‘Who are we remembering today?’

Cariad Lloyd talks about *Griefcast* and her new book to **Sarah Meyrick**

IF THERE is a single thing that the writer and comedian Cariad Lloyd wishes that, as a teenager, she had known when her father died very shortly after his cancer diagnosis, it is that she was not alone in her grief and confusion.

“I really thought what happened to us was like a freak, weird accident,” she says now. “I didn’t know that pancreatic cancer was the fifth biggest cause of cancer deaths in this country. I thought he’d had a very strange, weird cancer, and that no one else had lost anyone that quickly. And that made me really strange, and like no one understood me.”

It was many years before she discovered just how common her experience of bereavement was. “I wish I’d known that whatever you’re feeling right now in your grief . . . your grief is unique, but other people have been through what you’ve been through, and they got through it.”

This is why her book, out this week, is called *You Are Not Alone: A new way to grieve*. She was 15 at the time of her father’s death, and is 40 now; it has taken the intervening years to process the grief. The book is a distillation of what she has learned through her award-winning podcast, *Griefcast*. *Griefcast* — which has been downloaded a staggering seven million times — has been running since 2016. The prizes that it has won include Podcast of the Year 2018, in the UK ARIAS.

The format is simple: she talks to largely famous guests about their bereavements, and how they have come to terms with their losses. The interviewees include Michael Rosen, David Baddiel, Robert Webb, Marian Keyes, the Revd Richard Coles, and James Runcie.

She is blown away by its success and longevity. “I kept thinking I should do a podcast about death. It just sort of popped in my head. And I kept thinking: that’s a terrible idea. But it wouldn’t go away. So I thought, Well, I’ll do four, and then I can do something else. I can go back to doing comedy.”

She started by interviewing other comedians — “primarily because they were my friends, and they were easy to contact” — about their experiences. “I have been in the club, as we say on the show, for a very long time. And I wanted to create a space where you could talk about grief in a really real, honest way without any kind of . . . soft voices. Just to be like, ‘This is what happened. It was really awful. And this is how I feel.’”

She launched *Griefcast* in December 2016, just after the birth of her first child. A friend who is also a podcaster advised her to set up an email address so that listeners could get in touch. “And, as soon as I released the first four episodes, I started getting hundreds of emails from people saying, ‘I didn’t know other people felt like this. I thought I was having a breakdown. I thought I was the only person that ever thought these things.’”

By the start of 2017, she knew she would continue. “I find the word ‘calling’ a bit weird, but it felt to me like ‘Oh, it’s clear you’re meant to be doing this. The world is telling you that many people want this.’ This is useful — and, you know, you don’t feel very useful in grief.”

Almost 200 episodes later, *Griefcast* has “just rolled on”, she says. But this is to downplay the skill with which she conducts the conversations. She has a light touch: she draws stories out of people with compassion and warmth, as well as humour. There are usually tears alongside laughter. I’m yet to listen to an episode that isn’t profoundly moving.

Griefcast isn’t the only podcast on this subject, of course. Across the Atlantic, the CNN news presenter Anderson Cooper has recently ventured into this territory, and also reports an overwhelming response. Why does she think this is the case?

“I think we don’t talk about death enough, basically,” she says. “Even if we’re better than we were, say, 50 years ago, we don’t give space to grief. We don’t allow people to be sad. We kind of expect people after a year, maybe two years, to stop going on about it, even if we never say that out loud. But this is an agreed social role, in the same way that we all know how to queue. We all know if someone’s pushed in front of us, and we all know it’s awkward if someone’s crying about grief, and there’s an innate uncomfortableness about that.”

The problem is, people who are grieving want to talk about the person whom they’ve lost — every episode of *Griefcast* begins by asking “Who are we remembering today?” — and they want to talk about the experience that they’ve been through. Bereavement turns everything that you thought you knew upside down, she says. “We’re all desperate to have a space where we don’t feel ‘I shouldn’t say that.’ It’s nice to be in a space where people aren’t going to shut you down.”

The podcast has proved — unexpectedly, she says — transformative in her own “grief journey” (a phrase that she hates, but for which she has failed to find a better alternative). “Obviously, talking about my grief, week in, week out, I started to remember things I’ve forgotten. I started to think about things a different way. I was a bit more honest about some things that I sort of packed away or I was embarrassed or ashamed about.”

It was a great relief to find that others had the same overwhelming mixture of contradictory feelings — what she calls “grief-mess”. She says: “It really helped my [grieving] process. I should say that, at the same time as starting the podcast, I started therapy. And so, I think, both things went hand in hand.” She has found the experience hugely healing.

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It took almost 20 years to address her grief. Part of this was because, in 1998, there was very little support for bereaved teenagers. Her older brother was offered adult therapy, but she fell between two stools. Indeed, there is a painfully funny description in the book of sitting opposite a counsellor on child-sized chairs in a room full of toys and colouring materials.

“But, also, I wasn’t ready,” she says. “Having spoken to so many people in the teenage-grief club, I have a theory that a lot of us don’t talk about it until we are much older, because you spend your teenage years quite confused. You have all the feelings, but we don’t really have the vocabulary.”

