'People are like balloons...' – an analogy for explaining death to children

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Some months ago, I came across the following letter written by Alison Howarth, a primary school teacher who is also a funeral director, describing some ideas she has developed through counselling young children after a death.

'Children relate easily to concepts they themselves have had experience of, and so I liken life to a balloon. This is well within the experience of most children.

When people are first born they are like a new balloon – the form is there but there is no substance inside the balloon.

As a person grows they become bigger and become 'filled' with all the things that go to make up that person – learning, intelligence, relationships, etc. This is just the same as a balloon growing when it begins to fill up with air.

As the person begins to age they become a little more wrinkled and have less energy (like a balloon which slowly begins to deflate). At the end of life, when the person dies, it can be likened to all the air being let out of the balloon. Nobody knows where the air has gone, it may be all around us; we may breathe some in but you can't see it any more. All that is left of the balloon is a wrinkled shell with nothing inside it.

To explain a sudden death it can be likened to a balloon bursting, for no apparent reason, whilst it was partly or fully inflated. Sometimes it happens by accident because the balloon has caught on a sharp object and sometimes it happens because there is a fault in the make-up of the balloon...' *

I have since used Alison Howarth's ideas in my work with several bereaved children, aged between five and nine. They have readily understood and accepted the analogy, finding it helpful in coming to terms with death. One child drew pictures of a balloon person gradually deflating, then drew a box around the deflated balloon and finally coloured it over. In this way the child, who had not attended the funeral, created a way to talk about a death and say goodbye.

The description of the balloon being first expanded by all the things that go to make up a person, and then deflated or burst in death, with nothing left but an empty, wrinkled skin, is particularly useful. It helps children to understand that when someone dies the 'person' or 'soul' is no longer inside, or a part of, the now redundant body, and that it is the empty body which is being buried or cremated, not the person. It can be helpful to talk with a child about where the 'air' inside the balloon might have gone, but I would hesitate to include the idea of breathing in this air, as it may leave a child with more difficult ideas to understand and make sense of, and it could be upsetting.

The analogy can also be extended to cover other causes of death, for example, illness, where the balloon has something wrong with it which prevents it becoming, or staying, fully inflated so that it deflates before its time – in some cases quite quickly, in others more gradually. Balloons can also be burst by other people, accidentally or intentionally, so this can help to explain deaths in which another person was responsible (such as murder).

Bereaved adult clients who were having difficulties talking to their children about death, have have also found these ideas helpful and enabling. I have introduced them to teachers in workshops on bereavement and many, particularly those working in primary schools, thought they would be useful when trying to explain death in the classroom. Older children may not find the analogy quite as useful. My 13-year-old daughter's comment was 'It's a good idea, but sometimes if you're careful you can untie the balloon and blow it up again.'

* This extract is reprinted from *The Funeral Service Journal,* May 1994, by kind permission of the Editor and author.

REVIEWS

JOHN BOWLBY AND ATTACHMENT THEORY

Jeremy Holmes. London and New York: Routledge, 1993. £12.99 pb.

This is both a biography and a critique of the work of John Bowlby and of attachment theory. Written by a psychotherapist who is sympathetic to much of his work, it attempts a rapprochement between Bowlby and psychoanalysis that was never achieved during his lifetime.

Bowlby was, at one time, a prominent figure in the world of psychoanalysis. Training Secretary of the Institute of Psychoanalysis in 1944, he remained a member and never stopped calling himself a psychoanalyst. As time passed, however, although he remained committed to the psychological treatment of psychological disorders and continued to treat patients throughout his life, he became disillusioned with many of the fundamental tenets of psychoanalysis, with Freud's theory of infantile sexuality and his libido theory, with Klein's insistence on the importance of the mother's breast as the child's first attachment object and with the way most psychoanalysts ignored or played down the importance of traumatic life events in favour of the analysis of their patient's fantasies. In later years he lost interest in psychoanalysis and seldom attended meetings at the Institute.

His criticisms of their sacred cows put him at odds with the leading figures in the field, with his former supervisor, Melanie Klein, with her long-standing opponent, Anna Freud and with most of the rest of the psychoanalytic establishment. And as his star in the psychoanalytic firmament was declining, in other fields it was rising. His work, and that of his former pupil, Mary Ainsworth, brought about a major revolution in the psychology of child development and child care and the completion in 1980 of his trilogy, *Attachment and Loss*[1], provided us with a new paradigm for understanding the roots of love and loss which has been enormously influential and which brought him many honours.

Holmes rightly points to the importance of Bowlby's contribution to our understanding of bereavement; to the 'stages of grief' which, with James Robertson, he first observed in children separated from their mothers and later, with Parkes, applied to bereavement in adult life; and to the nature of the 'secure base' which lies at the root of attachment relationships and the loss of which makes bereavement so intensely painful and frightening an experience. 'Seen in this light', says Holmes, 'attachment is a unifying principle that reaches from the biological depths of our being to its furthest spiritual depths.' It also has important implications for therapy and counselling, in both of which the care giver must set out to provide the 'secure base' that has been missing or lost from the life of the client.

Bowlby, unlike most of his psychoanalytic colleagues, saw attachment as quite separate from sex. He wrote little about sex and Holmes, who clearly finds this unsettling, points out that, by comparison with Freud and Klein's passionate world of infantile sexuality, Bowlby's scientific world 'at times seems bland, banal even.' He clearly intends this as a criticism much as Sellar and Yeatman refer to the Roundheads as 'Right and Repulsive' while the Cavaliers were 'Wrong but Wromantic'[2]. Elsewhere Holmes says, of Bowlby, 'You did not really allow yourself to feel the full imaginative impact of psychoanalysis. The imaginative leaps, the heights and depths of emotion, the understanding of how intimate experience is engendered and gendered...'. He sees Bowlby's 'detachment' as a form of arrogance, yet in doing so he condemns himself, for what greater arrogance can there be than to mistake our own 'imaginative leaps' for objective truth?

Psychoanalysts cannot have their cake and eat it. If they truly want to be reconciled to their most penetrating critic, they must accept not just his science but his logic. The thing that saddened Bowlby most about psychoanalysts was their refusal to face up to the logical contradictions of psychoanalysis, their tendency to interpret disagreement as defence and criticism as personal attack. Yet he understood all too well that much of the rage that he engendered was a form of grief, a desperate attempt to cling to an obsolete model of a world that was threatening to crumble, and he knew that grief takes time and that it was no good trying to force the pace. So he stepped back from the fray and allowed time to pass.

It is good to discover that some psychoanalysts are now ready to revise their fundamental models of the world and this book will do much to pave the way. It is strongly recommended to all those who are familiar with the language and thought of psychoanalysis. The rest of us may be forgiven for wondering what all the fuss is about. We shall perhaps find other accounts of attachment theory