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"That was the chance we had" On ritual farewell events for children who die before being born

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Abstract

How to bid farewell to a child never known? In this article I discuss challenges connected to ritual farewell events for the stillborn. Stillborn children have been excluded from traditional funerals and burials in many cultures. Until a few decades ago, this was also the case in Norway. The Norwegian Church has now stated the right for everyone to have their own grave, and chaplains assist bereaved parents in farewell ceremonies. Based on interview material with bereaved parents and participant observation from farewell events, this article seeks to highlight the question of ritual farewells from bereaved parents' point of view. The need for individual adjustment stands out as a compelling concern. Parents underlined the importance of their own preferences being heeded to, but also the need for information about actual possibilities. The availability of proficient counselling, open to the complexity of the issue involved, was found to be crucial.

Keywords: grief, stillbirths, bereaved parents, rituals, pastoral care

Introduction: The incomprehensible loss

> I have been in mourning before. I have experienced the death of my father. But that was entirely different. This feels like a theft. When you lose your child, you feel robbed. The body is all prepared for something that will never happen.

Alva[1], who uttered these words, was one of the participants in a research project about the experience of losing a child before it is born. In Norway, the loss of a child in stillbirth has historically received little attention within cultural and religious practices. In the first decades after the hospitals took over births in the 1950s, stillborn babies were removed as quickly as possible, preferably before the parents could see them. Ritual events and memorials were absent, and up to the 1980s burying stillborn babies anonymously in the graves of strangers was a widespread practice that was also recognized by the church (Misje 2021:116, Kristvik 2018). This anonymous burials tradition continued until an abrupt change occurred in the mid-1990s, when the right to one's own grave was established. This right was granted not just after the 22nd gestational week, but without a lower age limit (NAV 1997).

Like other forms of grief, grief over the stillborn child is part of a basic, general phenomenon. However, the long history of concealment and denial, and a loss that is primarily about dreams and anticipation, make this grief special in many ways. I have wished to explore challenges related to grief support in this situation from the point of view of the bereaved. This article deals with farewell events.

Prenatal loss as a professional issue and field of research

The first works addressing the psychological burden of a stillbirth came in the mid-1960s. In a systematic follow-up of women after a perinatal loss, the Swedish psychiatrist Johan Cullberg found that one-third of the women required psychiatric help (Cullberg 1966). The English psychiatrist Emanuel Lewis gained notable attention for his criticism of what he referred to as a "conspiracy of silence" in the wake of a stillbirth and for calling attention to the sense of unreality that arises when there is no tangible person to mourn (Lewis 1976).

Lewis received much attention, as well as criticism, from other researchers (Christoffersen & Teigen 2013:60-61). His points of view have nevertheless prevailed. Encouraging bereaved parents to see and hold the stillborn child is now standard practice in maternity wards in Norway and other countries. Midwives also provide guidance about collecting mementoes about the child, arranging farewell events and making active decisions about what should happen to the dead body (Christoffersen & Teigen 2021).

Rituals connected to the end of life and disposal of the remains of the dead feature strongly in cultures around the world. Collective burial rituals may confirm a sense of community. They open up opportunities to come together and pay respect to the dead, process one's own grief reactions and support the bereaved (Worden 2009:118-120,

1 All proper names in the text are pseudonyms.

Doka 2002:135-139). The exclusion of certain categories of people from this ritual community is also a cross-cultural phenomenon. Stillborn children have been left out of burial rituals in many societies, with or without explicit justification (Kristvik 2016, Kaufman & Morgan 2005).

Funerals are also memorials in remembrance of lived lives, and a recognizable liturgy may open up the ritual and make it more accessible to the community. The death that occurs before life begins is often neither known nor recognized (Doka 2002:11-13) and might be perceived as a socially negated loss (Worden 2009:195-201). The regular funeral ritual does not necessarily fit the situation, but there may still be a great need for a ritual farewell.

Jone Salomonsen has written about the pervasive effect a ritual practice may have: "Through the combination of body and symbol it may induce a sense of the past, presence and future in the bodies of the participants, and connect them to 'themselves', each other, and a wider context" (Salomonsen 1999:18). Ritual practice may open rooms for agency in counterbalance to the passivity and helplessness a loss may lead to, counteract alienation and facilitate emotional release. This potential has also been applied in therapeutic connections (Wyrostok 1995, Rando 1985).

