

Essay

Memento mori: grief, remembering, and living

A few months after my baby died, I was flicking through a book on Victorian photography and stopped short at the image of an immaculately dressed dead infant. I showed it to the friend I was with in the bookshop, who glanced at me then said, "It's things like that this make you realise how different they were to us." Outwardly I agreed; inwardly, I was less sure. Was taking pictures, hand and footprints of my week-old baby in palliative care so very different? There are even professional photographers that hospitals now use for photographs of dying babies, even stillborn babies, but unless you are unfortunate enough to ever need them you would probably not know about those important services. Sands (the stillbirth and neonatal death charity) give advice on taking photographs and keeping mementos of a life that barely or never existed, as well as the long-term therapeutic support these objects and images give to grieving parents.

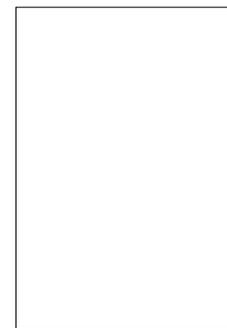
Victorian photographs of the dead, the subjects of any age—from young babies to the elderly—were often beautiful objects to be displayed alongside family photographs. They would accompany other objects of mourning, or memento mori, such as jewellery containing locks of hair or plaster casts of hands. Interest in these photographs has grown over the past few years, as illustrated by their inclusion in recent children's novel *The Lie Tree* by Frances Hardinge. One modern reaction to such records is to dismiss them as emblems of a sentimental Victorian obsession with grief that was a bit weird and creepy, which ended with the mass trauma of the First World War. There is some truth in that view but also much that is simplified, just as it is a simplification to point to the grief of Queen Victoria for her husband, Prince Albert, as emblematic of Victorian mourning. Yet even in her time, Queen Victoria's grief for first her mother and then Albert was seen as excessive and detrimental to the Queen, the monarchy, and the nation.

The elaborate Victorian mourning rituals and collection of memories within objects that could last a lifetime can be contrasted with approach taken in the fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* in 2013. The removal of the so-called bereavement exclusion from the diagnostic criteria for depression was not without controversy within and outside the medical establishment. Concerns raised at this extreme shift in attitude has been raised by groups such as the **Death Café**, and in various publications on grief and modern western attitudes to death and dying. One of the most recent is Brandy Schillace's *Death's Summer Coat: What the History of Death and Dying can tell us about Life and Living*. Schillace frames the book with her own attitude towards

personal experiences of grief, along the way considering how medical advancement has changed the way death is dealt with, and different cultural attitudes to death and grieving. Above all, Schillace considers the loss after the death of a loved one that is felt by those living and whether contemporary approaches to death and grief assist or worsen dying and grieving.

One chapter investigates Victorian attitudes to death and bereavement, pointing out that an important aspect of mourning was that it allowed outward displays of grief and thus societal recognition of loss. However, Schillace only touches on the "distinct class-bound death cultures" within Victorian society, as Pat Jallard puts it in *Death in the Victorian Family*; servants and factory workers, for instance, did not have the funds or time for the elaborate mourning rituals of the middle and upper classes. High infant mortality (ie, less than 1 year old) affected all classes fairly equally until the 1900s, while from the 1870s the death rates for children aged between 1 and 15 years fell, depending on geographical and economic situation. Most people would therefore have experienced the death of an infant or child within their own family or would know of such losses in the families of friends and acquaintances. The preoccupation with (sometimes saccharine) child death scenes in literature is more understandable given these fairly high death rates coupled with the desire for a peaceful 'good death', despite much personal experience of agonising, terrifying death.

The idea of a 'good death' had its roots in evangelical Christianity and played a large part in consolation literature in the mid-19th century. It is chastening to realise that consolation literature was used to assist children who had seen their siblings die and who might know that they could soon follow. The emphasis on a purpose to death and the stress on the end of suffering in this life and the joys in the (supposed) next one gave consolation to the living, as well as the dying. It is almost unbearable, even now, to read the account of the death of five of Archbishop Archibald and Catherine Tait's children over five weeks in 1856. The virulent scarlet fever meant that neither parent could touch their child as each one was quarantined from the others. Having seen the deaths of their siblings before them, each sick child knew that they would probably die. 23 years later, Tait published a memorial volume on his children's deaths and received letters of gratitude from bereaved parents. As today's groups such Sands and the Death Café show, the need to talk and hear about death has not changed. Loss leads to loneliness and, although no parent would wish such grief on another, the sharing of it lessens the isolation.



