – more of a movement really – the Jesse Lewis Choose Love Foundation dedicated to empowering young children with ‘social and emotional learning’ something she claims that if the shooter at Sandy Hook had had then signs of his dysfunction would have been picked up way before he picked up the gun that killed so many.



Scarlett Lewis – remembering Jesse died 2012 aged 6 (Sandy Hook Connecticut)

Our visits with bereaved families were fairly brief (a couple of days at the most) and we can’t claim to have witnessed the full range of their grief, but we came away with a sense that while the pain of their loss would always be with them, many had successfully channeled their emotions into good works. This also meant they had to be fairly public with their grief. Gayle Rose told us that before her son died she “would not have been so open about my vulnerabilities”. A new discovery not necessarily shared by all bereaved parents. Not all find the imagination or creativity required to reinvent oneself either in a continued relationship with the deceased child, or with the on going relationships they have with friends and family.

We are fundamentally changed as a result of our child’s death – this we heard over and over again. But society is resistant to understanding this change and many discovered that surmounting social expectations of how they should grieve was an arduous and lonely task. People would still purposely avoid Kim whose daughter died many years ago – “you don’t want to go down that aisle” they would whisper “she’s going to talk about her”. They would challenge why she had so many pictures of her daughter around the house. Kim had trouble adapting to the new Kim and re-presenting herself in public - in finding a ‘home for her grief’ – and she freely admitted that maybe it was her own fault. She blamed others for not caring enough, or for not being sad enough and she was too angry to allow others into her grief.

Grief, it turns out, ricochets in all directions. Kim’s sister Tracey recalls huge arguments in the family. “I screamed out at one point - just because your kid died that doesn’t make you Queen over everyone else – the rest of us don’t have to bow down and take your shit because your kid’s dead.”

Owning the pain of grief is a common theme especially among bereaved parents. “My grief is sacred ...” Denise Martinez’s son Jesse had died less than a year before we visited. “When you’ve lost your child that’s the most primal, private place for a mom and I don’t allow a lot of people to see that pain because it’s mine.” I recognize this sentiment as I have myself hidden my grief from others, comforting myself with the thought that only I know how I loved Josh and only I know how I really grieve for him. A major tension I think in the way we are expected to behave in the aftermath of tragedy – wanting to hold onto the intimacy of our feelings while at the same time desperately needing for them to be recognized and known.



Denise Martinez – remembering Jesse died 2014 aged 17 (Palmdale California)

We had travelled away from home partly as an escape from the social difficulties of trying to find a home for our grief - an act of what Neimeyer would call ‘self-compassion’. In the face of hostile reactions to our changed selves (either real or perceived) we had taken a decision also made as it turns out by many many others. As Jane notes in our film ... “everyone we met seemed to struggle with the same question of how to fit in and I kept thinking isn’t this mad. We are bereaved parents and yet we are desperately trying to fit in.” And the discovery that most of these people seemed to make was that though it was comfortable for other people if you were quiet and didn’t ask questions or didn’t express your grief it wasn’t healthy - it wasn’t good for you the bereaved parent. “I tried to be silent,” Jane says, “I tried not to talk about it and it made me ill”

A stifled grief is an unhealthy grief. This idea emerged in our conversations with Dr Katherine Shear, who heads up the Centre for Complicated Grief at Columbus University in New York.

Complicated grief is not without controversy in the sense that many believe that it begins to medicalise grief – to turn it into something that can be cured. None of our contributors had actually heard the term or recognized that they were in any way ill. Maybe this was because most had already taken steps to avoid ‘sinking into that black hole’ as one parent put it. They weren’t ignoring their feelings and they were consciously airing memories of their child however bitter sweet those conversations might be.

But within the profession (both academic and clinical) there is a hot debate as to how useful a terminology that allows grief to get complicated actually is. The symptoms and behaviours of those who would suffer complications are very close to those of depression but while complications in grief would seem to follow a timeline in which the distress of acute grief fails to give way to a gradual acceptance of the loss, Shear rejects any comparison with depression. Kim who spent ten years in a state of more or less constant mourning, anxiety and agitation, was not, Shear would argue, depressed.