But what are the preconditions for it to work this way? With reference to a Canadian context, Ronald Grimes has pointed out that traditional funerals fulfil many functions other than mourning work for the bereaved and may lead to suppressing grief rather than releasing it (Grimes 2000:234). Jørgen Straarup uses the term *dissonanserfaring* (dissonance experience) for the effect of a ritual that is not experienced as meaningful for the participants (Straarup 1994: 25). In addition to being meaningful for those concerned, according to Stifoss-Hanssen, the precondition for a ritual to be comforting is that it is carried out with sensitivity and is adapted to the situation of the bereaved (Stifoss-Hanssen 2001). It may thus facilitate an experience of reverberation, or what may be called a *resonance experience.*

A farewell ritual does not always follow a given, prescribed course. The term *ritualizing* (ritual creation), as Grimes has coined it, refers to actively and consciously creating and developing ritual, more innovative and intentional than what is usually associated with *ritualization*, as ritual practice or the performance of a ritual (Grimes 2000: 29). Ritualizing is a relevant term in relation to what Hedtke and Winslade refer to as carving out grief; they claim that the agency of the bereaved, the creative and aesthetic, are under-recognized dimensions in grief work (Hedtke & Winslade 2017). The importance of these elements is further strengthened in the light of more recent grief theories that, rather than regarding grieving as final processes towards emotional detachment, reckon that the bereaved can maintain a persistent, perhaps life-long, connection with the person who died (Klass et al. 1996, Root & Exline 2014). This will always involve demanding reorientation and re-creation, but the challenge can be particularly immense when the loss concerns a child who dies before being known, and the farewell must take place while the parents try to comprehend what has happened. As the stories of the bereaved parents in this project will show, continuing bonds can also be a relevant perspective in such a situation.

Compared to what has been done on the implications of seeing and holding the stillborn child (see e.g. Kingdon et al. 2015), research on the role farewell rituals may play for bereaved parents is rather sparse. Not much of the available work deals with the concrete implementation of such rituals and what bereaved parents perceive as important or challenging in connection with the farewell events (see e.g. Tseng et al. 2017, Peelen 2009).

Bent Inge Misje has documented retrospective narratives of bereaved parents from a time characterized by concealment and denial of grief over the stillborn. These are important testimonies about the consequences of being deprived of the chance to meet and say goodbye to the dead child and the opportunity to find out the whereabouts of the dead child (Misje 2021). So far, we have little knowledge about the diversity of experiences linked to the actual implementation of farewell events after stillbirths in a Norwegian context, as this field has become more open. What does the inclusion in funeral regulations mean for those who lose children in stillbirth, seen from the perspective of bereaved parents?

Method

The aim of the study was to gain increased insight into the experiences of bereaved parents. Interviews then emerged as a suitable method. Participant observation of ritual farewell events was also included, as the project had a particular focus on these.

Such a sensitive topic entailed special work for ethical approval. The procedure, which was eventually approved by the Regional Ethics Committee and the Personal Data Protection Officer at the relevant hospitals, involved consent in several stages: The parents initially gave preliminary, verbal permission for the researcher to contact them at a later time, as an answer to a question posed by a social worker or hospital chaplain while they were still in hospital. Then they were also asked if the researcher could take part in any farewell celebrations. A consent form was signed in connection with the first interview.

The material was collected between 2015 and 2019. Informants from three hospitals were recruited while they were still admitted. Bereaved parents after 29 stillbirths agreed to be contacted by a researcher regarding the question of an interview. In 10 cases, the parents also gave permission for the researcher to be present at the farewell ceremony in the hospital chapel or church room. When I made contact, bereaved parents after 25 stillbirths gave consent for an interview. Most were interviewed twice. The time frame was flexible. The first interview was usually conducted two to six months after the loss, with a follow-up interview one to two years later. The conversations usually took place at the home of the informants and lasted from one to three hours. Most agreed to audio recording.

The interviews were mainly narrative, with open questions. Although the primary focus was on ritual farewell events, the interviews evolved according to what emerged as urgent concerns for the individual parents, and the elaboration of different parts of the mourning process varied between different informants.

The audio recordings were transcribed by the author. After reading through the material several times to get a holistic impression, a content analysis was carried out to identify the main theme and pattern (Brinkman and Kvale 2015). The approach followed a narrative, thematic analysis, with a focus on what was emphasized by the informants and a theoretical processing of statements from the interviews that focused on the context and the connection to specific cases rather than a summary categorization across the material (Riessman 2008:53ff). The presentation is made with an emphasis on bringing out the scope and variation in the material.

