Andrew (aged eight) – father died after three weeks' separation

Andrew's father had a brain tumour which progressed rapidly, too rapidly for Andrew to assimilate the changes brought about by his deterioration. His father changed from being an active, sporty, humorous man to being morose, lethargic and unpredictable. As a result of his treatments he gained weight, lost all his hair and was unable to tolerate light. He was transformed from the person Andrew had known and loved into a monster.

He spent the last three months of his life in a hospice. Andrew visited him occasionally but was so distressed by his appearance and unpredictable behaviour that his mother decided not to take him any more. He had not seen his father for several weeks when he died.

It was unsurprising that Andrew had great difficulty in believing that his father had died. Although he was able to comprehend fully the factual aspects he was unable to assimilate the emotional content. The experiences leading up to the death had threatened to overwhelm him and he needed to defend himself against further threat of disintegration which was why he was resisting the reality of his father's death.

He needed to take his time and approach the issue at his own pace. When he felt safe within our therapeutic relationship I decided to make up a story which incorporated details of Andrew's experience of his father's illness and death, so that he could gently approach the reality of the death. I used a soft toy which transformed from a dragon to a dinosaur. (The use of a third object creates a focus for the story away from the child, thereby reducing the tension it may generate for the child.) The story traced the history of Andrew's father's illness and his various treatments, so the dragon gradually changed into a dinosaur. At each stage I reminded Andrew that the toy still loved his little boy and remembered their times together.

The story culminated in the dinosaur being admitted to the local hospice and his body being too ill to work any longer. Finally his body stopped working and the bit inside that belonged to God went to heaven. (Andrew's parents were committed Christians and I had previously discussed the extent to which their beliefs had been part of any other explanations.) Andrew listened intently and then asked me to repeat the story, which I did during that and the subsequent session. It was after this experience that he asked to return to the hospice to visit his father's room. I arranged this and a couple of weeks later we went together.

He entered the room and thoroughly inspected everything in it, calling quietly for his father until he was sure that he really was not there. It was only after he had completed this search that he could begin to mourn because the experience had become real. He had been able to connect the facts with the feelings and accept the explanation this combination made.

CONCLUSION

Explaining death to children would be relatively easy if it were merely a matter of communicating the facts. The difficulty lies in connecting those facts with the child's feelings and enabling the child to explore the impact of this combination. This process equips the bereaved children with the personal resources necessary for mourning and enables them to embrace the whole experience at each stage of their development. BC

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The loss of a twin



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The devastating loss of my twin, and the sense that I was never able to make up to my mother for being 'only one', have led to my lifelong interest in other people's feelings and, in time, to the decision to study how other lone twins actually experience this bereavement. When my research was eventually published[1] I felt that, at last, this unique loss had been given some recognition.

The first thing that I am nearly always asked, when someone hears that I lost my identical twin sister in early childhood is, 'Do you remember her?' She died when we were three years and three months old, so my memories are limited to small incidents that we shared, such as feeling scared caught in a tremendous downpour of rain in our large double pram, playing hide and seek in the park, and feeding the pigeons, which apparently fascinated us both from the age of two.

Perhaps what is always more significant is what one does not remember. I was amazed when recently my older brother, now at retirement age, told me for the first time, that he recalled very well when, at breakfast, my mother told us that our sister Pam, would never come home from hospital. My brother was not yet five years old, but he remembers going at once to sit on our mother's lap and that I went to my father. I guess that this memory was such a very painful one for me that it was buried far too deeply to recall.

My sister had developed a severe ear infection which became a mastoid. The doctor failed to diagnose this and, although she was rushed into hospital, it developed into meningitis and she died within a week.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Bereavement by death of a twin is a neglected area about which little has been published. Yet the death of a twin can set in train serious problems which may well come to the attention of counsellors and others who attempt to help the bereaved. In this paper Joan Woodward describes her own experience of losing her twin sister, the results of her research into the needs of 'lone twins' and the mutual help organization, the Lone Twin Network, which she set up to meet their need.

At that time there were no antibiotics. It is not surprising that my mother became very overprotective of me and my health after that.

