

## Amy Deane - The Early Years

I had a happy childhood, but at the age of 10, my brother and I lost our parents in a car accident. Although I was also in the car, I escaped with one minor physical injury, now just a tiny scar that I rarely notice.

The more lasting injury, of course, was my parents dying. When faced with trauma, our instincts kick in, and my instinct was to close down emotionally and just get on with things. Although this wasn't a conscious decision, I believe I couldn't have coped with the pain on my own, and all the adults around me were absorbed in their own grief and unable to help me.

It was 25 years before I was able to acknowledge my grief and my pain, and another 2-3 years to complete the process of coming to terms with and expressing that grief.

Back in 1977, counselling wasn't a generally accepted way of dealing with things and with that British stiff upper lip, people simply didn't discuss their feelings - and certainly didn't entertain the idea that a child might need to. The practice was more "Don't cry...", "There, there, don't upset yourself...", when of course, that's exactly what I should have been doing - crying, shouting, screaming! My parents were dead, I'd lost my security, the very people who framed my life, of course I should be upset!! But that simply wasn't the way things were done back then, and it was much easier for the adults around me to leave me to it, with the general assumption, I suppose, that if I wasn't crying, I must be ok. Not their fault, that's just the way it was. I sometimes envy the scenes of grief that you see on the news in other cultures, the wailing, crowds of people united in grief. At least they're expressing themselves and being honest about their pain.

On the outside, I was ok. Inside, the pain was tidied away to a deep and secret place that I wasn't interested in visiting. My survival technique was so effective that I shut out anything I didn't want to hear. Other people's grief, arrangements for the funeral, my brother's entreaties for information. None of it registered. I only know about this now because my brother has told me about his own distress and anger about not being allowed to go to the funeral and his frustration and confusion over not knowing exactly what had happened. He hadn't been with us in the car that day. One day his mum and dad went out and he simply never saw them again. It breaks my heart to think about it. Again, it wasn't deemed appropriate for children to attend funerals - too upsetting for them - so my brother never even had a chance to say goodbye. His pain runs as deep as mine.

There's no grave. No plaque. No special memorial. Still to this day, there's nothing to commemorate the lives and death of my parents, but my brother and I have talked about doing something about that. I still crave a place to go to feel close to them, to complete the circle.

Andrew and I went to live with our godparents, after a couple of months of uncertainty as the different sides of the family argued about what would be best for us. In the end, much to the relief of everyone I suspect, my godparents stepped in and said that we could go and live with them and their 3 children. They took us in as part of their family and I have never thought of my 3 extra siblings as anything other than my brother and sisters. Even their extended family of grandparents, cousins, aunts and uncles have always included us as their own, added to family trees and tokens left in wills. We are a close family and have lots of fun on chaotic days when we all get together, but I'm sad to say that not all parts of my family have embraced them in the same way.

It was a strange series of events that eventually opened the door to my deeply buried grief. I'd started going to a homeopath to try to cure the acne on my back that I had suffered with on and off for several years. All the doctors would offer me were antibiotics, but I was convinced that the cause was emotional and that homeopathy was a better approach.

During my first appointment I released a great deal of emotion surrounding the recent break-up of a long-term relationship and went home with my series of potions, which worked miraculously. I was cured! However, a few months later things were back to the way they had been and I made another appointment to see the homeopath.

At around the same time, my brother and I had received, out of the blue, an invitation to attend a party for a cousin of our dad's, whose family we hadn't seen since mum and dad died, and frankly I didn't even know existed. It was very strange to talk to someone over the phone who remembered visiting us as a child, but whom I had no recollection of whatsoever. She was very excited about having found Andrew and I, and what a wonderful surprise it would be for her dad that we were there at his party. I started feeling like the entertainment, someone's trump card.

The weekend of the party, my best friend, Kirsty, was visiting from Scotland and was going to join us at the party. I was feeling very low and through her gentle probing I started talking about when mum and dad had died and the fact that we hadn't been allowed to go to the funeral, something we'd never discussed before. Suddenly I felt very angry. Who did these people think they were, contacting us after 25 years and expecting us to be delighted that they'd finally remembered our existence? Where had they been all those years? I didn't go to the party, and as it turned out, my brother had decided not to go anyway. I confess that I never called with an explanation, and I do feel somewhat guilty about that, but I've never heard from them again.

The following week, I had my appointment with the homeopath and the floodgates opened. This time I mentioned my parents and a huge surge of emotion rose up and totally engulfed me. It took me completely by surprise, I had no idea this monster was waiting deep inside me, waiting for the day to arrive when it could have a voice. I was floored. Fortunately, at the time, I was working for a wonderful, caring company and was able to be very open about what was happening to me. I'm convinced that the Universe had waited until I had this security in place before allowing my grief to launch its attack.

I started seeing a Cruse counsellor, which allowed me to keep the doors open to my grief and not batten down the hatches again, which was my instinctive reaction. I can't say I particularly warmed to my counsellor, and I'm not sure she had the skills I needed to unravel what had been successfully buried for so long, but her weekly visits gave me a reason to cry, and were a release. I remember sitting on my sofa one day after my counsellor had left, emotionally exhausted, looking up at a photo of my mum, and realised that I was sitting in exactly the same way as her. I felt that my mum was with me, sitting beside me, offering support. One day towards the end of my sessions with Cruse, wracked with grief, the awful realisation dawned on me that no amount of crying was ever going to bring them back. I felt like a child that day. My mum and dad were dead and I would never see them again.

The baffling thing at that time, when your world has just fallen apart, changed forever, is that everything carries on as normal. How can that be? You feel like there should be no sound, no movement, everything should stop. But it doesn't. The birds keep singing, cars go past, people continue their conversations and laugh at jokes. And all the time, you want to shout out "STOP!!" "Don't you realise what's happened?!" "It's OVER!" But of course it isn't, life does go on, and every tiny memory and wisdom you've learnt through knowing the people you've lost, you carry with you into your future, it is a part of who you are. They may have gone forever, but they also never leave you.

One of the hardest things I did to embrace my grieving, was to talk to my family and close friends about their experience of that time and what they remembered about me. I'd avoided doing this over the years subconsciously, so that I didn't have to face their grief, and therefore mine. I still find it very hard to even think about what the people I love went through. It was even the first time my brother and I had really sat down and talked about mum and dad dying. We had tried once before, but it was very superficial, I think both of us were still trying to avoid the pain. I learnt things that I'd been unaware of, and still can't remember how he begged me for information. I suppose some things just get locked away forever.

My relationship with grief, and my personal explorations of how it affects me at different levels, emotional and spiritual, continues. At the beginning of 2007, my godfather, my Rock, who had been my dad since I was 10 years old, died suddenly of a heart attack. My World was jolted again. He was a larger than life character, and had always provided me with love, support and security. Despite the devastation I felt at the time, I did, and continue to feel grateful that he didn't suffer a long illness, or the indignity of losing any of his faculties.

Later that year, both my elderly grandmothers passed away. It is a very different grief when someone dies at a 'ripe old age', but death stirs some challenging emotions in people and some family relationships have been affected as a result.

A few months after my godfather's death, I attended a workshop where everyone just told their story. It was hugely cathartic, and incredibly inspiring and humbling. I met a girl there who had had some terrible experiences in her life. She was mentally and physically abused by both her parents. It made me realise just how lucky I had been. I was grieving the death of my second dad, and I felt an overwhelming gratitude. She had had one dad who had abused her – I had had two dads who had loved me. How lucky am I?! Love is the key to everything.