

'A Father's Story'

A Leadership Transformation Learning Forum Article

Losing my 24-year old son, Paul, in February 2009 has without doubt been the most traumatic event that I've ever experienced. To some extent this experience has transformed the way I am as a human being and, in addition, it is transforming the way I work as a coach.

Talking and writing about my experiences, and sharing them with others has proved to be a very beneficial exercise for my own learning and transformational journey. It's brought many of my deepest and strongest assumptions up from below the surface and into the light of day for examination; and it's allowed me to identify and challenge some of the unconscious beliefs that have limited my thinking in the past and, instead, start replacing them with more consciously created, empowering beliefs.

"Paul's Dead...."

How many words does it take to feel that your world has just changed forever? Like the biggest sledgehammer ever made has just hit you full on? If you'd asked me this question previously I would have replied, 'I have no idea'.

It was the 19th February 2009, and the calls came at around 5pm. I was working in Germany at the time and had just arrived at a friend's home after having driven for several hours from the Netherlands. There had been a lot of snow piled up on the sides of the roads, and I remember driving down a long main road alongside a wide canal with industrial barges going about their business.

The first call was on my mobile, and I could see that it was my then 23 year-old daughter, Emily. Unusual that she would call me on her mobile because she was in the UK, and I was in Germany. She'd never done this before. I answered the call saying 'Hi Em', and she responded by saying, 'Mum's here, she's got something to tell you'. Strange... Emily's mum was my first wife, Debbie. We had separated and divorced many years earlier and, now that our children Emily and Paul were young adults, we rarely had cause to speak to each other. Debbie came onto the line and said, '..... dead'. I didn't hear the first word she said because the line momentarily went faint.

The first thing that occurred to me was that my then 75 year-old father, John Monk, had died. So I said to Debbie, 'I heard you say that someone's died, but didn't hear who it was – I'll call you back on the landline'. In retrospect I realised that if my father had passed away then the call would have come from someone in my immediate family...and not Debbie. A few moments later Debbie's voice answered the call and, totally out of the blue, the first thing she said to me was... 'Paul's dead'.

I have since relived that moment many, many times... I dropped the phone to the ground and shouted, 'No!' Again and again I shouted 'No!' I ran from the

room where I'd taken the call and into another room where I fell onto my knees and shouted again and again, 'No...No...No...No!' My head was spinning; my heart felt like it had been torn out of my chest. I could do nothing else for maybe an hour or longer except cry and cry and cry, and in between crying, shout 'No...No...No!' I had to fight for my breath...it seemed as if my lungs only wanted to take enough air to allow me to cry out again. Everything in me cried out in pain.

After the penultimate year of his medical studies Paul had announced that he wanted to take a gap year so that he could travel and work in Africa. After this he would complete his final year training, and then settle down to build a career in medicine. Always an adventurous soul from a young age, Paul had travelled and worked in Kenya several times previously on charitable projects during summer holidays.

Having already taken a gap year after school, initially I was quite sceptical when he announced that he wanted to take another one. I said to him, 'Surely it would be better to finish your studies, then go off for a year travelling?' Being a fairly persuasive individual who knew his own mind, Paul soon convinced me that this wouldn't be the case. And, anyway, I knew better than to argue with him because once he'd made his mind up about something then, like his Dad, he became very focused on whatever it was, and so would almost certainly do it anyway.

After what seemed like an eternity, I managed to stop crying. I don't remember exactly what happened in the hours that followed that evening. I remember talking to Debbie again to try to find out what had happened; why and how had Paul died? He had always been so independent and able to look after himself. Having travelled alone in Africa previously I had no doubts that he'd be fine. It never even occurred to me – not even once – that he might be in any danger. And what about Emily, our daughter and Paul's sister? What must be going through her mind? I spoke with her and, like the rest of us, she was in a state of shock. All I remember mumbling was something like, 'Everything will be fine'. After all, I was her father, and I'd always been able to help out when she needed me. Right now though, I felt utterly shocked and powerless.

