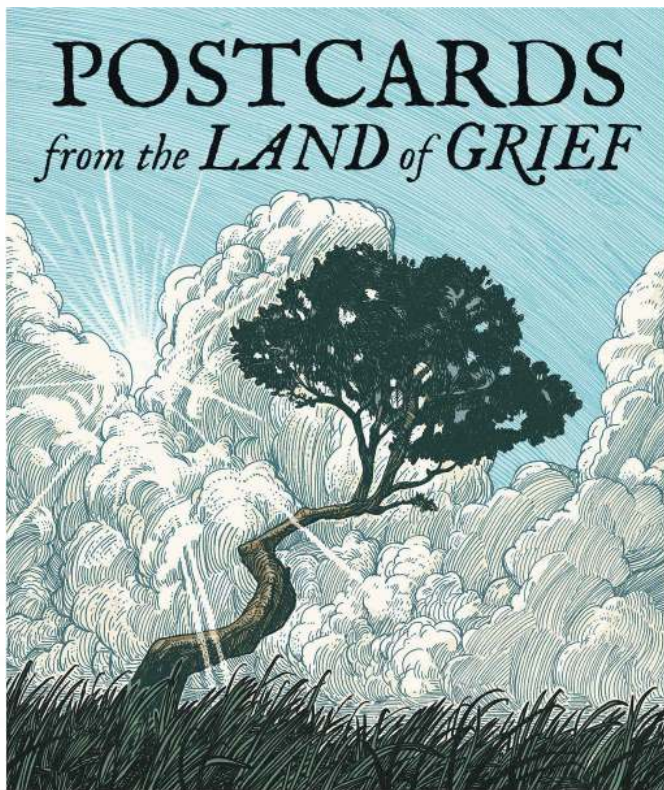


Comforting thoughts for NHS workers as they deal
with pain and loss in the coronavirus crisis



Comfort for the journey through loss towards hope

RICHARD LITTLEDALE

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'Postcards from the Land of Grief' – a special edition Spring 2020

A Personal Note from Richard Littledale

No two griefs are the same. Like snowflakes, every single one is different. Like snowflakes, when they all fall at once it is hard to look at any single one as you should. Right now, the Covid-19 pandemic means that you and your colleagues are absorbing grief upon grief from patients and colleagues alike. They fall and fall and you cannot take it in.

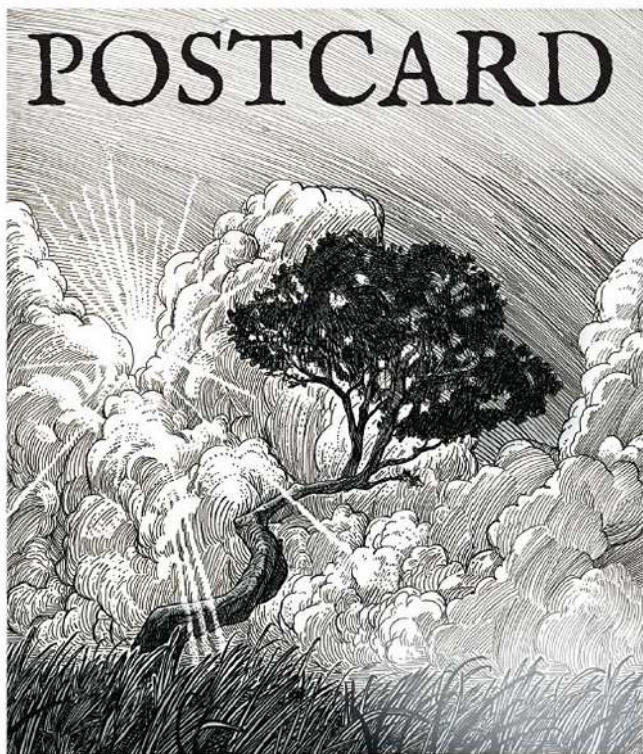
My wife, Fiona, served all her working life as an information professional. Her last ten years were spent working with the Medical Faculty of St George's in Tooting. She loved that job and kept at it through gruelling rounds of chemo and surgery for the simple reason that she believed it mattered. When her advancing cancer meant that she had to leave that work, it was the hardest day.

