

Title: **Episode 11. Last Train**

Speakers: Georgie Vestey, Dead Honest & Liam Johnston, Railway Chaplain

Interview Transcription

Georgie Vestey: How often does death intersect your work as a chaplain?

Liam Johnston: Across the whole of the network it works out on average about once every 30 hours somebody loses their life on the railway, and that can be via a deliberate act, or it can be by trespass and accident, but it works out about every 30 hours we see a fatality on the railway.

Georgie Vestey: I'm Georgie Vestey and this is Dead Honest, a podcast where we talk honestly about death. If you travel regularly on the railway, the chances are that at some point you'll have heard a message over the loudspeaker that a person has been struck by a train. What happens next? My guest this week is Liam Johnston, he's a Railway Chaplain who spends his days offering that much needed support to the many people affected by these incidents.

It's important but very confronting work and I want to make you aware of this because **this episode contains references to suicide**. I start by asking Liam, what happens after that tragic announcement is made?

Liam Johnston: When that happens the driver will come to a halt. Will contact the control and the signal box. Network Rail will dispatch a mobile operations manager or MOM, the driver then will be judged whether or not they are fit to continue, usually not fit to continue and a new driver will be brought in. British Transport Police or perhaps even the local police force, will arrive and they will do the body recovery. If there's suspicious circumstances, that could be a forensic recovery. Local funeral services will be called to collect the body and the remains of the individual that sadly has lost their life is treated with the absolute upmost respect in these cases.

Georgie Vestey: I suppose for most of us we think of the impact on the driver, in particular, and on the family of the person who's taken their life, but I imagine there are other people who are impacted on this that we don't, as members of the public, think may be affected. Who are those people?

Liam Johnston: If you think of an incident being like a cascaded pyramid, so at the very pinnacle of the pyramid is the driver and the individual themselves, but then below there you have other onboard staff, you have the Network Rail signallers, but then beyond there you also have the cleaners of the train. Of course, where a body has been badly disrupted, there may still be body matter caught within the mechanisms of the train. That train will be taken out of service, taken to a depot for cleaning and so the cleaners also experience that same kind of trauma.

We estimate on average directly affected is probably about 45 people within the industry, but beyond that if you take into account family members and friends and witnesses it can run into the hundreds.

George Vestey: You're dealing with that every 30 hours.

Liam Johnston: Obviously we're not able to offer support to all of those hundreds of people, but what we do is we follow up the rail staff as far as we possibly can. We also work with the British Transport Police with their suicide prevention and mental health teams, as well as their fatality investigation teams.

Through them, what they will do is as they are dealing with witnesses or family members or indeed somebody who hasn't actually completed an act of self-harm, they will give them the opportunity of being supported by a chaplain should they wish. What we don't want is for somebody to lose someone on the railway and to be so grief stricken that they go and they either put themselves in danger because they're wanting to lay flowers, or indeed they want to take their own lives because they feel so grief stricken that they want to do the same thing and sometimes in the same place. We try and intervene in order to prevent further loss of life.

George Vestey: Do all drivers ask for support?

Liam Johnston: No, they don't all ask for support. It's obviously very very traumatic for them. For some drivers they will accept the support that the company is offering directly through their employee assistance programmes. Others they just see it as an occupational hazard and as one driver commented, "Basically, it's just so much meat". That may sound a very harsh thing for somebody to say who has just been involved in a fatality, but they are distancing themselves from the act as a way of self-preservation.

I had a driver come to me when I first started on the railway, and he'd had six fatalities and that day was his seventh fatality. The previous six he'd shrugged off but on that seventh for some reason, he needed to talk, and it had brought back the memories from all the previous six that prior to that he felt he'd just shrugged off and moved on from, but in actual fact there was a cumulative effect within him and this seventh one was just enough to push him over the edge to me to talk. He came, he sat down, and he unloaded everything to me. I didn't have to say anything, I just had to sit and listen and eventually he stood up and said, "Thank you, I feel so much better", he just needed somebody to share. By no means does every driver seek support from the chaplain or indeed from other services that are available.

George Vestey: When you see a driver struggling, what is it that you're looking for, what are you seeing?

Liam Johnston: Someone has chosen to use the train that they were driving to take their life. Sometimes the driver will have the feeling of responsibility, they're not responsible at all, there's absolutely nothing they could have done to prevent it. Applying the brake on a train it can still take hundreds of yards if it's going at full speed to stop, it's almost impossible for a driver to do anything apart from just wait for the impact.

