Bereavement and shattered dreams

Exploring the connections



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The words used by bereaved people to describe their emotions, thoughts, bodily changes and related experiences vary widely. This means that those supporting them must listen carefully for each person's own 'language of loss'. In particular, it is important to be sensitive to feelings and words expressing the disruption that often accompanies a death, the disappointments and demolished assumptions, the shattered dreams.

Bereavement is subject to individual and collective interpretations; it is idiosyncratic and cultural, even while containing common elements. After her husband died, Ruth Coughlin wrote that she had learned and was continuing to learn another language, the language of loss[1]. Virginia Ironside wrote of her frustration with the metaphors, phrases and words of others, none of which accurately described her bereavement. She rejected 'journey', 'a series of stages', 'something you get over' and others, as uncomfortable or dishonest, not a match for her experiences[2]. Linda Pastan used poetry to describe a similar struggle:

> The night I lost you
> someone pointed me towards
> the Five Stages of Grief.
> Go that way, they said,
> it's easy, like learning to climb
> stairs after the amputation.
> And so I climbed[3].

Irish poet Eavan Boland wrote that language is a 'habitable grief', a fascinating turn of speech for the everyday abrasion of losses[4]. Perhaps language, personal and subject to misinterpretation as it is, can be a suitable setting for bereaved people, a habitat for grieving and mourning the death of someone dear. It may be the only container some people have for grief and bereavement. But carers must, then, be very careful that the language of loss they are listening for is the language of the bereaved person. Bereaved people want to have *their* stories heard; they do not want carers who impose their own language of loss or try to create a new one.

This article could be filled with the languages of loss, the many words, metaphors, and ways people use to describe bereavement[5], attempting to make of it something habitable. However here I highlight one which is sometimes overlooked, and it relates to what I have come to call shattered dreams.

SHATTERED DREAMS

Grieving people often punctuate their tales of loss with passionate statements like: 'I didn't expect this,' or 'This is not fair,' or 'I never thought this would happen to me.' These outbursts seem linked to the death they are describing, a natural expression of mourning, as if the mourners are trying to say they miss someone or are surprised at the emptiness of the house or bed. We hear shock, disbelief, and confusion, all of which, and more, probably occurred, and in many cases the bereaved people acknowledge this. But even when empathy and caring are present, shared, recognised and appreciated, many people frequently want something more. They seem to be searching for language to describe more than death and the accompanying bereavement – their words and our responses are not as yet 'suitable' for habitation. If, finally, someone responds to these passionate outbursts by saying, 'It sounds to me as if your life has not turned out the way you wanted it to. It sounds like your dreams have been shattered', there is frequently a firm and clear affirmative response, 'YES, that is exactly what has happened'.

For many people bereavement and shattered dreams are inextricably connected. For example, the widow, who when her husband dies loses her own, and their joint retirement dreams, dreams which they have been planning for well over 20 years; the parent who has to bury his dead child rather than the other way round, feeling that this is not the way things are supposed to be; the daughter who grieves at the early onset of Alzheimer's in her mother and then grieves again when her mother dies, knowing that this means that her children can never get to know the special person their grandmother was; the man who wanted to die in his own bed, but is denied this preference because he dies while visiting relatives in another region. One writer put such accounts into metaphorical language:

> my neighbor is hammering
> and mending his house
> he fixes in almost a frenzy by night
> he dreams of his wife
> dead nearly a year now
> he dreams of nailing and healing
> he dreams of repairing the damage[6].

Like bereavement, shattered dreams are personal and idiosyncratic. People use their own words to try to find a 'suitable' language for this loss, a loss that can be especially confusing because it is an internal loss, what Mitchell and Anderson describe as an intrapsychic loss[7]. Hence, passionate expressions like 'I never thought it would happen this way' can make sense as a description of something

EDITOR'S NOTE

By his use of the evocative term 'dreams', Ted Bowman means very much more than the unrealistic fantasies and day dreams of those we call dreamers. He includes all the reasonable hopes, expectations and assumptions that guide us through life and give our lives meaning. He shows how easily death can shatter these dreams and how important it is for those who care to give the time and support that is needed as people begin the slow process of rebuilding their dreams.

different from, or in addition to death – a loss of dreams.