OUR BIRTH AND BABYHOOD

My sister and I had a very precarious start to life, as twins were not expected. My mother told me that after Pam was born the doctor was putting on his jacket to go, but the midwife called him back, insisting there was 'another one'. Apparently an argument broke out, but my arrival settled it! I was a good deal lighter than my sister and as our combined weight only came to six pounds, we were not at that time expected to live. I feel deeply indebted to my mother who, in spite of being ill, persisted in feeding us both every two hours with breast milk that had to be pumped off and fed to us through little pen-fillers, as we were too small to suck for some time. The doctors were constantly telling her that there was no point in feeding us as we would die anyway. When telling me that story she would always tell me that though I was so tiny, from a very early age I would look at her in what she described as 'a very determined way' as if to say, 'keep going woman, I want to live' and that helped her to persevere.

I have been told many times how hard I struggled to keep up with my sister, as the difference in our birth weights continued for a long time, leaving me the smaller, weaker twin. I always wanted to do what she could and, if I failed, I apparently got into furious states of frustration. When visitors came, Pam would come out from behind the sofa with tinsel on her hair and a little wand with a star on it. With great confidence she would pirouette on her toes as a 'fairy'. There was no way that I could repeat this act and I would appear pulling a funny face and doing a somersault. At my most ironical moments it feel as if that is metaphorically what I have been doing ever since.

LIFE WITHOUT MY TWIN

Very soon after Pam's death, I witnessed three very frightening events. The first was when a carthorse fell down in front of me as I was guarding my little brother's pram outside a shop. Within days of this, another carthorse broke away from a brewer's dray, galloping wildly down the road with its chain thrashing from side to side. The panic and screaming of people around me, was as frightening as the incident. This was followed by a drunken man coming out of a pub where we were waiting for our parents. He fell down in front of us, badly cutting his face on his spectacles. Looking back, it seems unsurprising that at that point I refused to go out of the house. My twin had disappeared in a taxi never to return and I decided life 'out there' was terrifying.

My mother, who was remarkably progressive for her day, took me to see a well-known child psychoanalyst. I remember those session quite well. Her main recommendation was that I should start school as soon as possible and as a result, I started school at three and a half years of age.



A special relationship: six-year-old twins Bid (left) and Hilly Jones. Hilly died in 1959, aged 26. *Photo by H C Jones*

I grew up shy and deeply lacking in social confidence. I strove to counteract my mother's anxiety about my health, and our neighbours' gloomy forecasts, by becoming a tomboy. I often embarrassed my brothers by wearing shorts. In spite of being very slight in build, at the age of 11 I could get the shoulders of every boy in the class down on the ground. I do not think now that it was how I actually wanted to be, but rather that I felt compulsively driven to act in this way to prove I could distance myself from the image of the frail child who could fade away and die. Now, I am only too aware that anything that we 'have to prove' only maintains our deepest doubts about the possibility of doing so.

As I look back on my life, I see a clear thread running through all my work, both paid and voluntary, as teacher, psychiatric social worker, therapist and researcher: it is the struggle to get greater recognition of the value and importance of the emotional aspects of life. Perhaps in this way I have tried to compensate for the deep emotional connection with my twin sister that I have been denied.

SETTING UP THE RESEARCH

In 1982 I decided to study what it really meant to be a lone twin, setting this up on my own with official backing from the West Midlands Institute of Psychotherapy.

So much has been written about bereavement that when I began to research the previously published literature on the subject of twins, I had expected to find a number of studies. However, at that point the whole field was clear.

My study focused on how twins experienced their loss and I wanted to find out:

- how severely each had felt the loss
- what had been the worst aspects of it
- if anything had helped to ameliorate it.

The sample

I did not want to use postal questionnaires and decided to interview each twin, whenever possible in their own homes. I wrote in local newspapers and put up notices requesting help from lone twins. But it was not until a letter was published in a women's magazine with a vast circulation and I appeared on a TV programme, that I ultimately reached the 200 target suggested by a research statistician as a reasonable sample. I visited 219 lone twins, men and women with ages ranging from 18 to 92 years. Some of the twins were identical (monozygots) and some were fraternal (dizygots). Some had lost their twin around the time of birth, others in childhood and some in adult life. The study was presented

to the International Congress of Twin Studies in Amsterdam in 1986 and it was subsequently chosen for publication in their Proceedings[1]. This gave the work international status and made me feel that at last the unique loss of a twin had been given some recognition.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Severity of loss

With the inevitable occasional exception, the study showed that the severest loss is felt by those who lose a twin of the same sex, whether they are identical or not. The cause of death also affected the severity of the loss feelings. This was particularly so for those whose twin had died in a traumatic way: some had committed suicide and two had been murdered.

'The surprising fact that emerged was that the death of the twin before the age of six months tended to make the loss feelings more severe.'

