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BEARING WITNESS TO DYING

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‘Bearing witness to dying’ is a personal account of how a drawing project, based in sketchbook drawing, which began as a simple exercise in maintaining my drawing practice, shifted in emphasis to become the observation of my husband’s final fight with cancer. As the months passed, it developed into a support system for living with the threat of impending loss, and finally helped me to survive the subsequent bereavement. Unconsciously, I was simultaneously creating a lasting record of precious and painful memories. The drawing practice is juxtaposed against a relationship with social media, which also became important as a support, and contrary to the usual manner of publishing intimate information, managed to reveal the events that were unfolding without ever revealing anything explicit.

Bearing witness to dying

This is an account of how a drawing project, which began as a simple exercise in maintaining my drawing practice, became the observation of my husband's final fight with cancer. As the months passed, it developed into a support system for living with the threat of impending loss, and finally helped me survive the subsequent bereavement, simultaneously creating a lasting record of precious and painful memories. The drawing practice is juxtaposed against a relationship with social media, which also acted as a support without ever explicitly revealing the events that were unfolding.

Sketchbook drawing from direct observation occurred as a shift in my practice about five years before the events in this article. Previously, my work had been studio based to fit in with domestic life, often working from photographs. The chance of following a major building development at the Holburne Museum in Bath began as a private drawing project and instantly altered my method of work. Not only did I abandon all use of the camera, but I also realised that the people engaged in the development were my key interest, rather than the actual building work. As part of the phenomenological experience of being there it became apparent that my presence had some influence – usually taking the form of conversation or comment from the people around me. I often liken this situation to being a Shakespearean fool, who is accepted but not part of the community, and who 'speaks' through drawing, although these comments have no particularly significance.

The Holburne project became the first of several artist's residencies, bearing witness to the world around me, focusing on human activity. The constant practice of drawing has improved my hand-eye coordination immeasurably and provided a confidence to take risks. After a lifetime of artistic practice that was never quite sure where it was going, I have found an excitement and absorption that sustains me and is never onerous.

The diary of events

At the end of 2012 I realised that it was necessary to take a break from time consuming art projects to concentrate on looking after my husband, Bill, who had a long term cancer – multiple myeloma. The recent artist residencies had taken me away from my studio, so now I was keen to keep up my drawing practice while remaining at home. Therefore, on 1 January 2013, I decided to do a drawing every day for a year and post them on Facebook and Twitter. Initially, this public engagement was to ensure against giving the project up. However, I did not realise at the time how significant the use of social media would become.

The sketchbook was to be a journal of my everyday life, recording the people and objects around me. The first drawing happened to be Bill watching television [Fig.1]. Although I drew many different subjects, my preference for people and the fact that he was always there meant he featured quite frequently. His reaction was interesting. Having been a reluctant sitter for any formal portrait in the past, he accepted my quick sketches – possibly regarding them as unimportant, or perhaps he had other things on his mind. The result is that I was able to make over 40 drawings of him during what would be the eight months up to his death.

Drawing Bill so often meant that I was acutely aware of his changes in mood and energy. For the first three months he was his usual busy self, constantly reading, doing domestic chores, and working [Fig.2]. But during April tiredness began to show and by May the effort to do things was all too evident [Fig.3] – although he still enjoyed a good television programme or time spent with our children [Fig.4].



FIGURE 1: JANUARY 1 – WATCHING TELEVISION



FIGURE 2: MARCH 3 – WORKING ON A SCRIPT



FIGURE 3: MAY 2 - GARDENING



FIGURE 4: MAY 17 - WATCHING JOOLS HOLLAND

In June there was a significant event, which triggered further exhaustion. We paid a visit to Cornwall to help scatter the ashes of a very old and much loved friend. The walk from our hotel to the cliff top was arduous and with many wrong turnings that upset Bill. After we returned home there was a marked difference: television had lost its charm [Fig.5] and his appetite was fading noticeably [Fig.6]. His medication became worse than the disease, and it was apparent that the end was approaching [Fig.7].



