

The Place of Loss in Arts and Health

by Mary Grehan

Included in Anamnesis publication 2013

The theme of loss surfaces through art again and again, even when it is not named as such. As in Patrick Kavanagh's poem 'Memory of My Father', it flows out between the words almost despite itself:

'Every old man I see
Reminds me of my father
When he had fallen in love with death
One time when sheaves were gathered.'

Those of us who have lost loved ones can recognise that double take, the way our minds try to bring the lost one back to life. Art does this too. It makes the invisible visible, the intangible tangible and the absent present and so the experience of loss drives us to create.

There is a particular pain around the loss of a child who has died before or at the time of birth. With it comes the loss of dreams dreamt in the lead up to being born, the loss of hope and subsequent to the death, the loss of birthdays and endless other key moments that did not get to be lived. Parents are left with the helplessness of what might have been.

However the experience of infant loss is not acknowledged through the rituals of death our society usually employs, and so, paradoxically, for the wider community that has not yet forged a relationship with the lost child, the physical evidence of the loss is minimal.

In his poem 'A Part of Ourselves' (The Gallery Press 1998) in memory of his son John who lived for just a day, Peter Fallon tells us:

'We felt the need grow all night
to give him a name, to assert him
as a member of our care, to say he was
alive. Oh, he lived all right,
he lived a lifetime.'

This need for a parent to assert and validate their dead child's life is instinctive and strong, possibly because, in the words of Peter Fallon:

' - not to remember
seems to betray;'

And so, many parents who have lost a child at the time of birth, preserve an object or space, an amulet, as a physical manifestation of the infant loss. Mothers that Marie Brett has collaborated with in the course of the *Amulet* project have kept photographs, hand made garments, jewelry, and various other items following the loss of their child. The *Amulet* project brings this very personal and intimate object or space into a public arena and in so doing claims a societal acknowledgement for the loss that until now has been shrouded in silence.

What is interesting for me in my role as Arts Director of the Waterford Healing Arts Trust is that this project sits within the arena of arts and health. 'Arts and health is a specific field of work that seeks to enhance individual and community health and well-being', bringing 'together the skills and priorities of both arts and health professionals'. It 'moves fluidly between the more traditional formats of exhibition, performance, public art commission, and other environmental enhancement initiatives within healthcare settings, through to participative and collaborative arts practices that challenge and expand ideas about who makes art and where and how it is shown.' (www.artsandhealth.ie/about/what-is-arts-and-health/).

While acute hospitals are built on a curative model of care, the reality is that almost half of the population will die in hospitals. Similarly maternity services are designed around the safe delivery of a child, yet miscarriage and infant loss is an integral aspect of them that calls for compassion and understanding. And so, death and dying is part of healthcare, including its arts programmes, and the culture and practice of healthcare is adapting and expanding accordingly.

Although arts and health practice traditionally takes place in a range of healthcare settings, the *Amulet* project travels from the domestic space through the institution where the artist makes contact with participants to the public space of sharing. Grief and loss cannot be contained by institutional structures and hence it is appropriate in this case that the project follows human experience and need.

In Colm McCann's 'Let the Great World Spin' (*Bloomsbury 2009*) Gloria whose three sons were killed in Vietnam tells us of her experience of coming together with a group of women who had also lost children to the war:

'Funny how it was, everyone perched in their own little world with a deep need to talk, each person with their own tale, beginning in some strange middle point, then trying so hard to tell it all, to have it all make sense, logical and final.'

Art provides this conversation, a way of talking to ourselves first, before bringing the object to a wider audience. Later the presence of an art object in a public arena, and in the case of my work, in a healthcare setting, provides the context for a conversation beyond a patient's illness or condition, a conversation that reaches in and draws out what is going on for us as people.

By making the amulet public, Marie is creating a space for these conversations to happen, both through the collaborative process between woman and artist leading to final artwork and in the public exhibitions and discussions thereafter.

When we lose someone we loved, what's left in essence is little more than the memory of an experience and a sense of what might have been that often feels central to our very identity. While at no point does art offer itself as a cure or compensation for grief, the creative act, in this case, the documentation and sharing of the amulets in a public realm, has the potential to extend the understanding and empathy of the wider community around the experience of infant loss.

Mary Grehan is Arts Director of the Waterford Healing Arts Trust. In 1994 / 5, she was curator of the centenary arts programme of the National Maternity Hospital, Dublin. She has written widely in the field of arts and health.