After a broken night's sleep, I spent the next day wandering around on my own in a state of deep shock. I remember walking through a beautiful snow-covered German forest as I spoke over the phone to the Dean of Paul's Medical School to break the news to him. It all seemed somehow surreal...

Next morning I set off to drive back home to the UK. I remember stopping at the Passport office in Calais, France to show my passport hoping and praying that I wouldn't be asked, 'What's the purpose of your journey?' 'I'm going home to arrange the repatriation of my son's body from Kenya and organise his funeral' wasn't a story that I particularly wanted to share with anyone. Fortunately nobody asked.

A Funeral and A Celebration

Paul's funeral came and went. Various family members spoke and shared their memories. My daughter Emily read the beautiful passage on children from 'The Prophet' by Kahlil Gibran. One of my most abiding memories is of my wife, Lynn, who literally 'shone like an angel' when she stood up to speak about Paul. Truly she had loved him like her own. I read Mary E. Frye's poem 'Do Not Stand At My Grave And Weep'.

The following day we held a 'Celebration of Paul's Life' where around 200 people collected to listen to his friends sharing their (mostly amusing) stories about him. One man – a devout Christian – who had employed Paul during school and college holidays, touched me deeply when he spoke about how much he had admired him; so much so that he would '*try to be more like Paul in the future*'. Other friends shared their stories about Paul's fun-loving antics (there were many...). Hearing people talk so enthusiastically about Paul - his qualities, his passions, his foibles, his dreams, his humour, his adventurous spirit, his generosity - was both very touching and, at the same time, incredibly sad now that he was gone.

I was the last to speak, and this is a story I shared: "*A sailing ship lies at anchor in the bay with her white sails lazily billowing on the morning breeze. As the sun gets higher in the sky she is made ready for passage. Suddenly up comes the anchor, and she sets sail for the far horizon. Steadily she sails until she's about to disappear over the horizon. A man next to me says, 'There she goes'. And, at the same time, somewhere over the horizon somebody says, 'Here she comes...'*" This was to be one of the first new and different perspectives that I would take about Paul's death.

To bring this beautiful day to a close Emily projected a slideshow of hundreds of photographs from birth through to the last days of Paul's life that she had painstakingly put together, accompanied by some of his favourite music¹. The whole event was a wonderful tribute to Paul's life.

Dark Days

A few days before the funeral a former military chaplain and friend, David Devenney, said to me, '*However you're feeling right now, this is just the beginning...*' He warned me that the worst was yet to come. He was right. It was to going to get pretty tough.

The months following Paul's funeral were hard. I found myself in a very dark place at times where my life seemed fairly meaningless. Things that were important before didn't seem to matter any more. In addition, my coaching and training work had all but ground to a halt and, in any case, I found it very difficult to focus on anything. For a while I even lost my will to live. And while not proactively seeking a 'way out', the thought of death was not unattractive. However, I had my daughter Emily to think about, and other family members

¹ 'Teardrop' by Massive Attack.

as well. David had been right – being a bereaved father was a pretty miserable place to be!

Different Perspectives

After having been feeling pretty low for some months, and being particularly despondent one day, I decided that 'enough was enough'! It was time to start taking responsibility for myself again instead of being a 'victim of circumstances'. While I wasn't sure how I would go about making this happen, that morning I made myself a promise: 'By the six-month point (after Paul's death) something will have shifted and I will start feeling better again'. This point in time was only a few weeks away, and so I decided that I'd better start making some changes. Having not done so for several months, one of the decisions that I made that day was to once again put an hour or so to one side early each morning to meditate and read. It was while meditating one morning a few days later that suddenly the thought came to me, 'Choose a Wisdom Card', so I grabbed the pack, shuffled it, and chose a card².