FIGURE 5: JULY 6 - WATCHING TELEVISION



FIGURE 6: AUGUST 21 - NOT MUCH APPETITE



FIGURE 7: AUGUST 28 - SLEEPING

My reactions to the impending event took different forms. Early on I had said openly that I did not want to think about his actual death, supposedly because there was so much going on in the present moment. On reflection, the idea of him dying was too big to encompass. It seemed to be a disaster which, in Maurice Blanchot's terms, is a threat that never comes, because when the feared event actually arrives

one copes with the practicality of the situation, and it therefore no longer appears to be disastrous (Blanchot 1995). I could not envisage the moment of his death because it seemed too awful, nor could I imagine what life would be like without Bill. Rather than speculate on the future, although it was always in the back of my mind, it seemed best to concentrate on enjoying the time we still had together.

The question arose as to what I would draw 'on the day' when it finally came - and whether I could post it on social media. My children, who were both immensely supportive, said firmly that I should maintain and post the daily drawing no matter what. When the day did come in early September 2013, I drew Bill shortly after he died, an essential but ultimately private moment of saying goodbye, and therefore impossible to publish on social media. Instead I posted a second sketch of his uneaten breakfast, which he had rejected [Fig.8]. I had made him his favourite porridge but he only wanted a beer.



FIGURE 8: SEPTEMBER 6 - UNEATEN BREAKFAST, HE REALLY WANTED A BEER

The drawing journal as lifeline

Before Bill died, the drawing journal kept me grounded in the continual process of domesticity and caring. Throughout the daily ritual, it seamlessly and gradually shifted from being an exercise in drawing practice to being documentation of a person's final months of life, and a support device for expressing difficulties encountered along the way. It was a habit that satisfied on a daily basis, because the act of drawing made me feel better no matter what the day had been like. Although I did not want to think about his death, bearing witness in the months before the event was in some way preparing for it.

For me drawing has always been a way of 'touching' the world, in an attempt to understand its otherness. This is particularly pertinent when drawing people. I loved my husband deeply but even when his suffering was most obvious, I could never know his thoughts. This, in Levinas' words, is the 'pathos of love' where love and desire cannot be united in one being (Levinas 1987).

The other as other is not here an object that becomes ours or becomes us; to the contrary it withdraws into its mystery.

So when drawing Bill, my hand made marks that groped towards expressing how he was feeling in a sort of caress – again as Levinas conceived it:

....the caress does not know what it seeks. This 'not knowing', this fundamental disorder, is the essential. It is like a game with something slipping away, a game absolutely without project or plan, not with what can become ours or us, but with something other, always other, always inaccessible and always still to come.

I have used the analogy of a drawing as caress before, where despite the inevitable failure to reach the other, the drawing itself remains after the 'caress' – as a manifestation of the attempt. But here, in drawing Bill, it had greater significance because it was immersed in affection.

The need to cling on to Bill meant that my drawings of him during his final two months became more frequent. Previously, I had included our hospital visits in the drawing journal [Fig.9], but towards the end I also began to express the impact of the situation on my feelings [Fig.10].



FIGURE 9: JUNE 18 – HAEMATOLOGY CLINIC

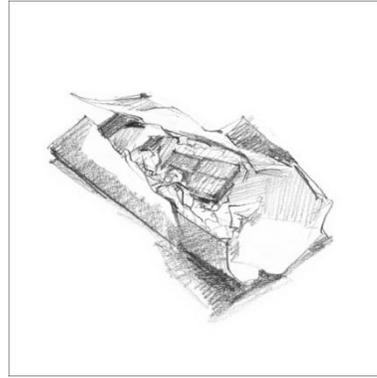


FIGURE 10: SEPTEMBER 5 - MUCH CHOCOLATE
NEEDED TODAY

I was in the room when he died and moments afterwards I felt all the energy run down my back into the floor, as if effort was no longer needed. However, there was still much to do and it was not until the next day that it was possible to allow myself to relax by spending the whole day on the sofa [Fig.11]. It was clear that drawings about my life without Bill would be an important part of the drawing journal, helping me come to terms with my new existence.