In November 2017, that cancer finally took its toll, and she died in my arms. In the days which followed, I tried my best to understand what had gone on, but I felt as if even the familiar places had turned strange. I was an unwilling visitor in a foreign land called grief and felt all at sea. I started to do what we often do when we find ourselves in a strange place – I wrote postcards. These were not worthy treatises; they were observations on how it felt on that day to be in that place.

To my surprise, they seemed to strike a chord with many who had been there. A collection of them aired on BBC Radio 4's *Sunday Worship* – and evoked a wide, global response. They formed the backbone of the annual Sue Ryder lecture at the Houses of Parliament last year, and they helped to launch their 'A Better Death' campaign. In August of last year they were published by Authentic Media in a book entitled *Postcards from the Land of Grief*.

As you deal with grief upon grief, Authentic Media and I would like to make this special edition of fourteen postcards available to you. It comes with our thanks for your sacrificial service, and our recognition that the landscape you cross right now is indescribably harsh. You will have little time to reflect, I know, which is why the postcards are short. If you find even a little solace in them during this time, then I shall be pleased, and I know that the woman who inspired them would have been too. Read on . . .

POSTCARD



A New Topography

I am learning that the landscape of grief is a strangely unnerving place. In part its strangeness is that those things which you had thought would be familiar . . . are not familiar at all. Grief can turn a soft memory into an unforgiving rock face or a hairbrush into a sword to pierce the heart. Regrets, like injected foam, expand to fill the space you give them. Words spoken or heard are like an old cassette left next to a magnet – muffled by exposure to greater force.

There is beauty here but it is strange and unnerving. In the end, the only thing which can pass the border controls into this strange new land is the faith which was there before its gates opened. The One who was there on the other side, is here on this side too, as it turns out. God, who created the love which hurts so much, will also give the balm to soothe the rawness of grief. Not today, nor tomorrow, perhaps – but in time.

Early on Monday morning last week, before things began to crumble so dramatically and irreversibly, I took a walk in the frost. The most ordinary things, like a crumpled and discarded bud, were turned into delicate works of art by the icy fingers of winter.

I shall continue to look for beauty in this new winter landscape – and I believe I shall find it.

Of Geese and Sages

I am learning that it is full of surprises, this landscape of grief. Some of its arduous climbs are undulating slopes, and some of its easy vistas are beset by hidden crevasses – just ready to swallow the unwary. At times I like to think I shall swoop across it like the Grey Goose – flying nobly on alone, as if untroubled. Other times I cross it more like a snail – propelled along on a trail of sorrow and a danger to anything that grows!

Sometimes it contains a mirror, this strange landscape – and you catch sight of yourself as you go by. They must be such narrow mirrors though, for they only show one person – never two. Like an inexperienced pilgrim, you ache as you travel here – but mainly in the heart. To experience grief as a physical ache has been a surprise.

And then there are the people you meet along the way. Many of them are unable to speak the language here. Some don't even try; they resort to the universal unspoken gestures of the foreign traveller – a smile, a hug, a tear shed in sympathy. These things are instantly understood, and received with thanks. Others speak as if they have an old phrase book and are urgently thumbing through to find the right page. A bit like the phrase book – you usually know what they mean, even if it ends up sounding slightly off kilter, as if you want to

travel by hansom cab or pay for your shopping with doubloons!

Others find themselves in this place promoted to the rank of prophet without ever knowing it. One such was the 6-year-old who presented me with a very special bracelet. At a children's service on Sunday, each child was making an 'advent bracelet' with different coloured beads to represent the different elements of the Christmas story. The idea was that these bracelets should be taken home and used in the weeks leading up to Christmas to retell the story. He came across, sat down next to me and explained that his had another purpose:

I have made this for you, because you don't have Fiona any more. She has gone to heaven.

