



'A journey through grief'
Words inspired by the sculptures of Jean Parker

Heather Whyte

Preface

This piece of work is inspired by a series of alabaster sculptures created by artist Jean Parker. The sculptures themselves were produced by Jean in response to her own journey through grief. Like all such journeys the experience was unique to Jean, however through her sculptures many people have explored their own journey through grief and many conversations have been enabled.

I was fortunate to meet Jean at Bude United Reformed Church in August 2015 and view the sculptures in an exhibition at the church. I took photographs of the sculptures and later was inspired to reflect on what each photograph said about the different stages through the journey of grief. As each sculpture stands alone so each reflection stands alone but it is the journey they make together which is powerful. Each reflection represents a moment in that journey, a stage which can last for any length of time determined only by personal circumstances and experience. No two journeys through grief will be the same. Each journey through grief is a spiritual experience and will be unique to that experience. Grief is often not a one-off occurrence in life, and can be sparked by losses of different kinds, the death of a loved one, the break-up of a relationship, changes in life because of illness, the loss of employment to name just a few. It is my hope that this resource may be a companion to be turned as often as needed.

The nature of the reflections is inspired by my own journey with creation spirituality and quantum theology, and how they mesh with my understanding of Jesus. The final reflection 'Peace' has no photograph - there is no sculpture - but peace feels to be the natural outpouring of the healing process, and so deserves acknowledgement within the journey.

My grateful thanks to Jean for her inspiration and her permission to photograph her sculptures, and to Bude United Reformed Church for the opportunity to explore something of the nature of grief.

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Some thoughts about grief

Loss is a natural part of life, there is a current of loss flowing through our lives; small losses and large losses, natural loss and devastating unexpected loss. Each moment, each experience is fleeting, of the moment and then gone never to return. Sometimes we may be tempted to dwell in the past, unaware of what is happening around us. Sometimes what is happening is uncomfortable and so we look to the future dismissing the present. Jesus encouraged people to live in the now and doing so, at a time of loss, means grieving.

We often talk about belonging and how important that is for a sense of wholeness but belonging can never be a fixed thing, it is always quietly changing and at its core belonging is growth. We need a sense of belonging to enable our growth, and loss is a part of that growth. Can we feel absence unless we feel belonging? Absence is the longing for something or someone that is gone. Loss is the hole left by what is absent. Longing implies that there was a relationship. Belonging is linked to relationships, our sense of belonging grows with the building of relationships within a 'community'; there are many different forms of community, where we live, where we work, where we play, family and friends but like belonging community is always fluid, and always changing as the relationships within it grow and change. If we have not found that sense of belonging, then we are not building the relationships that may result in a sense of absence.

Realising loss often only happens after the drama and ritual have ceased. Realising loss is like being thrown out of the shelter of belonging where your heart was at home, into a place which feels strange and alien. There are many words that are associated with this—unreal, numb, a sense of having lost a part of yourself, anger, sadness, isolation. Part of the grieving process is drawing that which you have given to what you have lost, back to yourself to, to hold and cherish before allowing it to move out again.

When we experience loss, we have a choice, we can choose to embrace grief, or we can suppress and deny grief. When we embrace grief, it allows us to belong to the changing nature of that community which will in turn enable us to be at rest in a new belonging. This is not so much a mind

exercise as a soul experience, we cannot think our way through grief we need to allow our soul to journey and find that new belonging.

In faith, the bright moment in grief is when the sore of absence gradually changes into a well of presence. The catalyst for this is often the realisation that we are grieving for ourselves. This realisation, which is accepting the loss, allows us to begin letting go of that sorrowful 'holding on at all cost' and we begin to glimpse the possibility of being with who or what we have lost in a new way. A new belonging becomes possible, a belonging which embraces all time and all places, and we are never truly separate from who or what we have lost. The sense of loss becomes a part of our new sense of belonging and the sense of absence is gone.

Grief is a part of loving; never to experience grief is to never have loved, never to know what it is to belong. The consolation of grief is that it is a journey, painful and terrible at the time but there is a path, and in faith, we can know that we are never alone.

Introduction to the reflections

The reflections within this piece are derived purely from the photographs taken of the sculptures, drawing on the emotion felt within the sculpture as it reflects a different stage of the grieving process. I invite you to dwell with each photograph and reflection, finding your own place in and pathway through the journey, whilst drawing hope from the knowledge that there is a path through your grief. The first five reflections in this book could occur in any order and may reoccur within the journey. Grief is unpredictable. Equally, acceptance and healing may occur more than once in a journey as small steps forward are taken and then it feels as if you move backwards again, there is no normal in the journey through grief.

