

THE HASTINGS BOOK OF THE EARTH

*Funerals that have been and
funerals yet to come*

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Supported using public funding by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**



This project is part of *Your Place*
and is realised with public funding through
Arts Council England's Emergency Response Fund
and East Sussex Arts Partnership

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Introduction

This project is a response to Covid-19 which has been a reminder that death is part of life. Many people have lost loved ones but have not been able to attend the funeral or say their farewells in the way they would have wished to.

Reminiscent of the Egyptian Book of the Dead, which laid out a journey through the underworld, *The Hastings Book of the Earth* explores what death means to the living in Hastings today, and reflects on the significance of rituals associated with death.

The book includes contributions from people who live in and around Hastings, in the form of memories of funerals that have been and contemplations of funerals yet to come. The book also includes a statement by a Soul Midwife, who reflects on death and dying as an individual process that is different for everyone.

The book is comprised of five parts which build on the written contributions with images and sounds and is organised by five journeys through locations and landscapes in Hastings.

Part 1 begins on a sandstone ridge that runs through Alexandra Park and ends in a narrow valley of soft rock and a stream in Coronation Wood and Old Roar Gill. Part 2 traces a journey from sea level at Pelham Beach to 200 ft above sea level in Summerfield Woods. Part 3 describes going out to sea and not coming back. Part 4 travels through urban environments from Hastings Cemetery to St Leonards Warrior Square Station and Bohemia Road. Part 5 explores the coast line from the East Cliffs and Ecclesbourne Glen via Rock-a-Nore to Pelham Beach.

Some parts contain edited extracts of the contributions and the full texts are included on the following pages, as are the credits for all the contributors of the project. ■■

Credits and acknowledgements

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Book design and montage construction: Andrew Barker

Imprint: Hastings, August 2020

My thanks go to all the contributors who have provided memories and reflections, or supported the project through conversations and recommendations: Katie Costello, Lisa Green, Lisa Pope, Andrew Downs, Michael Orourke, Mike Hatchard, Colin Priest, Marina LaPalma, and those who wish to remain anonymous.

Particular thanks go to:

Part 5, pages 3–6: Biodegradable Memorial Pot, text and photography by Lisa Green (2020).

Part 2, page 5 and part, 5 page 19: Sculpture: Norman longboat sculpture on Pelham beach, Hastings. Created by Leigh Dyer to mark the 950th anniversary of the Battle of Hastings. © Leigh Dyer 2016.

Many thanks to Tempo Arts who commissioned the project, and to Nick Weekes for technical support.

Full text of extract included in Part 2, pages 2–3

My thoughts and feelings around death and dying have changed over the years. I grew up with the tradition and ritual of Irish Catholicism whereby the dead were venerated. The loved one was laid out on their bed at home and neighbours family came to say a prayer over their body. Funerals quickly followed the death. Family members sat up all night with the body, guarding the soul before it left the body. I found these rituals a little eery and strange and I wasn't entirely comfortable with them. As I grew older and attended funerals, I preferred the reserved protocol of the English funeral – they were private, and one had to be invited to attend. This was far removed from my childhood experiences.

And then some years ago I changed my mind. I went to my uncle's funeral and it was a stark and lonely affair. There were few people in attendance and although he was 90, it felt as if his life had had no meaning. I reflected on the rituals of my childhood and remembered them as having more meaning.

My mother died recently after seven years of progressive dementia. She was 89 and had a long, good life. I had been expecting her to die for the last few years, but when it happened it still felt unreal. I went to Ireland for her

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funeral, and as had happened in my childhood, her body was brought to the house in an open casket and people came to say prayers in the room with her. My family and I said prayers, and although the content of the prayers held no meaning for me as I don't have a religious belief, the ritual of joining in prayer was comforting and fitting. There was something dignified and respectful to mark my mother's life and death with a joining together of her children and extended family to pray as one and acknowledge what she meant to us.

On the morning of her funeral, it is tradition for male family members to carry the coffin from the house to the hearse. Over the years I had dreaded this moment, thinking it would be too painful. Yet on the day as we carried my mother, my brothers and nephews and I, it felt both an enormous privilege and a terribly sad thing to do. As I walked I had tears rolling down my face but at the same time feeling I was honoured to be part of the intimate ritual of carrying my mother, this wonderful human being, to where her body would be laid to rest. As I reflect now, it is with an enormous amount of grace and serenity that I see those final moments of my mother's time on earth.

