

## REFLECTING ON RISK TAKING: ENABLING PARENTS TO CO-CREATE RITUAL FOLLOWING THE DEATH OF THEIR BABY *IN-UTERO*

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*Abstract: Qualitative research undertaken with bereaved parents who have ritually marked the life and death of their baby who has died in-utero is outlined. The significance for bereaved parents of sharing in the co-construction of naming/blessing ceremonies and/or funerals with a chaplain, as well as participating in the ritual itself is described. A short theological reflection on the risk involved for chaplains in entering into such relationships with bereaved parents is also offered.*

*Key Words: Bereavement by the death of a baby in-utero, chaplaincy, co-construction, ritual*

In order to reflect on the practice of chaplains working with parents bereaved by the death of a baby *in-utero* who seek to help them ritually mark their baby's life and death, a series of qualitative interviews with parents were undertaken. In each case the chaplains, where possible, had listened to the parents' experience, feelings and beliefs and from the meeting of the parent's particular story and the story of the chaplain (and all that informed both) blessing/naming and/or funeral rituals evolved. In order to help personalise these rituals chaplains, where appropriate and wanted, shared resources (sacred and secular) with parents so in their own time they might choose material for the ritual and further help inform its content. Chaplains also offered guidance and information regarding cultural norms relating to baby death, disposal and grieving, giving parents benchmarks to inform their decision making. This process of the formation of rituals over time is referred to as co-construction in this article.

### Research Methodology

In-depth qualitative interviews were undertaken with 31 bereaved parents (16 losses – 15 singletons and 1 set twins) whose babies had died *in-utero* from 16 weeks of gestation to term. All parents who were interviewed 3 to 6 months post loss had helped to co-construct and share in a naming/blessing and/or funeral with a chaplain. All 4 chaplains (3 generic and one Roman Catholic) were colleagues in the same team and all had a similar approach – Christian liturgy was not applied to the situation of loss but

the ritual evolved out of the interaction with parents either in the immediacy of their loss or in the days following the delivery of their dead baby. All rituals had a degree of co-construction though less so in the case of a blessing/naming where the ritual shared took place in the immediacy of the baby's delivery (though some parents had met the chaplain prior to delivery). The interviews were transcribed and analysed with the help of N-Vivo, a computer package which aided engagement with, and storage of, the stories gathered. The themes that the researcher noted and named emerging from the first three interviews were verified by an experienced qualitative researcher and also by a former hospital chaplain and pastoral theologian.

### Faith Affiliation of the Parents

As children –

23 of the 31 parents had an active affiliation with a Christian denomination.

None of the participants expressed an affiliation to a non-Christian faith community.

This was unsurprising as it reflects the religious demography of the city in which the study took place.

As adults –

11 of the 31 expressed a non-active affiliation with a denomination

3 of the 31 had active involvement (2 RC and 1 Baptist)

17 of the 31 had no affiliation

The vast majority of parents interviewed (including many of those who expressed non-active denominational affiliation) said they were not religious yet only one ritual performed contained no reference to God or an afterlife. Three out of the four chaplains were happy to perform non-religious rituals, a fourth was not and that chaplain performed 8 of the 20 rituals shared.

### Results

Following the death of their baby *in-utero* parents articulated a range of spiritual needs. For the purposes of this article only three of these are outlined. The research undertaken discovered that chaplains enabling parents to co-create the ritual marking of their baby's life and death as well as share in the ritual itself significantly helped these needs to be met. The importance of this to parents is also described below.

#### Loss of parental control

Parents experienced a sense of powerlessness that events had happened out of their control - both parents whose babies had died spontaneously and those whose babies were diagnosed with severe abnormalities *in-utero* (leading to a decision to terminate the pregnancy). Parents desperately wanted to intervene and actively do something to alter what they were experiencing. Fathers, who felt their paternal role was to protect and care for other family members, especially felt impotent.

*I know he felt useless.* (Mother 4 referring to her partner after the stillbirth of her baby).