As she says, though, grief doesn’t go away. “The thing with grief is, you think you can outrun it or hide from it, or you don’t have to deal with it, but it’s just the most patient thing I’ve ever seen in my life. It doesn’t mind how long you’ve got it. And then, if you start really ignoring it, it might give you some physical symptoms, or it might give you some mental-health symptoms, because it’s just knocking at the door, really patiently being ‘You need to feel these emotions.’”

Having a child had a bearing on her decision to undergo therapy, she says. Parenthood also changed some of her feelings about her father, which, as she writes in the book, were confused at the time of his illness and death. They were going through a rocky patch. “All the things that you think about your own childhood start coming up — like ‘Oh, it is hard to have a child.’ I see that now. Maybe he was very tired. Maybe that’s why he was quite stressed.’”

MATT CROCKETT

The book is full of useful advice for anyone experiencing grief or supporting someone going through it. She does her best to debunk some of the attitudes we seem to have adopted as a society. For example, the omnipresent theory of “five stages of grief” (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance), first posited by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. “I kept thinking, well, I’m not doing this five stages. I’m not doing it right at all. I just am furious. I’m angry. I was angry for years. I was so angry he died, and I thought to myself, well you’re not ticking the boxes. Basically, I blamed myself.”

When she started the podcast, she did some research on the Kübler-Ross theory — and found out that this was all based on a misunderstanding. She had, in fact, posited the five stages as an approach for cancer patients, at a time (1969) when patients were not always told that they were dying. “She was talking about working with terminally ill patients in hospital, predominantly with cancer. And she was trying to say to medical professionals: ‘We should be honest, we should tell people they’re dying.’ When you understand the birth of the theory, it makes total sense. . . It doesn’t work for grieving, because grieving doesn’t have a full stop.”

And yet belief in the five stages is deeply entrenched in our culture. “It’s like a chocolate cake with a cherry on top: like, brilliant, I’m going to go through these stages, then I’m going be OK. And I’ll be done: I can feel like I did before they died. But how can you ever feel like you did before they died? It doesn’t mean you can’t be happy, and you can’t experience joy, and you can’t laugh. But you can’t feel like you did before they died, because your person is still not here.”

Grief is hard enough without the idea that you are doing it wrong, she says. “What I’m trying to say in the book is, grief stays with you for ever. But that doesn’t mean that every day I wake up and I fall to my knees and I weep about my father. That’s not what my days are like. It just means, if you ask me, is that something that happened to me? Yes. Do I still get sad about it sometimes? Yes. Are most days fine? Yes.”

CELEBRITY grief memoirs seem to be having a moment, I suggest. The actor Richard E. Grant, and the comic and writer Rob Delaney have written well-received books on the losses of a wife and child respectively; *Church Times* readers may be familiar with the memoirs of Fr Coles and James Runcie. Is there a reason that they are popular?

“As someone who’s been doing the show for six years, I can tell you there’ve been some great memoirs,” she says. “I think it’s interesting that those people [mentioned] are all men talking about very emotional subjects. I think we are allowing people — and men particularly — to be more emotional, and to talk about something as emotional as grief.”

She is glad that the conversation is opening up. “But I’m very wary of letting us off the hook and being like ‘Oh, we’re so good at it.’ I still think we’re OK when someone’s fresh. Like ‘This just happened to me; so here’s my book, here’s my story.”

We’re good at immediate pain, she thinks, but less good when time has passed. “What we need to get better about is understanding that grief is a thing that will be present for ever. And that it’s OK that people still get sad. You don’t have to fix them. You don’t have to wrap it up and make it OK.”

IN THE book, Ms Lloyd describes her father’s funeral at All Hallows’-by-the-Tower, in London, where the family was closely connected. She also mentions another parish church that she attended in childhood, near the family home. Did either church offer the Lloyd family pastoral care afterwards?

She struggles to remember any, although she speaks very fondly of the then Vicar of All Hallows’, the Ven. Peter Delaney, who is still in touch. “He has been very kind . . . He emailed me because he knew my grandfather very well, and my dad pretty well.” All Hallows’ means a lot to her — “even though I don’t particularly have a faith any more” — and she has always felt very welcome there.

I mention a bereavement course held in my parish church, to which all funeral families from the past year are invited. Might that have been welcome at the time of her father’s death?

“To have a sign up saying, ‘It doesn’t matter how long it’s been, if you had your funeral here ten years ago, we’d still love to hear from you,’ could make somebody feel like ‘I’ve got permission,’” she says; people tend to grant the bereaved permission to grieve for the first year or two, and after that, it as if the loss is consigned to the past.

As far as supporting others, the important thing is to be there for the long haul, she says. “The key is showing up, long-term. In the first six months, you come round to someone’s house, and you bring some food, and you ask them, ‘Are you OK?’ Please, for a year do that. Please, after two years, too.

“They might say to you — especially with teenagers — they might say, ‘Absolutely no way. I do not want to talk about it.’ That doesn’t mean that’s true. And it also doesn’t mean you can’t repeatedly say, ‘I know you don’t want to talk about it. I’m just reminding you if you ever do, I’m here.’”

You Are Not Alone: A new way to grieve *by Cariad Lloyd is published by Bloomsbury Tonic at £18.99* (Church Times Bookshop £17.09); *978-1-52662-183-2.*