Denial



Hair in place.
Face a mask.
Head turned away.
Not me!
I'm fine!

Superficiality closes the eyes,
no window to the soul,
no clues to what lies beneath.
If I pretend hard enough
it is not real.
It belongs to someone else,
this news,
this devastating,
life transforming news.

No! Even that is too much.
Life is normal.
I look the same
so, I must be the same.
Keep the blank expression,
and no one will know.
I should get an Oscar.

Disbelief

No! I scream
No!
Open mouthed
I stare at the messenger of news,
bad news.
No!
There must be a mistake.

Alone,
my mind, still screaming,
is travelling at a million miles an hour
between possibilities.
It is too much to take in.
Is this really happening?
I thought I was coping,
it would be okay
but no!
Possibility,
probability,
certainty,
paralysis.
The numbness begins,
takes over;
I cannot think,
I cannot move;
I just lie here screaming
no!
No! No! No!
Not me!



Questioning

Out of the numbness
come questions.
Like a waterfall
cascading from my brain.
Why?
How?
What?
When?

Sometimes the answers escape me,
even though someone explained.
Sometimes there are no answers
but still the questions come.
I cannot think for questions.
Rest they say,
wait,
but the questions will not let me.
They buzz like hornets
inside and outside my head;
irritating, annoying,
Disturbing, bewildering
driving me mad
but I need them!
These automatic questions
stop me thinking.
It's a different kind of numbness.
My questions protect.



Anger

Denial,
then disbelief,
then questions.
Then suddenly it's all gone,
consumed by anger.

I see it in my eyes,
I hear it in my voice,
the journey lines are etched
deep within my skin.
It shouldn't be like this
it's not me
but I cannot help it.
Everything inside me is shouting,
the questions distilled now into rage;
rage against the world,
rage against those I love,
rage against God.
Rage against myself.
All is anger.
How could this happen
to me?

I want to shed this skin
but I know it won't change anything.
The anger goes too deep,
it's eating me up.
Day after day after day
life defined
by criss-cross slashes of rage.



Depression

It's gone,
anger spent
the shell is left empty.

Nothing left but emptiness;
no energy for decisions,
no energy for life,
no energy for death.
The cocoon of despair
holds me fast,
pushing me,
squeezing me;
criss-cross rage
replaced by blank face.
No emotion,
no expression,
just a deep well of emptiness.
No point.
No questions.
Every day the same.
I don't know what I want anymore;
I don't feel anything;
I don't know if I want to go on,
I don't know if I can go on.
I don't know.



Acceptance

Half here,
half there.
I blink.
Is there life?
There is life.
Is life there?
Life is there.
I play with words,
I play with feelings,
begin to feel again.
One eye open to the world
I begin to let life in.
Like a butterfly emerging,
I am new me,
transformed by experience.
I have travelled here through hell
but I am ready.
I blink again.
Something has changed
and nothing has changed.
I am
and yet I am new.
I am now,
I am alive
and when I am ready,
both eyes open,
I will take new me
and learn to live new life.



Healing

I am calm,
waiting.
Healing has begun
and new life is slowly dawning.
There is no hurry,
time will lead me forward.
I am learning to smile again,
not just from my mouth
but from deep within
as confidence in life returns.

I was broken for a while;
now I am mending,
the gift of creation
healing the broken edges
making me whole once more.
Like a fine Japanese plate,
lovingly mended,
the break remains visible,
etched in gold,
to show its place in my story;
it will travel with me,
a mark of experience,
a part of me forever.



Healing is not restoration
it is re-creation,
a journeying;
learning to love
myself,
my story,
my life
wherever I am led.

I am calm,
waiting.

Multi-faceted

Life emerges
picking up the threads
and weaving them into something new.
I am not the same,
I am more;
I see things differently,
more vividly,
from different angles.
Life is multi-faceted
and there is an inner glow,
a new depth,
that adds something.
I feel connected.
I feel whole,
no longer a shadow,
no longer a pale imitation.
This is life,
glorious life,
made for living;
each day a new adventure to be shared.
For I am not alone,
and will never be alone,
I see that now,
I feel that now.
I have grown.



Peace

Peace comes through love.

Love of life,

love of others.

A sense of belonging,

a sense of knowing.

Peace is a state of awareness;

that we are one,

that all experience is shared,

that giving of ourselves

is giving to ourselves

and sharing is living life to the full.

Knowing love,

being loved,

accepting love,

giving love without conditions;

nothing held back in fear.

Peace is quite simply

love without limits.