Result: Bereaved parents' experiences

A range of different farewell events

The farewell celebrations that are the focus of this article are either ceremonies in memory of the child, or the handling of the remains. With two exceptions, where the parents chose to have time for themselves at the cemetery instead of gathering parts of their network for a commemoration, all had some form of farewell ceremony. The ceremonies varied in size, scope and the degree of active participation from the parents in connection with planning and implementation. The two I mention below were at different ends of the scale.

A low-key memorial service: The lullaby facilitating emotional release

A few people are gathered in the hospital chapel around a coffin of the smallest size. Trond died 10 days before the due date. A drawing of a summer bird with outstretched wings is depicted above his name on the front of the program booklet. The booklet contains the lyrics of two songs to be sung together: the children's song *Måne og sol*, and *Klatremus' lullaby*. There is also a poem to be recited by the priest: *Do you see the stars, little one, from where you are?*

In the priest's speech, he talks about what the parents have told him about the child they were expecting. He states that every life, no matter how short, is a complete life.

As always, I sit in the back of the room. The bereaved parents, Turid and Torgeir, sit a few rows in front of me, tight and unmoved – right up to a certain point in the program. Then something loosens up there, and breath is released, quietly, but clearly noticeable. A neck bends, a handkerchief appears. It happens when we get to the song *So ro, little man. Now the day is over.*

Tears in Heaven is played via a CD recording while the parents carry the little coffin to the car waiting outside. The gathering ends there.

A farewell in church: Close to the funeral liturgy

The local church is filled to say goodbye to Hedvig, the daughter of Helene and Hans, who died two days before the due date. The funeral has been announced in newspaper ads and on Facebook. A photograph of four hands is depicted on the front of the program booklet: The tiny hand of Hedvig, surrounded by the hands of her mother, father and older sister Hanne.

The tiny coffin is at the front of the choir, open before the ceremony begins. The parents go forward with three-year-old Hanne to see her younger sister one last time. Hanne has seen her before but examines the small hands and fingers, one by one. Shortly before the ceremony, the parents place the lid on the coffin and fasten the four screws that keep it in place.

Helene and Hans have asked the hospital chaplain to officiate the ceremony. In addition to three hymns from the Norwegian hymnal, a song for Hedvig, written by the parents, has been included and is played in a recorded version. There is candle-lighting and reading of the Lord's Prayer before the congregation moves to the burial and blessing at the cemetery. Helene and Hans themselves lower the coffin in the ground.

Adjusted ceremonies

The simple ceremony in the hospital chapel and the funeral-like ritual in the local church are linked to different starting points and backgrounds of experience. The parents concerned were given room to choose what was right for them.

Helene and Hans did most of the planning themselves. They were well known in the church and congregation. It was still important for them to be assisted by the hospital chaplain on this last farewell; she had been there for them during the first, demanding time after the loss.

Turid and Torgeir agreed to have a farewell ceremony for Trond in the chapel but had no energy to promote their own wishes apart from that. To give them ideas about different possibilities, the priest loaned them a collection of programs from previous farewell ceremonies. However, in this case, the parents ended up agreeing to concrete proposals from the priest rather than going through the collection themselves and choosing from the multitude of possibilities.

What makes it possible to say goodbye? Stories about farewell ceremonies for the little ones

Community

Most of the people in this material had limited memorial services with special invitees. Some of them, however, chose open ceremonies in the local church. Hans and Helene, who initially did not imagine having anything beyond a small, private memorial service, gradually understood that it was important for them to have an open funeral.

> Hans: For us, it was not immediately clear that we should have a large and open funeral. That decision matured along the way. At the very beginning, you are unable to see or understand what is happening. You have to sign an autopsy report as you are about to give birth – everything is suddenly turned upside down! So the first thing we thought was that this must be restricted to a few of those who are closest to us. You have no other experience to rely on. But when we got some time to think it over, it just made more and more sense to have an open funeral. It has something to

> do with human dignity – after all, she was a real child, even if she wasn't born yet. We have a Christian view of life, and having a church ceremony, where the hope of heaven was included, was important to us. I think we would have really regretted it if we hadn't done it that way [...] It was good to see how full the church was. I cannot say who was there, or how many they were. But I did feel the impact of care and concern.
>
> Helen: Yes. And I think that way of doing it made it easier to meet people afterwards. After all, they took part in sharing something that was very important to us.
>
> Hans: And none of them had met Hedvig, right? So that became the only chance for people to have anything to do with her.

