

## **A Sister's Response**

A talk by Russell's sister, Delia Kaplan,  
given at a conference on bereavement.

I have a sense that today is a milestone for me in being able to share my personal experience of sibling loss.

My brother, Russell was diagnosed with cancer in April 1983 and he died on the 20 August 1984. I was 20 and he was 21 years old.

**19 years have passed since his death, it feels like a lifetime since I last spoke to him, laughed with him, hugged him.**

I would like to use this opportunity to talk about some of the feelings that the 20 year old in me had at the time of losing my brother.

Three weeks after his cancer diagnosis while I was still adjusting to this momentous news and what it could mean I was involved in a serious car accident in which I lost two friends.

**Suddenly, my world had shattered, I was confronted with the fragility of life. I felt as if I was living in another dimension.**

I was acutely aware that nothing in my world would ever be the same again yet the external world continued around me as if nothing had changed.

Life went on regardless of my pain and helplessness.

As the months passed I was brought face to face with the certainty of his death and the realization that I had no control over what was happening,

**Because Russell had reached a point of acceptance about his death...**he planned his own funeral, sorted his belongings, spoke openly about his dying and his readiness to let go. I found this extremely difficult to deal with.

I felt there was almost an **unspoken expectation** that because his death was expected that I too could prepare for it.

**But I didn't know how.**

After Russell died I understood that **death is hidden from daily life. I felt very alone. I felt alienated from my friends** in that no one could share in my experience. Friends were unsure of what to do and say, and mostly avoided any reference to his death.

If he was mentioned whatever was said did not feel right.

Outwardly, I became **numb, frozen and unreachable**. I was stuck. The analogy of an **ice block** comes to mind, I was simply **unable to access my pain and could not find words to express my feelings**. Everything felt unreal, as if I was in a nightmare and could not wake up.

I was **fiercely guarding my emotions**, believing that the hurt would overwhelm and destroy me. I had **perfected my mask**, immersing myself in study.... unbeknown to my classmates I had lost my brother.

**I put my pain on hold. My burden felt heavy, I was carrying a parcel that I did not know how to put down.**

Yet, inwardly, all the feelings were beneath the surface  
brewing and gathering momentum.  
In preparing this talk, I got in touch with many feelings

**For me there was anger -**  
that it wasn't me who had died  
at myself for not being able to do more.  
with my brother for abandoning me.  
anger with my friends  
and the unfairness of it all.

**Guilt ..for surviving,**  
I agonized why I did not die instead, compounded by  
my car accident.

**Regrets...all the if onlys...**  
If only I had told him I loved him more  
If only I had been different..more open and been able  
to move at his pace  
If only I had reassured him that I would be okay

**I experienced shame ...as part of me also felt relieved that**  
the unbearability of the last days was over.

**Major struggle re fear .....I was faced with the  
unpredictability of life which later translated itself into  
fear with a capital "F"  
Fear of life and of another loss.**

### **Helplessness**

.....of how to cope with the enormity of my loss

I also felt **powerless in the face of my mother's grief...**I  
could not take her pain away

**And then those moments....in planning his funeral he  
chose that "Bridge over troubled  
waters" be played.**

For many years I did not know how to respond when I  
heard the song in the supermarket..

What should I do?

Should I carry on shopping?

Drop my bags?

Stand still?

**I was concerned whether I would be able to live up to  
him - his courage and his inner strength**

How can I make his death a part of me so I can live again.  
To learn from what he had taught me about the here and the  
now

I was scared that I would not be able to find a way to make  
my life meaningful

Would I be able to develop my own identity versus  
growing up in the shadow of my deceased brother.

I felt **hurt and disappointed** that as the years passed my **brother was seldom mentioned, as if he had been erased...vanished.** On the odd occasion, someone would ask after Russell and then apologize for asking, as if their asking could cause me grief.

**This reaction mystified me as what can be worse than the actual loss?**

**Later upon reflection I understood people's inability to deal with untimely death.**

How could their questions hurt me?

On the other hand I experienced **deep gratitude** when somebody had the courage to acknowledge his existence.

My way of making sure he wasn't forgotten was when I was asked the innocent question "**How many siblings are in your family?**"

My standard response was and is still today, that we were 3 and are now 2.

In a small way I am making sure that I do not deny the life he lived.

I struggled with **How to have my own experience of my brother's death?**

Around me people were expressing how hard this loss was for my mother. I was repeatedly reminded that the primary loss was hers.

The focus was on adult grief, **there was little recognition of my sister and I, our grief was silent and misunderstood.** I felt I didn't have the space to grieve as a sister, beyond the confines of my parent's grief.

### **What triggers the missing?**

Experiencing moments where I found myself searching for similarities in other people Eg. a third year psychology student in my class whose hands reminded me of my brothers hands. My deep longing to connect with this student, I went out of my way to ensure a friendship.

Seeing my friends with their brothers used to evoke a searing pain which I avoided at all costs.

### **Death brought for me many other losses –**

The loss of the **family unit** as we knew it..... the change of roles, the burden of responsibility, I was now the eldest. Not being able to share our pain, each member orbiting separately.

The loss of my **parent's emotional availability** as they were caught up in their own impossible pain.

**The reversal of roles....** Children comforting and nurturing parent's.

The loss of **normality, stability and of a sense of trust in the world...**the fear of cancer lurking within a loved one loomed large on my horizon.

**The loss of my brother and I ..... our shared history.**

**So has there been a turning point?**

On my 30<sup>th</sup> birthday I expressed surprise that I had lived to such an age. I realized that I was **not living but existing in fear**, waiting to be diagnosed with the big C.

With this insight I really allowed myself the breathing space to give my sorrow words and to deal with my delayed grief. I recognized that only I could reduce my inner pain. Firstly, I released myself of the felt expectations to behave in a certain way.

Began to allow the ice block to thaw and soften.  
Drew inspiration and comfort from my brother's poem.

**I worked on forgiving myself for having survived when my brother and friends died and forgiving myself for the choices the 20 year old had made.**

As time passed I was more comfortable to talk about the loss of my brother and to share my memories.

As well as being able to consider my needs. In a practical way choosing how to mark the anniversary of Russell's death in a way that felt appropriate to me.

## **And where am I today?**

20 years on Russell's death has gradually become less painful.

With this is a concern **that my memory is fading** and I still experience moments of panic and ask myself "**Have you forgotten your brother?**"

However, I have learnt that my experience of losing Russell **remains an integral part of who I am and is interwoven** into every aspect of my life.

### **What frequently comes to mind is -**

His lively eyes, his chuckle, his questioning mind, our pillow fights in the dark and his extreme irritation when he lost a game of backgammon.

I remember his delight in the sound of the waves, the beauty of a daffodil and his appreciation for life itself.

### **Life has its own currents.**

**I am no longer struggling upstream but am learning to go with the flow.**

In reaching a stage of acceptance **I understand that healing does not mean forgetting but rather forgiving and trusting** that although I cannot see or speak with Russell, there is a part of him that will always be with me, that I carry within my heart.