disposed towards you as you probably feel toward me by now. When you have cooled off, I hope you will realise that I don't hate you – although I most certainly do hate the things you have done to me and I do hate the effects which I feel in my life up to this present day. It is true, as I have just said, that much of the sort of affection which might have been is missing from our relationship but I still love you and will always. You are my mother and, although I have finally become aware enough of the destructive effects of your human failings that I have at last admitted them to myself and committed them to paper, I will not forget that there were times when you have been good to me, sometimes tried to protect me, in your own way, and, especially early on in my life, you gave me a warm happy home. I'm sorry that I had such an unhappy childhood later on, that's all . . .

I did not write this letter to hurt you but to save myself from drowning in my own helpless feelings. I don't really expect you to understand this, not all at once, although you might understand a bit of it in a while, if you read this letter properly. I also don't expect forgiveness for this. If you had been the forgiving sort, who was willing to talk through problems, then this letter would never have been necessary. It just happened that I came to the realisation over the last few days that you will never forgive me anyway, for being me . . .

Go in peace. Live your life. See things and experience things. Enjoy your grandchildren in Australia. Spend money on yourself. After a little while, we might be able to talk about this – perhaps.'

FORTHCOMING CONFERENCES

Healing Grief. Workshop on Loss and Recovery. 9–11 September 1994. Stroud, UK (Hawkwood College). Barbara Ward and Dr Uthe Ernst-Muth. Details from: Barbara Ward. ☎ 0822–855619

National Association of Bereavement Services. 11–12 September 1994. Oxford, UK (Westminster College). Annual Training Conference and AGM. Theme: Moral and Ethical Issues in Bereavement. Keynote Speaker: Prof Ron Baker. Details from: Carole Lambert. ☎ 071–247 0617

Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide. 23–25 September 1994. Cottingham, Yorks, UK. See notice on p.18.

The 'why?' trick



Colin Murray Parkes

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In his important book *Loss and Change*[1], Peter Marris spoke of the way in which 'structures of meaning' are undermined by bereavements and other major life-change events. Marris was deliberately vague about exactly what it is that gives meaning to life but it is clearly not one thing but many, and that these things that give meaning to life vary in importance.

EXAMINING OUR ASSUMPTIONS

Meaning seems to derive from a perceived fit between our assumptions about the world (and our place in it) and the actual world that we meet. Thus, at one extreme are the habits of thought and behaviour that govern our day-to-day activities and give us a feeling of being 'on course', and at the other there are more fundamental assumptions about our place in a greater sense of things.

This is an attempt to delve, briefly, a little deeper into this hierarchy of assumptions and to clarify how changes at one level can have profound effects on those at other levels. This idea of an 'assumptive world', which must be relearned whenever we are faced with a major psycho-social transition, has been developed in more detail in my book *Bereavement: Studies of Grief in Adult Life*[2]. The bereavement counsellor is privileged to assist in the process of rebuilding assumptions and rediscovering meaning, which is the essence of the work of grieving.

Those who have raised small children will remember a particularly annoying trick that is played by children of around three or four years of age. It consists of repeating the question 'why?' 'Daddy, why do doggies bark?' 'To chase away burglars, darling.' 'Why do they want to chase away burglars?' 'Because if they don't, the burglars will steal all Mummy's jewellery.' 'Why will they steal Mummy's jewellery?' 'Because they are nasty people.' 'Why are they nasty people?' 'Oh, for goodness sake, go away and play with your brother.'

Questions of this kind reveal the layers of meaning that lie behind the simplest question of causation. Ultimately they lead to the questioning of basic assumptions, and this can be dangerous since any change in basic assumptions has a ripple effect that calls into question all the meanings derived from these assumptions. The child, of course, is more interested in asking the questions than listening to the answers, and it is hardly surprising if the adult gets more exasperated as the answers get more difficult and the questions more painful.

God is defined as the 'First Cause', that is the answer to all ultimate questions. Thus, to pursue our child's 'whys' a little further: 'Why are they nasty people?' 'Because that's the way God made them.' 'Why did God make them nasty?' 'That, my child, was St Augustine's dilemma and is the crunch point for Christians everywhere . . .' 'You mean you don't know' 'No, you little monster, I don't.'

EDITOR'S NOTE

Some readers may find helpful the analogy that Colin Murray Parkes draws here of a bereaved person with a computer and its vicissitudes – and others may not. I suspect it depends on how devoted a computer buff one is! We publish it in the belief that it may illuminate for counsellors some of their knottier counselling dilemmas.