Length of grieving

Grieving after the loss of a twin can sometime last a very long time. Some of the twins who talked to me had lost their twin very many years earlier and were still mourning the loss. For a few, it seemed the sense of loss increased as they got older.

Age at which loss occurred

Most people can easily imagine how severe a loss it can be for an adult to lose a twin after many years together. The surprising fact that emerged from the study was that the death of the twin before the age of six months tended to make the feelings of loss more severe. I believe this is because at that age the surviving twin has no way of understanding the loss – only of feeling it – and no way of talking about it. Surviving twins also have to contend with their parents' reaction both to them as the survivor and to the loss of the twin. Parents tend to either overprotect the surviving twin, as mine did or, far worse, reject them.

Guilt

There were some tragic accounts of how some had felt they were to blame for the death of their twin. Remarks such as 'you crushed your twin' or 'you took all the food', left survivors feeling they were living at the expense of the twin who had died. Some believed that their parents wished that they had died and that the dead twin had lived. This seemed particularly true for a few surviving girls, whose twin had been the only boy born to the family. Guilt feelings are very common in lone twins and these were shown to be enormously affected by parental attitudes. They tend to be specially strong in those whose twin had ended his or her own life. A feeling of guilt is sometimes expressed, as it was for me, in striving to 'live for two' in an attempt to justify being alive.

The twin relationship

The study provided many examples of the deep closeness of some identical twins. Some of the more light-hearted moments in the interviews came from stories of twins able to hoodwink teachers and even girl- and boyfriends by 'swapping places'. There is no doubt, that some twins 'knew' of the other's death before they were officially told. This kind of knowledge and closeness is not yet fully understood.

Negative feelings

A small number were able to express some negative feeling about being a twin. They described a sense of momentary freedom when they first heard of their twin's death. They were no longer 'the twins'. Such sensations were short-lived and followed by overwhelming feelings of loss, but they showed how complicated the twin relationship can be. It holds a fundamental paradox for all twins, but to a very variable degree, that their identity is held in the sense of being a pair, yet that holds a denial of their individuality. Their individuality can only be found totally without their twin, but this in turn means losing the twin relationship.

This dilemma was expressed in extreme form by the well known case of the Gibson twins who could neither survive happily together nor apart. It led to the somewhat mysterious death of one of them when they were about to be freed to live outside an institution. It is very rare for this dynamic to reach such intense levels.

'Some bereaved twins suffer such deep loneliness that they become loners, fearful of seeking closeness and risking another loss; others fear that their need for closeness may put people off.'

It seems to be this deep need in twins to express their individuality that drives them to behave in differing ways. If one is active and outgoing, the other tends to be quiet and to hold back. Some lone twins felt more able to be like their twin after their twin had died. One man whose identical brother died at the age of 12, became so like him that his family were convinced that he 'had the spirit of his brother within him'. It may be that the surviving twin feels the loss less severely if they can capture within themselves some of the lost twin's characteristics.

Relationships with others

The greatest effect on the surviving twin is in their feelings about relating to other people. I believe this is because the loss tends to affect the lone twins' perception of themselves very deeply. Some put this very starkly: 'I'm only a half'. Some bereaved twins suffer such deep loneliness that they tend to become loners, fearful of seeking closeness and risking another loss; others fear that their need for closeness may put people off. Many lone twins seek more from friends than they can get and feel constantly disappointed. I heard many stories about how the loss of a twin led to other losses in the family, with parents splitting up and mothers unable to cope with the child who was left.

Factors which helped

I had hoped to hear about what helps lone twins the most. For some, strong religious beliefs that enable them to feel the presence of their twin with them, coupled with the conviction that they will ultimately meet up again, provides great comfort. Some spoke to me about ESP experiences. There is an intangible sense of being a survivor that gives many lone twins a sense of strength and 'specialness', in spite of the pain of the loss. Every one of them continues to think of themselves as a twin.

THE LONE TWIN NETWORK

The best thing to come out of the study is the Lone Twin Network*, started some years ago, with a first meeting in London and annual meetings ever since. It came under the wing of The Multiple Births Foundation due to the support and encouragement of its director, Dr Elisabeth Bryan. The Network has subsequently had a good deal of publicity and is now moving towards becoming independent. Perhaps it is though meeting other lone twins, talking together and sharing feelings, that healing begins.

I sometimes think how very different my life would have been if Pam had lived and I wonder too how she might have lived if she had been the one to survive.

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Joan Woodward's book, *The Lone Twins*, will be published in Febuary 1998 by Free Association Books, London, UK.

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