

## “I’ll Never Get Over This”



Barry Albin-Dyer OBE is the proprietor and Chairman of F.A. Albin & Sons and its subsidiary companies, Barry Albin & Sons and Albin International Repatriation.

During Barry’s 40 plus years within the funeral industry, he has presided over some of the most high profile funerals in the UK, overseen repatriations which have involved travel to some of the furthest corners of the globe, including Thailand, Afghanistan and Iraq, been the subject of a six-part ITV1 documentary series “Don’t Drop the Coffin”, written six

books detailing his experiences in the industry, yet his feet remain firmly planted in a corner of South East London, along with his heart, in Bermondsey.

A part of the varied work that his company undertakes involves providing bereavement counselling services. To this end he has created the Albin Bereavement Team, whose job it is to support the Albin group in its work, whether it be in the back office of one of his chain of branches across the East and London or at the scene of a mass fatality or delicate repatriation case.

Here, Barry talks openly about his thoughts on bereavement and the personal path that led him to the close understanding that he has of the subject.

### **Dealing with loss, is their light throughout the journey or only at the end**

Having been conceived a Funeral Director, with Mum and Dad both working as Funeral Directors, ‘I’ll never get over this bereavement’ is perhaps the truest and most common remark I have regularly heard from the people we serve. True because it speaks for itself. We can never get back what we have lost, but we can learn to live good and full lives as we begin a new journey, one that we are often afraid to venture on but, given time and support, we can find the strength to live every moment of the rest of our lives, every breath we have left to the full. I believe this is the duty we have to ourselves and to those we have lost. To live, breathe, repair and continue is the human body’s natural function. We just have to convince our brain and heart to co-operate.

For some people, bereavement is like a heavy cold. We can go through the symptoms, shake it off and it is no more than that. For others it is like pneumonia and to shake it off is touch and go – a real mountain to climb. We have, I am sure, heard of the saying ‘They died of a broken heart’, well I believe it is true. We have to accept that when we completely give up, our body begins to shut down and for those very few cases and they are few and far between, it is the end of the journey.

People often ask me what advice I would give to someone in bereavement. My advice is simple – just get up every morning, put one foot in front of the other and see where that leads us. Sometimes that step takes us forward and we feel a little stronger, we see a light as the tunnel shows us an end. Other days the step takes us backward and we feel worse than the day before. Loss is full of highs and lows, but the real problem is when we don’t get up and make that step. It is a scientific fact that people suffering from bereavement hear only 24% of what is said to them. More frightening is the fact that they retain only 7%, which shows how hard it is to be heard or for a while want to be heard.

My mother died when I was 17 years old and still today I always say that leaving me was the worst thing she ever did to me. But in her leaving, she left me the greatest gift, that of knowing how empty loss leaves us, a chance for me to feel that terrible emptiness and begin to understand just how desperate the people I was to serve in my life were to feel.

On the morning she died some 43 years ago now (yet still fresh in my mind), I was staying the night at my Grandmother's as my Dad knocked on the door and the door was opened by me, Dad looked at me and cried in a shaky voice 'Mummy's gone Son, she died an hour ago' I just panicked and cried as all three of us fell in a heap of tears. Later that day and in fact the weeks that would follow, neither of us could make a decision. We were both Funeral Directors, my Dad for his whole life and in a lesser way, me for mine, yet we never knew what to do. All the practical decisions we help people make every day, for example burial or cremation, how to register, what documentation we needed, cars, dates etc. etc., we both were empty. Numb in fact. As years went by I was always puzzled as to why we were both so useless at that time, even with all the knowledge we possessed. So it posed the obvious question – If we did not know what to do, how would anybody else, which for me was the beginning of a long and endless journey to battle grief through knowledge, experience and most of all love.

As I learned my way around the minefield of loss, I first came across the stages of grief for which there are many descriptive words and terms, but I would describe them as follows:

### **Numbness**

This of course was exactly what Dad and I had felt and not understood all those years ago. Simply the mind blanking out the pain and protecting the body and organs to give them a chance in simple terms, to re-group and prevent any shut down, as the pain can be so great that thrust upon us in one dreadful moment, would be unbearable. That numbness is a defence mechanism to allow us time to adapt.

### **Denial**

Not being able to face the truth leading on from the numbness. A good example of this is making enough food for two when there is only one. The mind gently denying the truth.

### **Deprivation – Often described as anger**

Even on the days we feel better we can often be angry because we feel guilty at not being sad. As the truth hits home, we become very sad and angry at what we have lost, at what we believe in truth we have had taken away from us. Sometimes we can be angry with ourselves because we think we could have done more, or angry with God - 'Why me?' we may well ask. 'What have I done to deserve this?'. Sometimes people are angry with me as a Funeral Director. If there were no Funeral Directors, perhaps there would be no deaths? Of course the work I do has nothing to do with the loss of life, but for a while it can feel a little like that for people. Death comes to us all. From our very first breath it is only a matter of where and when – that is the pattern of life and death.

