

Touching Souls: Healing with Bereavement Photography

By Todd Hochberg

A bereft mother and father sit side by side, tenderly cradling their dead baby in their arms. A photographer, present at their request, opens and closes the shutter of his camera, capturing and infusing the energy of the moment on to a light sensitized silver-coated copper plate. One hundred and forty years after that daguerreotype was made, we can feel that couple's grief. Six years ago, I ran across an example of one of these antique memorial images at a flea market. I was struck by how evocative it was. Perhaps my recent divorce and struggle with my own grief figured into my attraction to collecting these photographs. I contacted a hospital chaplain friend who worked with parents experiencing perinatal loss and asked if I could help. My photographic work with grieving parents began soon after.

Thanatologists have posited and studies have shown that photographs can be helpful for grieving parents. Photographs of babies, some with their grieving parents, are valuable emotional touchstones and mementos for many families. For the past couple of decades, many hospital bereavement programs have used photography in the protocol for care of these parents.

My documentary style bereavement photographs are made after delivery, in the hospital labor and delivery area or in the neonatal intensive care unit, during the private time parents have to hold their dying or dead baby. I work to create photographs that can serve as a gentle link to memories and feelings pertaining to the precious short time spent with their baby. I work unobtrusively as a willing participant, making images about this experience without posing or staging. Though the images typically show mom and dad with their baby, often other family and caregivers are included, and religious rituals may be performed. These significant caring relationships and rituals are important to render and I also strive to elucidate the emotional and spiritual energy in the room. When all involved, including myself, are fully present and in the moment, the images seem to make themselves. They are truly a collaboration. I spend anywhere from 30 minutes to three hours or more with parents in support, my cameras at my sides much of the time, always cognizant of their vulnerability and needs.

I meet with families four to six weeks following their baby's death for an hour or so, also inviting caregivers that parents may have felt close with. We talk a while, reconnecting and assessing where they are emotionally. I present an archival album of 30 to 60 black and white 8 x 10 photographs arranged chronologically. We walk through the images together, revisiting the loss, allowing them space to emote and comment if they wish.

During more than five years of this work, I've learned from parents that the photographs facilitate their grieving by:

- making their baby's life and death real for them—a significant issue with perinatal death and an acknowledgement so important for parents;
- validating their feelings, both at the time of their baby's death and up to the present;
- being an affirmation of parenthood;

- providing a tangible record of their time with their baby, including cherished close-up details of their baby's physical features and evidence of loving familial bonds;
- allowing them to connect with the many feelings and memories that may have gotten lost in the torrent of overwhelming grief at the time or in the weeks since;
- offering them an illustrated narrative of "their story" for themselves and the loved ones they choose to share it with, fostering greater social support and connection.

One father, whose son died after several days in the NICU, indicated at our meeting that he was particularly anxious coming to view the photographs, his grief being so strong. After a time of viewing, he wound up cradling the album of photos in his arms. Smiling through the tears running down his cheeks, he turned to his wife and assured, "You are a good mom."

In follow-up with one mom two years after her baby's stillbirth, she offered the following written comments.

I shared the photos with family and friends. My mom, sister and best friend were in tears. In some odd way I felt satisfied that they understood ... that I did have a devastating loss...

With the photographs I can grieve my daughter. The pictures provide me with the details of my baby.... They help me in dealing with our loss because they make her real to me.

... I want the memories. They heal me. Yes, I have her ashes even the clothes she wore but nothing compares to the pictures. When I miss her I pull them out and look at her. I cry all over again. And, I think it's healthy."

Another couple wrote following their baby's stillbirth:

"You have brought our son Jeremiah to life, giving him personality and a role of his own in each record of our brief time together. You have captured the beauty of our son. You have also captured every nuance of emotion we experienced...every heartache, every proud moment, and especially the love.... You have validated our role in the experience by enabling us to share with our family and friends an important part of ourselves, a tale which could not be told adequately with words or even tears. You've captured the transformation that took place in our lives and hearts that night; we are not the same people we were before we met Jeremiah."

These bereavement photographs play a significant role in helping parents grieve and heal. As time passes, the images enable parents to hold onto precious memories even as they move forward in their lives. Photographs also help parents find the treasure in their adversity. They are an affirmation of these beloved babies' lives, and held dear by bereaved parents. ■

About the Author

Todd Hochberg is a photographer with Advocate Health Care in Chicago. His bereavement photographs are part of the permanent collection of the George Eastman House International Museum of Photography and have been featured in Life Magazine and the Chicago Sun-Times. Some of Hochberg's images may be seen in the "Perspective" section of the Santa Fe Center for Visual Art Web journal at www.photoprojects.org