

A Good Mourning

Maria Ahern's TCF talk on Wednesday 2 September via Zoom

Introduction

This was the second TCF Zoom online talk, with 150 attendees. Maria was chair of TCF for three years and TCF trustee for three. Most importantly, she stressed that she is a committed advocate for the bereaved – and wants to challenge the way society views us, as bereaved parents. But first and foremost, she is Jamie Ahern's mum. With a photo of Jamie to her right, she went on to introduce Jamie – her only child with whom she “danced the dance” – and still dances the dance full of colour, laughter and music.

The reality – no magic

Maria reiterated what we all know – that there is no magic formula, no map or wand to help us survive our catastrophic loss. As bereaved parents, it's a new world we are propelled into with a new language. In this talk, Maria's aim was to tell us how she has done it so that others can find a way of coping. She is still learning, but not falling over as much as in the early days. There are good days and bad days, but with the passage of time – in her case six years and two weeks – the waves of overwhelming and incomprehensible grief are perhaps becoming less extreme and pronounced.

The Ologists

At the heart of the talk lay the question – what is the difference between Grief and Mourning? The experts, or “ologists”, say that grief is an internal emotion, and mourning is the external expression of our loss – through ritual. The ologists portray grief as negative – and it's no wonder that people are afraid to approach us. They say that grief “typically” decreases in time and fades into the background – people say “we've moved on” – moved on where? Mourning allows us through time to re-engage with life and feel joy and happiness again.

But our grief is still present; it is complicated and doesn't follow the usual pattern – a fact acknowledged by the experts.

Planet Grief

In fact, we have been flung on to Planet Grief – there is no formal guide. If it stops hurting, does this mean you are forgetting your precious child? It's hard, traumatic, excruciating. You cannot fix it, there is no escape, yet must survive. Maria saw that she needed to survive positively and chose to survive by co-existing with James and Grief in a Good Mourning. “U” are central in the Mo”u”rning and you need to find your own equilibrium.

Elephants

Everyone needs to find their own unique way to survive the unbelievable, the unimaginable, the unbearable. Maria suggested ways to achieve this.

- Acclimatize for survival
- Do what works for you
- Remember to breathe – breathing slows you down. Take deep breaths – especially around birthdays, anniversaries, family gatherings - Look up, blink, breathe – repeat
- Educate others when you feel that others are neglecting your child – remember we’re talking a different language – we’re on Planet Grief. They don’t have the language skills.
- Let yourself laugh – humour can be a great balancer. You’re not being disrespectful.
- Cry. We’re bereaved parents, we’re sad.
- Talk to your child. Maria talks to James. They have conversations, a new relationship, and are co-authors. He remains involved in her life as it evolves.
- Shrug your shoulders and let go – lead the way and tell your friends. Your circle of friends may change.
- Dealing with the negativity – take up crafting for example. The repetitive actions help by slowing the brain down, heals, and you are making something.
- The others. There are lots of us on Planet Grief – each in our own “crater”. Maria did not think she would survive at the beginning, but she did, and you will too.

- Collateral beauty – one day you will look up and realise there are other parents on Planet Grief and you will offer your hand to a new arrival
- Maria sees it as a “grief chain” using the metaphor of elephants, one gently leading another
- Your child will continue to live through you

Maria’s talk was truly inspirational and moving – giving her own unique perspective in a clear and strong talk.

Judith Pinfold – September 2020