



Viewpoint Mike Smith

Photography is, first and foremost, considered to be something with which we record life. But it has its part to play in death, too

Death is one of the inevitables in life, yet we find our own mortality, and that of our loved ones, difficult to reconcile with what happens after death. And when we lose someone close to us, it leaves an emotional hole that is never filled, the pain just dulling with time. In consequence, memories become bittersweet and photography therefore has a key role to play. The invention of photography coincided with the high mortality experienced by Victorian society, so the development of photos of the deceased (memento mori) is fascinating in how they immortalised the individual (find out more at <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-36389581>).

But the Victorians were not the only ones who approached the subject of death. Nan Goldin, in her seminal work documenting the 1980s New York gay community, not only revealed their lives but also their unexpected deaths. Something she refers to as both a volume of loss as well as a ballad of love.

In coping with death, particularly of the young, relatives seek to record everything about their loss from life – possessions, memories and digital content (think Facebook, Twitter), including increasingly large archives of photos. And they may also want to record the funeral. My limited experience here not surprisingly shows that guests don't want to be photographed, but the family desire a tangible record of the breadth and depth of the life lived.

Capturing the final moment

I photographed my father after he passed away – it was an emotional moment for me, as his death was sudden. Standing in the hospital alone with him, he looked serene, at peace, very much as he had been when I last saw him. I just wanted to be alone and it took me some time before I actually picked the camera up. I shot handheld under the fluorescent light, just happy to be making a record – my last tangible contact with him. Would I go back and do it again if I could? You bet, and I would change a million things. But my preference is actually to remember him as the father from my childhood.



Mike's father, as he would like to remember him

'I shot handheld, just happy to be making a record – my last tangible contact with him'

My belief, then, is that people generally like to remember the young as they were, while there seems to be a preference to remember the old as they once were. At least, that was the case for me. Consider your memories of loved ones and think about how you would want to remember them – and then consider how you would want to be remembered.

All funeral photographers should be commended for the work they do, and we should strive to create these memories, by recording at least some of the scope of what the individual once was. To remember them and keep that essence alive. And that makes the work of UK-based charity Remember My Baby both essential and emotionally draining for those involved. It's a charity thoroughly deserving of support for the work it does and those it serves.

Mike Smith is a London-based wedding and portrait photographer. Visit www.focali.co.uk

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