Holidays for the bereaved as a form of therapy

by Philippa Weitz B.Ed., MSc.

Teacher and Counselling Psychologist

Worth Abbey Lay Community, in the grounds of a Roman Catholic monastery near Crawley in Sussex, is made up of about 300 young people from all walks of life who do not live at Worth but come here as and when they can. A small group of residents lives at Worth and welcomes visitors. They form the hub of this wider circle whose main purpose is to give young people a chance to live in a Christian community and to share in the life of the Benedictine monks.

The Lay Community has certain events in the year for which we all gather. Easter is one example, the summer holiday projects are others. These holiday projects run weekly, spanning the summer months and are specifically designed for those who might not otherwise manage a holiday, such as the elderly, handicapped adults and children, and single parents.

Since 1984, as part of the Summer Holiday projects, we have organised a holiday for the bereaved. I was the organiser in 1985, 1986 and 1987. Equipped with a band of about 20 helpers aged 14 to 35, many of us initially knowing little about bereavement and its effects, we received 19 bereaved guests in the first year and 17 in the second. All except one were women. Cruse had offered the Worth holiday to members nationally, and those who asked to go were self-selecting: all ages, backgrounds and differing length of widowhood. Some had never attempted a holiday on their own. Widowhood was the common denominator.

Involvement

The incidental therapeutic effect upon our bereaved guests was enormous, and not just short-term. There seem to be a number of pointers as to why this should be:

1. The widows lacked confidence in so many things; even taking a train was a nightmare to some. They particularly doubted that they could be of interest to anyone else. A week in the company of other like-minded people and our young team of helpers went a long way to improving that situation. To boast about overcoming it would be wrong but in this short time we feel that what we could do, by our involvement and care, was to begin a process. I believe, as does Cruse, that the process has continued.
2. They nearly all arrive looking sad and tense. The hardest moment of the week seems to be during the second day, when reality hits and many of them want to go home. Sorting out why they want to go and persuading them to stay are delicate works of negotiation and tact! By the end of the week much of their sadness has subsided because we laughed and joked and enjoyed ourselves, and this was catching. One of this year's guests wrote afterwards: "Almost best of all were the frequent gales of laughter which have been in rather short supply recently!".

   Further, they do not have many minutes to worry about themselves. We have a programme which, although optional, draws them all in and keeps them very busy for most of the time. This has proved ideal for people who, back home, have too much time on their hands but who, generally, find it very hard to relax. The relaxation comes naturally through tiredness as the week progresses and as they become confident enough to settle in and really participate. By the end of the week we notice that they are eating and sleeping much better.
3. The majority are on a multitude of drugs, particularly tranquillisers. By the end of the week many of the unnecessary pills have been forgotten. (Of course, some are necessary).
4. In the feedback that I have had after the three holidays many of the guests found the presence of young people very therapeutic. Some said they were used to being ignored by the young and here they found 20 or so lively young people who were genuinely interested in them. The helpers responded spontaneously to the needs of the widowed though some found this easier than others.

   One visitor summed up her feelings about the helpers: "From start to finish I felt I had been showered with love and care by everyone concerned with our welfare. Nothing seemed too much trouble to all the young members of the Lay Community who worked so hard and by their delightful understanding of our situations gave us all a lovely happy feeling. There they made it quite clear that, despite all the grief there could still be a happy, loving communication with people which made one feel human again".
5. Many, if not all the guests, found the spiritual environment helpful whatever denomination they were. The monks make themselves available to any visitor who wishes to talk with them, and we had one monk and one sister specifically attached to us for the week. One would often see Father Jerome wandering through the very beautiful gardens with one or other of our visitors. The 1986 Cruse Holiday has itself experienced a loss with the sudden death of Father Jerome six months later.
6. Cruse visitors come to Worth feeling very lonely and isolated. Perhaps one of the greatest assets of this holiday is that, if they wish, and there are some who don't or can't, there is the opportunity for friendship among similar minded people. British Telecom and the Post Office are doing a great trade as a result of the Cruse holidays! The level of caring among the widowed visitors is very high as they discover others who are worse off than themselves. Some of the friendships that have been made are still firm. The sisters at Worth have a holiday flat in Bognor Regis which they have made available to all who have been part of the holiday programmes at the Abbey. I often hear of small groups going there for a few days to renew friendships.



A milestone

As a result of the Cruse holidays at Worth we know of those who have found the courage to restart friendships at home, to go out, to work: often something that had seemed an impossibility a few weeks or months before. "There seem to be milestones on the road to recovery in bereavement" one widow wrote, "and my stay at Worth Abbey has been notched up as an important one that has helped me greatly and increased my well-being".

Of course, it is not all easy going. One cannot put nearly 20 emotionally strained people in an environment that is unfamiliar without some problems arising, and then there are the difficulties the helpers face. What the guests take to be ease and friendlines on the part of the young people is often at quite a price for each of them personally and in very different ways. Not only are the helpers taking part in the activities with the visitors, they are also living the life of the Lay Community. The day starts with Mattins at 6.45 a.m. followed immediately at 7.20 by a helpers' meeting, and then the day doesn't stop until about midnight.

Commitment

Why did young helpers opt for the Cruse holiday? Some came because they hoped that it would help them work through a bereavement in their own family, some because they wanted to find out more about bereavement, some because they were press-ganged by me, and others because another holiday project was already fully booked. I cannot say what effect the Cruse holidays had on everyone but I do know that we all went home profoundly influenced by what we had experienced. One of last year's helpers who was there all summer said that, in her opinion, of all the groups that had passed through Worth that year the widows had been the most handicapped because you could not 'see' their handicap. One young man who was a helper wrote to me: "The loss of a husband or wife is not just the loss of part of one's life; for many, after perhaps forty or more years together, it must seem at first like the loss of one's whole life. Sensing the distress of separation, being privileged to share a little in it, taught me an awful lot."

The commitment of a number of groups to raise money for Cruse week made the financial side possible; the guests each made a donation to Worth, the students of Marymount International School raised £200, the young people of the Crosswey Group raised £300, the Silver Jubilee Trust Fund donated £300. Our thanks go to all those who made it possible by walking, cycling, making cakes, etc. and who donated their time and money so generously.

Thinking about our modest successes, what really strikes me is that this holiday seems to be the only one of its kind, the only one in this country specifically run for bereaved people and planned with this in mind. The experiences that our guests told of previous attempts at a holiday were sad, largely of going alone to boarding houses or hotels, where the service was usually good but the loneliness unbearable.

* * *

For details of a similar holiday to be held this year in Oxford, run by Philippa Weitz and sponsored jointly by Cruse and the Independent Counselling and Advisory Service, please see page 12. Cruse sets a high value on the benefit these holidays have given to members and the unique mix of ingredients contributing to their success.