### **Last but not least – Depression (The most serious)**

The first time I believe the medical profession sees the process as an illness. For me I believe they often miss the early symptoms. It's a little like having a very small cancerous growth say on your hand, looking at it, recognising it, but not treating it until it becomes life threatening. Of course that cancer reported, would not be left. So why when bereavement occurs are we not recognising it as an illness straight away? Treating it only when it becomes clinical depression. I campaign constantly to change this perception.

When I meet a family in loss, I will often ask if they have seen their GP. A GP needs to know of a loss. He or she can help. It may be that you need a little help to sleep, or later vitamins, check your blood for iron etc., your diet – are you eating enough?, your weight or just have a chat or refer you to a group or counselling. It needs treating from day one to prevent stage four depression taking a firm hold.

I am a great believer in what we call the 13 month illness. "So what's that?", you may well ask. Well I'll tell you. I believe we have to go through all the anniversaries to be able to think differently. "This time last Christmas Dad was here", "This time last year we were all on holiday" – "Dad's birthday", "Our anniversary", "This time last year Dad was here", "This time last year Dad died". Strangely when you can no longer say "This time last year" your whole thinking can change. It's like drawing a line in the sand. After 13

months we can no longer refer to “This time last year”. For me this changes everything.

My father died some 19 months ago now and whenever I met someone during the first year after his death I would say ‘Dad died earlier this year’ or ‘Dad died in April’. But when I crossed the 12th month onto the 13th, I realised I had to rephrase what I had been saying for a year. Dad died 19 months ago did not have the same impact when voiced. Not a cure, but a line in the sand and I have to say I have been feeling better as I question my thinking and as we move nearer to the second year. Interestingly my Dad married again. He was never the same man but he lived a full and rewarding life and had great happiness. Mum’s death changed things for us all. We never forgot Mum and we never will, but happiness is found through the journey, not at the end.

People will ask me what is my job as a Funeral Director. Well you have a midwife that helps you into the world and I’m a kind of midwife that helps you on your last journey. In truth, what we do is rock the cradle – What do you do with a baby that is well fed, winded, changed, is well and warm, yet still is crying? We rock the cradle, pick the baby up, comfort it, walk around and even take them for a drive to rock them to sleep. I often say that everyone I meet in my professional life is sucking lemons. If we get a group of people together, cut up a lemon and ask everyone to suck on it, they will pull the sourest of faces as the citric acid leaves a bitter taste. Yet if we add a little sugar, it becomes lemonade – we sweeten up the bitterness, just enough to make it bearable (remember Rock the Cradle, sweeten the bitterness – it’s all anyone can do in the short term).

As all things in life, much depends on perspective. Now if I took you to Oxford Street and stood you outside that beautiful tall building we call Selfridges, on the street what would we see and hear? TRAFFIC, PEOPLE, NOISE, THE FRUIT SELLER SHOUTING ‘6 FOR A POUND’, THE HUSTLE AND BUSTLE ETC. – MADNESS. If you come from the country it could be a bit frightening. Now if I took you straight up in the lift to the roof, on a clear day you could see Windsor Castle, Hyde Park and the clouds – quiet, some peace, no people, no hustle and bustle, and cars etc – Just peace. Yet we are in the same place looking from a different perspective. So life is not always as bad as we first imagine it. So, you see, trying to change perspective is so important.

Having said this, remember there is no magic cure – it’s a hard road the bereaved walk, but not a road without end or hope. You could say bereavement is like walking around a labyrinth. We may pass similar ways time and time again but if we keep on walking, never stay still, we will without doubt reach the end. A labyrinth is not like a maze with lots of dead ends, if you keep going you will reach the end. If you stop, and give up, then there is no end.

I truly hope that this article brings you the knowledge that there is life after bereavement. If you know someone who has suffered with a recent bereavement, keep in touch with them, don’t let them be isolated, stigmatised, don’t be afraid to talk to them. If they are a little cross at times be patient. Just being there is a fantastic help.

I’ll leave you now with some of my F A Albin golden rules and an opening paragraph from ‘A Grief Observed’ – my favourite ‘must read’ book.

- ✚ No matter if the funeral is a Metropolitan Police, Fire Brigade or Military funeral, however large or small, there should be no difference in the importance or quality. Every funeral is precious and important.
- ✚ We are only as good as our last funeral – no matter how good our reputation
- ✚ The answer is ‘Yes’ – Now ask me the question
- ✚ Bereavement is already bad enough – Let’s not make it any worse.

And as C S Lewis wrote in the opening paragraph of ‘A Grief Observed’

*No one ever told me that grief felt like fear. I am not afraid, but the sensation is like being afraid. The same fluttering stomach, the same restlessness, the yawning. I keep swallowing. At other times it feels like being mildly drunk, or concussed. There is a sort of invisible blanket between the world and me. I find it hard to take in what anyone says. Or perhaps, hard to want to take it in. It is so uninteresting. Yet I want the others to be about me. I dread the moments when the house is empty. If only they would talk to one another and not to me.*

Losing someone is the price we pay for loving them. But we would not change that love for a moment.

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