Helene and Hans were familiar with the hymn book. For them, the church ceremony was a confirmation of Christian faith. Not everyone who chose a funeral from the local church was that explicit about their view of life. However, being assisted by a priest who knew them and knew something about their situation was still an important factor. For many, this was the hospital chaplain; others came into contact with a chaplain through their group of friends. One of the couples turned to the one who had married them the previous year.

The experience of support from the community was also there for parents who had smaller farewell ceremonies with specially invited guests. The fact that this was based on special invitations implied choices and decisions which sometimes appeared different in retrospect. Carl, the father of a child who died just before term, said no to his boss, who said she would like to attend the memorial service. He regretted this afterwards and said he wished he had understood the value of having her there. Due to a family conflict, Ingvild and Ivar refrained from inviting their siblings. In retrospect, they saw that an open funeral would have made the situation easier. With several others in the room, it may have been possible to keep tense relationships at a distance.

Resonance

Siv and Sivert were explicit about not considering themselves religious but were equally clear about wanting a funeral for their stillborn son. Sivert put it this way:

> It was the only way I knew how to say goodbye. Even though I'm not that religious myself, it felt right. One buries family members. And we were a family – for a short while.

Although they knew they wanted a funeral ritual in the hospital chapel, Siv and Sivert found it hard to find the right form and content for the ceremony:

> Siv: It was difficult to find something because most of what is used for other funerals is not suitable for a small child. And since none of us are very religious, it feels very strange with lyrics about Jesus and the children and things like, "Let the children come to me." To me, it makes no sense, although I know there are some who have found comfort in it. But we ended up borrowing some programs from previous ceremonies from the priest, and we found things we could use there.
>
> Sivert: It was very good that we could borrow those programs because then we could [...] look at what others had used before us, and it was almost like having it served to us on a silver platter, really.

Like many others in this material, Siv and Sivert found help in seeing what other bereaved parents had used in their own farewell rituals. The examples came from a variety of sources: from jazz pieces to lullabies, poems of many kinds, and fables and stories such as *Brødrene Løvehjerte* by Astrid Lindgren and *Sommerlandet* by Eivind Skeie. One of the priests also had a CD to lend out, which made it possible to look for musical elements that could resonate for the parents. Most people I met greatly appreciated this access, but for some, such as Turid and Torgeir, going through the collection of available alternatives was too demanding a project. Then, it was the priest who attentively searched, along with the two, for what could resonate.

Scope for action

The need to be actively involved in planning and carrying out the farewell ceremonies was a consistent theme, with great variation in what parents chose as the focus for their own efforts. For Frida and Fredrik, who lost a long-awaited daughter just before the due date, the decoration of the chapel was what they put the most work and effort into. There was nothing that suited them in the catalogues from the funeral agency. Looking for an alternative, Frida thought of moss, spruce and lichen – the forest, which meant a lot to both of them. They invited the extended family out on a walk to collect material for a workshop at the table in their sitting room.

> Fredrik: We had been in mourning, the two of us, for more than two weeks. Now we were forced to go out and do something. I saw that Frida was uncomfortable about it in advance. But I also saw that she cheered up when she started making these hearts. Then you were able to focus on something else: making something beautiful for our daughter. It was super tiring, but it was also good. And we were a little proud too! About how it looked in the chapel that day. […] Each of the children had made their own heart with twigs and orchids, which they placed around the coffin. It turned out very nice. We had been told that we had to prepare for the sight of the small coffin on the big stand. It just sounded so miserable. But then it didn't feel like that when you got so much else there. It was terrible, but it wasn't just the lonely little one all by herself [...]

> Frida: We also brought a tree from the forest. It was there in the chapel, and it is in the garden here now. We'll see if it survives.

