

JULIA SAMUEL HAS MADE IT HER MISSION TO CHANGE THE WAY WE ENGAGE WITH GRIEF, INSPIRED BY HER OWN UPBRINGING, WITH ALL ITS ARISTOCRATIC RESERVE, AND HER FRIENDSHIP WITH PRINCESS DIANA. SHE TALKS TO GAVANINDRA HODGE

THE HEALER

JULIA SAMUEL HAS a strategy for dealing with the anxiety spirals that can afflict even the most balanced people. "You need an interrupter," she explains over Zoom, looking spritely in a silk shirt. "On a really bad downward spiral our system goes into hyperarousal. It stays there until we do something to bring the gears down. It doesn't really matter what: going for a run, picking daffodils, talking to a friend, stroking a dog... but that interrupter drops cortisol and raises oxytocin, and that enables you to connect with other people again; it makes you feel sane."

Samuel, 61, is a sort of human oxytocin, an antidote to despair. She has been a grief counsellor for more than three decades, working in Bayswater, west London. She was great friends with Princess Diana and remains close to Harry and William. She is Prince George's godmother and, it has been speculated, is the "friend of Harry's mother" to whom the Duchess of Sussex went for advice on navigating pain and English aristocratic reserve, as revealed in her interview with Oprah Winfrey.

These are subjects in which Samuel has deep wells of experience. Born into the wealthy Guinness family, known mainly for brewing and banking, she was brought up in the sort of home where there was a genteel yet steely silence around sadness (and there was a lot of it). This was a damaging strategy that Samuel has refused to perpetuate, choosing instead the harder path of bringing grief into the light, examining it in all its gnarly complexity, talking, feeling, transforming. "The things you do to avoid pain are the things that do you harm," she says. Her mission is to heal every body, not just the sort of people who can afford to pay £150 an hour for therapy.

Samuel has turned herself into a one-woman grief industry, starting in 2017 with the publication of her first book, *Grief Works*, which has been sold in 17 countries. "I wanted to democratise the idea of therapy," she says. "So, if you can't get a therapist, you can buy a £10 book and begin to have a handle on

your experience. I hoped it would make a difference, and it definitely has; people keep it in their handbag or by their bed. They use it as a sort of talisman."

There was a bitter serendipity to the fact that Samuel published her second book, *This Too Shall Pass*, about managing change, in March 2020, just as the Covid-19 pandemic struck, transforming all our lives. Recognising that this was a moment of collective trauma—"I was getting all these messages from people saying, 'What am I going to do, I don't know how to cope, I'm so scared'"—Samuel took to Instagram and began posting weekly interviews about grief, as well as offering tutorials about different coping strategies. In addition, Samuel hosts monthly online sessions with Good Grief, a resource for the bereaved, that each focus on a different aspect of bereavement. She has launched an app, also called *Grief Works*, which offers a guided 28-day programme to help people to process loss using "tools, meditation, films of me and audio of me." There is also a new podcast, *A Living Loss*, about coping with losses that aren't death: "breaking up with a partner, a health diagnosis, moving country..."

and a forthcoming book on the same subject. She is on Imperial College's ethics committee, is a vice-president of the British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy and helped to establish the charity Child Bereavement UK, in which she is still heavily involved as a patron. She no longer works with bereaved parents at St Mary's Hospital in Paddington, a role she held for 25 years, but over the lockdowns she says she has supported a team of health professionals at the hospital, "twice a week. They have experienced unbelievable trauma."

She still also has her private practice, as a coach about 15 people a week. "I could work 24/7. The demand for support is way beyond what any therapist can meet. In the past year I have seen more suffering than ever in my 30-year career. It has been terrible to witness, but also it has come to the point where I feel like I am doing what I need to be doing. That has felt very meaningful."

Samuel is driven by a relentless curiosity and an urge to connect. "I'm a twin, so I like connection. In utero, twins have their noses pressed against each other, and that is my preferred position. I always move towards someone, but I do it by listening. Being the youngest of five, there were a lot of voices. I learnt to listen and to observe in order to try to make sense of what was going on."

Samuel's mother, Pauline Guinness, had five children in the space of five years, including two sets of twins. Miranda and Sabrina were the eldest; Anita was the singleton in the middle; Hugo and Julia were the youngest. "That is a strong dynamic," Samuel says. "The image I always have is that we were like little birds, fighting for the worms."

It was a traditional childhood in which the family spent weekdays in London and weekends in the country, the children all living in the nursery, only permitted to use the back door and the back stairs. "My mother was very glamorous. I'd go into her dressing room in the evening before she'd go out. We didn't see my dad that much." Everyday emotional care was provided by the Guinness governess, Miss Lowndes; Samuel remembers the cosy contentment to be found sitting on her governess's lap and smelling her Elizabeth Arden Blue Grass perfume. She does not blame her mother for any lack of hands-on parenting.

"I really love my mum. She did a pretty good job. I think both my parents, given who they were and what they knew, did a really good job. I have no axe to grind; they were a part of their generation and they were no different to anybody else. What I feel sad about is how ignorant we all were about trauma." Trauma was the backdrop to Samuel's childhood, unspoken but, in the air, on the mantelpieces, black-and-white photographs of people who Samuel, as a child, understood were connected to her, but knew nothing about: uncles, aunts and grandparents who had died in sudden and heart-breaking ways, but whose stories were never told.

"By the time my mum was 25, both her parents had died, as had her sister, who died from asthma,

'The way that Diana modelled being empathic and compassionate did bring it into the open in British culture'

cleaning the carpet, and her brother Tony, who was killed in the war. My dad's father died of a massive heart attack and his brother was killed in the dentist's chair after having anaesthetic. These were all sudden and traumatic deaths.

"It is really only since I have understood more about trauma that I realise how much my parents were traumatised. The thing about grieving is that it is adaptive, it is a natural process, you can learn to live with the new reality that the person you love has died. Trauma is not adaptive. It sets the fear network in the brain; you become stuck and you have to use lots of things to unblock it."

This was not understood in the postwar years. And Samuel's parents were part of a generation who had experienced collective trauma during the Second World War and were brought up by a generation traumatised by the First World War.

PHOTOGRAPH BY HANNA-KATRINA JEDROSZ

