THE ONLY SURVIVOR by Rebecca Western

When, at the age of 11, Rebecca Western's entire nuclear family were killed in a car accident she attempted to block them from her memory. Six years later she looks back on this event and gives us an articulate account of her journey through grief and of the way in which she has learned to talk about their deaths. Editor.

I find that one of the most difficult times to talk to anyone is after I have told them my background. I am eighteen now, and when I was eleven my parents, brother and sister were killed in an automobile accident, leaving me the only survivor. After I inform a listener of this, the immediate reaction is one of shock and nervousness.

The shock, of course, is because it is rather a harsh thing to hear. I was very shocked myself when I first heard it. The nervousness, however, is for himself, as he feels awkward because he is not sure what to say. Should he say "I'm sorry", and apologise for something that was not and never will be his fault? Should he gasp "Oh my God", and show horror and sympathy? Should he ask me more about it risking the fact that I might burst into tears and have hysterics right there in front of him?

I have received all these reactions, and my own solution is simply to tell the facts and go immediately to another subject, giving the listener time to digest the facts without having to talk about them, as many people have an absolute terror of talking about death. If he wishes to bring up the subject again it is on his own initiative.

CONCERN

Some people, as mentioned earlier, are worried that if they question me further I will get dreadfully upset. I appreciate the concern, but it is not necessary. I can discuss my family's death calmly and objectively, or I can get very personal, according to the questioner's wish, but I have talked about it too many times to start crying now. Six years has made me realise the truth of the old saying "Time heals all wounds". My wound is healing, although there was a time when I was sure it never would. Even though it may not completely heal, and I will certainly never forget my family, I do have my own life to lead. I am quite sure my family would not want me to spend my entire life mourning when there are so many things I could be doing and so many people I could be helping. Sometimes I feel it necessary to talk about my family, and the relations that I live with will listen to me if I need to talk. Talking is absolutely necessary, as I will show.

BLOCKING OUT THE MEMORY

For several years I refused to talk about my family's death unless I was absolutely forced to. I tried to block out their memory and pretend it never happened. This led to hiding most of my other feelings, and I have spent 9th October, 1984 through 2nd April, 1985 in a psychiatric hospital with a case of severe depression and a question of whether or not I was going to try to commit suicide. I had been seeing a psychiatrist for more than six months, but had not really told him any of my real feelings. And holding in my feelings led to my being put in this hospital.

Contrary to popular opinion, these hospitals are not "nuthouses" or "looney bins". The really disturbed patients were kept separate from us; by us I mean the adolescent boys' and girls' units. All of us were under eighteen, and as it turned out I was one of the oldest and the average patient was fourteen or fifteen, with the youngest being eight.

None of these kids was crazy; they just had problems like a lot of other people. Some had been kicked out of their house or abused and had no place else to go. Many were there for alcohol or drug rehabilitation. And some like me had their own special problem, like my roommate who was being treated for anorexia nervosa. We weren't crazy, we just needed help, and we got it. We were each assigned a doctor from the hospital, and the staff was always available if we wanted to talk. That was a main emphasis in the hospital, to talk about your feelings; however, this did not necessarily mean everyone actually did talk.

For three or four months I played my usual game of refusing to talk, until suddenly I just couldn't keep it in anymore. Everyone was so willing to be there for me that the words just started pouring out of me. I had several sessions with my doctor when I ended up crying because I had finally talked about something that had been bottled up for so long it hurt to get it out, but later on I felt so much better that I **had** actually gotten it out and I no longer carried it around with me.

It was wonderful when I was discharged from the hospital, not just because I was getting out but because I **felt** so much better. I came from America to England to stay the summer with my aunt and uncle, and I could enjoy it fully, especially since I had no more unspoken thoughts to bother me.

ONLY BY TALKING

It was only by talking about my feelings that I actually "recovered" from my family's death, and I suspect it is the same for others. If you really want to help and comfort a person who has experienced the death of a loved one, let them talk. Encourage them to talk. Some people want to talk but they can't find a listener because so many people find death distasteful and something to keep away from. Some people, like myself, need to be pushed a little before they will talk, but they do need to talk, so question them, very carefully, about the death and how they are dealing with it. I should be exceedingly careful with deaths less than six months old.

Another reason people dislike listening is because they are unsure what to do when a person begins to cry. Let me remind you, as you have so often heard, that crying is an excellent way of releasing emotions and tension. I always hated crying and felt very awkward when I cried in front of other people, but it did allow me to discover what made me feel better and makes others feel better. Just take hold of the person and let them finish crying on your shoulder or in your lap. This may sound childish, but I can tell you it is very comforting, and it works as well on adults as it does on children. Sometimes it is just what a person needs, to know there is someone who cares and is trying to help. If you ask questions and the other person talks and begins to cry, you have helped that person in a little way to deal with the death. No matter how painful it is, it has got to come out, and the sooner it is dealt with the sooner the pain begins to fade.

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REVIEWS



ARCHETYPE: A Natural History of the Self

Anthony Stevens. Routledge and Keegan Paul. 1982. £12.50.

This book is a journey of discovery, rather like exploring two great rivers from their sources and then continuing onwards with the assurance that the two become one great waterway in the final stage. Dr. Stevens traces two kinds of self experience, that which belongs to mankind from the earliest dawn of mental functioning, and that bounded by a single life.