In the effort to create a beautiful frame for the farewell of their dead daughter, Frida and Fredrik gave concrete expression to how important she was to them. Other parents found other forms of expression for a similar need. Many spent a lot of time choosing music, songs and lyrics and designing the program booklet and emphasized that there was comfort in that. Several presented self-written farewell words. Eivind sang Teddy Bear's song, which he had sung to his unborn son and had looked forward to continuing to sing to him. The mother, Eivor, also wanted to sing a dear song for the child but did not trust that she would be able to do it at the memorial service. She got help to make a sound recording so her song could still be performed in the chapel. For several of the parents, carrying the coffin to the grave, handing it over to the gravedigger or lowering it into the ground themselves was what they particularly focused on when talking with me.

Recognition

Ingvild and Ivar left the hospital without envisioning having a farewell ceremony. Their daughter's gestational age was six months when she died, after a complicated pregnancy. The parents kept hoping for a different outcome but eventually realized which way it was headed. Was it then okay to mark the grief? Ingvild and Ivar were asked what they wanted to happen to the dead body, but the hospital did not come up with more than that.

It was the funeral agent who questioned the decision to leave out a farewell ceremony and suggested that it be arranged in the premises of the funeral agency. The parents said yes, and invited some of their closest relatives to be with them when the child was laid in the coffin, wrapped in a blanket knitted by the mother. Ingvild's grandfather gave what he called great-grandfather's speech. Ingvild was moved when she talked about this: "It was like an acceptance that it had been a human being".

Both parents expressed great gratitude for a memorial service that came to mean a great deal to them, but which they had not felt able to ask for. They spoke of this farewell ceremony as the most important thing they did after the birth, decisive in the grieving process. When I met them again two years later, the conversation comes back to the memorial service. Then they were even clearer about what it meant to have a farewell ceremony.

> Ingvild: Now I think we should have had a full funeral. Because that was the only opportunity we had. I kind of thought we had lost too early to make so much fuss about it. That it would be to overdramatize the grief – what a weird thought that is, really! Because it wouldn't have been like that, I see that now. Having a funeral would have been completely fine. I'm glad we had a memorial service. It's better than nothing. But I wish I hadn't been so afraid to make a big deal out of the grief in the beginning.

> Ivar: Yes, that is what I felt, too: The great uncertainty as to whether this was something to be sad about. We didn't know that we had the right to be influenced by it.

The great uncertainty about what was a legitimate expression of their grief underlines how important a ritual event can be for confirming a loss. That the value of this does not weaken over time comes across strongly in Ingvild and Ivar's story. In their case, as for several of the others I met, it is the opposite: They were even more clear about the need for a farewell ceremony when I met them for the second time.

Where will the child go? Long-term integration of the loss

After a long period of indiscriminate handling of the stillborn by the church and healthcare system, bereaved parents are now being asked to decide on the question before they leave the hospital: Should the child be laid to rest in a grave of its own, a family grave or a memorial grove? When the parents are unable to make a decision about this, the child is placed in an unmarked memorial garden.

Personal grave as confirmation of a human life

The first impulse for many of the bereaved parents was to choose a burial place of their own, with their own stone. This was how it was for Mona and Martin, who lost their fourth child in week 22. They had three children from before. The loss of the youngest one, who died shortly after life had begun, was still a great sorrow for everyone in the family. They spent a lot of time finding a suitable stone and discussed the text and font for the inscription. They were never in doubt that Mina should have her own burial place.

> Mona: Even though she was only 22 weeks, it was our child, after all. We knew her – okay, we didn't get to know her very well, but she was actually complete. She was only supposed to grow and get bigger.

Mina was not included in the statistics for stillbirths. With her 22 weeks, she was just below the limit for that. On the same basis, the parents' application to join a bereavement group was also turned down. The unconditional help they received for the farewell ceremony and burial stood in contrast to what they experienced as denial of their grief from the centre for bereavement support, which also felt like a rejection of their deceased daughter.

For Mona and Martin, and many of the others I met, a special gravestone in the churchyard was a clear manifestation that theirs was a real child, with her own name. Images of decorated graves and selected stones I was often shown confirmed the desire to give the child the very best. One of the pictures showed an open grave with all the edges covered with layers of wildflowers heaped closely together.

Taking care of the grave: An ambiguous task

The cemetery where Mina was buried was on the way to work for her father. When I spoke to Mona and Morten for the first time, a couple of months after the loss, Morten visited the cemetery daily. Several of the other couples I spoke to also visited frequently during this phase.