The wisdom card that I chose that morning was: '*Perspective: your response to any situation depends on your perspective. When in a rut your vision and choices are limited, whereas an eagle's view allows you to survey the bigger picture and reveals many options*'. Wow! This was a message that really struck home! At the time I didn't really know how this was going to work out, but I knew deep inside that taking different perspectives would help shift me forward.

Immediately after reading the 'Perspective' wisdom card I remember hearing the 'voice inside my head' saying, '*You've got too much work to do, and you can't afford to waste time sitting around here taking different perspectives*'. Fortunately I also heard the small voice inside me when, at that moment, it clearly said, '*Just get on with it*'.

I remembered the 'Perceptual Positions' exercise that we'd done on my NLP³ training a few years earlier, and so decided to get out a couple pieces of paper and write 'Dad' on one sheet and 'Paul' on the other. I arranged two chairs facing each other a few feet apart and placed one piece of paper on each chair. I sat on 'Dad's' chair and talked to 'Paul' for some time about what had happened, and how I was feeling. I asked questions like, '*Why did you have to go to Africa? Why didn't you stay on at Medical School instead of taking another gap year? Why did this happen? Why did you die?*'

When I'd finished as 'Dad', I changed positions and, instead, sat on 'Paul's' chair. Then, for a while, in a strange sort of way I became 'Paul'. Another way of describing this experience would be to say that I 'embodied' Paul's energy. However one might describe it, for me this was a deeply insightful experience. I started to see the situation from Paul's perspective and, at the same time,

² 'Wisdom Cards' by Diana Cooper & Greg Suart, Findhorn Press

³ NLP (Neuro Linguistic Programming) Practitioners course run by Kath Temple, The Lifelong Learning Company (www.lifelonglearningcompany.com)

realised how wrapped up I'd become with my own pain, and my own story. The 'conversation' went back and forth several times as I changed positions. I cried a lot during this 'conversation' – it was quite cathartic. This exercise had given me some totally new and different perspectives!

The 'Other Side of the Coin' Perspective

I made one other really big shift in perspective that morning, and I describe it as the 'Other Side of the Coin'. And, while this may sound simple, in reality it takes real focus and application to practice. So this is what I did: instead of labelling myself as (or telling myself the story about being...) a 'bereaved father', I started to really connect with how lucky I'd been as a father to have had Paul for those 24 years and 9 months. How lucky I'd been to be there at his birth, and during his infancy, childhood and teenage years. I'd been part of his growing up to become a man, seeing him go off travelling around the world, seeing him and his friends having fun together, he and I rock climbing together, riding a motor-bike together, going out running together...and the many other experiences that we'd shared. This was yet another different and, when really connected with, powerfully insightful perspective.

The 'Eternal' Perspective

Although I'd dabbled with Christianity many years earlier, I didn't really have any particularly strong beliefs around life after death. In recent years I'd read quite a lot of 'New Spirituality' books written by authors such as Neale Donald Walsch who, for example, describes death as an 'other dimensional experience'⁴.

Remembering that I had been 'guided' to take different perspectives through reading the wisdom card I had drawn earlier, I decided to explore the largely unconscious assumptions I held about life after death. To help me on this part of my journey I read several books, including 'Life After Death: The Book of Answers' by Deepak Chopra⁵.

At the centre of my inquiry was, I think, a really basic question: '*What happens when we die?*' Does every part of us just completely disappear in every way possible? Do the living and the dead become totally separate from each other through death, never to be reunited? Or does some part of us go to some other 'dimension' that's beyond the awareness of our five 'normal' senses (i.e. sight, hearing, touch, taste & smell)?

In surfacing the unconscious assumptions that I held about death, it became clear from my prolonged, painful reaction to losing Paul that the hidden beliefs I held were actually based on '*death being a full and final separation from the living*'. Otherwise why would I have been so very upset and unhappy? It was actually quite a profound insight just simply to bring this belief to the surface!

