

Speaker - Andrew Powlesland Wordsmith - Russ Tunney

Stop.
Just for a moment.
Stop and reflect.

Think about what we have got. About what you have got. You don't realise what you have until it's gone.

We don't really talk about Grief. Especially not men. Even more so Military men. British Military Men? No chance. My dad was in the forces. We didn't talk about that kind of thing.

I went straight from school to 12 years in the Royal Navy. I got married. I had children, a son and a daughter. They gave me three wonderful grandchildren.

I worked other jobs after the Navy. Social Services, a trainer and teacher. When I stopped working I thought that's it. I'm done. I've done my bit.

I'm 66 but I don't feel like it. I feel about 30. I always thought I'll never work for free or join any of these ex-service things and yet here I am. I volunteer at the Oxfam bookshop and at Arundells community garden, for the veterans' charity Boots on the Ground.

That's what I do now.

You look back on your life as a series of fragmented memories. The joy of seeing a plant grow. Slipping the wedding ring on your wife's finger. Sunflowers reaching for the sky in Africa. A Robin landing in front of you and watching you knowingly. The birth of your children. Being on the deck of a ship enjoying the sun at the Equator or in the Falklands watching a ship burn. The birth of your grandchildren. Eating sandwiches with a mate in the sunshine.

For just a minute. Stop and reflect. Think about what you have got.



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Here's a favorite memory: About two years before Covid, my wife Sarah and I went to America. We were stood in the immigration queue and the guard called out "Are you two together?" Sarah piped up immediately: "Yes. We certainly are. We've been together 40 years." So, the guard gives a long hard look and then says "Well, I'd better not separate you now" and waved us straight through.

People ARE kind. You see it in daily life. And then you see what is happening in politics. The rich getting richer. The poor getting poorer.

Sarah worked as a midwife and a nurse, it's all she ever wanted to do. Yet many times, she would come home and say "I'm doing this job. I deliver babies. And yet people in an office in York or London are telling me how to do it." What's the point of ignoring those who actually have the practical lived experience?

Sarah – a born carer, generous and desperate to help anyone she could. She brought over 1500 babies safely into the world and knowing her hasmade me a better person. She always said the important thing is to help people.

That's why I volunteer with ex-servicemen who are less fortunate than me. I've started working at the community garden. Some of the guys come along and we just sit and chat and share. We make tea and have biscuits. I don't know if it's some military thing or because we are just sitting together, but one comes with sandwiches and if someone else didn't have any, they say "have some of mine, mate'.

Most of us in this country have a good standard of living. Most of us in Salisbury have a good standard of living. But not everyone does.



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This inequality is because we're subsidised by other people. We buy cheap goods from China & Kenya. It's made by slave labour. We buy vegetables from South Africa that are flown in. Coffee from South America. It's grown actually, I imagine in pretty poor conditions. There is so much inequality. If only we could just stop and spread the wealth around.

I know it's not that simple. I'm sure if we took all the money in this country and gave everybody £500,000, by the end of the year, some people will be broke and some will have millions. That's the way it is. It's so often a twist of fate or bad luck that changes the course of a life. Being born into a family with no stability, never knowing your father, experiencing a trauma, no money... bad luck. Just bad luck.

I lost my wife Sarah a little while ago and people want to help but we don't know how to talk about grief.

How do you explain something like that to a five-year-old?
He just says to me sometimes "I'm really sad Nana's not here"

And I say, "Yes, I know, mate."

He comes out with such stuff sometimes. One time, when we were altogether in the car, a robin flew down and perched on the fence looking at us he said, "That's Nana. She always comes down to keep an eye on us when we're together." And I thought: he's doing something with his grief he knows how to talk.

Grief is like wind. It's better out than in.

A few days ago, I went for a walk with my son. He's a grown man now. And as we watched the sun go down he said "I miss her". And I said "Me too" and we hugged. What would my dad have made of that? Me, My son, my Grandson. Where is our stiff upper lip?



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Sarah and I would talk about problems and I would try to think of solutions but there are some things you can't solve. If I could bring her back I would.

That makes me stop. Stop and Reflect on my story of fathers and sons, the sea, Sarah, that little robin, helping others, most of it here in Salisbury. This ancient gathering place, the place where five rivers meet, winding their paths through countryside, industrial estates and finally the city itself, carrying fragments of what they encounter on their journey.

Like we all do. Carrying fragments with us, to pass down to whatever is downstream of us.

So now, I spend a lot of my time volunteering. Especially at the Garden. I don't really know anything about gardening but luckily Becky does – she runs the community garden. She says its community not just garden. It's about turning up and talking and being together. Many have seen active service.

Sometimes we don't get much gardening done. Sometimes we just want to talk and share stuff but sometimes we don't know how. We sit and talk rubbish or work together but there's a unity in that. We do it together.

Like family. We do it together.

Like a marriage. We do it together.

You leave the services after 20, 30 years and it's a real culture shock. Life changes, completely. You lose your wife and it's a real culture shock. Life changes, completely,

Like how a garden changes with the seasons.



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Now I play a small role in nurturing a community garden. Before that I did that, I think I did a different kind of gardening at home and at work. Planting seeds and nurturing growth, ensuring that there was water and light enough for all the people most dear to me. Society is our garden really, and we've all got a role in tending that garden.

When that little Robin flew down to me and my Grandson, I think he was right. Sarah was with us right then.

All the family together. We do it together.

How lucky I am. How lucky we are. Perhaps we take it for granted sometimes.

So, here's what I have to say to you: Stop, reflect, and think about what you have got.

You will miss it when it's gone.