Gunvor, who had extensive experience as a nurse in a ward for premature, seriously ill children, learned that the condition of the long-awaited child she was carrying was not compatible with life. Gunvor had made up her mind about a personal burial site before the child was born. For her, the cemetery continued to be an important place to go to, even after she had a new child. This is how she spoke about the grave of the firstborn four months after the birth of her second son:

> Gunvor: He is not in the nearest cemetery. […] The cemetery which belongs to this area is located in the middle of two motorways. So then it just became so important for me to have a place where there was peace, a place that was good to go to. And so it has been. I'm still there almost once a week. I light a candle and take care of the flowers. My father has found a stone on the beach where the family comes from, and it has just become such a peaceful, good place to be.

For many, the establishment of the grave was part of a practical effort that was helpful in processing what had happened. The longer-term maintenance work was more ambiguous and could also become a burden. Some were aware of this at the outset, and it became a motivating factor in choosing a family grave or memorial grove. For others, it was an insight that came gradually.

When I met the parents for the second time, and most of them had had more children, the thought of a cemetery that was rarely visited and not cared for in the way the parents had initially imagined was a theme that often came up. The story of Kristin and Karsten was an example of this.

> Karsten: I always feel a bit guilty that we are not at the grave often enough. But when we do go, I stand there feeling like an idiot. [...] I actually think of Karin in all kinds of situations, and that gives me more than what it does when I'm there by the grave [...] But I do feel that we should have been there more; we should have looked after the grave better. We spent a lot of money on a nice stone and a nice place, and then it just lies there withering.

Kristin and Karsten were not alone in experiencing that the meaning of the grave changes over time, even if the child continued to be important to them. No one in my material had asked to have the grave deleted, but other parents have come forward in public with such a decision (Bjørke 2016). When I asked Kristin and Karsten if they considered a memorial garden, it was clear that they had not thought of this as a real possibility and had unclear ideas about what it entailed.

> Kristin: In that situation, I suppose I thought that I did not want her to end up in a mass grave. But now I think a memorial grove would have been very, very nice. It would have helped us a lot if we had heard that there are many people who use communal graves. I, who have never experienced a death in my family in my adult life, have no idea about what happens and how it works with cremation and all that – I have no idea!

Thrown into a situation they had never imagined, these parents, like many others in this material, express a strong need to know what others are doing. In my material, there were not many who chose family graves, but Frida and Fredrik, who placed their daughter in the grave of her great-grandparents, was an example of that option being used as well. Instead of engraving the name, the parents had a sculpture of a tiny bird set up on the stone. That the shared responsibility for attendance and maintenance influenced their choice was revealed in what Fredrik said:

> Fredrik: It's nice to have a grave that we know is visited by others. A place that we know is taken care of. We'll never forget, and we'll never stop visiting, but it's kind of good to know that maybe someone else has been there when we haven't made it. And (in tears) there has been a burning light there all along now.

Some parents, like these, managed to get by on their own. Others were overwhelmed and uncertain. Specific information about concrete alternatives was greatly appreciated when it was offered. In some cases, it was also requested when it was missing.

Memorial grove as an alternative resting place

The burial of stillborn children in public memorial groves was practiced for a long time without bereaved parents being involved or informed. In accordance with increasing attention to the needs of bereaved parents, memorial gardens for the stillborn have become increasingly common. In the area where I did fieldwork, there were several, and two new ones were opened during the project period. The burial of coffins or urns in the memorial groves took place three times a year. Bereaved parents were then invited to come. Aware of questions that could arise afterwards, information about the planned location of each of the stillborns was carefully noted before the burial.

The ritual practice at the time of the burial differed slightly between different memorial groves. In some burial groves, parents who were present gathered in the chapel for lighted candles and quiet music before carrying the coffins or urns to the memorial grove. In other places, the coffins were already lined up around the open grave when the parents arrived.

The first time I met them, Eivor and Eivind had just attended the burial of their stillborn child at the memorial grove, ten weeks after the loss. The idea of the maintenance of the cemetery was included in the decision on the memorial garden. It was Eivor who was most clear about this. In contrast to Eivind, she had previous experience of losing someone close.

> Eivor: Having a grave is nice, but it also entails a responsibility [...] Tending to it may become a burden, and if you don't do it, you can easily feel guilty. I have experienced my dad passing away and have learned that I don't need a separate burial place to remember him. I can do that anywhere.