When we're talking to drivers, we're trying to take that away from them, so that they can process it in a way that protects their own mental health, their own wellbeing, because they're not responsible. An exception to that, a friend of mine who's actually a train driver or was a train driver in Germany, he was actually the driver of a train that took the life in an accident of 17 people. He was responsible because he passed a signal at danger. He's had to live with that all these years.

Georgie Vestey: Can you talk a little bit more about the circumstances that he faced? In what way was he responsible or would you not feel comfortable talking about that?

Liam Johnston: He's perfectly open to talking about it. His name is Helmut, it was 2 February 1990, he was driving to Frankfurt, the weather was fine, everything was going well, the train stopped at Russelsheim Station I believe it was pronounced. Doors opened, people got off he looked at the signal, everything was okay. Said,

“Please stand clear”, looked at the platform, closed the door, all the displays were okay. He pushed the master control to move forward, checking everything was okay and as he says, “I was not driving too fast or too jerkily”. He says, “I looked at the signal again”, and he says, “Shit. How could that signal be at danger?”

The next thing he remembers is waking up on an IV drip and basically had ran into another train. Those people, those 17 people lost their lives because of his inability to concentrate just for those few seconds as he left the station. He’s lived with that all this time and believe it or not, he still works on the railway although he could never drive a train again.

Georgie Vestey: I can imagine there are rail staff in the UK who have experienced similar. What is the most effective support you can offer rail staff in those circumstances where they may feel that responsibility?

Liam Johnston: As a Chaplain, sometimes you feel absolutely powerless, and you feel absolutely inadequate because there is nothing you can do to fix the situation. The thing with chaplains is we often like to be able to help people. We like to be able to fix things, but there comes a point in our lives where we grow up and we realise that we can’t fix things. It’s at that point that you begin to understand that sometimes the most important thing you can do is to be with people and to share their burden to share their pain, is sometimes all you can do but it’s also the best that can be done.

Georgie Vestey: I’m aware that the people who work on the railways in the UK come from a very diverse cultural backgrounds and with many different faiths. I’m curious to know how you work with other faiths when you’re working with railway staff?

Liam Johnston: We don’t think about ourselves as working with other faiths, we just think of ourselves as working with the railway family. We are there for all faiths and none, we are there to support people. The reality is, is that the people of the other faith recognise people of faith and understand that level of integrity. They may diametrically disagree with our beliefs, but nevertheless they understand that we are people of faith, of integrity and as Muslims will say, “You are people of the book”, Jesus is the second highest prophet in Islam. Other faiths isn’t a problem.

George Vestey: Liam, can I take you back. Can you tell me about the first fatality that you attended as a chaplain; do you remember that?

Liam Johnston: I do, yes, and you'll probably have me in tears. Do you want me to tell you about it?

George Vestey: Yes, I would if you feel okay telling us about it.

Liam Johnston: Okay, the first fatality I was involved with, I was asked to support the family of a young man who'd taken his life. He had been seen on the platform by other passengers kneeling at the side of the platform and as they said in their statements, "It was almost like he was praying". This young man who'd had so many mental health issues over the years had turned to God to try and help him, he was in a mental health institute and a chaplain at the hospital had given him a Bible because he'd asked for one and he'd been reading that.

His mother came and took the Bible off of him and said, "You don't need this", and that weekend, he was allowed out at weekends, he went to see his grandparents and said, "If you don't see me next week, it's because I've gone to God to ask him why he won't make me better". Of course he knelt on the edge of a platform and as the train came in, which wasn't a stopper, he was knelt praying and just pushed himself in front of the train, which had a driver and also a trainee driver on board as well.

That was very hard for me as a Christian minister to go and talk to the family and support the family through that. His mother who had taken the Bible off of him didn't want any involvement at all in the funeral from anybody from church or chaplaincy or anything. Although the grandparents who he'd actually lived with for many years, and they'd almost brought him up, they did but unfortunately their hands were tied.

Georgie Vestey: Every death on the railway is a tragedy, but I wondered if there are some deaths that affect you more than others?

Liam Johnston: Yes, there are. I think the deaths that affect you the most are the ones where there is some kind of personal connection. When I say, "Personal connection", I don't mean that you're a relative or you know but something in the circumstances of the person's life that perhaps resonates with your own experience. I'll give you an example of that, a number of years ago, police officers were clearing the remains of a very badly disrupted body up in the North East, and they do this

with the utmost respect. Every piece of human matter is treated with the utmost respect as if it was a person in themselves.

There was a moment when everything stopped for these officers and that was the moment that they picked up a warrant card and it was one of their own, it was one of their own officers that had taken his life. There are those kinds of incidents where there is something that connects you and when it's children if you've got children yourself, it's quite difficult to deal with sometimes.