I thank God for all the people I am meeting in this strange place – but today I thank him especially for that small prophet.

The Currency of Kindness

It continues to surprise, this land of grief. Its topography is so hard to read – like the shifting sands of the desert. To climb a tiny hill can feel like scaling a mountain – leaving the lungs gasping for air at the top. Once scaled, the view behind may be spectacular, but the view ahead is hidden, at least for now. Some of the valleys which look like no more than a ditch prove to have sides so steep that they all but blot out the light.

As ever with foreign travel, the currency is unfamiliar too. Money has little value. It can pay the bills and provide some distraction, but it has no real worth. After all, it could not pay any fee to prevent crossing the border into here. In this land the currency is kindness. It comes in words and actions, cards and letters, and even smiles.

I started this week by re-reading all the cards and letters which I have received. They came from every direction, in every kind of handwriting and from every age. Some were poetic, some fulsome, some brief – but all have made me richer here.

I thank God for every single one of them. Like money sent home from abroad, they have helped to sustain life in this foreign land and I am humbly grateful.

Invisible Borders

I once heard a refugee describe how the border with his home country ran just alongside his refugee camp. He could stand at the edge of the camp and gaze across at an old familiar tree in the home country – but he could not go there. The border was both invisible and impervious.

I am finding that the landscape of grief has just such a border. I can gaze across it at old familiar things. I can watch normal life unfold before my eyes, and I can stand and have a conversation with those across the border as if nothing separated us. That said – it is impossible to cross for now. When it comes down to it, they live there and I live here and nothing can be done about that. I make occasional forays into their land, and they are precious. It turns out, though, that I take the border with me. I am like a cartoon character racing to outrun an elastic band – legs whirring and arms pumping, but the snap of the elastic must bring me back as surely as night follows day.

The refugee made a new life for himself across the border. He would still gaze from time to time at the old, familiar tree – but he found others in his new home. Like the old one, they provided shade and the kind of mental landmark which makes any new place a little less strange. Today, I shall go looking for trees . . .

Times and Spaces

One of the features of travelling outside your own country is that you find yourself unable to read amounts – be they of money, distance or ingredients. The ‘small’ pack of a familiar ingredient in a foreign supermarket may be way too big, or the ‘large’ pack in another may be way too small. Distances can be deceptive too. Two towns which look adjacent on a map may be minutes apart, or hours apart, depending upon the traffic conditions.

I am finding that I am unable to read this particular map. The distance between this task and the next one may appear to be very short, and yet it will take hours, or weeks. The distance from here to the borders of the land where I used to live is one which I cannot begin to calculate.

As ever when staying abroad, shopping can prove to be an interesting experience. Not having the right coin with me, I had to ask a member of staff to release a trolley for me. ‘Big or small?’ she asked. Momentarily thrown off balance, I reluctantly replied ‘small’. In fact, my judgement had been poor, and even the small trolley was too big. I shall have to learn how to shop here, I think.

Single Ticket

As I continue to live in this new land of grief, I am struck by the parallels with other times when I have stayed away from home. At first, you can be so taken with the novelty of what you see around you that the country you have left behind seems shabby, or dull, or uninteresting by comparison. Stay a little longer, and some of the quirks of what you have left behind assume a kind of rosy glow, making you curious to sample them once again. Stay longer still, and the limitations of the new place may become rather more annoying than the ones you have left behind. In short, it is time to go back.

The comparison is not altogether fair, since the travels I describe above have always been ones I have chosen to undertake. Not so on this occasion. Furthermore, going back is not an option. I cannot go back to where I used to live – my ticket was one way. That is not to say that I am stuck here, though. There is a path – but it lies ahead, rather than behind. I have not been here long enough to discern it yet, but I know that it is 'over there' in Another Place.