⁴ 'Conversations with God Book One' by Neale Donald Walsch, Hodder & Stoughton

⁵ 'Life After Death: a Book of Answers' by Deepak Chopra, Rider Books

Why? Well, even without any 'spiritual' beliefs to the contrary, as a Biochemistry graduate in my younger days this position just didn't make sense. I know that everything is composed of energy. Science tells us this. In addition, through my more 'spiritual' studies I also know that some of the ancient wisdom traditions, such as the Hermetic Laws from ancient Egypt, have taught this for thousands of years.

When I reflected on seeing Paul's body lying in a coffin, the one thing I could say for sure was that there was '*something*' missing. You could call it '*life energy*', or '*soul*', or perhaps '*life essence*' (maybe you have another word for it?). While clearly his '*life energy*' had been there before; wherever it was now, it certainly wasn't in Paul's physical body any longer. Given that energy cannot be created or destroyed, then the obvious conclusion is that Paul's '*life energy*' must have gone somewhere else...

Too simplistic for some perhaps and, by the way, that's fine. However, for me it changed my whole perspective on death! And, in so doing, changed the view that I took on Paul's departure. In addition, having surfaced the limiting belief that '*death is a full and final separation*', I was then able to work on changing it to a more empowering belief that worked better for me (i.e. '*death is a temporary separation*')⁶.

Having identified and replaced the old unconscious, limiting belief with this conscious, more empowering belief, Paul's death no longer represents for me a once and for all time total separation (although I still miss him today). While I don't know in practice how we will actually meet again, I know that someday in some way, shape or form Paul and I will be re-united. We'll sip a cosmic beer together in a cosmic bar somewhere and spend time catching up on 'life and the universe'. And I look forward to bending his ear...

Personal Transformation (i.e. the Impact on Me as a Human Being)

One of my observations – backed up by others close to me – is that in some ways I've actually changed permanently as a human being since Paul's death. In other words, I've gone through some personal transformation. For example, I know that I have become a kinder, softer, more 'tolerant' and less judgmental person (although I still have my moments!). Also, I am more willing to listen and more generous than previously, and less serious/ more humorous. Why have these changes taken place? At a fairly simplistic level, several reasons occur to me.

Firstly, having been to the depths of despair myself, I now feel compassion for others who are feeling this way. Being surrounded by a 'black cloud' isn't a great place to be. Selective use of humour can be a godsend when in this situation; and while sometimes this creates just a temporary shift in demeanor, it is often very welcome all the same.

⁶ I used Katie Byron's 4 Powerful Questions from 'The Work'. See <http://thework.com/thework-4questions.php>

Secondly, when I was 'down in a very dark place', I had a number of experiences that would stay with me. In the weeks and months following Paul's death many people showed me compassion; often having no idea what to say to me, they simply tried to help in the best way they knew how. Conversely, others didn't even attempt to acknowledge that anything unusual had happened at all; instead taking a 'Let's pretend that everything is fine' position (and this one was particularly difficult to deal with). Some people asked, 'How are you?' Others, who I had thought would do so, didn't. I wondered whether, understandably, they were simply afraid to hear the reply in case they felt unable to 'deal' with it (not that anyone has to...).

As a result I learned a few lessons about how to (and how not to...) help someone in bereavement, and I now feel much more capable of helping others who find themselves in a similar situation. Indeed, it feels natural for me to do so now. And, given my own experiences, it no longer feels like a scary experience because I now have an idea of how to respond. In actual fact, it's quite simple. All we need do is simply share our love; one human being to another...

Based on my experiences at the 'coal face', and to help all of us become more compassionate human beings, I decided to write a simple and effective 10-step guide on "*How to Be With Someone Who's Suffered Serious Loss*". I've re-produced the outline of my guidelines below so you can also use them.