THE DISRUPTION OF OUR ASSUMPTIVE WORLD

The grief and bereavement literature includes many parallel words or phrases for shattered dreams. In Ronnie Janoff-Bulman's study of trauma, she found that:

> Although different terms are used, there is clearly congruence...of a single underlying phenomenon. The reference is to a conceptual system, developed over time, which provides us with expectations about the world and ourselves. This conceptual system is best represented by a set of assumptions or internal representations that reflect and guide our interactions in the world and generally enable us to function effectively.[8]

She was not the first to use such words. John Bowlby, for instance, had written over a decade earlier: 'Every situation we meet with in life is construed in terms of representational models we have [in] the world about us.'[9] He suggested that people address losses in their lives using that representational model. His colleague and friend, Colin Murray Parkes, wrote similarly: 'All of us, from the moment of our birth, have been building inside ourselves a model of the world, a set of assumptions on the basis of which we recognise the world that we meet and plan our behaviour accordingly.' He added that anything that challenges the model can incapacitate people[10]. Peter Marris used the phrase 'structures of meaning' in his sociological study of loss and change[11].

Medical anthropologist Gay Becker described disrupted lives in this way:

> In all societies, the course of life is structured by expectations about each phase of life, and meaning is assigned to specific life events and the roles that accompany them. When expectations about the course of life are not met, people experience inner chaos and disruption. Such disruptions represent a loss of the future. Restoring order to life necessitates reworking understandings of the self and the world, redefining the disruption and life itself[12].

Theologian Andrew Lester used the words 'core narrative'. He wrote: 'Our sense of self, our identity, is built piece by piece as we form our experiences into stories and then integrate these stories into our ongoing core narratives'[13].

These and other writers have expanded our understandings of loss by their powerful word pictures. Drawing on their insights and especially the work of Mitchell and Anderson, here is my definition of shattered dreams:

- the experience of losing an emotionally important image of ourselves, our body, our family or even our death;
- losing the possibilities of what might have been;
- the abandonment of plans for a particular future.[14]

A BARRIER TO HOPE

Loss of dreams is more than disappointment: it can be and often is the shaking of the foundations that guide people's lives. Katherine Charnley describes in poetry what can happen as a result of such losses:

> To lose the power
> to dream dreams,
> is to lose the rich seam
> that runs through life
> like a vein of quartz through granite[15].

Too many people who experience shattered dreams have trouble dreaming again, even when the death itself has been faced and mourned. A woman and her husband had talked about their plans for dying in some detail, including her announcement to him that she was to die first. Two years after his death, despite support and care from her family, friends, and faith, she was still, as she put it, 'angry as hell!' No one, in the time since her husband's death, had explored his and her pictures of life and death with her. She lost not only her husband but also an emotionally important picture of herself. She had no internal pictures of widowhood, because she did not want to be a widow. She had planned to die before her husband... a loss of dreams.

When Mary Sheepshanks' young daughter died of complications resulting from being born with a rare disability, a beloved family member turned to Mary, and said, 'I thought you would be so relieved... How can you be so upset?' Mary reflected, 'Of course relief was there on one level too, but how could I explain... about the intangible link between mother and child, or that I was grieving for might-have-beens.'[16]

Stories such as these illustrate how death can demolish assumptions, disrupt lives and shatter dreams. Failure to address loss of dreams as part of bereavement care can truncate the grieving process and allow a barrier to new dreams and hopes to remain. For many, moving forward with hope and healing requires attention not only to the death, but to the loss of meaning and hope for the future.

RESPONSES TO BEREAVEMENT AND SHATTERED DREAMS

An important early response is to hear, acknowledge, and even inquire about dreams and hopes, so that people can be supported in mourning the range of their losses. Bereavement often brings surprising feelings and confusion, and this can be exacerbated when someone thinks they have faced and grieved a death, only to have trouble moving on or even finding a way to live with the loss. There can, of course, be many causes for conditions like these, but one way to assess whether shattered dreams are involved, is to ask about emotionally important images of oneself and the future that might have been. Here are examples:

> When you pictured this time in your life, what did you picture?
>
> When you thought of death in your family, how did you think it would be, how did you think it would happen?
>
> Tell me about the plans you and (the name of the deceased) had?

