WORK WITH BEREAVED BOYS

It was a crowd which held a promise for the future, for death is as old as life and funeral rites are a tradition as old as mankind, essential as they are in the process of mourning.

by Patricia Goldacre

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It is often said that the subject of death is today's taboo. That people no longer know how to deal with it and shy away from anything to do with it instead of accepting it as part of the pattern of life. It is, therefore, no longer usual in the Western world for people to mourn in a way that meets their psychological needs. No longer do communities, especially in cities, share grief with families who have suffered losses. Coming into contact with death is a rarer occurrence than heretofore and so the more frightening for that.

Death was a commonplace part of the fabric of my life when I was a child. My father was a clergyman, and as soon as I was able to understand with a child's understanding the finality of death, from the age of about eight or nine, my father used to say on the occasion of a pauper's burial, 'Pattie, this poor man has no flowers. Would you like to make him a wreath?' I took artistic pleasure in making a wreath of wild flowers, for we lived in the Australian Bush. I made a tombstone for my cat that died Like Mary, I had a little lamb. A dog savaged it and how I wept over it. An insightless person once said to me, 'I don't think children should have pets. They get fond of them, the pets die and then the children are very upset'. I was not deprived of the rough and tumble of life or of contact with one of the basic facts of life—death!

For many less fortunate than I, it seems too frightening to think about or talk about. They are embarrassed by it. Yet, in a school in the London area with which I have to do, some teachers readily identified ten boys all of whom had lost a parent recently through death. The mother of one had killed herself (he found her body lying beneath the window of a block of flats), the father of another had died of a heart attack in the boy's presence, the mother of two other boys stepped off a bus under a passing car, the mother of another boy had died of cancer, and so on.

I do not believe that this is unusual in a secondary school. All the boys showed behaviour disturbances. Some had accepted referral to the local child guidance clinic, others not. What could we do to help them? Additionally, they had not been helped by the current fashion of not allowing children to go to funerals. Some teachers felt that they could not discuss the boys' experiences with them—even that it would be a bad thing to do because the boys should 'forget' their experience, put them in the past, get over them.

Was it because these teachers had not had the opportunity satisfactorily to mourn, and their own inner conflicts about their own losses were too great? At my instigation the teachers read two articles about bereaved children (Black, 1974, and Cowmeadow and Elliott, 1975) and one of them said to me, 'I had no idea that anyone was working with young people like that'. So, fortuitously, the groundwork was laid for our responses when a pupil at the school was electrocuted on the railway line nearby. He was the only child of a single parent.

The teachers were not sure why some of the boys had wanted to go to the funeral, those who had not been particular friends with the boy. I knew that one at least was mourning a little bit more for a mother who had died. We agreed that all had behaved with great dignity and sensitivity.

This brought back to my mind an episode I had witnessed in a remote Australian country town where a pupil at the local high school had been killed in a car crash. He too had been the only child of a single parent. All his classmates went to the funeral and I shall not forget the sight of the crowd of them as they assembled in the churchyard preparing to go on to the cemetery situated on the outskirts of the town as is usual in Australia. It was a crowd which held a promise for the future for death is as old as life and funeral rites are a tradition as old as mankind, essential as they are in the process of mourning. As I understand it, the teaching of the modern church is that children and young people do not benefit from being excluded from the arena of real events and in this episode the church and the school were working together in the interests of mental health in the school and the community.

To return to the school I mentioned earlier. Because no such arrangements were being made there—the inner city—I was not surprised when some of the boys whom I know well clamoured to talk with me about the accident on the railway lines. We spent some time in discussion and a couple of weeks later, when the inquest was over, they came and told me that the funeral was to be that afternoon. The deputy head, the year master and the tutor were all to attend to 'represent the school'. 'Can *we* go?' asked the boys. After due consideration, and with some doubts on the part of the teachers, agreement was reached that, from the school's point of view, they could go.

It was pouring with rain when our party reached the cemetery before anyone else arrived and we sat dripping in the chapel. The clergyman lent the boys a huge brightly coloured umbrella. 'Where will the

coffin be put when it comes?' they asked us. We explained the lay-out in the chapel and the teachers felt that it might be inappropriate for them to go to the graveside. The clergyman said that for the church's part there was no reason why they should not. After the service in the chapel the family prepared to drive up the hillside to the site prepared for the burial and we decided to walk rather than drive in the school mini-bus.

The boys stood together to watch the vehicles leave. The mother of the dead boy, who was so sedated that when she tried to walk she had to be half carried, was sitting in the back of one of the cars. At this moment she caught sight of the boys and recognised one in particular as being her son's friend. It was like the sun breaking through the clouds, though it was still raining, when she stopped weeping, smiled, waved, and blew him a kiss.

