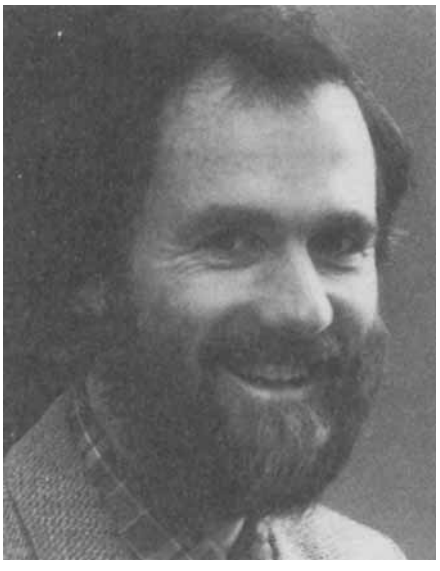
Settling the Spirit

Tony Walter

Small babies, who live very much in the present, react with extreme distress to the absence of their mothers. Two things eventually reduce this tendency—the confidence that she continues to exist when no longer in the room and the awareness that, for a while, they can survive without her. The same beliefs can mitigate the basic grief in adult life and, as Rosenblatt et al[1] show in their cross-cultural comparisons, these beliefs can be articulated in the rituals of mourning. Editor

1. Rosenblatt PC, Walsh RP, Jackson DA. Grief and Mourning in Cross-Cultural Perspective. New York: HRAF Press, 1976.



After my father died, we held a memorial service for him in the parish church in the middle of the Cotswold village in which he had lived since his retirement. Nothing very unusual about this, except that the address to the all-white congregation of relatives and villagers was given by a black Zimbabwean, a close friend of the family.

What Kingston said in his address was very comforting. And it was rather different from the homilies we English usually hear on such occasions. I'd like to explore this difference. Not only has it helped me come to terms wth my loss, but it's made me rethink the way we English handle death. And especially, it's made me rethink the individualistic psychology that underlies our approach to bereavement.

African rituals

As in many hot countries, the Shona funeral is performed almost immediately. The body is disposed of either in an ant-hill, where the soil is easy to dig, or under a rock. It is a very informal affair, and the rules are not at all clear. People deliberately dress down, with relatives who normally work in collar-and-tie getting into their dirty gardening clothes. This is perhaps surprising for a culture that is normally very clear about its social rituals—perhaps it indicates the trauma and reversal of everyday life that death entails.

The period of mourning lasts weeks or months. During this time, grief can be expressed, the inheritance is sorted out and arrangements are made for the care of any dependent members of the deceased's family.

After several months comes a ritual called 'hitting the grave'. The ground near the grave is vigorously beaten with sticks. This wakes the spirit of the departed person, in preparation for the final and major ceremony, which is the one on which Kingston based his address to us.

This final ceremony is called 'settling the spirit', and can take place any time up to a year after the death. The spirit is invited back home, it is invited to re-enter the community. This may be symbolised by a physical journey, such as bringing a goat from the bush back to the homestead.

The Shona believe that once people are born, they are permanent members of the community. They exist; they give joy and pain; they work; they affect other people. The community is not the same as it was before that person was born: it has been changed. We respond with love to love given us, whether the one who loved is still in this world or not. We enjoy the fruits of someone's generosity, whether or not he or she is still with us. We are constituted by our relationships, our relationships both with those still with us and with those gone. The dead live on, and indeed throughout much of Africa are called 'the living dead'.

For the Shona, it is a terrible thing not to bring a dead person's spirit back into community. In truth, they are still a part of the community, and to leave their spirit under a rock or in an ant-hill is unthinkable.

There are two exceptions. One is young children, who will not really have become a part of the community. They receive a much simpler ritual.

The other exceptions are the few people of evil disposition, whose spirit would have a meddling influence were it to return to the homestead. Instead, their spirit is ritually placed into a goat, which is then driven out and set free to roam wild. Woe betide anyone who takes in this scapegoat.

Inviting the spirit home

There are some striking differences between the Shona and the British way of bereavement.

In Britain and N. America, we believe the individual to be the basic unit of existence. Certainly we need other people, but according to western individualism it is individuals, not relationships, that make up the building blocks of society.

When someone like a spouse, with whom my life has been intimately tied up, dies, I want to cling on to her, to deny she has died. The function of grieving, according to most western psychology, is to enable me to move through this stage of clinging, to the point where I can admit deep down that truly she is no more and that I am once again in the basic human condition—alone. Only then can I act autonomously once more, and begin to live life freely. The dead one has become a stage in my life, a stage from which I have now moved on. Her memory will always be dear, but it will not drag me down. I am free of her, and can live.

In this western view of grief, the goal is the recreation of the unattached individual. Attachment to the deceased is a phase, a means, towards this goal.

A couple of weeks after Dad's death, my mother said to me, 'you know, when I'm sitting here in the living room in the evening, I feel his spirit is still here.' Western psychologists interpret this surprisingly common experience of the presence of the departed as a phase, a healthy phase, but one which ultimately my mother will have to go beyond. She will ultimately have to admit, deep down, that he is no longer there.

The African would say otherwise. Living with his spirit among us is the goal. Facing up to the fact that materially he has gone is a phase, a means toward that goal. In truth, my Dad lives on the different people

that my mother, and I, and others have become because of how he lived and how he related to us. It is a shock facing up to the fact that physically he is no longer with us, and the Shona peoples have their burial ritual and time of mourning to allow this shock to take its course. But the final ceremony is that of settling the spirit, of inviting the spirit back home. The final goal is the continuing community, a community that has worked through the upset caused by the physical departure of one of its members and can acknowledge his or her continuing presence.