Yesterday I paid a visit to Anthony Gormley's artwork of the same name – a place I had last visited with Fiona. The statues still stand there – stock still and staring out to sea. Sometimes they

are hidden, sometimes they stand tall – but always they turn their steely gaze to another place.

I was especially struck by one figure. The waves were lapping at his chest, and all but engulfing him. He is unmoved, though – and he continues to look to Another Place. I am hoping that I can do the same . . .

Home from Home

I am discovering that, no matter how far you travel here, the things you left in that old country are not far away. As I write this, I am more than 3,000 miles from home, enjoying the company of loved ones. The language, and even the alphabet, are different. The skyline is different. Much of the food is different, and the climate is definitely different.

The climate of the heart, though, travels with you. The sun may beat down outside whilst it rains inside, or a wild wind may snatch at the heart and imagination whilst all around the air outside is as still as can be. Sometimes I think the frost of this inner winter is thawing now. Then I catch a glimpse of an old photo or touch a familiar object again and the thermometer plummets.

One day, maybe soon or maybe not, these two climates may equalize, like warming the air up in an aircraft before the pressurised cabin is opened up on a blistering runway. Until then, I shall carry my climate with me, I think.

The Treachery of Absorption

When living away from home, and once you realize that the stay may be long-term, things begin to change. You learn the language. You grow to love the food. You stop scanning the supermarket shelves for those things which you know you can't get here anyway. In short, you learn to fit in. To do so can be quite gratifying – a successful experiment in cultural adaptation. This is not where you meant to be, and it may not have been your choice to come here – but you are making the best of it.

And then, the moment of treachery comes. You are walking through your new-found neighbourhood or talking in your new language with your new friends, when you stumble because you cannot remember the old ones. Perhaps you struggle for a word which was once so familiar on your lips and it just won't come. You're glad the people in that other country can't see you now, because you would feel ashamed.

There are days now, in this land of grief, when I feel like I am starting to fit in. I recognize that single man in the mirror and do not flinch. I look at an old picture in a new space or sit in a new chair in an old room and it feels . . . normal. Then there are other moments when that new normal feels like a treachery to the old. It feels like the person who has studied their new language so hard that when

a newspaper comes in their mother tongue they can no longer read it. Absorption, which was such a laudable aim, feels like treachery in that moment.

At least one of the many cards I received on entering this new country quoted this phrase:

Faith is not knowing what the future holds – but knowing who holds the future.

I was certainly surprised to see it on the side of a burger van in a safari park in the desert! It is, of course, true. However, I am learning that in this place I have to know not only who holds the future, but who holds the past.

Adjustment Fatigue

Yesterday was a good day – infused with the zesty scent of new possibilities and a whole string of new stories to be published. Yesterday was a bad day – stalked by the dank smell of melancholy. Yesterday was a good day – meeting with people who matter in all sorts of ways. Yesterday was a bad day – with fears about tomorrow playing some ghastly version of hide-and-seek amongst the realities of today. Yesterday, like most days in this foreign land, was exhausting.

It is easy to forget that simply living ‘abroad’ in a place where language and culture and norms do not come naturally, is tiring. Unwittingly, you are engaged in a constant battle to adjust, as if spending your day on a balance ball. Years ago now, I spent a year living abroad and speaking a foreign language nearly all the time. For the first few months, even the very business of living was exhausting. The years have not changed that.

Hopefully, the intervening years have taught me that fatigue cannot be charged, like a bull at a red rag. Nor can it be ignored, like some distant smoke alarm which seems like somebody else’s problem. Instead, it must be accommodated, like a creeper growing round the lamppost or a tree growing away from the immovable fence. This, too, is an adjustment – but hopefully it will pay dividends when said tree flourishes.

