

BEL



MOONEY

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That, no doubt, is the work that each of us should spend a lifetime doing: rubbing the gold piece put in our hand at birth, so that it shines ten thousand times more brightly when death comes to steal it.

From *The Eighth Day* by Christian Bobin (French writer, born 1951)

DEAR BEL

THREE years ago, my now former husband came home and told me he loved me like a brother, but was leaving, after five years of civil partnership and 11 years together.

This came just two weeks after his 40th birthday. I had organised a party, helped him to start a new business, booked a holiday...

I fell to pieces. Naturally, there had been someone else (younger) for six months.

Eventually he admitted there had been various other physical

encounters over the 11 years we were together.

He left us in a financial mess, but through determination I paid off the debts and legally ended the civil partnership within six months.

We stayed in contact for two years, but when he told me he was engaged to the guy he left me for, I stopped.

It has been a year now. Since those dark days, I've been promoted at work and have lots of friends, but I'm stuck.

I simply don't have the courage to go out and meet someone.

I'm scared this is 'it'. Divorce is bad enough, but to be out of a gay civil partnership, you can't even tick the box... I feel lumbered with the words divorced, single.

It's lovely to have the extra money each month and peace and quiet at home, but I'm working myself into a corner. I go to the gym, but I am just a face in the crowd and for anyone I might meet, there will be a younger, fitter lad just around the corner. So what's the point? Oh, and how do I face the ex and my 'replacement'?

We avoid each other by drinking in different gay pubs in town. But that won't last for ever and then I will have to face his relationship and my failures head on.

I am 42 and stuck. This isn't what I want or how I thought life was going to be.

My friends say I am a better person without my ex and that I should have moved on by now.

A gay divorce support group would be helpful, but where is live there's very little support.

Any advice?

SIMON

and the damage done by it and my ex stops me.

I have not had any physical contact with a man since August 2014 (a one-night stand) as it took a lot to rebuild my confidence.

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AFTER three years you certainly should be picking yourself up, yet as I write the word 'should' I check myself, because people do not move according to preordained rules, like automata.

What matters is your *own* sense that it's time. Three years ago, you had a terrible shock, knowledge of the love affair made worse by the discovery of all those cheap infidelities as well as his incompetence at even paying a bill.

Lost love is one thing, utter disillusion doubles the pain. I confess I don't quite understand your 'paperwork' issue. In your uncut letter you talked about 'dissolving', too, leaving me a bit confused.

All I will say is that getting hung up about a piece of paper and a label is just an excuse not to face what happened and process it.

No one cares whether you are separated, divorced, marriage dissolved, unconsummated... whatever. It doesn't matter. All that matters is that you are still hurt and lonely and need help.

We live in a world obsessed with division. My generation will never understand LGBTQ 'politics' and I have no wish to because the whole

At 42, I'm terrified that life is passing me by...



Picture: NEIL WEBB

thing has become ridiculous. What interests me is common humanity, not the self-obsessed boundaries people put up between each other.

Sick of people wittering on about 'gender', I want to yell: 'The human spirit does not have a penis or a vagina, so for heaven's sake lift your minds from your bits!'

This is not to minimise the terrible way that gay people were — and in so many parts of the world still are — treated.

Nor is it to say that such things don't matter when they cause mental health problems. But they are not *all* that matters. With that

in mind, I mentally excised any references to your sexual orientation from this email because what does it matter that you are gay?

Your story could have been written by any woman or man whose spouse behaved like yours. Infidelity, dishonesty, casual cruelty, disillusion, anger, terrible hurt, the inability to take the next step forward... all are gender-free zones. Do you see what I mean?

This longing to meet someone else but fear of doing so, anxiety that you are getting older while the world is full of young, hot people, the ongoing outrage (yes) that you

were dumped and replaced. Such feelings are staples of this column in letters from men and from women. I want you to look outside yourself and see the whole.

SO WHY seek a local gay support group and, because you can't find one, do nothing? I did an internet search for 'Counselling services + [your city]' and came up with a number of options, so maybe you should start there, with your broken heart, bruised self-confidence and a firm decision

to talk to someone neutral about your problems.

Remember how determined you were to pay the debt he left? Use that steely will right now. Are you going to carry around for ever the 'damage' inflicted on you? Yes, he smashed your hopes, but when that happens we *all* have to cease clinging to the past and act.

Get out there! Meet new people, of all genders. At 42 you're a chick to me, so be determined to greet the ex with an indifferent wave (yes, be a good actor) as you remake your life.

Because — listen — you can.

I feel powerless to comfort my grieving son

DEAR BEL

I AM 61 and have experienced the loss of relatives in my life from an early age. As we get older, we come to expect it. But I am writing to you to ask how we comfort, and what we can say, to our children when they are faced with the loss of their friends when so much younger.

I phoned my son for a catch-up and he told me that a friend of his collapsed a few days ago and is not likely to recover from a coma. No explanation yet as to the cause.

