

Mourning the end of grief

APART FROM THE OCCASIONAL ASIDE in these columns I have not written about personal matters. But now on the second anniversary of Gary Banham's death I am breaking my rule. Gary and I had been together for twenty-five years when he died quite suddenly of a cerebral haemorrhage. He was 47. I was present when the breath left his body, torn between an almost overwhelming desire to flee from the room, and a terror-stricken need to stay and see it through. The bustle of paramedics, policemen, and a hastily summoned doctor, all alerted by a sudden death, carried me along. Signing forms, being formally interviewed at the police station on Via San Vitale (we were in Rome at the time) and by a consular official at the Embassy, making arrangements with the multiple authorities and organizations, needed for the international transportation of a body, kept me resourceful and self-possessed for the flight home and the task of breaking the news to our families and friends, and to Gary's many colleagues.

Grief arrives with its full force once the welter of responsibilities associated with the death are completed - the funeral, the condolences, dealing with the lawyers, pension funds, and the bank – then grief emerges out of stunned distraction to envelop one with fear and disbelief. You are aware that this is simultaneously an ordinary, a common experience, and an intensely personal one. It is an experience from which you cannot expect to recover, but one that has to be incorporated, so to speak, in your present and future in a manner that enables you to live, without perpetually embarrassing your friends, or

allowing your loss to become a defining feature of your personality.

Yet in the early days, when putting scissors through Gary's bank cards, throwing out his slippers, tooth brush, dressing gown, or later, giving away his extensive collection of philosophy books, I was viscerally aware of how annoyed he would be when he discovered what I'd done. He would really be outraged when he came home to discover my vandalism. Joan Didion, in her book, *A Year of Magical Thinking* reports that when she was throwing out her dead husband's shoes she was gripped by the guilty sense that he was going to need them when he returned. I don't think that there is anything metaphysical in this; it is simply the manner in which the certainty that the loved one is dead is entwined with the certainty that this cannot possibly be true.

It is then that one is hit by the howling, by sudden weeping at any time of the day or night, hit by the abiding need to suppress these outbursts on the bus for fear of making a holy show of oneself, or of upsetting friends and acquaintances, with situations in which there is nothing that can be done, and nothing that can usefully be said. Death is after all, a final matter, which no consolation, can resolve.

On it grinds, the seemingly endless preoccupation with loss, the fathomless reflection on things not done, things not said, which should have been said and done, thoughts evoked by the grief-stricken present, rather than any positive memory or past intention. Then this all becomes mangled up together with mawkish self-regard – how will I cope? How will I live alone? And, more positively, how will I reconstruct my life around the fact of Gary's disappearance? For an entire year, 2013-14, I dragged everything through this swamp, like the man in *Un Chien Andalou*, whose desire is defeated by the past he drags behind him, learning en route (and much to my surprise), that I could actually be depressed, not simply low spirited,

but paralysed by a thoughtless inertia that rendered the prospect of any activity at all radically improbable.

Then without warning, on the first anniversary of Gary's death, the veil lifted, and I became aware for the first time, how exhausting it had all been; I became fully conscious of how drained I was, and it was then that I began to climb slowly out of the despair into which I'd fallen. The abrupt disappearance of the lively, animated, and cheerful life that Gary and I had created together ceased to be overwhelming. My sorrow for his loss, for all that he was, for all that he might have achieved, began to be something defining about my life, but not definitive; something with which I could sail forward, rather than a burden that would sink me. The confusion, between focus upon Gary, his violent but momentary suffering, his life suddenly cut short, roiled together within the sediment of my own predicament, began to dissipate, as I was able to distinguish the one from the other.

Without warning, in the middle of January this year, I realised with some surprise that I was no longer grief stricken. Still, fragile when thinking or talking about Gary, but no longer saturated with the fact of his loss. A month later I startled myself with the realisation that I was happy – of course happiness is always framed with imperfections and absences – but happy nonetheless, happy to be carrying on the management of Gary's project, *Kant Studies Online*, happy to be making new friends, happy to be enjoying what I regard as my extraordinarily good fortune, and happy about the prospect of continuing to find pleasure, and much of interest in the world about me.

In some accounts of mourning one is supposed to be stricken with guilt and anger or to traverse a series of stages defined in 1969 by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross as denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and finally, acceptance. This stages theory is often presented in a rather mechanical and pat fashion as if there really are definable phases,

which follow one another, rather than a mass of intertwined, confused, and competing thoughts about the one lost and about oneself. Every encounter with grief must be different; it is after all an intensely singular experience, it cannot be shared, it must be lived through, no respite can be sought.

However, friends, relatives, and acquaintances supported me throughout. They helped me to continue with everyday life, and they were always there in the background. So too was Diazepam, prescribed by my doctor, not actively engaged, but there if I needed it. I had thought rather vaguely about seeking counselling, or the support of a gay bereavement group, but opted instead for keeping a diary (rather episodically, it must be said), and reading Joan Didion's account of the death of her husband, and C. S. Lewis's book, *A Grief Observed*, on the loss of his wife. Despite, Lewis's Christianity or the huge difference between Didion's circumstances and my own, I found both of these works extremely useful. It was reassuring to realise that the madness of grief, which seems so exceptional is most probably quite as universal as death itself.

When confronted with mortality in such an immediate and visceral manner thoughts concerning 'existence' and the widely promised 'life everlasting' are inescapable. But still, I cannot think that it is possible for me to know anything about an omniscient Creator. On the other hand atheism seems unsustainable because of the absence of proof regarding the existence or otherwise of God, although I must say that I regard the idea of the Almighty as inherently contradictory. In any event, given His much vaunted jealousy, and His autocratic desire to make us as miserable as possible for some trifling act of disobedience committed at the time of our naked innocence in the Garden, God is not an entity that I want anything to do with.

That being said, Gary was always cagey about God, although he had no time for religion, he always refused to be drawn on his attitude towards the Deity, and I was never able to discern what he really thought about all this – because I suspect that he regarded such questions as intrinsically unanswerable. For me there is no life after death, no heaven and no hell, Gary is gone for good to the place before conception, from whence none of us returns, leaving only traces in the memories and lives of those he knew. These are the traces that I will continue to love and, I have no doubt, will weep over from time to time, now that my grief has waxed and finally waned.