A Landscape Transformed

This week it has been snowing in the land where I now live. Snow has a soothing effect on the landscape – like a cool cloth on a fevered brow. Sharp corners are rounded, bare trees are frosted, dropped litter and chewed up verges are hidden by a kind of physical amnesia. Every one of the millions of snowflakes is an emissary in this campaign of transformation. As they fall, drift and settle, between them they contrive to hide what was seen.

New memories and experiences fall in similar fashion upon this landscape of grief. Each one is tiny, and incapable of making the slightest difference on its own. The corners are too sharp, the hollows too deep, the cracks too wide. Between them, though, they begin to transform a landscape. Sometimes now it is possible to look over it and see a little beauty where before there were scars. Sometimes the sun creates more brightness than shadows across it.

Like the snow, though, the transformation can be temporary. Snow does not fill the pothole in the road or round the sharp corner of the roof – it only makes it look that way. With the melt the new becomes old again and the quest for transformation resumes. What I am finding, though,

is that even a temporary transformation can be welcome. To see beauty instead of scars, or to see softness instead of hard edges is a sign of hope even when it is ephemeral. The land of grief, like any other land, has seasons . . .

Not Jumping the Fence

Occasionally in this new land of mine, I catch sight of the suitcases I used to use when travelling. They are far more than I shall ever need for one, and I look wistfully at a sunhat perched on top of them which no one will ever wear again. These are bags for those who travel, not for those who stay.

There are other bags, though, which I have packed many times in these past five months. I pack them in a hurry, like a character in a film storming out of their life and heading for the airport. I pack them as if I have had enough of living in this strange place called grief and I would like to go home, thank you very much. This experiment in living alone has been interesting, and on some days I have survived it better than I thought possible. However, enough is enough, and now it is time to go back to being married, just like I have been for the past thirty years. I crave the easy familiarity of routines honed over the years and a companionship so deep as to be instinctive.

Thoughts trailing like a stray sleeve caught in the suitcase lid, I head for the border of this land and demand to be let through. Sadly, I cannot pass. The border is sealed, the guards are impervious, and my ticket was non-returnable and one way. I live here now. Bag tucked under my arm, I head disconsolately back, and stow it away for next time.

This is a process which is likely to repeat many times, I think – like a dog running time and time again at a high fence before realizing it cannot be jumped. However, as with every trip away from home, it looks slightly different each time you return. Each time I come back from the border with that suitcase, ready to stash it away, I see the house just a little differently. I move things around, I update old things, I act like I am intending to stay here. Like a person with no passport, I start to think how I can make a life here rather than pining for there.

Family are a huge help – constant in their love, and unchanged from the way they were. They live here, as well as there, it turns out. Friends are a blessing – kind, patient, standing by but never pushing in. The value of my faith is incalculable – lending light to the darker days and hope to the deeper valleys. Even if I did not choose to live here, there are ways to make it work and people who are willing to help.

Not ready to pack those 'go-bags' away quite yet – but maybe one day.

Home Advice from Abroad

Sometimes shops in holiday resorts would offer postcards with no picture. Instead, the front would contain a checklist of postcard-style information which could be deleted as applicable. This might include:

- Weather is good/bad/indifferent
- Food is too spicy/too bland/interesting
- Hotel is smart/shabby/comfortable

Very soon, I shall have been living here in this land of grief for seven months. This being so, I am sending a list back to that other place. These are lessons learned here which count so very much there.

- Never believe that money is worth more than time – it is a poor trade.
- There are many conflicting duties, but the primary call on you is love.
- The things which have the highest value are those which have no price.
- A beautiful view shared is a view immeasurably enhanced.
- It is never too soon to say sorry nor too late to swallow your pride.
- Every conversation has value, no matter how trivial its content.
- Faith, hope and love endure, to coin a phrase.

Reasonable Adjustment

When you first start to live abroad as a foreigner, people make adjustments. For the most part, they realize that you know things are 'done differently here' and that you might be unaware of the unwritten rules. If your turn up too early or too late; if you wear clothes which are too informal or too smart; if you bring a gift which is inappropriately large or small – people will make allowances. These things are only to be expected from a new resident here.

