

Bereavement Without Entering A Funeral Parlour: My Personal Experience of Grief

Walking round our parish church, my brother said to me: 'I don't ever want to end up just in the ground with a gravestone – the thought is really depressing.' We were in our twenties at the time, home for the Easter holidays; me, up from Cornwall, and him, down from Edinburgh. Rare moments spent together like this were precious to us both.

I asked him what he would prefer. 'I don't know; I've never thought about it, but plant a tree, or something that will grow in my memory.' We must have ended the conversation abruptly – it's not the kind of thing you discuss when you see your whole life ahead of you. And Christian had plans.

Having studied biology with zoology honours at university, he was trying to get a project off the ground which involved him travelling around the Eastern Caribbean, alone, studying the fauna of the islands. He was looking for a book publisher with the aim of recording the animals he found, and their natural habitat, and stressing the importance of preserving them.

In what would become a forewarning to us, his family, he packed himself off on this self-funded adventure, working on boats for money, and living for much of the time out in the bush. In the end he made two trips; the second to take over 500 photographs to accompany his text – my favourite being of him, with long curly hair tied back, dripping with sweat, holding up a young anaconda with a firm grip on its head and tail. Madness, really.

Writing became his life for several months as he tried to corral his explorations onto the page, and his head was full of other projects – a film about spiders' webs and visiting the major seabird colonies around the UK. But he became inspired by someone else's travels and Africa became his next focus.

Christian acknowledged, at 27 years old, in a letter to a prospective publisher that 'I have realized [sic] that travel and exploration are my passion and my next project is one that I am particularly excited by.' And this next adventure was a biggie. He told me about his plans and, to be honest, I was trying to scratch out a living in Cornwall so I didn't really take much notice until it was time for him to leave and I travelled home (where he was staying with my parents) to see him off.

I will leave it to him to explain the project (written to a prospective film company):

'With the bi-centenary of the death of the British explorer Mungo Park soon approaching, I thought it would be a fitting tribute to his memory to recreate his travels in post-colonial West Africa. I intend to follow the brief set for him by the African Association in 1795 to "pass on to the River Niger either by way of Bambouk [sic] or by such other route as should be found most convenient, to ascertain the course, and if possible the rise and termination of that river'... To be "the first" to tread *terra incognita* was a major motivation for many early explorers and the sense of freedom, excitement and hope that travelling to wild, undiscovered lands embodied

was a great lure to their fertile minds. One cannot help but to admire his bravery.'

It was only when I saw the mountains of notebooks covering Christian's desk and the piles of papers on the floor of his childhood bedroom that I started to understand this all-consuming passion of his to travel and explore the planet's isolated regions. One evening we looked through his dictionaries – English into Mandingo, for example – he was fully committed to being able to interact with the people he met on route.

It was also at this point I realised my parents' concerns. Christian would be travelling alone, although sometimes with a local guide, and on foot or in a pirogue (dugout canoe) on some sections of the Niger. GPS technology was in its infancy and he was entering one of the more inaccessible lowland areas on the planet. He had a film camera with him, although very little else. But trying to dissuade Christian, or point out the dangers, only made him more determined to go. My mother ended up calling Bamako in Mali, 'Bloody Bamako', because she heard the name so often.

For my part, I bought him a small book – ironically, a survival guide for intrepid travellers – and sent him an email the evening before he was due to leave. My greatest regret is that he never read this email. I told him how proud I was of him, and that I loved him.

I suppose I have given the game away. Christian never returned from his travels in East Africa. The last contact we had was a phone call Mum and Dad took, two days' before Mum's birthday. He had found a tin shack by the road, containing a working phone (amazing!), and he took the opportunity to call. After that, we had letters arriving addressed to 'Jesus Christian' from young children that he must have met during his travels – he was always a magnet for children and had worked as an auxiliary nurse in an adolescent psychiatric unit after leaving school.

I was still living in Cornwall, and had thought nothing of Christian's silence as he had warned us communication would be virtually impossible. It wasn't until he missed his flight home, and after waiting another few weeks, that my parents called the police. Being so far from home, I was shielded from the real nightmare Mum and Dad were experiencing. I can only now, since having children of my own, begin to understand the gut wrenching heartache they must have felt as they slowly realised their son was missing. Of course, the questions started: How long has he been missing? Where should we start looking? Who can help us search on the ground? Suffice to say, when I flew into London from Cornwall to meet police detectives, family and Christian's closest friends to work on a plan of action, I was hit with overwhelming emotions. I was sucked into the nightmare, too.

This was eleven years ago, and we still have no idea what has happened to my brother. I saw one of my oldest friends last week – one of my only close friends who knew Christian – and she told me she couldn't imagine losing one of her brothers. 'They're genetically the closest people to me in the whole world.' Of course, this thought hurt me. Part of my problem dealing with my brother's disappearance is just that: he has disappeared. There is no body, no headstone, there's been no service; we are still in limbo and cannot grieve properly. As a family we have dealt with his loss in different ways. I can't speak for my parents, but I have fabricated a story

about what happened to him (that I don't want to share) to help me view his loss in a positive light.

Until I wrote this article, I hadn't been able to bring myself to go through the files on his computer: his letters to prospective publishers and agents, his research, his travel diaries (which includes his decision to spend more time with me and get to know me better). Hardest to bear, the photos he'd taken of himself before his African trip. He's so excited, expectant and utterly beguiling that I have no doubt that if he were here today he would have been on our TV screens, taking viewers along with him on his adventures. What surprised me, and I hadn't realised until I'd read his proposal, was that Mungo Park had inspired him so much – this Scottish lad of 24 years old had set off, at the request of Sir Joseph Banks (president of the Royal Society and founding member of the African Association), into the great unknown with only his wits, a basic grasp of the Mandingo language and the knowledge that his predecessor had perished on the journey. Mungo and Christian were very similar.

Today, Mungo's name pales next to the later African explorers – Burton, Stanley and Livingstone. I don't want my brother's name to pale. And I have tried hard to keep his memory alive. We've held a fund-raising event to pay for private searches in Africa, but never a memorial service - we just can't seem to countenance the idea. Being in limbo is horrendous; although there is always a miniscule glimmer of hope still allowed us. But how do we collectively grieve, and how do we remember?

I have different ways of trying to keep my brother's memory alive. Our son has his christian name and surname as middle names and we celebrate 'Uncle Christian's Adventure Day' on his birthday. This involves going on, as the name suggests, a day of discovery; so far we've been to the zoo, had a steam train ride and made a den in the woods (our children are under-5). I want them to know about their uncle as he would have been the best uncle ever – I really, really feel sad at Christmas when I think of what could have been, family-wise.

Being a writer, my initial thoughts turned to recording stories about him and I started up a blog where his friends could leave their memories of him: his exuberance, his humour, his kindness, his love of broccoli stems and eating Opal Fruits in their wrappers....

While it's been a comfort to us, hearing of his life away from the family, I still feel we have lost many of his stories. At some stage, probably soon, I will feel strong enough to attempt to pull the various strands of his life together to create a memory book – perhaps my grieving has reached a plateau? But that doesn't seem to be enough.

I have taken another step. As Christian was inspired by Mungo, so I have been inspired by my brother. This doesn't mean I'm going to pack my bags and embark on some solitary exploration, but I want to gain something positive from his loss. We've learnt the hard way that a long life is no guarantee and a person's stories can disappear prematurely – so I'm on a mission to help people preserve their life stories, so they and their families don't have similar regrets. I've become, what is termed in the US as, a personal historian. Christian lives on in my heart and in my work. He does not have a headstone, so I hope he would approve.

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