George Vestey: When you leave this role, if you leave this role, which are those cases that you've worked with or the people you've supported that will stay with you that have left the deepest mark?

Liam Johnston: I think obviously the first incident that I dealt with because of that Christian faith element, I think that affected me more. Also dealing with the families of the two children who sadly were killed in Wales. It was two families and the parents of one of the children decided that they would go for a picnic on the railway line, and they sat on the edge of the railway line looking out to sea. Said to the four children that were with them, two girls, two boys, that they would watch out for trains.

The children went and played on the railway bridge, dropping stones through the gaps down into the water below of the estuary and a train came, a sprinter came, probably doing about 80 kilometres an hour and because the wind and what have you, the sound is carried away rather than towards you. So, they didn't hear the train coming. The driver saw them and sounded the horn, at which point these four children stood up on the bridge with nowhere to go.

Unfortunately two girls were struck, and they were both tragically killed. I was asked to support the families and to support Railtrack at the time in putting in a memorial to these children. I had to deal with the sets of families and there was a lot of recrimination and blaming, the police were blamed for bringing a prosecution of manslaughter to the mother and stepfather of one of the children. Railtrack because they were responsible for the railway line, they were blamed. The train operating company was blamed, the other parents were all blaming each other, and I was in the middle of that trying to be a conduit between all of them so we could have a

memorial put in place. We eventually did have that memorial put in place, so that whole time will stay with me.

George Vestey: When you've had a day like that, when you've had a day of dealing with families and particularly in that circumstance where there is so much sadness and grief and recrimination, how do you repair yourself?

Liam Johnston: Obviously I get support from within the team, but I think another really important part is being able just to take a little bit of time and to think about the value that you have brought into people's lives at a time when everything seems to have lost value, because they've lost somebody so close to them.

Just being able to process that yourself, to understand yourself, what you have done that has been of some kind of value and as I said before when we're trying to support people, even if it is a tiny, tiny amount of support, sometimes that tiny amount of support can be of the greatest value.

Georgie Vestey: You have attended many families who've had to grapple with the loss of a relative who've chosen to take their life in this way, and I wonder what is it that you see as the more common reasons. What is it that doesn't surprise you when you come across these cases?

Liam Johnston: The thing with human beings is we've got an inbuilt survival mechanism, so to overcome that takes a tremendous amount. I don't think reasons ever surprise me, because I know that for somebody to have got to that point, that mechanism for survival must have been overwhelmed.

Alas the reality is that with some people, if they don't complete suicide and they survive or their lives are saved by somebody intervening, eventually they'll come to the point where they'll often say, "I'm really glad I didn't do that because my life is better, and I understand that that was not a solution to my problems".

Georgie Vestey: Liam we've talked about drivers, and we've talked about families, we've talked about the people who have taken their lives and we've touched on witnesses. I'm mindful when we stand on those train platforms, we see the signs at the end of the platforms to call the Samaritans. What can we do as members of the public if we see somebody looking vulnerable on a platform?

[Liam Johnston](#): You can engage with them. We run a programme or a day every few months with the NHS and British Transport Police and Network Rail etc called, “Are you okay?” It’s simply being able to ask that question, “Are you okay?” Sometimes in our culture we say to people, “Are you okay?” and we’re actually not interested in the answer but if you see somebody vulnerable you need to be interested in the answer.

Sometimes the answers can be not what you’d expect, you can have somebody say, “No, I’m not okay, I’ve just gone overdrawn on my bank account by £10, it’s devastating”. You can think to yourself, “You’ve gone overdrawn by £10, for goodness sake, get a life”, but actually that person who’s gone overdrawn they may have also just had their loved one diagnosed with terminal cancer, or they may have just lost their job or something else. Other things going on in their life and suddenly this one tiny thing, this one straw has broken the camel’s back.

Sometimes when we say, “Are you okay and somebody says something, that seems almost insignificant”, we don’t know their backstory, we don’t know their life’s experiences. If you do see somebody who is vulnerable talk to them, break them out of that mindset that says, “I may as well just end my life, because I’ve got nothing else worth living for”. You show somebody that they are important, that they are worth listening to, that there is something in this world that is worth living for because people do care.

[Georgie Vestey](#): My thanks to Liam Johnson for sharing his experience as a railway chaplain. If you’d like to know more about the organisation he’s part of you, you can visit their website, Railwaymission.org. If you’ve enjoyed the podcast, I’d love you to post a quick review, nothing fancy just literally click the star rating it really helps other people find us.

I’m [George Vestey](#) and this is [Dead Honest](#).