

## **OpenLearn mini documentary**

### ***Narratives of COVID***

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SHARON MALLON: The pandemic profoundly impacted us all. The restrictions and loss of personal freedoms left many isolated without access to loved ones. This film shows an extract from the book *Narratives of COVID Loss, Dying, Death and Grief during COVID 19*, capturing three individual narratives from the authors themselves.

LAURA PATTERSON: TTFN by Laura Patterson, Dr Graham, Edward Hobson was and is my dad. Funny and clever with a BSc, MSc Ph.D., and DFC, he described himself as the real doctor and invested a lifetime in the genetic engineering of fruit. But his ability to alter genomes couldn't stave off Parkinson's or prevent his two subsequent heart attacks. A fortnight after celebrating Dad's 90th birthday, his low blood pressure mental hospital admission.

My head hurt as I considered his loneliness. A few days post admission, a doctor rang to say Dad had agreed to a do-not-resuscitate order. I sat with this information angry at the thought, coupled with an awareness of the COVID crisis and the need for a sensible approach. A second call came. We're very sorry to tell you that the man in the next bed has COVID, and we've been nursing them both without PPE.

My heart shattered into a million pieces. I wanted to scream at COVID and at God, but in the end, all that labour for me were 14 interminable days of waiting and praying. After 10 days with promises that I'd find carers for him at home and would nurse him myself. Despite living 120 miles away, they agreed to transport him home.

His wit, fierce determination and resilience had gone, replaced by a frail old man, incoherent, incontinent, and immobile. And whilst the changing of soiled pads and flannel bed baths felt like a pitiful reflection of our relationship, these were the very last acts of love I could bestow on him. There were some bright times once we dressed him to sit for his soup at a table and he reminisced coherently about old friends.

That day I took one final photo of him, smiling. Another time he asked about my Ph.D., and I was able to reassure him that I, too, would be a proper doctor. One day I would leave the house only to weep uncontrollably because even in my denial, I knew the end was coming. Gradually, he stopped eating and would only accept spoons full of water.

The interminable wait for death to arrive made me wonder if leaving would help him take that final breath. I packed and after a wrenching goodbye, I left. Minutes after the carers rang to say Dad had slipped away. With the searing loss in my heart. I arrived home and everything and nothing had changed. One week later, we came together for the last goodbye.

Everyone gathered in disparate solitary groups near the church. No hellos or hugs, just waves of sad acknowledgment. The sight of the coffin broke me. My brother hesitated. The social distancing rules were clear, but he put compassion before risk and held me as I wept on his shoulder. Ten months have passed, and the pain explodes in waves. Having no parents is like being lost at sea, abandoned and alone.

My dad's death won't feature in any COVID statistics, though it played a substantial part in his demise with an inability to grieve as we would want and no chance to fully celebrate the life lost. The ache and tragedy remain.

JACQUI PRICE: It could not have happened at a worse time. By Jacqui Price. It is February 2020. My brother-in-law calls me unexpectedly. I was right to feel anxious. My sister Jo has had a brain haemorrhage and is being transferred to the neuro centre in Liverpool. Although conscious, the scans show a critical haemorrhage that needs surgical intervention. I phoned Dad to share this distressing news.

A widower of ten years. This is a difficult call. I drive to see Jo early the next morning, knowing that by the time I arrive, she will be post-surgery and in intensive care. I pray everything will be successful, but I'm an emergency nurse and I know the odds are stacked against her. Being a nurse makes being on the other side a strange and surreal experience.

You know some things, but not everything. My family looked to me to fill in the blanks, but I only have more blanks. My sister has two children. They are young adults. My heart breaks watching them struggle with the situation over the following days and weeks. And it only gets worse. I return each week by March. There is talk of a transfer to the neuro rehab ward where they hope she may improve from the low awareness state that she's now in.

Then COVID strikes. Visiting is reduced to one person per week given to her husband, but with some empathy for our children to also visit. Then lockdown brings an end to all visits.

We're all lost in a world of sadness and fear. Jill is transferred to a long-term rehab centre in Chester. No visiting or way of communicating with her.

What must she think is happening? When we last visited, she knew who we were. Jill was still in there. She may know nothing of COVID. She must feel abandoned, cared for by strangers. Whilst we live our busy lives. The sadness and powerlessness is overwhelming. We send text messages to each other as it's too painful to hear the wobble in the words.

So, hugs and love are expressed through crosses and emojis. Then the call. Jill may have COVID. We all hold our breath. This could be it. And we cannot even be with her. Relief. It's not COVID. And she's back to the rehab centre. This happens three times. It never gets easier. The news improves and visiting restarts. But we're outside, six feet apart, gowned, gloved, and masked.

No touching. Not even a hand squeeze. Jill now struggles with facial recognition. I'm fairly sure she doesn't know who I am or what is happening. Dad is still in Wales. Different lockdowns mean we cannot coordinate a joint visit. He is so sad and lonely. Tears are shared after each video call with him. I visit Jill in December this time behind a clear screen.

There are smiles. The distance is immense. I'm holding back my tears and frustration. As a nurse, I have to get physically close to my patients, but I cannot even hold my sister's hand. Her physical protection is absolutely paramount. But what about her emotional protection? The staff tell me not to worry. How do I explain that? It's not worry.

It is a need to show love and to connect with Jill when she's not able to speak. She's unable to tell us how frightened she is. Unable to ask when will things be better? I don't know the answers, but I do know that the decision to protect physical health above emotional wellbeing has had an incomprehensible impact on so many lives.

Our future will attest to the emotional trauma that these decisions have wrought.

MARTIN CLARKE: On the 27th of March 2020. My aunt died in hospital, having contracted coronavirus around a week earlier. My uncle had been able to make one visit the day before she died, but was to his lasting sorrow, unable to be with her for her final moments. The end for my aunt was seemingly, mercifully swift. Within a week of being diagnosed with COVID 19, she and her husband were told that her death was imminent.

And within little more than 24 hours of that, she had died. After the initial sadness on hearing the news of her death and subsequently reminiscing with family members about my childhood in which my aunt had been very present, I sought to understand her death in the context of

what was at the time a new national and global situation, and one unlike any that I'd experienced before.

These were the early days in the pandemic, as we adjusted to the strangeness of the first lockdown and attempted to process emerging information about the nature of the virus and its effects. Looking at a Facebook post I made shortly after. I can't help but notice the death toll that's recorded. Four deaths in one part of the UK didn't sound that many even then, but I couldn't have imagined her smaller number would end up seeming in relation to the overall number of deaths that would eventually occur.

As time wore on and I became aware that conspiracy theorists were claiming that the impact of the virus was being overstated. Their rhetoric brought my aunt's death back to the forefront of my mind the casual dismissal of deaths such as my answers, those that would have happened anyway rode roughshod over the experiences of so many families.

While the emotional strain on those who died will never be known, the bringing forward of these deaths by days, weeks or months was not some mere inconvenience, but the robbing of precious final moments of intimacy and dignity. The rawness of grief has faded, but there are still things that are hard to grasp.

Just as an end to COVID 19 feels difficult to imagine, so too does finding a way of commemorating its indelible effects.