Throughout the first months of living here, in this land of grief, people have done just that. They have understood if I am a little more cautious or fragile than I used to be. They have accepted that my appetite for change and progress has been muted, as if a taste bud had been removed. They have understood if occasionally the victor in the battle for today's small wins is sorrow rather than strength. To be honest, they understand it still – but I fear the day when they will not. I fear the day when I will do something like a foreigner making a faux pas in an unfamiliar situation and my supply of understanding will have run out. I am grateful that they are more tolerant of me than I am.

Today, I have had cause to rejoice when I look at the difference which has come over my rescue dog, Ginny, in the time she has been with me (134 days).

The caution and timidity have almost gone. The eyes are those of hunter rather than hunted, and the coat bears the gloss of a contented animal. All the same, I sometimes fear that the slack people cut her 'because she is new' will run out one day. Maybe not yet, though . . .

The Last Postcard?

There comes a point while living abroad, when to continue sending postcards seems a little odd. After all, you live here now. The tastes, sounds and smells are no longer new. The language and customs may still be a little odd – but you can fit in with them to a degree. You live *here*, they live *there*, and if you want to write it should really be a letter rather than a postcard. I am in the process of writing just such a letter now.

The sun has now risen 365 times without its rays ever falling on her face. I have not made her a cup of tea nor held her hand for 365 days. Suns and moons and stars and mistakes and conversations have all passed by without ever sharing them. I have managed, very falteringly, to live without her. She lives *there*, I live *here* and we shall not meet again until I travel to another place more foreign still. It will be foreign to me, I suppose, and yet in the truest sense ever it will be home.

Until that day comes, and today especially – I shall head for the sea. I shall gaze at its seemingly endless waves. I shall look for its invisible far shore, and I shall choose to believe that on another shore she looks for me.

An offer of support from Richard Littledale

I hope that these words have been of some help to you.

When those snowflakes of grief fall and fall, I hope you can talk to someone. Talk to a colleague, talk to a friend, talk to your family or talk to God – but talk to someone.

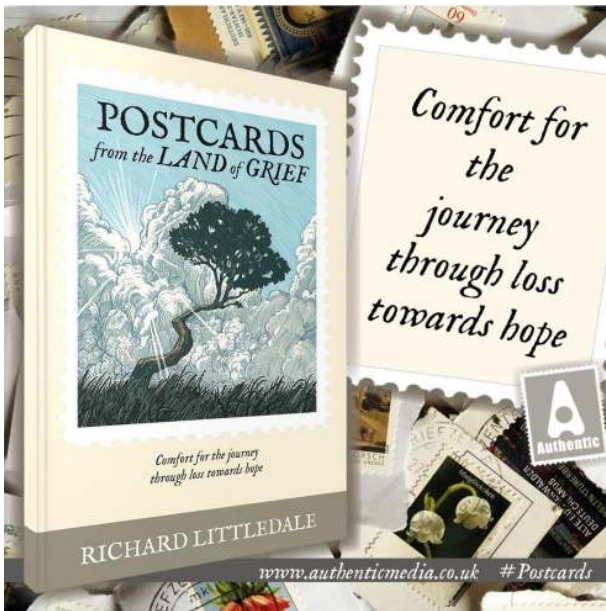
If you would like to leave me a message, you can do so here: Email: postcardprayers@hotmail.com

A thank you from Authentic Media Ltd

On behalf of Authentic Media Ltd we hope and pray that this selection of reflections from Richard Littledale has brought you comfort and peace. We applaud you for your dedication and commitment as you continue to share love and kindness to all those who come into your care.

Our prayers are with you all, as you face daily challenges.

'Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High
will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.
I will say of the LORD, "He is my refuge and my fortress,
my God, in whom I trust."' (Psalm 91:1-2)



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