



JONATHAN ROMAIN

As a rabbi I thought I knew grief. Then my son died at 34

A year on from the phone call every parent fears most, Jonathan Romain reflects on what he's learnt and why he chose not to follow the traditions of his faith

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hat a strange animal is grief. At times it lies deep and immovable

within us; other times it rises up and attacks us unexpectedly. I have felt both keenly since my son, Benedict, died exactly a year ago today on his honeymoon, aged 34.

In theory, as the rabbi of a large congregation and used to dealing with death, I should have been prepared for the emotional avalanche that hit me.

In practice, we are hardwired towards our personal life being regular and normal. We cannot live constantly expecting the unexpected.

So I knew exactly what to do when the dreadful phone call came late on a Saturday night — who to alert and what forms to fill in. Yet, looking back over the past year, I learnt so much about facing loss that it makes me think I was a complete novice all along.

Benedict drowned in the Philippines, and the bureaucracy and paperwork is difficult and time-consuming, as anyone knows who has had to repatriate a person. It is also dangerous, as it means the immediate grief is often channelled into anger against officialdom, which saves some of the instant pain but stores it up for later.



The late Benedict Romain with his sculpture of a prayer book transforming into a dove, made for his father's synagogue in Maidenhead

The big advantage of “being in the business” was that I had the know-how, and confidence, to make the funeral as personal to him as possible. I have always urged other people to do so and be as creative as possible, but they rarely do.

We acquired an empty coffin before he arrived back, and my sons and their partners painted it with 64 images of all that was important in Benedict's life, including one of his sculptures, the saxophone he blew, a Sudoku puzzle and his cat. We made it *his* coffin.

At the funeral itself, we included poems and songs he loved, and attempted coffin-surfing (though failed to do it properly) in imitation of the body-surfing that had happened at his stag night.

His friends were invited to place in his grave notes with goodbye messages, though some also put in items associated with him, such as a tuna sandwich and a skateboard.

It felt a bit pagan, like a Viking burial with weapons and tools, yet also meaningful and appropriate. We could not give him more years, but we made sure he had a good funeral.

This was one of several ways in which, to my surprise, I steered away from my own religious traditions. Another was limiting the *shivah*, by which mourners stay at home for seven days and are surrounded by people, noise, food, hugs, and conversations repeated over and over again.

It can be very cathartic — sharing the agony and feeling the warmth of communal camaraderie. It also acts as an emotional escalator, taking us from the depths of grief back into the stream of life.

But I wanted it not. Instead of seven whole days, we had three nights. Maybe it was me and the intensely private person I am, or maybe it was too hard, as someone who gives, to go into role reversal and receive.

It is not as if I wanted to be alone with God. We have an awkward relationship right now, and God was certainly no use at this time. Instead, it was family, getting back to work and reminding myself that I was not unique, that everyone has to face the wrench of death, and that carrying on is the only option.

Another surprise was learning two simple but wonderful lessons as to the best help one can give mourners. Not flowers or chocolates (kind as they are), but a giant

pack of teabags for all the visitors, plus a hand-knitted wrap for curling up in at night. Both immensely practical.

It is also best in subsequent weeks and months to let the bereaved person take the lead as to whether they want to discuss their loss or not. Many a time I have been at a cinema or football match and bumped into someone who immediately asks how I am coping, when all I wanted to do was concentrate on the film or game, not be yanked back into grief mode. Far better to put it more neutrally — “How are things?” — and let the mourner direct where the conversation goes.

In addition, if the mourner says: “Doing OK, thanks” — meaning they do not want to take the conversation further — do not follow it up by saying: “But how are you *really*?” and put your need to be caring above their need to change the subject.

Of course, grief affects people in different ways. My wife and I mourned very separately. I have seen that damage other couples, who feel ignored or misunderstood, but it is best to give each other the space to heal in their own way.

It is much worse for Benedict’s wife: we have lost our past, the child we had nurtured, but Stella has lost her future and all the plans they had together. Her life has been wrecked, and her recovery is only just starting.

Another surprise has been the calendar. I was caught off-guard by December 31 — saying goodbye to 2023 meant leaving behind the last time he was alive. The change of date, however artificial, made his death feel as if it belonged to an ever-distant past and “old news”, whereas for me it was still immediate, my feelings still raw and the voice down the phone saying “Benedict is dead” still echoing around my head.

It also felt like a betrayal. There is no doubt that the further one gets from a death, the more the intensity lessens. While that is welcome, it also means letting go of

the cold comfort of being cocooned in grief, and instead becoming used to a world without my son. Real, but tough.

A final surprise was that I have not wanted to visit his grave and have done so only once, when I was doing the funeral for someone else nearby. I feel I carry him with me constantly — his voice, his laugh, his annoying habits — and a muddy patch brings him no closer. I hope he does not mind.

I should add that every now and then I fantasise that some divine messenger offers that I could give up the remaining years of my life and give them to Benedict. Can there be any doubt as to what I would reply?

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