Parents struggled with the absence of prevalent cultural norms regarding how they might deal with baby death resulting in a lack of comparative markers to aid their decision making (for example, relating to ritual marking).

*It is quite a surreal situation because you don't know, you have never been in that situation, you don't know what to do and you don't know what is right and what is not right....and so there's that sort of black hole of not knowing at all what to do.* (Mother 14)

Parents found they lost all their usual sense of order and routine in their daily lives, in the immediacy of their baby's death.

*You do lose your parameters, you do lose your kind of structure and your, you know, I suppose you are kind of floating.* (Father 1).

#### Loss of meaning and purpose

For many parents the death of their baby meant the loss of their main reason for living in the present.

*I just wanted to give up. It wasn't worth going on. There was nothing, everything we have ever worked for it was just gone... like that. I mean I felt really, really empty...* (Mother 4)

Parents had invested emotionally, spiritually and materially in their baby. Their dreams about future parenting had been shattered and their plans and sense of purpose for the future had been lost.

*What might have been? The loss of that...* (Mother 8)

All parents interviewed struggled to make sense of their loss and attempted to find meaning in it within the framework of their own values and beliefs.

*Why did you give us gifts and take them away again?* (Father 6)

#### Loss of self worth

Mothers in particular, expressed a sense of failure as a parent when their baby died *in-utero*.

*You are trying to bring a child into the world and you have not been able to do it.* (Mother 1)

Low self esteem was especially felt by mothers who had terminated their pregnancy due to fetal abnormality.

*I did not expect a funeral service that was so personal. It might have been how I was feeling at that time when I didn't think I deserved anything - so I didn't expect anything.* (Mother 2)

## **Involvement in co-construction and sharing in ritual marking enabled:**

### **Parental control**

At a traumatic time in life when significant events have happened out of parental control, ritual and its co-construction provides a means by which, in part, some control in life could be regained.

*...it (the funeral) does actually help you have this feel of kind of control...having something that you can influence in the situation where you are completely unable to influence events because it has been taken from you. (Father 1)*

Rituals helped to provide some orientation in parents' lives amidst the confusion following baby death.

*(The funeral) Brought order to our lives again....we seemed to be just floating around aimlessly. (Father 9)*

Sharing in co-construction and ritual marking itself also helped parents to feel the ritual performed was theirs for their baby. Such involvement also enabled a degree of regulation (WALTER 1999) of grief - a means by which the bereaved can compare their experience, feelings and behaviour to judge whether how they are dealing with their grief is within the bounds of normality. During the process of co-constructing a blessing/naming ceremony (where possible) or a funeral with a chaplain, parents may be given the opportunity to hear and read about what choices, behaviours and feelings are culturally normal. This in turn helped parents to make informed choices and to regulate parental grief.

*It was the importance of just having all the information, so you could take ownership. It was our opportunity to do something for our twins rather than just letting somebody else do it. He (the chaplain) gave us our place as parents. (Father 14)*

*A book of readings from people who've been in the same, a similar situation to yours, actually does make you think it is normal, not nice but its normal and I'm part of something within a level of normality, rather than being this complete freak. (Mother 1)*

Parents were thus able to feel that they had invested something of themselves into rituals, especially funerals.

*We feel as if we put some contribution into the funeral as well. (Father 6)*

### **Parents to find some meaning and purpose**

Helping to co-create rituals enabled the best possible parenting of their baby in the circumstances.

*We were just trying to say that we are there for her. We are your family, you have 2 brothers. (Father 6)*

Part of what some parents considered best possible parenting was symbolically handing the care of their baby over to another trusted parental figure (trusted deceased relatives and/or God), within the context of ritual, who would ensure their baby was appropriately cared for in an afterlife. This was a source of great comfort and hope to parents – they believed their babies were safe and at peace.

