The journey to 'Mum's last mountain'

Helping two young children come to terms with an accidental death



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When asked by Jim Ballard whether I would accompany him and his children to the Himalayas, I was thrown into a confusion of emotions and loyalties. Jim was planning to take Tom and Kate, aged seven and four, to the cold, harsh environment where their mother had died just a few weeks before; he had also agreed for the trip to be filmed. There was bound to be criticism but, looking back on this unusual and controversial trip, I have no regrets.

The family and I had become friends on an expedition to Everest the year before and I was still in a state of shock and grief myself at the recent news of Alison's death. So my first response to Jim was, 'Do you think the children are ready for it?' He assured me Tom was adamant that he wanted to see his mummy's last mountain, and that it probably didn't matter where Kate was, as K2 might as well be Ben Nevis as far as her concept of the world went.

I sought advice from child psychiatrists, a child psychologist, two paediatrician friends, the other doctors at my practice, and lots of relatives. The range of opinions was vast, and often extreme. Even the professional advice was subjective; people have strong opinions about whether Alison, as a mother, should have climbed at all and whether Jim was exploiting the children or callously trying to make money from his wife's death. I was not interested in these extreme views. When I spoke to Dr Dora Black, child psychiatrist at the Traumatic Stress Clinic, London, I was encouraged: her research into the care of bereaved children had shown significant benefit, at least in the short term, from encouraging grief through counselling early on.

So, with a sense of loyalty towards Alison and Jim, I agreed to go, with my husband, David, as the children's doctor. Unsure how my role would pan out, I decided to keep some distance initially and let the children decide what they might want from me. There were, in any case, plenty of potential physical hazards – altitude sickness, gastroenteritis, accidents and so on – which might need my medical attention, though the children had spent seven weeks at 5400m before at an Everest base camp with few problems and I knew they enjoyed the outdoor, camping life.

PRE-DEPARTURE

I had not seen Tom and Kate for a year so, during a few days before our departure for Pakistan, I tried to reestablish my relationship with them. I wanted to assess how they were coping with the bereavement so far, and what they felt and understood about the journey and its significance.

Tom understood that the trip was to see K2 but, when asked what was special about K2, he would say 'it's the second highest mountain in the world' and did not talk about his mother, or her death. On one occasion when David mentioned 'Mum' to him, he pointed up, and talked about trains crashing high up above: 'When there's a train crash, there must be trains high in the sky'.

Kate was more spontaneous. She was very aware of various clothes her mother had bought her, and wanted to take them with her on the trip. On one occasion she had a tantrum, sparked off by her dad eating one of her chocolates. 'Mummy, mummy, mummy, come back to me mummy!' she shouted and screamed – the first indication to me that she knew she had lost something very important to her.

I was alone in the kitchen with her on the day before we left for Pakistan when she explained to me that she was going to see her mum and 'give her all my love forever, and Tom is too.' I wasn't sure where this had come from – possibly brother and sister had talked about the trip together – but it was very moving. I wondered, then, whether either or both of them fantasised about being reunited with their mother when we got to the mountain.

A MESSAGE FROM TOM

Having got to Islamabad and survived the initial attentions of the media, we gradually relaxed and the children got more used to me, and I to them. Then out of the blue during supper one evening there came a crucial message from Tom. He handed a folded paper serviette to David, telling him it was 'a message for Cath'. As soon as I saw it, I knew it was significant. On the white, folded, mountain-shaped serviette was a face drawn near the top. At the bottom, was

EDITOR'S NOTE

When Jim Ballard announced he was taking his children to see the mountain on which their famous mother, the climber Alison Hargreaves, died in a snow-storm, there was enormous criticism of him by the public and in the media. He was felt to be imposing a cruel burden on recently-bereaved children. Yet the children were experienced 'mountaineers' and had accompanied their mother to base camp when she had climbed Everest the year before so that, as her body had not been recovered, the venture was not dissimilar to visiting a grave (although much more spectacular!), which on the whole would be viewed with approval. Anyone watching the BBC film of the trek and reading the book about it would be left with no doubts that the children fared well, that it was therapeutic and healing for them and that it moved them on in their understanding of what had happened to their mother, of why she felt compelled to climb, and of how much she loved them and was loved by others. Dr Collier, a young trainee family doctor who was herself a climber and a friend of Alison, accepted the task of caring for the children and conscientiously acquired the tools and skills for doing so. Her account of what she did has many lessons for us all. Dr Collier tackles the difficult ethical issues of whether children should be filmed in confidential counselling sessions. I believe the safeguards she built in were adequate and the children's awareness that their experiences might be of help to others would in my opinion weigh heavily in the balance when assessing the costs and benefits of such exposure.

a vehicle, and a tent. The rest of the serviette had been obliterated by scribbling. Tom explained that this was Chinese writing. 'What does this mean?', I asked. 'Well, that's for you to find out', said Tom.