FIGURE 11: SEPTEMBER 7 - TODAY I STAYED IN AND DID NOTHING

Social media as a discreet aid

Every drawing in my journal, with the aforementioned exception on the day he died, was posted on Facebook and Twitter; this had always been part of the project, to incentivise its continuation. However, I have an intense dislike – even a horror – of any public display of personal troubles and grief on social media, and actively resented any mention of Bill or his loss by no doubt well meaning friends and family. So it may seem odd that I had been using social media to publish my drawings of him. But it is possible to choose a way of communicating discreetly while maintaining privacy – and this was especially necessary to me in the circumstances surrounding Bill's illness and death. I never mentioned him by name, nor

gave any indication of his situation. Indeed, this article is the first time I have published the personal aspects associated with my drawing journal, and it is only possible now because it is eight years later and in the context of an academic interest in drawing and loss.

The act of publishing drawings with non-specific or indirect captions allowed me to tell friends who knew the situation what was going on, while avoiding any announcement to the general public. The fact that those close to me were being informed in this discreet manner precluded the need to keep them up to date through personal contact, which would have been quite painful and may have seemed like a cry for help. This may appear to be cowardice but is more complex than a mere desire for privacy. The use of social media began as a strategy for keeping the drawing journal going as a project. Like the drawings themselves, the act of publishing them developed into another support system.

Artists have a basic need to put things out into the world. Sigmund Freud made a comparison between the artist and the neurotic, outlined succinctly by Richard Wollheim in *Art and its Objects* (1980):

...both the artist and the neurotic... lead a large part of their lives in the world of phantasy. But the artist differs from the neurotic in that he succeeds in finding a 'path back to reality'... For the artist, unlike the neurotic, the phantasy is a starting point, not the culmination, of his activity.

Given that in my case the phantasy is a desire to make sense of the world through drawing, by expressing what troubles me in a drawing I get some respite from the emotional stress of difficult circumstances. The further act of putting the drawing into the public domain prevents it from returning to an internal anxiety, hidden in my sketchbook.

The dual nature of my use of social media, in which the general public cannot know the situation but my friends can read the coded messages, is something I relish. Having acknowledged my enjoyment, I must admit to being at a loss to comprehend the reason. It is not a liking for secrecy, because the need to tell my friends is a strong motive. Privacy is certainly important, in particular because Bill never used social media, but mainly because of my unwillingness to tell the world about my vulnerability, and I definitely do not want to expose my innermost feelings. Perhaps it is a wish to remain in control and deal with bereavement on my own terms. However kindly meant, advice on how to cope is usually unwanted, and having observed how other people deal with death, it is clearly a matter of individual choice. Mourning takes many forms and my strategy is to be instinctive. So, while getting on with life after Bill, I have allowed myself to howl in private, to wear his clothes, to stay close to where he had been, and above all to draw things that resonated with him. I do not regard numerous drawings that remind me of Bill as a morbid fascination, but rather as a method, following Freud, of letting out my feelings.

In the weeks immediately after his death, I made several drawings of the family around me [Fig.12], and drew many things around the house that rekindled his presence, and helped me through necessary chores [Figs.13-17].