We walked up the hillside and the teachers were diffident about being too close but the clergyman beckoned us to stand around the grave with the family. When the service was over the boys looked down into the hole in the ground at the coffin, reflecting on every detail. As we drove back to school they asked me if I would see and talk with someone who had had a fight with the boy shortly before he had been electrocuted. 'He feels very bad about it,' they said. *We had looked after their feelings and they were looking after someone else's in turn.*

The teachers were not sure why some of the boys had wanted to go to the funeral, those who had not been particular friends with the boy. I knew that one at least was mourning a little bit more for a mother who had died. We agreed that all had behaved with great dignity and sensitivity. What we were all sure about was the psychological value of the shared emotional experience in the mud and the rain and that we would not forget the comfort which the sight of the boys had brought to the mother. 'What hospital is she in?' one asked me. 'I would go to see her'.

These were all 'difficult' boys, but they had shown themselves to have a sense of responsibility and reciprocity. Bearing in mind that some behaviour problems in older children are linked with inhibition of grief, I hope that we have to some extent helped them to express and share grief.

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Teachers have an important role to play in helping their pupils to cope with the death of one of their mates. The late Patricia Goldacre in this issue recounts some of her work with deprived boys which enabled them to take part in the funeral of their friend. Readers might also like to refer to Arngrimsson's account, "A community crisis resolved by a mourning ritual" (Bereavement Care, 1984 3:2) which describes the creation of a ritual for school children deprived of one of their friends by his accidental death. Although death in childhood is rare, children at special schools for the physically handicapped are more likely to face death—their own or their friends'. Teaching children about loss and bereavement should be a part of the curriculum and a pack for teachers will shortly be available.

How can children learn to cope with the facts of death? The first funeral a child attends should not be that of a parent or sibling, and so there is a duty on the part of children's caretakers (parents, teachers, etc.) to help them to learn in a less painful setting. For many children the care of pets may bring home the reality that "All who live must die" (Shakespeare: Hamlet). Sateki Faletau's little poem (p. 21) shows us that the lesson has been learned in a healthy way. Lucie-Smith's lesson from his father's death (p. 22) is a subtle and less healthy one—the use of grief to bind the bully's fist may lead to the misuse of grief later on. Poems and pictures (see cover) can help children to understand, anticipate and cope with the painful feelings in themselves and others aroused by death.

Doctors and nurses too can help or hinder the processes of grief and mourning in patients and their families. Those working with children have to face the possibility that their efforts to cure may not succeed. In this issue we publish an account by Dr. David Morris, an eminent paediatrician, of his pioneering clinic where he counsels families who had lost a baby in the neo-natal period. One of the problems for children in coping with death is their very familiarity with it in forms which become meaningless by repetition and distance. I refer to televised death and violence—both fact and fiction. Two recently published papers and correspondence in the British Medical Journal* continue the debate about the effect of "soap" suicide attempts on the suicide rate in the population (see Bereavement Care 1986, 5:3). For children who cannot easily distinguish fantasy from reality, the continued exposure to TV death may lead to a blunting of emotional sensitivity. Do we do enough to protect children from such dangers?

EDITOR

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BEING BEREAVED

by Michael Stewart, Social Worker.

Whenever I notice a sudden death in the press these days, my mind begins to wonder how many will be bothered when I die. Selfish thought? Maybe. But still, I can't help wondering. My father died in 1975. Nearly 11 years ago now. There were several hundred at his funeral. Yes, several hundred, all of them in some way bereaved of my father. I remember feeling a sense of pride and excitement. I also recall an unwelcomed feeling of resentment. After all, he was **my** father! I was more important than them. He was only their friend, or neighbour, or colleague, I was the 'real' bereaved. I was a close relative, his oldest son.

I couldn't cry at the funeral. I had to be strong and look after my mother. Some of the other mourners did cry. Men my father had worked in the same office with. Friends he had been close to. Mates. Men in their fifties. Men I had never clapped eyes on in the entire time I had been my father's son. Afterwards, as is the custom, everyone stood around and talked. I listened in. I learned a lot about my father that day. From total strangers.

By the time the sun went down on us, a crowd of mourners, I had had an object lesson on one very important item of life's experiences. My father did not belong exclusively to me Nor to my brothers and sisters. Nor to his brothers and sisters. Not even to his heartbroken wife. My father had many friends. He belonged to them, too.

The reflection on his personal experience of bereavement was written for 'City Link', the newsletter for those affected by the Bradford City fire, and is reprinted here with permission.