It was clear that he wanted to communicate, and I was flattered that he felt I could be trusted to listen to his emotions. Tom thus dictated my role. He would occasionally remind me that I was his and Kate's 'special doctor' and seemed to feel safe and pleased with this idea.

IN SIGHT OF K2

The next day we flew to Skardu, in the mountains of Baltistan. On the flight, Tom opted to sit by me although the views were to be better on the other side of the plane. He knew we were likely to get our first sight of K2 during the flight and his anxiety was palpable – he was tense and possibly a little frightened as we looked out over tremendous views of jagged ridges and peaks. The BBC were pushing the family to go to the cockpit where the mountain could now be seen. Tom initially refused, preferring to chat to me, imagining planes landing on the peaks and planes, and helicopters crashing down into the valleys. Finally with my encouragement he agreed and, squeezed amongst film crew, Jim, Kate and the pilot, there we saw it – the amazing triangular peak of K2, prominent on the horizon. Tom did not want to stay long and, back in his seat, was quiet for a while and then got excited, taking pictures out of the window.

As we waited in Skardu airport, another new, confusing environment, the children were restless and so it seemed a good time to bring out my supply of pencils, crayons and paper. Tom immediately drew a picture of K2, this time in warm colours, with a black patch near the top. Above was a night sky, with a new moon. After this he was much more relaxed and happy, and went to on to draw a wonderful picture of the charismatic police chief with his warm, smiling, teddy-bear face. Having no children myself and no experience of the use of art in my work as a doctor, I was very struck by the power and release in this artistic activity and pleased that we had begun to help Tom express his feelings in this visual way. Kate drew too, colourful, abstract pictures, and she also seemed happier afterwards.

We arrived at the K2 motel where Alison had stayed on her expedition. It was a magical setting and there was a small garden party with local VIPs, and the inevitable filming session by the BBC. Jim was interviewed again, and the children were certainly exposed to a lot of talk about their mother, and how special she was. The local people were very open about talking to the children about Alison, in strong contrast with British culture. I felt this was very positive for them, although still difficult. To an outsider, Jim often spoke of Alison in a rather 'prepared', unemotional way and possibly the grieving that the children had been exposed to had been low key. This may not have given them the opportunity to grieve themselves, in their own way, though I felt it was most important that they had a remaining parent who was so together and reliable and we had to respect his style of coping.



K2, with storm clouds, by Tom *Photo by David Collier*

The family were given the room which had been Alison's. Jim dismissed this as unimportant sentimentality but, as we were to discover, it held a strong significance for Tom and Kate. David found the two of them alone in the room, while their father was fetching some luggage, and this is his account of what happened:

> I found Kate was curled up at the edge of the bed, half kneeling, and looking upset but not crying. Tom was quiet and curled up in a chair, sucking his thumb, as usual. I asked Kate if she wanted me to stay and she nodded. Was she upset because this had been her mum's room?
> 'Yes.'
> I knelt down next to her, but facing Tom. Kate asked, out of the blue, 'How did mummy die?'
> 'Nobody knows exactly,' I explained. 'We know that mummy climbed to the top of K2, and on the way down – you know that mummy was always very careful and cautious – ' ('*yes*,' emphatically, from Kate) 'there was a big storm while they were still high on the mountain, and we don't really know if it was an avalanche, or if she was blown off, we don't really know.'
> 'Mummy could still be alive up there,' suggested Tom.
> 'I really wish I could believe that, but it was high up, and I don't think anybody... (Tom: 'She could have built a snow cave') ...don't think anyone could have survived up there. She must have died.'
> The children fell quiet, but it was not a bad silence. Then Jim breezed in, all plans and action, so I beat a retreat.

The children came up to our room later, demanding the pencils and paper. They started drawing K2 immediately. Kate said that the pictures were to give to mummy at base camp. David wept and Kate seemed surprised, but Tom explained, 'Even daddy cries sometimes.' Kate's pictures now were very black and abstract but Tom went happily into drawing the aeroplanes and helicopters that he had seen earlier.

