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.

Three assumption levels

The computer literate will be familiar with the idea of 'operating systems', which are the programmes that control the other programmes. Thus an English programme will contain commands written in English. The operating system translates these commands into 'machine language' and tells the computer what to do. The computer performs it and sends a message back to the operating system, which translates it into English and passes it back to the programme for further processing.

Likewise, in the human mind, there are low-level assumptions, habits of thought, which govern most of our day-to-day activity, getting up in the morning, having breakfast, going to work and so on. Behind these are medium-level assumptions – that we shall get into trouble with the boss if we don't go to work and that we will feel hungry if we don't eat breakfast. Finally we come to more fundamental assumptions – that work is necessary to our sense of self-worth, that eating is necessary for survival and that survival is an end in itself.

Of course it is not only children who question our basic assumptions. A man who is offered a substantial payment to accept voluntary redundancy is perhaps being invited to place a cash value on his self-esteem. The patient with cancer who refuses to eat may be challenging the doctor's assumption that survival is an end in itself.

BEREAVEMENT AND ASSUMPTIONS

One category of events that inevitably leads us to question assumptions is bereavement. The loss of a loved person throws out of kilter a mass of low-level assumptions – what do I do when I get up in the morning? who will make the breakfast? and so on. It also causes us to question medium-level assumptions – who cares what the boss thinks? I don't have any appetite anyway, what's the point of eating? – and causes a similar questioning of fundamental assumptions – my self-esteem seems of little importance now that the person who loved me most is gone, I don't care if I live or die.

The effect is akin to the effects of a computer virus that has wiped out a disk-operating system, resulting in paralysis. Just as the computer can 'break down' in the face of such a disaster, so the bereaved person may cease to work, to eat, to communicate. In extreme form, the bereaved may become mute, sluggish, neglectful of their own needs and of the needs of others. We speak of 'depressive withdrawal'.

Other bereaved people will continue to operate low-level assumptions despite the disruption of those at deeper levels. They continue to get up, eat, go to work and so on, and their friends may think that they are doing well. But these actions are carried out in a way that betrays the fact that the bereaved are 'on automatic', zombies who go through the motions of living but lack any real feeling of purpose or direction in their lives.

Creating new assumptions

As time passes and the intensity of grieving diminishes, people gradually build a new set of assumptions about the world, and new meanings seem to arise out of these. In the long run, these new assumptions come to replace the old habits of thought and, because they have been tested in the flame of reality, they are often more mature, more profound and more durable than the assumptions that preceded them. They may be less romantic and self-deceiving, but they are more likely to pass the test of the 'why?' trick.

'Why are they nasty people?' 'Well, maybe they're just angry with everybody.' 'Why are they angry with everybody?' 'Maybe someone was cruel to them and it hurt so badly that they just got nasty.' 'Why was someone cruel to them?' 'Well perhaps their Mummy had lost their Daddy and she was so upset she took it out on her little boy.' 'Why did their Mummy lose their Daddy?' 'Because their Daddy got sick and died.' 'Why did he get sick and die?' 'Because it is inevitable, a law of God that everybody sooner or later must die.' 'Why?' 'Why not?'

References

1. Marris P. Loss and Change. London: Routledge, 1974.
2. Parkes CM. Bereavement: Studies of Grief in Adult Life. London: Tavistock/Routledge, 1986 and Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1986.

BOOKS

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