1. Listen to the other person with everything you've got available.
2. Keep listening.....don't interrupt.
3. Continue listening.....continue not interrupting.
4. Repeat steps 1 – 3 above until the other person stops talking or crying (or both).
5. Do not make any judgment of the other person and don't say anything yet.....
6. When they haven't said anything else for a while, then – and only then - ask if you can say something.
7. If they respond with a 'yes', then - and only then - say '*I'm really sorry to hear about your loss. Is there anything I can do to help?*'
8. If they start talking again repeat steps 1 – 4 above. Above all, do not try to solve their problem for them (in any case, given that death is irreversible, it's not possible...).
9. Repeat any of the above steps as necessary.
10. When you part company tell them that you'll be thinking of them, or praying for them (or whatever your equivalent is).

Use this as a rough guide and I can guarantee that your colleague or friend will go away feeling better than before – or, at the very least, deeply listened to. Your very presence (and I mean 'presence' at a soul level) and the deep connection this brings will have helped them.

This brings me onto another of the main differences between the 'me now' and the 'me who I was before'. If you meet with me face-to-face these days, or speak to me over the phone, then you are far more likely to a fuller degree

of attention than I was able to provide previously. It is highly likely that I won't be thinking about yesterday's news, this evening's supper, tomorrow's coaching, next weekend's kayaking, or when my next cup of tea will appear. Although I can't guarantee that I'll never think about these things (and others!) when we're in each others presence, what I can promise is that, on balance, you'll get more of my presence now than I could have given before.

Professional Transformation (i.e. The Knock-on Effect on My Work)

On a practical level I describe my work as being a '*leadership coach and facilitator/ trainer*'. On a 'soul mission' level I describe myself as a '*Life Adventure Guide*'. In my mind both descriptions point to the same thing; they're just two different ways (or perspectives) of describing it. Combining these two descriptions, and adding some other aspects that inspire me, then the following communicates how I describe my vocation (or 'calling'):

'I have fun supporting leaders and change-agents on their life adventures to inspire the creation of an abundant, synergistic world'.

During a recent supervision session with my own coach, David Pearce, another aspect of the coach's role came to light. We had just completed our session during which, at some point, the phrase '*professional human being*' had come up. Reflecting on our session, David remarked that being a coach is essentially about being a '*professional human being*'. We both chuckled at the irony of this new perspective.

So, back to the question: while I know that this life-changing experience has had a transformational impact on my personal life, what about my professional life?

One of the changes that I've already mentioned relates to the way that I am with other people in the sense that, as one example, I'm now generally far more '*present*'. As a coach that's quite a useful capability, and so this alone has made me better at my work than previously.

I've also noticed that when coaching on a 1-2-1 basis or with groups, I now find that I am much less attached to achieving a particular outcome and, instead, much more willing to go with the 'flow'. Indeed, I am actually able to sense the flow much better. I'm also able to make myself more open, more available; and, conversely, when I feel absolutely 'centered' around a particular issue then I'm also able to be more directive and un-yielding.

In addition, I find that, having done this work with myself, I am now much more able to help others to explore their '*shadow*'. In other words, the often-unconscious parts of our personalities that periodically come to the surface as 'fears', and that often hold us back from living our most magnificent, freewheeling lives.

And how have my clients responded to the changes in the way I work? Many of the people that I've worked with in the last year or two have had deep

insights that have helped them to make big shifts and move forward. Would they have done this anyway? While I don't know for sure one way or another, I strongly suspect that they're having deeper insights now than previously.

Epilogue

While thinking about how to end this article, I realised that - in a sense - this is just the start. My journey continues...as of course does yours. Good luck!

This article is dedicated to the memory of Paul Thomas Monk who departed from this life at the young age of 24 years old. An adventurer from his earliest days, and never one to sit still for too long, Paul continues his adventures in another dimension...wherever that may be.

This is one of a number of similar articles written for the 'Leadership Transformation Learning Forum' by leaders and change-agents based on their own life experiences. The Leadership Transformation Learning Forum exists to explore the link between personal and professional transformation. Among other things, this Forum provides an opportunity for leaders and change-agents to share their life-transforming experiences and, importantly, the learning that they've received.

Chris Monk
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Exeter, UK