My son is 31, so his friend is a similar age. His friend's parents are already being asked about organ donation.

I feel so sad for my son losing his friend and am at a loss as to what to say to him. We live many miles apart. I said: 'I don't know what to say.' He replied 'There's nothing you can say', but in a sympathetic way.

Bel, how do we talk about death to others? How do we find words of comfort within ourselves in order to help others?

JAN

'Give sorrow words. The grief that does not speak Whispers the o'erfraught heart, and bids it break.'

THOSE lines from Shakespeare's *Macbeth* express the truth that grief must be spoken or else it turns in on itself and makes loss so much worse.

Yet people are not being feeble when, faced with grief, they mumble: 'I don't know what to say.' Philosophers and saints quail before the enormity of death; their rationalisations or beliefs sticking on the tongue.

How much worse when the dying or dead person is not elderly. We can't help believing there is an allotted parcel of time — 'four score years and ten.'

When a child dies, the anguish of those around (not just the grieving parents) is rooted in a sense of the unfulfilled potential of that life: all the experiences not had, all the joy not felt. When the young person is 31, the response is similar: 'It's too soon,' we

cry. Not for most of us the consolation of the Victorians: another angel has joined Jesus in heaven. In our secular age you are left with no life-raft in the black sea of grief.

So to the helpless words: 'I don't know what to say.' Well, it would be better not to begin with 'I'. This is not about *your* feelings, but (in this case) your son's. Better to say: 'How dreadful it must be for you to imagine him like that and I shiver to think what his parents are going through. God, I'm so sorry.'

That is what you're thinking, isn't it? Those are meaningful, sincere words.

When we try to give comfort to others, let all our thoughts and spoken words try to begin with the word 'you'. It's a helpful suggestion when faced with life's huge rites of passage. This is not the accusatory 'you' of quarrels, because in that circumstance it is banned. This is the 'you' of reaching out and sharing.

When Jewish people 'sit shiva' (when the bereaved stay home, visited by those who care, often bringing food), the conversation is about the dead person, and can often turn to sad laughter when memories are shared. ('You remember

that time Sam kicked a football through Uncle Abe's greenhouse and ran away?')

So you could say: 'You must have so many memories of great times with him; it must be unbelievable to think of him now. Do drop a note to his parents. They'll need that.'

The best way to start talking of death is to recognise it is something we all share. Therefore, we must find a common language; one that speaks to our own fear of grief as well as to the bereaved. Speaking *from* the heart is the best start. The head may be tongue-tied, but the heart is overflowing with pity and terror.

There is no way to make sense of death to the young (or anyone), so murmur the truth: 'You must feel it's horribly unfair. So do I, love, honestly, it makes me want to howl.'

When someone is a long way away, it feels impossible to give comfort over the phone. But you can say: 'Oh, you sound so miserable. If only I could be there to give you a hug.'

And if you're in the room with someone and feel helpless, you can say: 'You look so tired. No wonder, it's beyond awful. Let me make you a cup of tea.'

AND FINALLY

Wellbeing is just one click away

THOUGH I often suggest counselling (see today's main letter), I know it isn't always plain sailing.

At two difficult times in my life I went to see psychotherapists, recommended by a friend who knows about such things.

They were OK, but in each case I went three times, then stopped. I guess I felt the two women weren't right for me, though I reckoned someone with a much stronger personality would have been. You only discover by trying.

In truth, I don't know a single person who wouldn't benefit from confiding in an experienced outsider, to try to make sense of worries.

When I was 'down' last August, I got in touch with my friend, clinical psychologist Linda Blair (author of *The Key To Calm*), and she did me much good. The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy has a separate site to help you find an experienced therapist in your area. You can watch a video of one of the professionals talking.

A website I have never mentioned here is *Wellbeing.org*. It was set up by former journalist Louise Chunn in 2013 and has received recognition by being added to NHS Choices as a recommended resource on its counselling and psychotherapy pages — [nhs.uk/Conditions/Counselling/Pages/Introduction.aspx](https://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Counselling/Pages/Introduction.aspx)

Louise Chunn explains the purpose of her website: 'We have gathered a range of information, tips and advice about all aspects of health and wellbeing, alongside our innovative therapist directory of professional mind and body practitioners from across the UK. We hope, like our name, wellbeing, we can empower you to build the happiest, healthiest version of yourself.'

Like a good magazine, the website offers much to read. There's a section called 'What's worrying you' and 'Stress' to find useful suggestions.

The 'Find a therapist' section looks useful. I like the way the site tackles subjects as various as spirituality and specifics, such as body dysmorphia.

I hope you find this non-commercial enterprise useful. As I said, you can only find out if you try.

■ BEL answers readers' questions on emotional and relationship problems each week. Write to Bel Mooney, Daily Mail, 2 Derry Street, London W8 5TT, or e-mail bel.mooney@dailymail.co.uk. A pseudonym will be used if you wish. Bel reads all letters but regrets she cannot enter into personal correspondence.