It goes something like this – if you are happy to drink yourself to death following the pain of your lost loved one, that's your choice, not a particularly good choice but unlike depression for instance you do have the wherewithal to make it. Conversely if you are not happy with such a decision and for one reason or another (and these might be the reappearance of previous psychological issues) you can't find a way through the 'complicated' emotions that grief will inevitably throw up then perhaps you could find a solution in the therapies that Dr Shear has to offer. Grief, for Shear (and for Neimeyer), can get complicated not merely because you fail to recognise reality, but because there are underlying predispositions that prevent a successful readjustment to life without your loved one - unhealthy, unsafe or misguided attachment issues for example or a history of familial dysfunction.



The Anglin family – remembering Jordan died 2014 aged 14 (Farmington New Mexico)

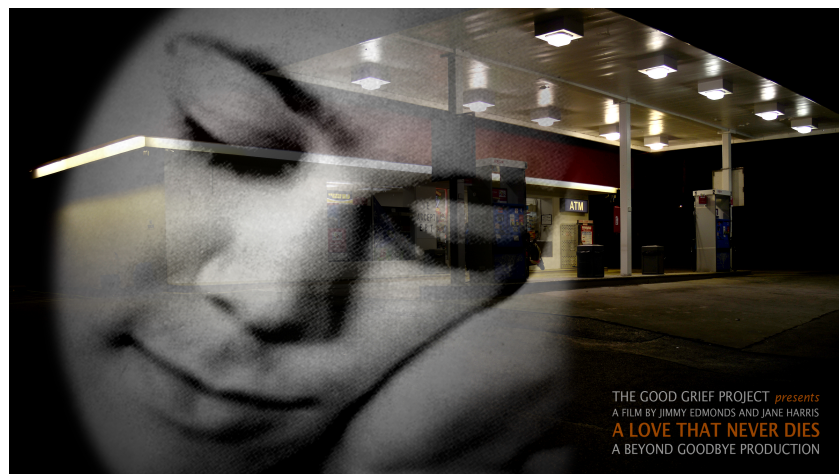
But perhaps more importantly Neimeyer told us “Complicated grief is a social phenomena it's not something that is intrapsychic, something that's just with in us. It's also around us in the way the world responds to our loss. Culturally it can be complicated ... whether the culture is advising dry eyes and a stiff upper lip when we need a safe place to dissolve into tearfulness or the reverse when tears are expected but not felt to be necessary by the bereaved”

To say that grief for the loss of a child is the most complicated is a grand understatement and its not surprising when one considers all that is lost - not merely the past and the present but also the child's future – all that they were and all that they could be. The question for a bereaved parent, says Neimeyer, is how to maintain a sense of connection and to “revise it in the light of their childs physical absence. How do I not only hold them in memory and in my heart but weave them into conversations with others”. It's that repeated telling of stories and having them heard that is so

complex in a world that wants to move on. But this will be absolutely necessary if we want to confirm the reality of our child's death, and at the same time give ourselves the space and a renewed confidence to keep them as a continued presence in our lives.

We are wired for attachment and the great majority of world cultures throughout history and across the planet acknowledge this in their spiritual traditions and community practices - practices that tend to honour these connections even after death.

But the western world almost uniquely in the 20th and 21st century has de-emphasised this continuing bond to the point of almost banishing it. The successful transition from grief back to normal life is accomplished, we are told, only when one has moved on, let go or found closure. Shortly after Josh died a friend of mine (a psychotherapist) even suggested that sooner or later I would have to forget him if I was to regain the composure and the equilibrium necessary to continue living. Not the best advice for parents who were intent on creating a lasting tribute whether that was in the form of our current journey or the film that would result. But here we were four years later and clearly Josh was still very much a part of our lives and this without the help of any religious or spiritual belief.



Both the USA and Mexico are religious countries with over 80% of their populations believing in God and by inference in an afterlife. In homes we visited pictures of children as angels or in the arms of the Lord were common. But what we wanted to explore was not necessarily peoples chosen belief systems, but the way rituals are used to navigate ones way through the pain of grief. As non-believers ourselves we had struggled to find the appropriate more secular rituals to help us with our loss. We could reflect on how this might have forced a more creative (and more personal) response to Josh's death – following a contemporary trend his funeral was as much a celebration of his life as it was an acknowledgement of his loss – but this project was always intended as an enquiry into the ways people have coped with their grief over the longer term.