FIGURE 12: SEPTEMBER 16 - I LOVE GUESTS WHO WASH UP – SUPPORTIVE FAMILY



FIGURE 13: OCTOBER 5 - HIS HAT AND SCARF

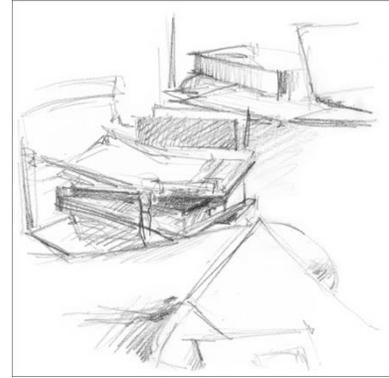


FIGURE 14: OCTOBER 7 - PAPER WORK, HARD WORK - DEATH AND TAXES

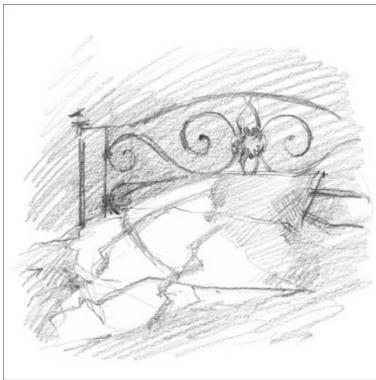


FIGURE 15: OCTOBER 11 - SHADOWS. THE SUN IS OUT, THE SKY IS BLUE... - BUDDY HOLLY



FIGURE 16: OCTOBER 12 - BOWL OF BITS FOR SORTING – MEMORIES

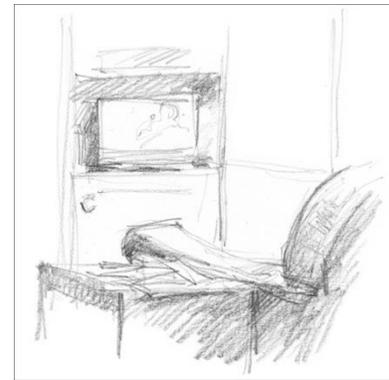


FIGURE 17: NOVEMBER 29 - EMPTY CHAIR & BLUES ON BBC4 - FEELING BLUE

The loss of a partner is unlike any other death. It is monumental. It is impossible to get over it, so one can only get used to it. Occasionally I am again ambushed by memories and therefore I still make drawings that relieve my feelings [Fig.18].



FIGURE 18: SEPTEMBER 6, 2020 - SOUVENIRS AND MEMORIES

There is no doubt that drawing sustained me throughout a very difficult year of caring and loss. What began as a simple exercise in maintaining my drawing practice took on a pivotal role in helping me to

cope during my husband's final months of illness, to be able to honour his death (albeit privately), and to survive the long bereavement that followed. Drawing provided an outlet for my worries and emotions on a daily basis. Naturally, the journal of 2013 contains many more drawings of my day to day existence that are not directly concerned with Bill, but that discipline of drawing each day in a sketchbook always gave me a time to pause and reflect. By spending those few minutes letting my hand take thoughts from my head and put them on paper, I kept myself grounded in a very simple and practical way.

In the same way that the drawing journal developed, the reason behind sharing the drawings each day on social media also shifted over time. From a basic strategy to keep the project going, it became an outlet for confiding unobtrusively with friends and family. Whether any members of the general public ever guessed at the story behind the drawings does not really concern me. Discretion was preserved by the lack of direct information given, while the constant practice in drawing did, I hope, show what daily drawing can achieve.

My drawing journal continued after 2013 and eight years later I have not missed a day. It has seen me through good times and bad, including further loss. It is a habit that I cannot imagine giving up – but why persist? It is not a mere discipline to keep my drawing muscles in tune. I am no longer a carer and therefore free to engage in more significant projects that would stretch my practice further. There is no doubt an emotional investment in this daily ritual, although I never overtly express my innermost thoughts, but may refer to feelings like being tired, or missing Bill, or pleasure in my cat or garden or the weather. When making a drawing I am taken out of myself and connecting to something other in the world. There is no continuity or concept of finishing, it is simply a basic need to 'touch' the world – that elusive caress Levinas speaks of, that does not know what it seeks.

What would happen if I gave up my drawing journal? The implications are far greater than losing face on social media. Blanchot speaks about writers who keep a journal having a need to maintain a relationship to themselves when engaged in a search for art. Here I have substituted the male writer with the perspective of the female artist.

The journal is not essentially confessional; it is not one's own story. It is a memorial. What must the [artist] remember? [Herself]: who [s]he is when [s]he isn't [drawing], when [s]he lives daily life, when [s]he is alive and true, not dying and bereft of truth. ...the truth of the journal lies ... in the insignificant details which attach it to daily reality.

Perhaps giving up my drawing journal would mean losing the affirmation that I am alive...

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