*For me it was like God taking her. (Mother 6)*

*It was just quite calm and peaceful and made me think that they had moved on to better place and that we would see them again. Safe in God's arm or in the palm of his hands and I think that's how we felt ...that your mum was looking after them.(Mother 14)*

Ritual enabled parents to act out their relationship with their baby.

*We brought her into the world and we let her go. (Father 9 referring to him and his wife lowering their baby's coffin into the ground).*

*I was proud to carry his wee coffin into the crematorium because I was his father and he was my son. I wanted him to be proud of me for doing that. (Father 5)*

For some parents it felt as if it was their only opportunity to parent. Thus, ritual marking reduced parental feelings of regret and unfinished business, as well as offering some sense of meaning and purpose.

*We grieve because he is not here, not because we did not do all we could for him. (Mother 11) It (a*

*blessing) was the only thing we were going to be able to do for him...at that point. (Father 4)*

*I felt at peace knowing that I had done the right thing for him. (Father 9)*

For parents whose baby died *in-utero* in the second trimester, ritual was felt to be the only formal way parents could publicly recognise the life of their baby.

*It marked her life. I just felt really, really strongly that her existence should be marked ...and that (a funeral) was the only way of doing it. (Mother 2)*

*It made me think he wasn't just a nobody. My boy...wasn't forgotten. (Father 4)*

For other parents the most significant part of ritual marking was the fact that they were publicly recognised as parents of a child who had lived, been an important part of their lives and died.

*One of things I remember of the words was being referred to as our baby's mummy and daddy, which was nice. (Mother 2)*

*It's probably the one chance that we're going to get at the moment because there is no baby to show, to say look I am a parent. (Mother 1)*

Ritual marking also helped cement bonds between parents and their babies. One mother felt strongly that her baby's naming ceremony enabled her to develop a deeper bond with her dead baby and to relax and enjoy more fully the time she spent with him in hospital. He became, for her, through their involvement in ritual marking not just a dead baby but her son.

*He was our baby. It (the naming ceremony) made me feel closer to him. It made me feel like I was his mum and I could sit and talk to him. (Mother 13)*

Positive memories for parents were created by sharing in ritual. This enabled something meaningful to be remembered from such a distressing time. Moreover, along with the utilisation of mementoes (for example, photographs or blankets which the baby was wrapped in) such memories allowed parents to continue to remember their baby and his/her place in

their family in a way that they found helpful and comforting.

*It was probably the saddest experience in my life. It (the funeral) was for me a helpful and really positive bit of it and I am really glad that we did choose to see the chaplain and have that beautiful funeral and that beautiful memory will always be with us. (Mother 1)*

*It (blessing) is a very sort of tangible memory and it's something that we can hang onto. It probably gives us a happier memory of the hospital because it was pretty lonely sort of time in there. (Father 11)*

*The memory that will stay me for the rest of my life was carrying the wee white coffin into the crematorium. It is not an unpleasant memory. It is a good memory. (Father 9)*

Rituals, funerals especially, provided a focus for parents' lives in the immediacy of baby death. Focussing on the funeral in the days following her baby's death was the only major source of meaning and purpose in life for one mum. It was her main reason for living at that point in time.

*I thought I cannot give up I have got the funeral. I can't just do away with myself or anything. (Mother 1)*

Parents, whether they considered themselves religious or not, found they were, in the context of ritual, put in touch with a dimension in life which transcended the distress and pain of their situation. Some found sharing in ritual enabled them to make a connection with God. This not only resulted in a sense of parental well-being but also in a finding of meaning and hope.

*I felt really uplifted. I'm not religious but it was almost like a spiritual thing. (Mother 1)*

*It's almost like being put in touch with God and we've talked about not being overly religious but we still believe in God. (Father 13)*

### **Affirmation of parents' worth and creativity**

Co-construction allowed parents to be creative at a time when they perceived themselves to be failing as parents, and in their ability to create. Thus, their



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A fuller account of Kelly's research findings, theological reflections and recommendations for practice can be found in: KELLY E. (2007) *Marking Short Lives*. Oxford: Peter Lang.

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