There was a fitting moment after the priest had finished the funeral rite and my mother was laid in her grave. The priest said he had to leave as he had a

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baptism to perform. The cycle of life was complete. One's life had come to an end and we were saying goodbye to who they had been, and another was being welcomed into the world with the joy and hope that they too would have a long and contented life.

“[Snow] was falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly upon the Bog of Allen and, farther westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves. It was falling, too, upon every part of the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Furey lay buried. It lay thickly drifted on the crooked crosses and headstones, on the spears of the little gate, on the barren thorns. His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead.” *The Dead*, James Joyce.

Full text of extract included in Part 3, pages 3–7

My Dad loved the sea and sailing. He'd been in the navy in the war. He was titled Lt Cdr on envelopes, short for Lieutenant Commander. He kept a 23 foot sailing boat near Southend where I grew up. Her mooring was off Two Tree Island, where there was a boatyard and the municipal landfill site.

Dad and I were never close. Up to the age of around 15 I'd occasionally accept an invitation to go sailing with him, nudged by my Mum. She would never go; Mum was afraid of the water. Like Mum, I'd failed to learn to swim but I liked being on the water and felt secure in my lifejacket. Dad was a strong swimmer.

It was good to be out on the estuary, sailing up to the pier and back. More often than not we'd miss the tide on the way back and become grounded before we'd make the mooring. On these occasions we'd have to settle in until the tide would lift us off the mud again. Dad would light his hurricane lamp and warm up a tin of beans on the primus stove in the cabin for our supper. I must have made for a sullen, albeit patient, companion.

This was well before the days of mobile phones. Dad would say with some disdain "Your Mum will be worried sick, of course." He was frustrated that Mum's response to his love for sailing was characterised by anxiety and

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indignation. One time we got grounded, knowing we'd be stranded until after dark, he shouted our phone number across the water to the crew of a passing boat so they might call Mum when they reached shore and let her know.

Long after I'd left home and had my own life working in London, I took a phone call on the payphone in the hallway of my bedsit in Muswell Hill. It was just after the late May bank holiday. On the other end was a police officer. He told me my Dad's boat had been found adrift and crewless off the Kent coast after stormy weather. He suggested I go home to be with my mother while she awaited news.

Dad's body was later found washed up on a mud bank. My older brother had the task of identifying him. In writing this, I found out that, before any news had reached him, my brother had felt unaccountably cold on arriving home from a weekend away, as though something was drawing on his energy. He'd said to his partner "I wonder who's died."

When it came to the funeral I tentatively expressed a wish to be one of the pall bearers. I was told it was best to leave it to the professionals.

I bought my first suit to wear to his funeral.

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At the inquest in Chatham I was greatly impressed by the wherewithall of the sailor who'd spotted Dad's boat. He'd spotted her adrift, boarded her, found no crew despite a recent entry in the log book, secured the boat and alerted the authorities.

The last entry says:

Sunday 3 May Harty Ferry

*A wild wild night with banshee howling wind from the south west
barometer 30.1 steady.*

Full text of extract included in Part 5, pages 11–17

I am a Soul Midwife. I am a companion to the dying. My role varies in many ways. I am a shoulder to cry on, ear to listen and Soul to hold space. I can make the tea, or I can clear the energy in the room. I can give you a hand massage or I can sit and listen to your soul wounds and help you transition as peacefully and gently as possible. Don't get me wrong, we cannot fix things, we cannot stop what is happening and we certainly have no control over anybody's 'fate'. But we can support and offer loving kindness and compassion when someone needs it most.

Soul Midwives work on many different levels. Our work varies so much because people do. Each person I have worked with has been special and unique. As living beings, we are precious, worthy and individual and this same thinking is applied to our work with the dying as well. Death is the only thing we all have in common, yet it is as individual as our fingerprints.

When Claudia asked me to contribute towards this platform, I was intrigued but straight away excited. Anyone who wants to support the dying and talk about this side of life, I believe is working to the highest good and will help many. During our conversation, the main thought that seemed to transpire most was about how death and dying is such a unique and personal process.