For more on Sands see
<https://www.uk-sands.org>

For more on the Death Café see
<http://deathcafe.com>

In the Victorian period, the relative frequency of child and infant death meant that there was more extensive consolation literature about children. Infant death was common but not treated as commonplace. In her 1872 book of lullaby's and rhymes for children, *Sing-Song: a Nursery Rhyme Book*, Christina G Rossetti included seven poems about infant death. 120 of the poems were illustrated by the pre-Raphaelite artist Arthur Hughes after extensive direction of Rossetti herself (her original copy can be seen in the British Library). A *Baby's Cradle with No Baby in it* depicts a mother weeping over an empty cradle, while *"Why did Baby Die?"* depicts a child and mother by a grave:

Why did baby die,
 Making father sigh
 Mother cry?
 Flowers, that bloom to die,
 Make no reply
 Of "why"
 But bow and die.

The poems do not soften the words 'die' or 'death' with euphemisms, and they stress the omnipotence of death, but they offer consolation in the promise of no suffering for the dead infant and a better life in the next. Their focus is as much on the sorrow of those left living. The parallel image to the text is important as it often shows the grieving mother or siblings. These poems are interwoven among other happier themes and sillier poems that speak to the experience of infant death as a normative one amongst all the joys and other emotions of parenthood. Fortunately, in the early 20th century such experience became less normal. In a new edition of Rossetti's *Sing-Song* in 1924, 41 poems were omitted, including all those about infant death. Whether this was because infant death was no longer so common, or because the taste for displays of grief and talking about death had changed is unclear.

Hughes' illustrations for Rossetti often show a memorial or emblem of the child of some kind. Schillace points out that the memento mori of the Victorians was influenced by the commodity culture of the nineteenth century and the craze for new technologies, such as photography. In the context of the vast amount of things collected by middle-class Victorians in particular, it is of no surprise that objects memorialising loved ones were part of this commodity culture. These remembrances—and that word is crucial—were seen as positive signs of loss, and aids to remembering, but now they are often treated as morbid curiosities. Remembering and the use of memory in the grieving process is considered by experts as key, and these objects could be valuable aids to mourning. Today, agencies that assist with therapy for grief recognise that keeping remembrances can lead to acceptance of the death of a loved one and an ability to live relatively normally again; though grief is never healed. However, the general response in contemporary western

society is to hide death and grief away. Schillace observes that the 19th-century images of parents cuddling a dead child do not just memorialise the dead; they break down the boundary between the living and the dead, and commemorate the grief. Recognition of loss and grief can lessen the isolation.

There is some evidence that attitudes to death and grief are changing in modern western society. The Death Café group with which Schillace is involved was formed in 2011 to encourage more discussion about dying and grieving. Recognition of problems with clinical and societal responses to death and the bereaved was made as long ago as 1969 by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in *On Death and Dying*. The stages of grief that Kübler-Ross identifies are generally accepted, though personally I am still too close to loss to comment. Schillace points to the hospice movement and a number of other interventions to improve the medical and emotional care of those dying and their families. Although, if wider society does not change and the conversations about dying, death, and grief do not filter past these interventions, once you leave the hospice or place of care, the isolation of loss is brutal. Schillace points to the relative lack of contemporary writing on grief as an indication to the lack of frankness about loss and death in contemporary culture. Arguably Helen Macdonald's book *H is for Hawk* on the effect of grief on her world after the death of her father and the plaudits it has won may indicate a change. *H is for Hawk* is not consolatory in the Christian tradition but consoles in the sense that grief is a burden that can be shared.

I do not know what I would have done in those first few months without the memory box, provided by Sands, for any tokens connected with my dead daughter. The most thoughtful gift, among the many my husband and I received from kind friends and family, was an engraved silver frame with her name and dates inscribed, in which we put the prints of her hands and feet. The giving of it from someone else somehow made it seem more acceptable to place it among the other of our family photographs in our front room. It was a recognition that my daughter would not be forgotten and a recognition of our loss, not unlike the use of Victorian memento mori photographs. As someone who has worked in museums for more than 15 years, I know well the power of objects and images to make people feel as well as think. The objects connected to and images of my baby speak to a loss so terrible that looking at them brings back memories of both her and what we all went through as well as the enormity of my grief. Ultimately, for me at least, accepting her death went parallel with accepting how terrible it was and that my grief was therefore natural and normal. The mementos of her helped me live more fully again, and so rather than judge the Victorians and their photographs of their dead children, I just hope they found some peace.

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