What we discovered was that far from a reliance on religious symbolism, many were inventing (sometimes by borrowing ideas from other cultures) their own more personal way of commemorating their loss. The parents of Jordan Anglin, Dan and Kelly habitually leave small pebbles with their sons name painted on it (expanded to 'captain' Jordan – he was a great fan of the super hero Captain America) in places where it could be found by who knows who. "Jordan" his dad told us "never met a stranger. He was

friends with everyone.” In leaving these stones in places for others to find his parents are openly marking an on-going relationship with their son – “if he had been here then he would have been known”.

We ourselves leave photos of Josh for people to discover – markers of his always being with us – although it’s recording the event with a photograph that perhaps provides a more substantial and longer lasting impact on the story of our grief.



Another now more common resource for creating ritual are cremated remains – the ashes of the deceased. Denise keeps her son’s ashes in a mason jar in the headboard of her bed – “so that he’s close to us when we’re sleeping at night” but the potential for a renewed ceremony whereby ashes can be scattered in significant locations is proving to be an important way of honouring the dead beyond the initial funeral rite. The Martinez family (more of a motorbiking clan really) had ridden out on the day Jesse would’ve been 18, to throw his ashes into the Grand Canyon, at a spot he’d visited with his Dad in the year before he died. We had done precisely the same a few days earlier.



The significance of these rituals, either as a social event or as a private iteration can seem a little forced – to start with. Communicating either symbolically or emotionally in some real feeling way with the deceased as does Max’s mother Gayle when she calls him down to dinner, can seem a little crazy and definitely a departure from the social code - we are raised not to speak to ghosts. But Neimeyer sees these as genuine

attempts to rediscover who we are in the 'infancy of our grief'. Rather like the young child who plays at being a nurse, we will eventually grow into our new roles and our changed relationship with the deceased. And if we don't subscribe to the traditional religious rituals, we must invent our own.



'projections' – Oaxaca Mexico

'Here in Oaxaca, we're afraid of death. We toy with it, but we're scared to really face up to it.'

Marlen Gonzales (Bereaved mum)

our stories in Mexico involved quite young children who had died in the weeks just before 'muertos' and as belief has it, spirits do not return in the first year after death. So while the rest of the world was out getting drunk and having a good time, they were left heartbroken and friendless.

In Mexico too we were surprised to find that despite a more open attitude to death in general, many bereaved parents still found themselves isolated and bewildered by a resistance to acknowledge the special circumstances that is the death of a child. Again these parents were in need of extra support which they found in Renacer, a peer to peer network similar to The Compassionate Friends. And as with TCF, the ethos of a shared understanding and a shared grief engenders a similar bubble of safety in which parents (and siblings) can develop and explore the special bond they must retain with their child alongside friends who will not judge.

But even in Mexico where the Day of the Dead is a national holiday and where death is recognized more as part of life, much of the razzamatazz of the celebrations are seen as a ploy to ward off fears of the ultimate unknown. And accepted, well rehearsed rituals can sometimes get in the way of an individuals opportunity to grieve. Both of



Marlene Gonzalez – remembering Sebastian died 2007 aged 8 (Oaxaca Mexico)

He may come, he may not ... why not believe - right? It's a possibility... If the Day of the Dead did not exist, I think I would be even more hurt.

Yeri Hernandez (Bereaved mum)

back. We were pleased, excited, and honoured to be invited to join Marlen Gonzalez and Yeri Hernandez, to place Joshua's photo next to those of their children Sebastian and Santiago, and to wait for that special moment when they would return. I would admit to a certain anxiety as 12 o'clock approached – how would I react should I sense their presence. Minutes passed. I heard dogs barking in the distance. Bright sunlight cast shadows against the curls of smoke drifting from the incense burner. And the silence did get heavier, the air slightly thicker as parents, siblings, uncles and aunts exchanged glances and smiled knowingly.