KATE'S TURN TO TALK

For the ten-hour drive to our next stop, Kate insisted on sitting on my lap in the front of the jeep. She spent much of the journey admiring her face in the wing mirror, apparently oblivious of the dangers of the loose, treacherous road which constantly threatened to disappear from under us.

I encouraged her to talk about her mother. She said she was going to draw a picture of K2, with all her friends on it, to leave at the foot of the mountain to show her mum that she was not alone. She spoke of her grandparents and agreed that they loved her and Tom very much – a useful conversation, reinforcing how much support she had around her. Later, chatting about fish, Kate mentioned that she had seen a film about sharks, where a man had his legs bitten off, and then died. I asked what it meant to die. She faltered at this, but eventually said, 'It's when you're not alive, like Mum.' I explained that when dead you did not feel pain. She said the man bitten by the shark would have felt pain when he was bitten, but that when he was dead, he would feel no pain - excellent logic from a four-year-old, I thought.

She asked if we were all going to K2 to die, 'like Mum did'. I explained that we were going to return home at the end of the trip; if we died, we would not be able to do that. Her mother would not be able to go home because she was dead; she would have to stay on the mountain for ever. Kate seemed to accept this, quietly sucked her thumb for a while, then happily went off into her imaginary world in the mirror again.

When we arrived at our first camp site, in the dark, Kate sat on my lap in the mess tent, chatting about her mother; she seemed to understand that we were following in Alison's footsteps. Watching all the porters carrying luggage, and bringing tea, she commented that we must be very special to have such a welcome. I said, 'Well, it's because your mum was special'. Kate

agreed, 'Mum was special in climbing'. 'Yes', I replied, she had climbed K2 and Everest. Then she said, in a rather quaint, adult way 'Yes, Everest was a very happy thing, but it is terribly sad about K2, isn't it?' I agreed. 'Your mummy didn't want to die.' 'No, and I didn't want her to die.' 'None of us wanted her to die, and it's very sad that there was a big wind...' Kate, 'No, there was a storm, and it blew mummy away.' She was obviously processing what she had heard in a very useful way.

COUNSELLING SESSIONS AT THE CAMP

We had a few days in a camp at Thongol. Tom needed to do some school work which Jim had nominated me to supervise. As it turned out, this helped to smooth the introduction into what naturally became more formal counselling sessions. As he tired of his school assignments, Tom responded well to the introduction of a workbook that Dora Black had recommended, *When Someone Very Special Dies*[1], in which children are invited to draw pictures about their feelings; it proved to be a very useful tool.

I started with an open mind and some anxiety. We sat at the edge of the campsite and, on a bank above us, the local children lined themselves up, watching with fascination. Tom was so engrossed in colourful drawings that he did not seem to notice the children looking on for the full two hours, nor the camera pointed at us from four metres away. He did not know that I had been wired for sound, as I had little warning before the session and no time to prepare him. The BBC had assured me that nothing of these sessions would be included without Jim's and my consent.

Tom worked hungrily through the book, often impatient to draw more and more. He listened intently as I read the comments on each page, explaining how things change through life. Change creates loss, and the pain from loss is called grief. When asked to draw the ways people die, Tom's first picture was of guns and bullets, then stabbing, then drowning. He carefully and thoughtfully drew a picture of that person he loved that had died, and was very proud of the pretty result. There was no hesitation in drawing how she died – the triangular mountain was dramatically outlined on the page, followed by fast and heavy strokes of black pencil, representing the storm. I felt he was rapidly assimilating information, and constructing his own concepts of death, and hoped that any fantasies of reunion that he might still have held were gradually dissolving.

After this session I felt exhausted, but Tom was happy and after playing for a while in the stream joined in with a game of cricket. In the evening he looked tired and troubled, threatening to work himself up into one of his tail-spin tempers (which long pre-dated his mother's death). He left the mess tent that evening, and disappeared for half an hour into the darkness on his own. When he returned he told his dad that he had been thinking about his mum.

