BOOK REVIEW


As the author states in her preface, this has become more than a book or an account of traumatic loss. The 18-year journey to ‘allow the right words and the right shape’ to emerge remains an ongoing journey to understand and show compassion towards people whose actions resulted in such pain and suffering. The process of sharing this story is a very personal journey exploring human relationships and what we can learn about ourselves and others when those relationships are harmed, damaged or, as happened to the author, snatched from us in the most traumatic way. The author’s story, shared with great honesty and vulnerability, is a story that most of us cannot and do not wish to imagine. I was immediately struck by the courage and generosity shown by the author in her commitment to seek to understand what had happened and use that learning to help herself and others ‘confront and dissolve the roots of fear and prejudice that lie within and without’ (Preface). As the author states, ‘for those readers who were in the UK at that time, this crime will need no introduction’ (1). The UK was rocked by the revelations of mass murder.1 On the day in 1994 when the press first released details of the discovery and identification of more bodies at 25 Cromwell Street in Gloucester, home of Fred and Rosemary West, I was sitting in a lecture theatre at Cranfield University in the UK, attending a research methods course. The shocking news was the topic of conversation amongst fellow students. Just as the lecture was about to begin, the colleague sitting next to me said, ‘one of the bodies that has been found is my sister Lucy’. David, the author’s brother, was a fellow student at Cranfield. I have thought back on this experience many times in the intervening years and when I was introduced to restorative justice in 1996, it was certainly one of the experiences that I called on to examine my own emotional response to loss and harm and conflict. In If you sit very still, there is much to reflect on that challenges the reader to think carefully about how we interact with our fellow human beings and how we respond to the learning that comes from grief and trauma.

The author uses the joint love of English Literature and poetry that she and her sister shared, to structure the narrative journey in a way that reinforces the fact that this is a continuing process and that the book is an expression of that journey. In particular, the fourteenth-century manuscript – The pearl – a copy of which was in Lucy’s bag when she was abducted, highlights this journey towards healing and forgiveness. The book is structured in line with the style and shape of the medieval dream vision and thus each section of the book explores the author’s journey to seek understanding in a way that is ‘wider in scope than modern psychotherapy’ (2). This carefully crafted and poetic narrative leads the reader

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through Crisis, Confessing, Comprehending and Transforming to an Epilogue that highlights how the ‘language of dreams’, used by the author throughout the book to create meaning, continues to provide the author with connection to her sister and richness in her own life.

The first section of the book – ‘Crisis’ – explores the author’s experience from the disappearance of Lucy, through the years of ‘Not Knowing’ to the discovery of Lucy’s body and the ‘re-earthing’ of her remains in a final, appropriate, resting place. The author seeks to find the words to describe the significant moments during this period of more than 20 years and does not shy away from the reality or horror of what happened describing in detail the facts and the emotional responses relating to each of the significant experiences in this ‘crisis’ phase. From the start, the author sets out the purpose of her writing by describing that the Chinese word for crisis can mean ‘opportunity for change’ (9) and leads the reader to seek the learning that can come from the ‘profoundly shocking profanity of the murder of Lucy’ (9). The sources of support that the author has drawn strength from are beautifully threaded through the story such as her Quaker beliefs, poetry and literature, her friends and family and significant events such as intimate relationships and giving birth to her children. The author also shares interesting insights into the justice system and the processes, which in her words ‘did not answer my need to know the truth of what happened to Lucy’ (52). In this analysis, the purpose of our justice system is questioned and the author asserts that ‘our human potential is not enlarged by this punitive process’ (52).

In ‘Confessing’, the author begins to disentangle and acknowledge her own history and experiences that she recognises may lead to rage, darkness and negativity. She also continues the search to ‘reclaim Lucy’, herself and her family from the ‘labels’ associated with the very high public profile of their story. The author avoids nothing and shares selflessly some very dark times in her life that if denied might well have been inflicted on others in a way that the darkness in the lives of Fred and Rosemary West may well have led to their destructive behaviours and the infliction of great pain on others. Dreams, poetry and writing continue to give the author the strength to address these dark areas of her life that many would wish to deny or ‘edit-out’. The author highlights some really interesting studies on violence and how physical acts of violence are an ‘expression of the logic of shame’ and often represent our physical and psychological inheritance.

In the next section of the book – ‘Comprehending’ – the author continues her journey of self-investigation enabled through Buddhist retreats and the contemplative ethos of her Quaker faith. She explores further the structure of The pearl as her inspiration to develop her dialogue with Lucy and accept the loss. This section of the book includes really thought-provoking analysis of our understanding of language around terms such as ‘victim’, ‘perpetrator’ or ‘bystander’ and prefixes such as ‘dis’ and ‘re’ (117). Thus, the author seeks the strength to move from terminology associated with physical acts such as ‘dis’ member to more positive emotional responses such as ‘re’ member and to examine the derivation of the word ‘for’- ‘giveness’. The author suggests that ‘to withhold compassion towards any form of life lessens our true place of belonging and destroys our potential community’ (140).
In the final section of the book – ‘Transforming’ – the author further develops the ideas from *The pearl*, moving from the acceptance of loss towards changed identity. This section has an outward focus and describes the engagement of the author in the world of restorative justice. Language and the ‘transformative power of words’ continue to be offered as a ‘gift’ to the reader. As the author states, ‘words couldn’t save your life Lucy, but they are enlarging the place of your aspirations now’ (159). The author describes her introduction to work in prisons initially through Tim Newell, then Governor at HMP Grendon and Springhill and then through the ‘Forgiveness Project’ and the work of Marina Cantacuzino. The author describes how her experiences of Lucy’s death are helping those who have committed violent crimes to experience victim empathy and also ‘integrate their own victim pathology’ (147). The restorative approach to justice resonates strongly with the author and she states that on her invitation into the world of restorative justice, ‘it was as if my inner search had led to an outer form’ (147).

In reviewing this book, it has felt a privilege to be invited to journey with the author, share in her story and the learning that has emerged along the way and reflect on the implications for the future of ‘humankind’. There is particular poignancy, in light of terrorist attacks such as the Manchester Arena bombing in the UK in May 2017, in her assertion that

> if you have nothing to lose, trapped by fear and a lack of love, you take others with you, like suicide bombers under the delusion that death will bring all that life and oppressive cultures have denied (72).

The potential for hatred and bitterness, fear and prejudice, is clearly evident with opportunities for these negative emotions to spread quickly through social media and negative press coverage. The author states in relation to her own experiences of trauma, loss and grief that

> commitment to good seems vital to our survival. It is a journey that each one of us needs to take. It involves looking at the darker side of our human nature as well as the lighter side (62).

The lyrical and carefully crafted use of words and poetry and the exploration of our subconscious through dreams provides an inspiring framework in which to explore some very dark and difficult issues that we would all be wise to reflect on. This is a book that you will find hard to put down once you start reading it. I am humbled and inspired by the ability of the author to bring meaning and under-

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2 See the commentary on the portrayal of the Manchester suicide bomber here: www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/greater-manchester-news/salman-abedi-manchester-arena-bomber-13601393.
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standing to such pain and suffering and hope that the learning can be used positively to transform lives.

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