Later when I rather guiltily admitted that I hadn't felt anything, that for me Josh had not been there, our hosts grinned with an air of mild superiority. It's what you choose to



Publically the Day of the Dead is a grand festival with marching bands, firecrackers, gaudy costumes and of course an abundance of skulls, skeletons and all things macabre. In the family home things are much more sedate as relatives gather around a home made altar filled with favorite foods and drinks to entice the deceased loved ones

believe they acknowledged. As far as they were concerned their boys had returned and they were content. If in the first year of their grief they were lonely and distraught all the subsequent 'muertos' were a true blessing and a time for real celebration.

There are many differing practices and histories of the Day of the Dead with Catholic and modernist interpretations superimposed on indigenous beliefs but they all feed an imagination that truly allows for a continuing relationship with the deceased and for a grief that is open and rewarding.

Neimeyer again - "If we think of grieving not as a process of saying goodbye but as a process of saying hello again. How do I recover the relationship in a form that is sustainable now - reopen the doors closed by the loss. How do I continue a sense of communication beyond the grave then we have a different paradigm for grieving and maybe for growing through loss".

RETURNING TO INSPIRE



We are not academics so assembling our experiences and our findings into some kind of authoritative report has never been our purpose. Our first and last impulse was to gather stories that would produce a documentary in which we could represent a

version, perhaps our version but in any case an accessible version, of what it means to grieve. Necessarily anecdotal and with no claim to be representative these are personal stories that as collected together into one narrative we hope will provide insight to the fears and hopes of all bereaved parents (at least of those in the western world). This is important both to substantiate the experience of people traumatised by the death of their child, but also to help people who care for the bereaved either as professionals or as friends.

When Josh first died, in fact in the first two years after his death, I didn't want to hear about anybody else's grief. Josh was my son and too special to be shared with anyone else. His death is ours and ours alone to mourn. In a sense I wanted to hang on to him and to the pain of my grief in the privacy of our own making. His death and the torment of my grief was not to be divided up into easily digestible chunks for public consumption – neither did I have room for any other tales of woe. Not all bereaved parents would respond in this way, but that was my beginning, that was how it started for me.

Six years down the line and with a completed feature documentary waiting to be released to the public, I now feel very different. This comes with the realisation that mine is not such a unique grief. That everybody grieves in one way or another for something or another. Whatever it is that others have found that makes their lives worth living again, for me it was ditching the fear that Josh would disappear into some anonymous congregation of dead people. And that I have a choice as to what I do with my memories, that he still resides as a vibrant part of my imaginings, that he is still very much a part of the story of my life.



Josh Edmonds – died 2011 aged 22

It has taken over a year to edit the footage of our trip to the Americas.

We returned just before Christmas 2015 – and started work logging and assembling the stories. Our first cut (90 mins) contained nine of the stories we shot but the film was too long, rambling and repetitive and as with all films in the edit stage, the mantra of less is more was applied with increasing precision. The final version is now 75 minutes long and features just six stories from States and none from Mexico.

As filmmakers, I believe we have done a good job ([you can watch the trailer here](#)) even if it means disappointing many who gave us their time, their energies and their friendship. But we had explained the process to all our contributors along with the possibility that they might not make the final cut. And to tell the truth making decisions as to who to leave in and who to take out is a pretty onerous task. The issue here (and this is where it gets quite personal) is one of validation. To tell your story on camera and have it replayed back is to authenticate it, to make it more real. So it hurts when your story is not included in a wider project, when it's not part of a more generalized, more public appreciation of grief. It's like you've been sidelined from the discussion.

We had anticipated this and as we develop the website for THE GOOD GRIEF PROJECT, we are starting to publish short clips from all the stories we filmed both in the States and Mexico. Six down and six to go. [You can see them here.](#)

THE ONGOING STORY

THE GOOD GRIEF PROJECT is now registered in the UK as a charity. Our mission is to promote the creative potential of those who grieve, especially for those bereaved by the death of a child or similar untimely loss. Our strategy is twofold – to continue making short films and personal testimonies of peoples experience of grief – and to develop a series of creative workshops, courses and weekend retreats all designed to help people work actively with their grief.

It's no understatement to say that the initial funding from WCMT was instrumental in getting The Good Grief Project off the ground. The money was important but so was the confidence we got from the Trust's recognition of our work. As non-bereaved parents we would not have the faintest idea of the needs of those who have lost a child. In order to put Josh's death into perspective we needed to learn from others similarly bereaved, to understand their hopes and fears, and to share those findings in the way we best knew how. The grant from WCMT made all that possible.

