

On the Importance of Remembering

When Derek passed away without a next of kin, it was a stark reminder of lives that too often go unnoticed. Filmmaker and photographer Mark Chapman tells us about his friend Derek, challenging us to reflect on dignity, loss, and our human connection in the modern world

[Mark Chapman](#)

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When I arrived at the crematorium the doors were locked and the service information hadn't been changed from the day before. I had travelled from London to Middlesbrough the previous night and was suddenly nervous that Derek's funeral service had been cancelled and no-one had told me. It had been extremely difficult to find out information about his death and I had relied on the homeless hostel - where Derek had lived for many years - to keep me informed of developments. [Derek](#) had no family, so this would be what is rather prosaically called a 'public health funeral' organised by the local authorities when there is no next of kin.

Whilst waiting, I walked across the empty, frost-covered car park and took some pictures of the bare trees in the crematorium garden. When Gill arrived - the representative from the hostel - she laughed and told me that the hotel where I'd stayed overnight was infamous in the local area for swingers' parties and a variety of dodgy behaviour (*though all I saw there were blokes glumly sinking into their pints*). Finally, Rodney, the hospital chaplain, arrived. The service would indeed be going ahead. Apparently, the crematorium holds around one public health funeral a month. Rodney, as usual, had been given little information about the deceased. In fact, he seemed a bit surprised that anyone had turned up. I told him I was a friend of Derek's and he asked if I wanted to say some words about him during the service. I felt that someone needed to personalise the service in some way, so I said yes.

Derek's body arrived in an elegant oak veneer box in the back of a hearse. Black-clad pallbearers carefully removed the coffin from the back of the hearse and carried it solemnly into the chapel. Teesside Crematorium has two chapels - St. Hilda's and St. Bede's - and the service was scheduled for the latter. There was something slightly sterile about the chapel's interior with its flat screen TV featuring a close-up image of a burning candle, copious wood panelling and magnolia curtains.

Attending the service were just Gill and myself. I was the only person at the funeral who had even met Derek. I wondered about how Rodney would have delivered this short service if we hadn't turned up. How infinitely sadder it would have been to speak those words to an entirely empty room. During the service, Rodney kept on saying that 'little

was known' about Derek - not his fault, of course - but the repetition of those words irritated me. This was why I had been determined that Derek wasn't alone at his own funeral - because I knew about him.

Derek had died a few weeks earlier. I hadn't heard from him in about a month - something I thought was unusual - so on my way home from work I texted him. About an hour later someone - a contact unknown to me - informed me via Instagram that Derek had died. That he had been robbed at the hostel and in his resulting fear and depression had locked himself away with a large stash of amphetamine. A few days later the hostel staff had found him in a terrible state. He then suffered multiple organ failure and died in hospital. I had never really thought about his death before it happened. I'm not sure I was prepared for it.

Derek and I had been friends for over a decade. I first met him when I was making a film about Camrex House, a notorious hostel in Sunderland. In one of its many mouse-infested rooms, Derek lived without the safety nets many of us take for granted. Significant life choices - involving financial difficulties, physical and mental health - were always close to the surface. When Camrex House finally closed, Derek was rehoused and we lost touch. After a few months of trying to locate him, we finally reconnected: it turned out that he had been moved to a hostel in Middlesbrough. Shortly after this we would begin work on a photography project that would end up becoming a book, *God's Promises Mean Everything*. For years I would occasionally ask him if he had any images of himself from *before*, of his younger self, but he didn't. When we discovered that publishers were interested in the photographs we made, it felt like an amusing irony that Derek would refer to the book as 'the photo album' - as though it contained rose-tinted views of family life. These photographs were the only images of him that existed. Now those images formed a whole book all about his experiences. I understood the possible whiplash effect of this, but he loved the completed book and in the weeks after I gave him a copy he would contact me almost daily.

The hostel where he lived was not a home. In the past year, the owners had introduced a 'no visitors' policy and stopped serving regular meals to residents (a lifeline for Derek). This obviously had a devastating effect, and I can't quite get rid of my outrage about this. As a result, I'd frequently send him deliveries of food from a local supermarket, but whenever we'd meet up he would confess that he had not eaten anything for days. We would immediately go to the local pub for food, which he'd ravenously demolish (we also discovered the joys of Wetherspoons' all-you-can-drink hot chocolate refills). Despite this, he had looked noticeably thinner and older in the last few months of his life.

It seems that society's enduring idea of people who live in hostels is of 'wasters' and 'layabouts', lazy *Benefits Street*-style stereotyping which, even now, years after the Tory party's catastrophic austerity programme, is present in our political rhetoric. I've met some extraordinary people who have simply been beaten down by misfortune. We like to imagine that the safety nets of family and social connection are forever stable, but the stories of the people I've met have revealed this to be a fiction. We're all vulnerable. At any moment we might be confronted with a tragedy like the one Derek suffered when he lost his daughter in a hit and run accident.

Rodney, the chaplain, looked up and signalled that it was my turn to speak. It was the first time I had spoken at a funeral and I probably would have been nervous if I'd had more time to prepare. As it was, I simply verbalised whatever came to mind. I spoke about Derek's generosity, his resilience in difficult circumstances, about how honest and genuine he was - perhaps not characteristics usually associated with people who have a long-term drug habit. He was a very gentle soul; perhaps too sensitive. He would soak up the hostel's brutal atmosphere and turn it inward. I thought about his last days and I wished he would have reached out to me. Only once did I hear my voice tremble with emotion.

I then spoke about when I knew we were becoming friends. The moment that came to mind was one I have been thinking about a lot over the last few weeks. I visited him at the hostel shortly after we re-connected and one afternoon after a series of sleepless nights (due to my noisy neighbours) I fell asleep in his room. I woke up a short time later and he looked over at me smiling as he cleaned up his kitchenette, probably amused that this hostel outsider now felt so comfortable in his presence. Mildly embarrassed, I jokingly asked him who the hell he thought he was looking at and he just kept smiling warmly.

The curtains closed around the coffin and he was gone. It was all over.

Looking back, I think I was attempting to make him feel like he was not alone in the world. Some people want to just disappear - to become lost in their sadness and despair and recede from view, inviting the end. As sad as that may sound, it's their right to do so. However, I don't think Derek was like that. He wanted to connect. He liked to be photographed; he liked the company and the attention. Whenever I photographed someone else at the hostel I could see that he would become almost imperceptibly jealous. He would fade into the background and quietly monitor the scene; waiting for the gaze of the camera to return to him.

It's hard to deal with the sudden absence that death brings. I'm going to miss his gentle humour and his kindness, his friendship and creative collaboration. I probably photographed him more than I've ever photographed anyone. I'd be lying if I said I knew why - it just evolved that way - but it was a privilege that he allowed me to tell his story.

The book we made has now become a memorial and Derek deserves to be remembered. I'm going to miss him very deeply.