For Eivor and Eivind, it was evident that they should participate in the burial. It was especially the time in suspense that made them uncertain: Would it lead to an emotional upheaval and a prolonged grieving process? In retrospect, they regarded being there at the time of the burial to be important, even if it was demanding.

> Eivind: It was a bit special. Heavy. I thought about it a lot in advance. You kind of see that you're recovering a bit, slowly coming more back to everyday life, so I wondered what it would be like to have the burial so long afterwards. If it were to tear the wound open and cause a kind of relapse. And it was very tough, I think. After we had been there, we spent the rest of the day taking care of each other and going through the loss of our son [...] We focused on honouring him. It was his day.

> Eivor: I was afraid that it would be like a mass grave and that there would be a lot of people present. But there was only one other couple besides us, and that was very good. There was no coffin on coffin and that feeling. I think it was a good moment. We were invited to hand the urn over to them and were allowed to put down whatever we wanted with it. We laid down a rose and a picture of the three of us. And then we laid a wreath at the common memorial.

They initially doubted, but in retrospect, Eivor and Eivind were happy they decided on a memorial grove. One of the main reasons for the doubt they initially had about it was the thought of the time they had to wait for the burial. For Ylva and Yngvar, another pair of parents, the waiting time was decisive for them putting the idea of a memory garden aside:

> Ylva: For us, it felt important to have a grave to go to on the due date, for example, instead of knowing that he was kept in an urn in a cold storage room.

For many, the burial in a separate grave or memorial grove was an important part of the farewell process, also for parents who were not physically present when it was done. Several of the parents expressed a feeling that something was incomplete and unfinished before the coffin or urn was buried.

The tulips by the shore: An annual farewell ritual

Ingvild and Ivar chose cremation for their daughter and scattered the ashes on the fjord. It was only the two of them present then. They took three tulips with them, which they placed in the water; one tulip for each member of the family.

For Ingvild and Ivar, the tulips in the water became an annual ritual, which they repeated on the day of their firstborn's death. When I spoke to them the second time, they had had another son. They had recently had their ritual on the shore, then with four tulips; a bunch of flowers that still indicated each member of the family.

Discussion

The farewell ritual and the need to make the unreal real

The vast majority of the parents in this material had some kind of farewell ceremony. Everyone had seen and held the dead child in the maternity ward. The decisions on commemoration and burial were thus included as part of a series of measures in accordance with Lewis's recommendations to make the unreal real.

Several of the parents pointed to such an effect of the farewell ritual. One of the clearest expressions was what Ingvild said about her grandfather's speech, which confirmed that the child in the coffin was a real child. Ingvild and Ivar had mourned their daughter for a long time when she died in her mother's womb. They had, as Ingvild said, shed many tears on the tram on the way back from the hospital without worrying about that being visible; the other passengers just had to put up with it. These parents knew what they had lost. Still, they were very unsure of what right they had to express their grief. The ceremony in connection with laying the child in her coffin was a clear sign of value and legitimized the grief in relation to the surroundings.

The farewell event as a way to make the impact of the loss clear to the network of the bereaved parents also appeared in other narratives. Helene and Hans, who had more time to make a decision, emphasized that the open burial helped to make the daughter real to others, who would otherwise have had difficulty understanding what the two of them had been through.

When the psychiatrist Lewis talked about making the unreal real, he was primarily concerned about giving the parents a chance to accept the loss (Lewis 1976). His main focus was on what it meant for the parents to see and hold the stillborn, but burial rituals were also part of what he recommended. The assertions implied in such rituals, as it appears in this material, are especially important in relation to the social network of the bereaved parents. Participating in the farewell ritual may make the loss more real, also for them, which may be of crucial importance for the support they are able to provide to reduce the loneliness that characterizes the situation of many survivors after a stillbirth, even today.

What is possible? On confirmation and experience

The stories in this material are narrations of loss as the onset of a condensed time where many decisions had to be made. The decisions taken in the very beginning could be crucial for the subsequent mourning process. For some of the parents, the initial choices had long-lasting consequences in ways they did not imagine in advance.

According to the bereaved parents I met, discovering and seizing the chances they had during a limited window of possibilities was not an evident process. Confusion

and perplexity are typical traits in many of the stories. Many parents had an intense distrust of their own impulses, such as Ivar, who expressed doubts about the right to be influenced by what had happened.