Thus this book fulfils its subtitle of "a Natural History of the Self", and it brings together the specialist findings of psychology, psychiatry, ethology and biology within a language that allows a particular continuity of imagery. The key to this is Jung's belief that all species have the ability to actualise an archetypal potential in the presence of experience. Archetypes are seen as biological entities already encoded in the psycho-physical organism. These primordial images have the capacity to involve through natural selection within the species and the individual. Each archetype-as-such needs to be distinguished from the ideas, images, feelings and behaviour which arise from the actualisation of that special archetype. It is only the inherent neuro-psychic system, the innate releasing mechanism which initiates behaviour by preparing the individual to find a needed presence. For instance, the small babe is able to search for the mother's breast by being prepared to find it.

Jung, ahead his time, outlined the idea of an essential biogrammar of behaviour encoded in each species, and available to each individual. However the author, following a heading "On Encountering Archetypes", engagingly quotes Jung as saying that though he had devoted over half a century to their study, archetypes must defeat all attempts to grasp them academically, for any archetype must be related to its feeling tone. "Archetypes gain life and meaning only when you take into account their numinosity, that is their relation to the living individual." In other words, an archetype is something to be experienced rather than defined. Now this is an important note of guidance to you, because by the end of the book some of you, too, will have had an experience, meaningful but hard to share in an academic manner.

SURVIVAL?

Body, Mind and Death in the Light of Psychic Experience.

David Lorimer. Routledge, Kegan Paul. 1984. £5.95.

The first 108 pages of this book is a rather over-ambitious summary of various past beliefs about life after death. The first chapter looks at animism, the Tibetan Book of the Dead and the Egyptian Book of the Dead. Then follows the Greek view from Homer to Plotinus. The third chapter is on the Chrisitan view. This first section of the suffers somewhat from being a summary. It is an adequate objective presentation but hardly does justice to the underlying experience and intensity of belief, and its relation to human life. And this section is inevitably highly selective. Historically many other sources could have been called on. However it provides a historical back cloth of a kind.

Only with the so-called Enlightenment in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries do we arrive at people who thought that life after death might not exist. In the chapter headed 'Mind and Matter in the scientific and Cartesian framework' I think the author is more at home. We move on then to 'Modern Theories' which runs from Darwin and Freud to those moderns who go beyond the Newtonian world and revert again, or progress further, to a view of life after death, such as Alister Hardy, and John Baillie and Leslie Weatherhead on the Christian front—well selected names, though we can only have a paragraph or two on each.

The final section of the book opens with a chapter on Swedenborg (b. 1688) and his experiences and then a series of chapters detailing a large selection of cases under the headings: Apparitions, Experiences out of the Body, Near-death experiences, Post-mortem descriptions of bodily death, nearly 200 pages devoted to this excellently summarised body of evidence. In a final chapter of conclusions and challenges the author writes that whilst the data surveyed are not conclusive proof that the conscious self survives bodily death, they demand a comprehensive and coherent explanation. He himse'f thinks that 'we may reasonably expect life and light at the end of the tunnel'.

There are references, a valuable bibliography and a useful index.

JOHN M. TODD
Writer & Publisher

THROUGH GRIEF—the bereavement journey.

Elizabeth Collick, Darton Longman & Todd/Cruse. 1986. £2.95. Foreword by Claire Rayner. and THROUGH GRIEF audio-cassette. Cruse. £4.00 by post from Cruse House.

Elizabeth Collick is a widow and a bereavement counsellor. The book and cassette are sold separately and are companionate. The tape is addressed directly to the bereaved in a series of personal talks: Mrs. Collick follows the same "bereavement journey" on both, but with the material adapted to the spoken word, and music marks on tape what would, in the book, be chapter ends. The book is perhaps more evenly directed towards the bereaved and to counsellors, helpers, professionals and the general reader.

The bereaved—and particularly those who are grieving in isolation, searching for self-understanding and reassurances—are the focus of the author's concern. Although a Christian herself, this background of belief only enters by direct reference at certain times, and the content is otherwise universal. The presentation allows the freedom to dip in and out, to concentrate on one section at a time, one emotion or one mood. There is no easy solace offered, but a conviction central to both book and tape that expression of grief is necessary and helpful. "There is no way round grief, only a way through."

There is a feeling of comprehensiveness, with neither argument nor promulgation of any particular branch of research, but a journeying that is organic and developmental, throwing up the various experiences of grief and looking squarely at them. The point of acceptance and healing represent the goals of the journey. The grieving person's own pace and timing are respected. Authenticity comes from the people met by the author in groups and as individuals and from her own experience. Her respect for anyone experiencing bereavement and her urge to support them softens the authoritative punch this distilled, disciplined approach would otherwise have. Both book and tape are well produced and good value for money: good companions in a time of need.

DIANA KING

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If a person absolutely refuses to talk, however, do not push too hard just then. It will only make the person angry and more stubborn, and more than likely a very bad argument will take place. This has happened to me several times when I wanted to be alone and people kept trying to make me talk in an effort to help me, and I got so angry one time I threw a chair at someone to make them go away. I had to be pushed very hard to open up, and it took the combined efforts of several people over a period of time in a place I could not get away from to do it. I do not think any one person on his own could have done it on his own, although different people helped in bits and pieces along the way. It is not pleasant, but sometimes people must be forced into things for their own good, as in my own case. However, most grieving people don't need drastic measures to help them: most can be helped gradually just by talking at different times, but not all at once.

Talking is **the** most important thing to help a person, and it will help them, even though they may deny it at the time. If you don't feel you can deal with talking to a person, don't do it. There is no point in both of you feeling awkward and getting upset. But if you do think you can cope with possible tears, please talk to the person. Don't let him mess up his life because of another's death. Talk!