GROWN UP CHILDREN LOSE A PARENT

Impressions of a Cruse Counsellor and parent

The loss of parents in adult life comes to nearly all of us sooner or later, and statistical studies suggest that this is seldom a cause of serious psychological problems. In fact some only achieve full maturity when they become senior members of their families.

Even so, the loss of a parent is sometimes a cause for great distress, and occasionally gives rise to lasting difficulties. The biographical paper which follows gives us some clues why this may be so—deep attachments complicated by earlier fear and ambivalence, unexpected death without the opportunity to say "goodbye", bereavements in which, for various reasons, the younger generation feel unable to express their grief, bereavements where the child had remained unduly dependent on the parent, and bereavement complicated by anger and guilt. All these will be helped, as were most members of the family, by talking through the situation, sharing feelings and revising the assumptions upon which family life is based.

COLIN MURRAY PARKES

When my father died, from cancer, after a long and undignified illness, I was surprised and taken aback by the depth and profoundness of my reaction. I was middle-aged. I had a family of my own. I had not been with him a great deal. I adored him and in the last two years of his life had lost an earlier fear of him and had become very close to him. Shortly before he died he said, "I wish you could come and look after me for the rest of my life." We had found a way to express our affection for each other; and he was gone. It was as though the backcloth of one's life was torn away, as though the solid ground under one's feet had become a quicksand. I did not cry much; I could not. I did not even talk about him very much and that was my loss.

So it was that when my children lost their father—also from cancer, I had an awareness of the significance of this event in their lives. People have been so kind and solicitous to me. "How are you?" I have often been asked. But because the children are grown-up seldom has anyone asked after them. They have all suffered, each in his or her own way. It has taken them more than two years to start emerging from their deep grief.

Certainly for the three who were with him when he died there was a degree of acceptance and it was an experience they were glad of. The two who came too late felt a little excluded and had special difficulties in the early stages. The two eldest had not been allowed to mourn their mother who was killed when they were young children, and I knew there would be the necessity for a double mourning for them. In fact one has continued to contain his feelings but knows that eventually something may happen to crack him open. The other, who did so much to help me at first, then became very ill (it was called 'flu) losing twenty pounds in weight in ten days. Even now it is possible to see in his face a withdrawn look of enormous pain and grief, and he isn't able to talk about it.

Of the three younger ones it is the daughter, so like her father emotionally, who has been able to express her grief most easily. Together we have talked endlessly about him (we still do), and when four months after his death we cried TOGETHER for the first time we were drawn very close and were given a new dimension to our relationship. Now she has a good and deep relationship with a man she loves but wants and needs her father to talk to. "Father will never know him", she says. "I can never have his approval. He will never know of my success in my job." It seems that the transition from father to lover is vital for a young girl; and for her there will always be that gap. I know in my own bereavement it is my father to whom I have needed to turn continually.

Of the younger boys one went abroad knowing he might not see his father again, and when sent for was only able to arrive back the day after his death. He is reserved and has remained withdrawn for a long time. I know there has been guilt within him; there has been much anger which has emerged in quite out of character gestures; for him there are unresolved difficulties because of NOT having been close to his father, and because of having to disappoint him over career prospects in order to be true to himself.

It is the youngest boy who shared with me at home the last three years of his father's life; who shared the trauma of the illness, the waiting, the change of character. He bore it all patiently and at great cost, working through O levels and A levels, embarking on university two months before his father died. Later he was able to say he had "hated" his father. Later still he wrote from abroad, "I have been thinking of the funny things Father used to say to us," and gave some hilarious quotes. More recently at his twenty-first birthday party he turned to me and said, "I have been thinking a lot about Father lately." "What have you been thinking?" I asked. "Love and forgiveness," was the simple answer.

I have not been able to help them very much because of my own grief and because I am too close to them. It needs other people to listen and support and recognise the needs of these older children who lose a parent. As my daughter has said, "After a few weeks people got bored of me talking about Father." Who would help her do her grieving?

They are all emerging I believe, from a tortuous time during which they seem to have been tossed about and battered a great deal. Perhaps in the end they will be the richer for it. But this can only be so if these grown-up children are afforded the help given to spouses, and if the bereavement of losing a parent is truly recognised.

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

FIAV, the International Federation of Widows and Widowers Organisations, is holding its first international conference in England, from 18-21 April 1985. The programme includes talks by Dr. Phyllis Silverman on Widowhood in the 1980's, Dr. Colin Murray Parkes on Recovery from Bereavement, and Dr. Veira Bailey on Bereaved Children. There will also be many discussion groups, and opportunities to meet delegates from overseas. The conference venue is: Royal Holloway College, Egham, Surrey. The cost is £85 with bed & breakfast (£57 without). Application forms from Cruse House, 126 Sheen Road, Richmond, Surrey, U.K. Closing date 28 February.

The Stillborn & Neo-Natal Death Society

SANDS has moved its offices. The new address is: Argyle House, 29-31 Euston Road, London NW1 2SD. Tel. 01-833 2851/2. Their Chairwoman is Sue Burgess, and Director Paola Sandersley.