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No two deaths are the same, and each situation and circumstance that we have experienced in our lives contributes towards our experience of our death. Every relationship, every holiday, every moment of love, hurt, joy, fear, anger and glory makes us who we are and affects us in a very deep and profound way. Even if we are not aware of it at the time. As humans we may physically see the same sea views in life, we may visit the same towns, we may have the same holidays to Spain, we may all have a father, mother, child, friend and colleague but our connections and relationships with those people are so different. It is impossible to compare anyone of us to each other in any way. Who we are, the emotions we feel and why we feel them is so specific and exclusive to us. They are so personal, poignant and profound, that they are part of our soul and something we cannot explain or justify. If we can all learn to recognise this, we allow others the space and respect, to feel their own unique experience of their death more freely.

It is impossible for me to try to write something that resonates with everyone. It is not viable to write a 'how to' for everyone to follow. That I think, is my main message to anyone reading this.

For those that are facing the end of their lives, please know that whatever you are feeling and going through, is OK. It is OK to be feeling the way you are and thinking the thoughts that you are. It is OK to have a good day and

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feel happiness and it is OK to have a different day and feel anger. It is OK to struggle and not want to talk. It is OK to say the truth about how you feel, and it is OK to change your mind and feel something different the next day. It is OK to sit in a place of denial. It is OK to waiver between acceptance and hope. It is OK to want to be positive and forget what is happening and it is OK to then want it all to be over.

There is no right or wrong when it comes to how we handle our dying journey. There may be healthier ways than others but what those are will be different for each of us. Whatever choices you are being asked to make, please listen to your inner wisdom and trust your gut instinct. No one can tell you how to do this. No one else is wearing your shoes right now. No one else is experiencing the things that you are. You will hopefully be supported by friends and/or family and more than likely have medical professionals guiding you as well. But you still have choices and you are still allowed to do things your way. That applies to making big decisions such as refusing treatment and your preferred place of care and death. It may be smaller choices such as what you want to eat or wear that day. Go with what feels right for you. And please know that those feeling are allowed to change, whatever the decision, at any time.

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A common theme in my work is about spirituality and religion. If you are a person of faith, you may find that your faith and beliefs are stronger than ever. Your beliefs may give you immense strength and comfort. You may find that your faith changes or you doubt belief systems that have served you well all your life. You may want to explore other faiths and ways of thinking. You have not experienced death before so how do you know what your faith will be in this new moment? Please allow yourself the space and kindness to explore these thoughts and feelings freely, without judgement. Please allow yourself to have no faith at all if that what feels right for you.

Death is the most emotive thing we go through as human beings. To lose a loved one affects us deeply. If it is you who is poorly, you may be feeling and seeing the effects your journey is having on those you care about. If you can, try to open up and be honest about your thoughts and what you are going through. It will be hard but try to believe you are brave enough to open up those tough conversations about what it is you need or want. It is easier said than done but truth and clarity have a powerful effect on us in life, and death.

I said earlier about never dying before. I feel we should often remind ourselves of this, as obvious as it may sound. We have no idea how we will react, feel, think or behave when we face the end of our lives. Who are we

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to judge each other about a situation we know nothing about as regards how we feel going through it? Why should people be or feel a certain way about something they have never experienced? Can we prepare for death? Can we plan? Of course, we can plan the practical elements of our journey. We can plan our funeral, get our affairs in order and sort our finances but can we really get ready emotionally for such a moment as death? We may not be able to predict every eventuality of our journey, but we do always have choices. They may not be great ones, but they are there.

Please allow yourself space and permission to feel and think about whatever choices are presented to you. Please remind yourself this is new, and it is the biggest unknown moment of your life. Please remember, no one can tell you how this will be or how you will feel. Please know that this is YOUR journey and it can be how you want it to be. Please be kind to yourself as you navigate these final steps of your path. Please know there is help and support available in many different forms and you can choose what, if anything, is the best fit for you.

To everyone reading this, no matter who you are or what you are going through, I send you heartfelt love, peace and strength.

By Katie Costello, Soul Midwife, Horsham

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