

## Interview with Jerusha Hull McCormack, author of *grieving*

*Q. Jerusha, you have just published a book called **grieving: a beginner's guide**. How did you come to write it? How did this all begin?*

A. When my husband died ten years ago, I didn't know where to turn. People talked about me "losing" my husband – as if I were careless or something. But in fact, it was I who was lost. It seemed incredible that there weren't *maps* – I mean, we all lose or are going to lose someone in our lives. How come there aren't maps to help guide us through this experience?

So, in the end, I decided that if I couldn't find a map I would have to make one. This book is my attempt to make a map.

*Q. But why a "beginner's guide"?*

A. It's called a "beginner's guide" because I think we all come to this as beginners. Grieving is too important an experience to be left to the professionals. And it is different every time – a bit like falling in love – and like falling in love, it is absorbing, life-changing, painful and sometimes even –remarkably – radiant.

I think that in grieving we are at the very frontiers of our experience. We are the pioneers and we are the ones who have to find the passage through the unknown, paths to a new life.

It's to make that passage a bit less daunting that I wanted to make this map.

*Q. And what do you mean by a map?*

A. Well, everyone talks about grieving as a kind of journey. But where do you go? How do you move on?

So, to answer that question, I wanted to show the kind of territory you go through as a grieving person. How to find the roads – for there are many – and how to avoid the dead-ends – which are as numerous. In other words, how you can best proceed on your journey?

*Q. Tell us about the different kinds of roads.*

A. It seems to me from what others tell me that in one sense we each find our own paths – grieving in one way is deeply personal. But in another, there

are paths we all follow and some of them lead somewhere and some lead nowhere – into a kind of desert region, where one can die, in the spirit.

So the idea is to give directions down the roads that lead somewhere: towards a place in which we can still honour our dead but not feel we have to die with them. To a new place where we can make a new life, but without abandoning the old one.

*Q. Tell us a bit more about this place.*

A. Well, first of all, it's a new place. You can never go back to the old place, the one you lived in before. This came as a shock, because I spent the first year after my husband died trying to get back to where we were before. One day I realized that I was never going to get back; that place was gone. It was a terrible moment.

But then I remembered how I felt when I first came as a young bride to Ireland. I am originally an American and had met this magical Irish student in the States and we had married there and then he had brought me back home. Only it wasn't my home; it was his. I had left my home, my family, my friends, my country to be with him – and it was a long time before Ireland began to feel like my home.

But that experience came to my aid, because I suddenly realized that the kind of pain I felt then – the confusion, the homesickness, the loneliness – was much like what I was feeling now. Then I thought: this is a very useful analogy. Death moves us to a new country. We are like emigrants, mourning the old life but thrown into a new one. Here we have a chance to start again. And it is death that has brought us there.

*Q. To sum it up, now that you have had these ten years behind you, what do you now think about the experience of grieving?*

It is *important*. If I had only one thing to say, that would be it.

It is a central, life-transforming experience.

It's an experience that doesn't have a past tense. It lives with us.

It lives with us because we never lose the dead. They live with us too, not only in our grieving but in the many ways, by living and then by dying, they have changed our lives.

Grieving is painful, but that doesn't mean it is bad. It is painful the way childbirth is painful, as a way of entering into new life.

In that new life we grow to understand that death is as inevitable as life itself, and that without encountering it fully and honestly we can never love, nor fully live, as death is the very condition of both.