Two days later Tom asked to look at the book again. We reviewed what he had done so far and Kate listened and watched with interest. Eventually she insisted on joining in and so I introduced her to her copy of the book. They both enjoyed discussing different emotions and drawing faces representing feelings of sadness, happiness, anger and guilt. Tom got carried away showing us what anger was; he roared and raged around the camp, Kate joined in and I tried to give them space to express themselves. Again Tom had been unaware of the camera filming us, but suddenly he noticed them and it dawned on him that they had been there for the last hour. He understandably felt betrayed, and allowed himself to use the aggression that we had a few moments before been practising, pacing up and down to the camera, sticking his tongue out and shouting at the BBC not to film him. Guilt was felt all round. It was difficult to explain that we meant no harm, and really were his friends. The BBC director and cameraman explained that they had not filmed any of his drawings. But Tom was not impressed. We wondered if he would ever forgive us.

However it seems he did forgive me and a few days later asked to look at his 'special book' again. His drawing of 'something sad' was, again, that classic triangular mountain, the lone figure near the top, and the violent storm represented in heavy strokes of pencil. When asked to draw what frightened him, his picture was of a jeep on a bumpy road. I agreed that was a frightening thing and, looking back on the whole trip, probably the most dangerous part. Tom and Kate agreed unanimously on what they worried about: first Tom and then Kate drew a picture of a man sitting watching the television. 'This is Dad', said Tom. 'Yes', said Kate, 'he's always watching TV'. 'Lazy Dad', said Tom. Jim rarely watches television so I was surprised by this image, but the children were adamant that this was the most worrying thing in their lives. There must be a few fathers that would feel guilty at hearing a child say this!



Counselling session with Tom *Photo by Jim Ballard*

Eventually Tom was saturated and tired, but Kate bubbled on with endless energy. She decided she was good at having lots of friends and I agreed that she was a very friendly person. She is well aware that she can charm her way into most people's hearts! Her hunger and enthusiasm equalled Tom's and we raced through page after page. Things slowed down when it came to drawing her mother, and we must have spent over an hour on that one drawing. Her mother's dress got more and more elaborate, her face more and more covered in make-up, and her jewellery ended up quite extensive. Kate's memory of her mother was of a very pretty woman in a smart dress looking great on a special occasion. This was certainly true, but most people, including myself, would remember her as the fresh faced, compact, athletic climber, perhaps complete with ice axe and crampons. This aspect of her mother was certainly not the one that Kate felt was the most important.

A VERY SPECIAL CEREMONY

We continued from Thongol on foot and the first sightings of K2, from a ridge below Paiju seemed less upsetting than those from the plane. However at Paiju, David got dysentery and was really very unwell. Jim was most supportive and we were able to agree quickly on a plan to make this our destination. I do not think the children lost anything in terms of their emotional journey; we were able to have the memorial ceremony in view of K2 and that, after all, was the main focus of the trip.

Jim decided that we should walk onwards from the camp towards the mountain for an hour and that wherever we reached would be the site that the children built their cairns and said their farewells. Tom took the silk rose that he had chosen

to leave for Alison and held my hand for most of the way, sucking his thumb and clutching his ever faithful brown bear. He tended to mumble away in a babyish manner and I occasionally caught the words 'K2' and 'Mum'. This was a difficult day for him but he had been preparing himself for it and it became obvious when we got to the chosen site that he had a clear plan. As one hour approached, Tom went to walk with his father and Kate, and I could not help feeling proud of the way he was dealing with things. On the hour and in view of K2, Tom set to work building his cairn and Kate copied from a few metres away. Jim sat and watched as the children built their memorial mounds of stones around the silk flowers and pictures they had chosen to leave. There was a strong sense of love and goodbye. It felt right.

Tom later got fed up with the filming, and went off out of sight in a gully. I imagined he would be deep in thought. As the BBC interviewed Jim, Kate explained to me that 'Mummy had tried her best to come down and see us, but she just couldn't, the storm was so strong'. She said that when she had left her last time, her mum had told her that she would return for Christmas. Now she would not be there at Christmas, but her spirit would come. Kate then helped me build my own cairn, and made a representation of her mother, with small stones, grass, and moss. 'Mummy will be able to see this forever,' she said. 'Yes', I said, 'and she'll be able to see the beautiful flowers and picture you left for her.' Kate gave a big smile.

We finally had to turn back from what had been very precious moments, in a very special place. I could not imagine a more beautiful tribute to Alison.

IN RETROSPECT

Tom and Kate had grown used to their mum disappearing up mountains. The close bond between mother and children had been obvious on Everest the previous year but they had showed very little anxiety during her periods of absence and had been able to look to their father to fulfill their needs. The children had full confidence that their mother would always return from her climbs and no reason to believe otherwise.