Some parents immediately knew what they wanted and stuck to the choices they made at an early stage. This confidence may be related to previous experience with death. This seems to have been the case for Gunvor, who had long experience as a nurse in a ward for premature children, and for Eivor, who lost her father at a young age. Most parents took longer to decide what they wanted, and some regretted the choice they made. Kristin and Karsten were explicit that their lack of experience with death made it difficult to navigate and that they wished they could have received clearer guidance when important decisions had to be made. For Ingvild and Ivar, it was crucial that the funeral home made them aware of the possibility of having a ritual farewell when the child was placed in a coffin. This gave them the freedom to carry out their own ritual when the urn could be collected from the crematorium.

Ritual creation and resonance

The feeling of being abandoned, described by Alva as the experience of a robbery, corresponds to stories told by other bereaved parents about an overwhelming feeling of being exposed to something beyond their control. At the same time, the many stories about the mobilization of efforts in connection with funerals and memorial services bear witness to expressiveness and creativity. The grieving parents are here both object and subject, at one and the same time, and the stories show that farewell rituals may mean a lot for both aspects. That the chance implied in the ritual for getting in touch with feelings of grief and irreversible loss was experienced as demanding, and at the same time meaningful, comes out, for example, in Eivor and Eivind's story. There were also many examples of rituals opening up a highly valued scope for action.

Several have advocated for the development of a specific liturgy for the very youngest. In the Swedish church, alternative suggestions for prayers, Bible texts and hymns at farewell ceremonies for the stillborn have been made available (Biskopmötet 1991). Misje has also shown examples of liturgies that have been used in various parts of Norway (Misje 2021). The question of a special liturgy was raised when the Bishops' Conference invited to a consultation on liturgical arrangements for the stillborn in 2017 (Den norske kirke 2017). At the time of writing, the question is still under consideration by the bishops.

Would a particular liturgy for the stillborn help bereaved parents? Or would the introduction of such a liturgical set-up lead to examples of what Grimes described as funerals suppressing grief rather than leading to emotional relief? With regard to the content, the answer, as it appears in this material, depends on the meaning, or resonance, this gives to the mourners. In this sense, a separate funeral liturgy might mean a lot for Helene and Hans but would probably have been of less help, and perhaps the opposite, for Siv and Sivert.

When it comes to the fixed form itself, the answer is again ambiguous. A standardised form may provide relaxation and relief when the resonance is there. At the same time,

a ready-made form may limit the chance for co-creation, which is a recurring theme in the material, especially because the opportunity to do something for the child is so limited in the first place.

Most of the farewell events in this material were simple ritualizations or ritual creations with content that the parents themselves had chosen. An important criterion for the selection was the resonance the content created for those involved. In this way, the rituals could create resonance experiences, important both at the time of the event and afterwards.

What is fixed, and what is in motion: On burials and time

The long-term aspect of the establishment of specific graves with their own stone and a lease on a churchyard is not always immediately clear. In several stories, the grave gradually becomes a burden, even if the parents still feel strongly connected to the dead child, and other stories show that the burial site may continue to be a source of comfort and relief. A question that arises, and which remains open here, is whether clear and expressive ritual farewell events may reduce the need to establish permanent burial sites that the parents may not have the capacity to maintain.

Many of the parents were explicitly concerned with preserving the bond to the child they lost. When the expression in the ritual resonates with the bereaved, it may pave the way for a participation which can be decisive for the chance to integrate the loss into the personal life history and social network of the bereaved. The ritual may be a help to say goodbye while also indicating what lives on. A tree from the funeral that lives on in the garden may be a sign and a constant reminder of that. A bunch of tulips that drift into the water every year may be a tangible confirmation that, paradoxically enough, can make it more possible to let go.

Conclusion

Ritual creation in farewell events for their stillborn children emerged as a crucial need for the bereaved parents in this material. Access to concrete examples of possible content in farewell ceremonies appeared to be an important resource. For those familiar with that language, liturgical alternatives may be valuable elements in such a reservoir. The findings in this study indicate that the resonance, or dissonance, that different alternatives may create is decisive for how helpful they will be for the individual parents. With support that combines sensitivity and flexibility with concrete information about available options, grieving parents may, each in their own way, make choices that help make the incomprehensible loss real and begin the process of integrating that experience into a future life course.

Further research may provide complementary knowledge in relation to other groups of parents bereaved after stillbirths, especially bereaved parents from religious and cultural minorities. There is also a need for more knowledge about priests' experiences in the field.

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