

LESSONS IN LOSS

By Deborah J Brown

professional guide / personal journey

Introduction

In the book *The Outsider* (Camus, 1942) the main character Meursault reacts to the death of his mother in a way considered by others to be odd, unnatural, even disturbing. He did not shout or scream or cry or react outwardly in a way society might expect he should. There was simply a quiet acceptance that it had happened and there was nothing to be done.

What *The Outsider* teaches us is that there is no right way to understand, cope with and accept loss. Each of us will do so differently, and it is with this understanding we approach any role in grief support. For each child, their reaction to the death of a loved one will be different. Understanding who the bereaved child is, is therefore of great importance. What is essential is that we begin to understand the types of losses children suffer and that grief is not only linked to death, the feeling of loss can manifest from many different situations.

This book charts my own personal and professional interest in the way in which we support young people in education through loss, it includes losses that have affected my life. I share my story at the start to give the reader an insight into part of my loss history. I hope this book becomes a guide for those seeking to know and understand more about how loss affects young people. Within it, I discuss the inevitable issues faced within the education system in the UK and how change is so desperately needed. Some names, dates and locations have been altered to maintain privacy.

I became a fully qualified primary school teacher in 1998, having studied for a Bachelor of Education degree in Environmental Education at Sheffield Hallam University. Now, 25 years later, I am a headteacher and Certified Grief Recovery Specialist working in the suburbs of Manchester, England. My in-depth research on the subject of grief and loss and how it affects young people, began the day after I received a call from a parent telling me she was going into palliative care just a few weeks after I became a headteacher.

When the phone rang that day, my heart sank. I knew the call was coming and I told myself I needed to be strong and promise I would look after her little boy. But how?

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How Television & Film Can Be Used to Support Children Through Loss

The near-forgotten British television children's show *Pipkins* (Hamon, 1973) addresses the death of the show's goldfish in what remains an extraordinarily blunt but honest manner.

"Everything and everybody have to die. That's just the way it is, Topov" is the stark and simple answer Johnny gives when Topov asks why his goldfish had died. Even now, almost fifty years on, the short exchange between Johnny and the puppet rabbit Topov can appear blunt but there is a remarkable calmness to the exchange. A burial for the goldfish Dicky has taken place and later Topov is sat in the "quiet corner" thinking about his pet friend. Johnny approaches and asks Topov how he is feeling before answering all of his questions in a calm and honest manner. Including the candid answer "I don't really know, Topov", to the question of why the goldfish died.

Television and film play an important role in teaching children about death, that loss happens and is an inevitable part of life. Like many of you I have clear memories of watching films that famously involve loss such as *Bambi* (Hand, 1942), particularly the very emotional scene where Bambi's mother dies, and the passing of Hazel in *Watership Down* (Rosen M. , 1978) at the cinema. What didn't occur afterwards was a conversation about death; there were no connections made to death in the real world. They were simply seen as children's films, not an opportunity to discuss what can be the difficult subject of loss. There was also no attempt to reassure or otherwise ensure the films had not caused any traumatic feelings, nor discuss how I may have understood the films. All this was normal for most of us growing up, it wasn't intentional emotional neglect. These things were simply not discussed. Sadly many of these social norms remain, with death and loss often a taboo subject in many countries, especially when children are around. There remains a near instinctive parental and societal need to protect the children from it.

"...whether or not children learn about death from films might depend on whether parents watch the films with them and are willing to have discussions with their children". (Enrica E. Bridgewater, 2021)

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How Can Books Support Practitioners to Support the Children?

Many primary schools in the UK now follow a narrative curriculum; meaning the books teachers read to children are specifically chosen to provide links to a variety of subjects. At our school, when choosing appropriate reading material, time is now spent considering how death and loss feature in a helpful and easily understood way as part of that narrative curriculum. Whilst there are now more books to choose from compared to just a few years ago it nevertheless remains challenging, as teachers also need to ensure the novels they select, offer links to other aspects of learning, such as History, Geography and Personal Social Health Education. The same considerations also apply to reading material the teacher assigns pupils. Whilst within children's literature there are a relatively small number of deaths, only around 3% of US published books include deaths according to the Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development (Gutiérrez IT, 2014), there are many more which include loss of some sort.

Kensuke's Kingdom (Morpurgo, 1998), the beautiful story of friendship between Kensuke, a Japanese soldier shipwrecked on a desert island, and Michael, a young boy who also finds himself marooned on the same desert island, is one book I chose to read with my year six class many years ago. After they had both been made redundant, Michael's parents decide to set sail on a round-the-world trip. It is a great adventure until Michael and his dog Stella are thrown overboard during a storm and later find themselves on what they think is a deserted island.

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The Truth About the Stages of Grief

“You’re at the anger stage of grief”, a friend said as we sat in a café four days after mum had died. Lots of people offer advice and guidance after the death of a loved one and invariably that advice will include an opinion about the *stage* of grief you are currently experiencing. A stage picked to match their own perception of how you must be feeling. Such help is of course offered with the very best of intentions, an attempt to empathise, sympathise and provide support, but it can also be unhelpful or just plain wrong. There is a lot of information about the expectations of what grief should look like, on the internet, in books, from people you know, and even from strangers, and what is most pervasive are the perceived *stages* of grief.

About four days after my mum died, I was out with a friend having a coffee. I was a bit snappy with the lady who brought the coffee to the table, asking for a new one because the one she’d brought was cold. This wasn’t how I would normally act and my curtness stood out. My friend, sat opposite with sadness, frustration and pity on her face said, “You’re at the anger stage of grief. Be careful when you get to depression. You can end up stuck there, but if you get out of it, you’ll end up accepting it”. I can’t remember my immediate response, but I do remember thinking. I’m not angry. I genuinely didn’t feel angry that my mum had died. I was sad, not angry. I also remember wondering which stage of grief this meant I was in because I could not see how I would ever move out of this sad stage. At the time I also broadly knew about the *stages of grief*, seemingly everyone does to some degree. An inescapable and simple list of steps we are all expected to follow when we experience loss. Except I wasn’t following this step-by-step guide on how one should feel when grieving and I began to question if anyone really does.

The five stages of grief were first developed by Dr Elizabeth Kubler-Ross. The grief model became famous after she published her book *On Death and Dying* (Kübler-Ross, 1969). In the book Kubler-Ross gives the five stages as *denial*, *anger*, *bargaining*, *depression* and *acceptance*. For many years these have been the culturally accepted stages of grief and we have all, to some degree, been taught to follow them as if they are a road map out of grief. The Kübler-Ross model has been the traditional and accepted tool of support for grievers for

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