It would therefore be surprising if they had not entertained fantasies of reunion, and, from some of the issues they raised *en route* it seemed that they had both been doing so. Though it could seem cruel to dispel such comforting dreams, the journey would have been a very negative experience if they had reached the end of it still hoping to see their mother. I think the counselling sessions did help them understand the finality of death, at least for this life, and the endless talk about their mother throughout the trip, always in the past tense, also helped to get the message across.

I had had no formal training in counselling, although every consultation in a family doctor's practice has a psychosocial dimension, but at least I was there to give Tom and Kate time and space to express feelings. I have no idea whether this role would have been better filled by a counsellor, doctor, relative or friend.

Tom and Kate's progress

I was struck by the power of Tom's self-expression in drawing and the relief this seemed to bring. From not talking about his mother at all, he reached a point of being quite comfortable about showing his drawings, first to me and Kate, and then to his Dad and the other trek members. Since returning to Scotland he has happily returned to school, has very good peer relations, and plays more co-operatively with his sister. He appears to have taken on a slightly protective role towards Kate, often calming conflicts between her and their Dad.

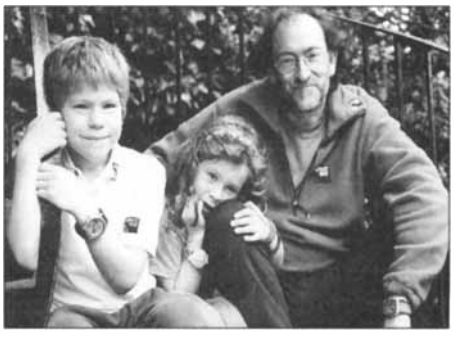
It is impossible to know how much the trip and the counselling may benefit Tom in the long-term, but I am confident that the counselling helped him through the trip and that the trip helped him grieve in a healthy way.

Kate seemed less traumatised and more spontaneous in expressing her feelings of loss from the outset. Being four years of age her understanding of death and the purpose of the trip was very much less than Tom's and her memories of her mother were sketchy. If internal representations of the dead person help children work through the loss in the years following bereavement, then maybe it was important for Kate to build on and consolidate her images and memories of her mother (perhaps the elaborate drawing of Alison also helped here). I feel that this, and improving her understanding of death, were the main benefits of the trip for Kate, rather than promoting mourning *per se.* I hope that she will be better equipped to deal with, and work through, her loss as she grows up.

When Kate and I meet now, she shows great enthusiasm to see me, but is not upset at parting. She is busy with life and is less frantic about searching for a replacement mother. Both children are more content to express their feelings about their loss than they were before the visit to see K2.

Filming and ethics

The filming of the counselling sessions, and inclusion of parts of them in the BBC documentary, complicated the ethics of the trip. Tom and Kate were my friends and I would like to think of our conversations about their mother as like those with any friend of the family. However, I was in the official role of 'doctor' and hence the sessions could be seen as confidential patient-doctor exchanges. To broadcast the children's feelings and emotions to the nation could seem thoughtless and possibly harmful.



Tom, Jim and Kate, Sept 1997 *Photo by Robert Davidson*

On the other hand, the British have been slow to recognise that children do experience grief and feelings of loss, and that it can be helpful to allow and encourage them to express these feelings. Society continues to try to protect bereaved children by keeping them from funeral services and not talking about the dead person in their presence. The evidence is reasonably clear that remembering, crying and talking in these circumstances is healthy. We felt such a documentary film, with large viewing figures, might help to dispel some of the less helpful attitudes.

As far as confidentiality goes, consent from the parent is enough to cover most things within reason although consent from the child, if he or she is of sufficient understanding, should also be sought. Tom and Kate saw the film with me before it was broadcast, and seemed quite matter-of-fact about their exploits on film. The footage of Alison cut into the film was far more powerful and difficult for them: the ability of video footage of the dead person to almost 'resurrect' him or her into young people's lives could well confuse their conceptualisation of death and be emotionally difficult. To Tom and Kate, at age four and six, being broadcast to the nation did not seem to faze them, but we cannot know what they may feel when, as teenagers or adults, they reflect on this episode of their lives.

I would like to thank Jim Ballard and BBC Books for their kind permission to publish this article, which is based on a chapter in One and Two Halves to K2, *by James Ballard, London, UK. 1996.*

Reference

1. Heegard M. What to Do When Someone Very Special Dies. Minneapolis, USA: Woodland Press, 1991. Available from Cruse Bereavement Care, 126 Sheen Road, Richmond TW9 1UR, UK.