Our documentary A LOVE THAT NEVER DIES will be released to the general public early next year 2018. We have had a number of cinema screenings notably as part of our local film festival in Stroud Gloucestershire, and a special screening at THE COMPASSIONATE FRIENDS National Conference in Orlando Florida. There are a number of further charity screenings planned for this autumn to include TCF UK's National Gathering, Cruse Bereavement Care Conference and our local NHS Trust.

The film has already received encouraging reviews and it's clear that we have an audience that is potentially much broader than our immediate community of bereaved parents and their support networks. The best way to reach that audience is to create a 'festival buzz' which in turn could attract TV broadcasters, especially in the states. But film festivals are not interested in films that have been screened too widely. So we have postponed a planned UK cinema tour until we've completed the festival circuit sometime in the spring of next year 2018 (hopefully with some successes). This will be followed by a Video on Demand release on the internet.

Reviews and nice words about the film

Thank you for such a moving, sad but beautiful film. I think that it has helped me to understand my own grief a bit better and also to understand the grief of people I love.

Carolyn B.

This film will change the way we see grief

Scarlett Lewis (bereaved mother of Sandy Hook victim)

Essential viewing for anyone trying to rebuild their lives after tragedy. This film will reach the hearts of many.

Professor Robert Niemeyer (Dept of Psychology – Memphis University)

Grief can bring us together and teach us how to live. Few people have embraced their grief stories with as much love and energy and courage as Jimmy and Jane.

Dr Katherine Shear (Centre for Complicated Grief – Columbia University)

Beautifully crafted and paced and shot. A triumph of your amazing spirits.

Ollie Huddleston – film editor

Bloody brilliant! Yes it was uncomfortable ... (but) it had coherence and moved seamlessly between complex themes.

Dr Kate Sackett Psychiatrist

Beautifully made, poetic in its grace, deeply moving ... inspiring

Roger Graef – Documentary film maker

Mercifully I have absolutely no idea of what you've been through and continue to live. But in your generosity in sharing your experience, I am given a moment to face some of my own grief and my own weird relationship with death which has been a theme in my life since my father's suicide when I was a child.

Jennie W.

A Love that Never Dies is honest and instructive and enlightening, occasionally shocking and sometimes funny. ... the smorgasbord of grief laid out here, in all its variety, wit and humour; its resilience and ingenuity; its shame and defiance, its determination to be seen is, in the end, a testament to life.

Flic Everett – Author

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I would like to acknowledge and thank all those who have supported us throughout this project

This has been very much a shared endeavor so my gratitude goes first to my partner and Josh's mother Jane Harris. We live and breathe our grief together.

Also to Josh's brother Joe and sister Rosa who have cheered us on at every step. And to Josh's cousin Jonny and his wife Rachel for their hospitality in New York, and Timmy and Ruth Harris in Colorado.

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About the Author

Jimmy Edmonds is a Bafta award winning documentary film editor having cut over 100 titles for the BBC, Channel Four and other UK and European and American broadcasters. His own film Breaking the Silence about the sexual abuse he suffered as a child was broadcast as part of the BBC OneLife strand in 2006. Since retiring (sort of) in 2015 and in collaboration with his partner Jane Harris, he has produced a number of films for charities including Say Their Name for The Compassionate Friends, and Gerry's Legacy for Alzheimers Society. Their production company BEYOND GOODBYE MEDIA continues to make films for THE GOOD GRIEF PROJECT, the NHS and other clients.

Jimmy and Jane live near Stroud in Gloucestershire where they have developed their new charity THE GOOD GRIEF PROJECT dedicated to an understanding of grief was an active and creative process. They have three children, Josh who died in 2011 aged 22, Joe (38) is a personal trainer and Rosa (24) is a video production coordinator.



LINKS

The Good Grief Project : <http://thegoodgriefproject.co.uk>

Beyond Goodbye Media : <http://beyondgoodbye.co.uk>

A Love That Never Dies (the film) : <http://www.alovethatneverdiesfilm.com>



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