

Deeply Immersed

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Ancient peoples, living from the instinctive and emotional level of their being naturally acknowledged bereavement as part of life. They left traces of it everywhere; huge megalithic burial sites, cairns and small single graves. Archaeologists found objects buried with the dead; precious tokens of finely worked jewellery, ornate food vessels and other elaborate objects which can be called Amulets. Why include these talismans in the grave? It seems the physical loss of a loved one creates a void which we try to fill, and although on a logical level this may be a futile effort, emotionally the Amulet does offer solace.

An older person leaves many mementos to hold onto; photographs, DVDs, memories of shared experiences, children, grandchildren, close friends, along with a lifetime of work, in the home and community. The bereaved person hearing stories of others encounters with their loved one avails of a treasure chest of second hand memories, a wonderful gift of solace when recounted.

When a family loses a baby which has barely made it into the world or only had the womb as the home while alive, the expression of grief can be very difficult... it is hard to grieve the ethereal and intangible. Ancient peoples processed their grief by taking time to fashion precious objects from hard to gain raw materials and buried them in elaborate sites; testimony to the importance they assigned to grief. It is hard to believe that in recent history this basic urge to grieve for babies was taboo in Irish culture. This denial of a place to grieve such as a marked grave or a space to openly grieve in the community was a terrible barrier to their grieving process; firstly was the loss of the life, secondly the loss of the potential future with the person and thirdly the loss of a shared grieving process and acknowledgement of the short life lost. Instead they grieved in silence, with no acknowledged graves, no opportunity to speak of the life lost, or acceptance of their pain. It is interesting to note that as society advanced in so called civilisation it seemed to have regressed in emotional intelligence!

A problem shared is a problem halved; similarly a grief expressed is more bearable. This norm by past society to stoically ignore the grief for the very young, forced those grieving to implode all their strong emotions and pain within themselves. As a coping mechanism parents often gained comfort by keeping an Amulet special to them in relation to the baby and the loss. They usually kept it hidden to all but a select few. These cherished objects acted as a bridge to help them cross the river of grief throughout their lives especially on anniversaries and special occasions. This Arts and Health project brings to life again the Amulet as an aid to the grieving process and a way of marking and celebrating short but poignant lives.

The role of the Arts in the Healthcare context is manifold. It can be for patients, staff or the wider community. It can be in various settings within the hospital, or community. It can be any art form, such as performances of music or drama. Other artists work directly with the patient helping them make their own, art, music or poetry. There are artists in residence working on site specific projects with patients or inspired or responding to the healthcare setting including percent for art schemes.

This project is multifaceted in scope crossing so many boundaries by bringing together a community of interest in a deeply respectful and safe way. The artist Marie Brett worked both with midwifery and bereavement counselling staff, with former patients of the CUH hospital, and the parents of the bereaved. She also worked closely with artists and craftspersons Nancy Falvey and Bernice Jones of BTACI. Also the project was replicated in Limerick and Waterford Hospitals. The artist time travelled in a way by working with families who experienced bereavement a long time ago and those quiet recently within the past two years.

This project is timely as it marks a transition in Irish society which was reflected in the healthcare context. In last few years thankfully, there have been palpable positive change in peoples approach to the grieving of the death of the very young. Nowadays there are individual graves for babies often awash with toys and mementos; communal unmarked graves have been blessed and consecrated by religious orders. There have been many documentaries, films and soap opera characters in popular culture dealing with the subject. Celebrities openly share their grief in magazines, on TV chat shows. The subject is no longer taboo. This project gives voice in a respectful way to some, who in the past, missed this opportunity. It offers a link to parents from generations past, to those who have quite recently experienced the same grief, but expressed it in very different ways.

Ten artworks of a deep personal subject matter, of something special and significant, were created by the Artist Marie Brett with and on behalf of the parents. There was the opportunity for the parents to deeply immerse themselves in the creative process in a positive, self selecting way. The artwork will be exhibited at various galleries and public locations throughout Ireland. This is a major step forward as it offers viewers in a similar situation an empathic opportunity to share in dialogue about their own experiences. Other outcomes of the project are this book, which will be available during annual Bereavement Ceremonies organised by Maternity Hospitals involved in the project. The book is a tangible object reflecting the nature of the Amulet which will create a ripple effect in the wider community helping those without Amulets to rediscover their power, and those with Amulets to acknowledge it.

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