When Kingston suggested we invite the spirit of Len Walter back into our home and into our village, he was not just suggesting that we cherish his memory as a fine man, an example to follow. He was saying that he is a part of us, and we are denying that if we do not invite him home. It seemed to several of us that day that here was a wisdom we individualistic westerners would do well to heed.

Certainly the time is ripe. Many of us are unhappy with the individualism of western society. A wholistic approach to life understands how we are all bound up one with another. Some of us are experimenting with more communal ways of living and sharing, but few of us have thought of more communal ways of dying. When it comes to death and bereavement, we have little but an individualistic western psychology to help us. But acknowledgement that the dead are indeed living, 'the living dead', is not so very difficult, as we found in that Cotswold church.

Catholic and Orthodox Christians, of course, retain a vivid awareness of living in the presence of the saints. And those of us critical of the West's infatuation with novelty, with its denigration of old ways and old people, can surely recognise that the ancestors are indeed part of us. This is not ancestor worship, merely a recognition of fact.

Talking

We tend not to talk about the dead. A friend recalls going to a particularly tragic funeral in Britain. At the reception, everyone assidously avoided mentioning the girl who had died. Everyone, that is, apart from the husband of six months, who, to everyone's embarrassment, kept on bringing out photos of her, saying 'she'd have loved this . . .', and generally mentioning her at every possible opportunity. In the West, many of us are unsure how to talk with the bereaved and so keep silent, while the bereaved may well feel like going over the top like the classic romantic heroes Romeo or Tristan for whom the death of the beloved is the death of me.

For the Shona though, the deceased is spoken of as an ordinary member of the community. Kingston encouraged us to talk thus of my father, and personally I found this helpful. I also found helpful the many letters that arrived and that simply and accurately talked about him, his personality, and things he'd done in the past.

The Jews understand this. Like the Shona, they bury the body within a day or so and then the close family 'sit shiva'. They sit in the living room at home for a week, while friends, relatives and neighbours come and visit, bringing food, talking about the departed. Talking endlessly. Laughing, crying, sharing memories. And then after that week, the family slowly get back to ordinary life.

Is it because we do *not* share memories like this that the demand for bereavement counselling has arisen? Because we do not have friends and neighbours to listen, we must go to a professional or para-professional for this. If community means anything, it surely means sharing our memories of the departed.

The morning of Dad's memorial service a letter arrived from an old family friend, who had been bereaved of her husband not long before. She quoted the passage by Henry Scott Holland that her wise old doctor husband had left her. He understood what Africans and Jews understand intuitively. These words are increasingly used at British funerals, offering hope that we are indeed moving towards a more normal attitude towards death.

'Call me by my old familiar name, speak to me in the easy way which you always used. Put no difference in your tone; wear no forced air of solemnity or sorrow. Laugh as we always laughed at the little jokes we enjoyed together. Play, smile, think of me, pray for me. Let my name be ever the household word that it always was. Let it be spoken without effort, without the ghost of a shadow on it. Life means all that it ever meant. It is the same as it ever was; there is absolutely unbroken continuity. Why should I be out of mind because I am out of sight? I am waiting for you for an interval, somewhere very near, just around the corner. All is well.'

Tony Walter's book *Funerals—and how improve them* is published by Hodder & Stoughton. It is available from Cruse, 126 Sheen Road, Richmond, Surrey TW12 3DU, price £8.99 plus £1 p&p.

Reactions to the Death of my Husband

Ursula Bowlby's comments on her reactions to the death of her husband, John Bowlby, whose obituary appeared in the Winter 1990 issue of *Bereavement Care*, provide evidence that the idea that the dead can remain a part of the family and community to which they belonged when alive is not confined to the Shona of Africa. The timely death of a person whose work is done gives little cause for lasting grief. **Editor**

John died last September, unexpectedly, of a stroke. He was 83 and we had been married for 52 years. I hadn't expected him to die first, although nine years older than me. But he had an exceptionally strong constitution and everyone assumed, including both of us, that he was indestructable. 'I'm immortal,' he used to tell the grandchildren.

Anyway I had not anticipated how I should feel. If I *had* imagined this, I am sure I should have believed myself totally shattered. He was my Rock of Gibraltar.

John died on the Isle of Skye, where we had a family house-party of 10, and I had six days warning, between two strokes. This made it possible for the rest of the family to come north for his funeral and burial on the island (which he had asked for. Being immortal was just a joke.) So I was anything but alone, and this was a tremendous comfort.

At midnight on 2nd September, Broadford Hospital rang through to say that John had died, of a second stroke, without pain or discomfort.

Instead of being shattered, I felt suddenly comforted. He seemed secure in my heart and I knew I would carry him about with me for the rest of my life. I have this sense of continuous companionship. I am never lonely. I can't understand the 'how' or 'why', but as a believer I accept it as a wonderful gift from God.

And I know it will last, because although I didn't expect it, I *recognise* it. My greatly loved mother died 12 years ago, aged 88, and the same thing happened then. I had spent my life dreading losing her, yet when she died I felt her safe in my heart, and *free*—free from the disabilities of old age. She is still in my heart. The two people I most dreaded losing, are not lost to me.

I feel that John has both expanded—into a world of total freedom, together with the winds, the sea, the hills, the flowers—and contracted, into my heart.

After his memorial service at Southwark Cathedral on 8th January, I talked to Colin Murray Parkes and he encouraged me to write to *Bereavement Care*—it may be that other widows share my experience?

Ursula Bowlby