

The Amulet: Sheltering a Community of Be-longing

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Belonging is a comforting word – it evokes a sense of being enfolded within a community of recognition and knowing; a deep sense of being seen, known, experienced and wanted by others. It is also a word with an underside – a shadow sense that seeps through the hyphen in ‘be-longing’, a word keening of the longing to be.

The Amulet project is a shelter for a community of belonging and be-longing. Within the space of its deeply held intention it re-inscribes lost presences within the memorial community of lived beings. Sons and daughters, brothers and sisters whose short lived but deep presence was felt within their mothers’ womb are re-membered into the community of those whose presence was loved, treasured and is mourned in its absence. The singular intimate amulets are crucibles of deeply personal grieving and remembering – each one a unique concentration of love, loss and yearning held within a material repository that conserves for eternity the significance of a short life. The Amulet project is the protective shelter within which these heartfelt creative acts and objects of love and remembering can be seen, understood, respected, preserved and protected.

Without the holding space of the Amulet project, the amulets are vulnerable –materially, emotionally and symbolically- to harsh light, to insensitive handling, to carelessness and ignorance of how it feels to have loved and lost an infant or unborn child, a living presence within one’s life. For most of the last century in Ireland those who experienced this kind of loss had no shelter – they were neglected and ignored and their babies went unrecognised. A society dominated by a rigid and misogynistic church and state allowed no sheltering space for experiencing, recognising and redeeming loss. On the contrary it harboured a deep hostility towards women’s bodies, minds and feelings – why else did women need to be churched (cleansed) after giving birth? - brooking no space, no language and no community within which women who had lost their babies and the babies that they had lost could receive recognition and honour.

Tessa, a woman I loved dearly was one of these women. On a St. John’s night over forty years ago she felt the heavy pressure of her full term baby straining to come into the world. She knew her baby was ready to be born but women’s wisdom about their own bodies has often been discounted by those with power. She wasn’t listened to and a couple of hours later her baby son Stephen was born dead. He was taken away and buried without a marking while she lay in her hospital bed. Three days later she came home and nobody talked about Stephen again. His absence became a silent wound. Only Tessa spoke of him. She grieved sorely for 33 years and died with a broken heart.

Tessa would have found shelter within the Amulet. Stephen would have been re-membered into the community of those who have been. This is what the Amulet does – it restores recognition to lost lives and it surrounds those who mourn with love, recognition and support.

Within the Amulet women -and men too- are ‘churched’ in a redemptive meaning of that word. A church is a holy place – a sacred site. What is sheltered within it must be honoured and never defiled. That is the meaning of sacredness. The Amulet brings into being a psycho-social, emotional and cultural architecture of the 21st century for the shelter of infant loss. It creates a sacred space where those who mourn can go and re-member their born and unborn infants and where those infants can come into being again through recognition – can find a home for the longing to be. This shelter is composed not of the heavy fixed materials of granite, marble and glass. Rather the fluid components of its non-local multi sited structure are attunement, empathy, generosity of heart and artistic vision – raw materials that are conduits of connection between people spread across geographical distances and inhabiting shared emotional space. The Amulet provides a sheltered public space for support and witness of what is profoundly and inexorably intimate, private and personal. It is the gathering place of community support for the personal expression of loss and re-membering of infant presence. And also it is a gateway of atonement and redemption – for the profound socio-cultural neglect that Ireland has visited upon infants who have died and those who have mourned them.

The community that finds shelter within the space of the Amulet is composed not only of the parents and families who have experienced infant loss. Within the ether and atmosphere of this sacred soulful space many people gather who feel empathy with deep loss: – bereavement and loss midwives who support parents and families to honour and express their pain; craftswomen from Ballyphehane who create beautifully handcrafted layettes for infants who have died; artists who are the visionaries and guardians of the Amulet; arts administrators, arts and health practitioners and healthcare staff who all work behind the scenes to sustain this deeply nourishing yet fragile non-localised structure; counsellors and support staff from SHEP who ensure that the Amulet is a safe space for all involved with it; radio producers who seek to spread the word about the Amulet and give the solace of recognition to those whose loss yet remains unseen, unheard and un-witnessed. As the resonance of the Amulet ripples outwards and reaches more people, the numbers wishing to enter within its space swells. There is a beckoning quality to this project – it calls to those who long and care for healing and redemption in loss. This is found in the Amulet through the solidarity of remembering and through honouring the experience of loss and those who have been lost and call to be restored to presence through memory.

Tessa often talked to me about Stephen – always with deep pain. I never knew what to do – how to leave her know that her loss and her baby mattered. I hope that this piece reaches her wherever she is and that she will know that Stephen is re-inscribed into the community of memorial presence. I am placing it within the shelter of the Amulet where I know it will be honoured and protected and where I know they will both belong in their be-longing.