Listen especially for wide discrepancies between what was pictured and how things have turned out. Pay attention to specific details as well as 'big picture' assumptions or hopes. Shattered dreams could result, for example, from previous expectations about:

- retirement;
- how or where a home 'should' be (death often means that a house must be sold because of size, expense, care or memories);
- having time for autonomy/control;
- personal or family privacy;
- family relationships which can withstand any stresses or challenge;
- plans being sufficient, or things working out when the time comes;
- dying and death, how, when, who, where;
- being buried by your children (rather than the other way about);
- a reconciliation with someone which should have occurred before their death;
- being accepted by society as having a right to mourn (which can be denied in cases of 'disenfranchised grief'[17]).

RELEARNING THE WORLD

Acknowledgement of shattered dreams can facilitate consideration of other dreams. Thomas Attig called this relearning the world[18]. Caregivers, he wrote, can facilitate bereaved people as they recognise and address the tasks of what some others call the new normal. The relearned world can include modifica-

tions of earlier plans, assumptions or hopes, or something completely new. Ronald Valdiserri, working at a centre for disease control, wrote this at a time when his twin brother was battling with, and dying from AIDS:

> It would be easy to assume that the AIDS epidemic, so often associated with loss, generates nothing but sorrow in those it touches, that the personal adjustments we make are all negative. I find, on the contrary, that AIDS has helped me to clarify just what does and does not matter during our brief time in this world. The epidemic has not taken hope away from me, but it has taught me the inadequacy of looking toward the future as a means of rescue from the present. AIDS has shown me that hope is strongest in us when we seek our fulfilment in the circumstances of the present, when we refuse to defer our dreams or to accept defeat[19].

For many, like Valdiserri, coming to grips with a death results in the realisation of what is truly important. Tragedy shakes many from what was a more casual appreciation of who and what was of value to them to a new clarity. Assumptions and meanings that were disrupted by death cause a reconsideration of ways of behaving and dreaming. As for Valdiserri, it can cause some to live more in the present, even with their hopes and dreams, rather than far in the future.

Mary Oliver expressed a yearning that when death came, she would approach it with a curiosity and zest, as she had lived her life.

> When it's over, I don't want to wonder
> if I have made of my life something
> particular, and real.
> I don't want to find myself sighing and
> frightened,
> or full of argument.
> I don't want to end up simply having
> visited this world[20].

Sogyal Rinpoche in *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* described such appreciation for life and death this way:

> Perhaps it is only those who understand how fragile life is who know how precious it is.[21]

CONCLUSION

Bereavement, then, can be associated with shattered dreams. Those who provide care and presence to the bereaved are often told to meet the person where they are, so if bereavement is accompanied by a shattering of dreams, attention must be paid to that loss also. Acknowledgement of connections such as these is an important act of bereavement care and, when done well, bereavement becomes a habitable grief. For bereavement care, at its best, emphasises listening, not fixing; social support, not advising. Nicholas Wolterstorff, a grieving father, pointedly spoke to bereavement carers when he wrote:

> What I need to hear from you is that you recognise how painful it is. I need to hear from you that you are with me in my desperation. To comfort me, you have to come close. Come sit beside me on my mourning bench[22].

So, you are asked to listen. When you do, listen for the connections between bereavement and shattered dreams. BC

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** Available from Roxburgh House, Dartmouth Road, Strete, nr Dartmouth TQ6 0RW, £3.00.*

† Available from the author at 8 Miles Road, Clifton, Bristol BS8 2JN, UK.

¥ Available from Cruse Bereavement Care, 126 Sheen Road, Richmond TW9 1UR, UK.

FORTHCOMING CONFERENCES AND COURSES

Life, grief and continuity. 6th International Conference on Grief and Bereavement in Contemporary Society. 9-14 July 2000. Jerusalem, Israel. Booking through Peltours-Te'um Congress Organisers, PO 52047, Jerusalem 91520. email: grief@teumcong.co.il.

Bereavement and loss: professional and personal issues. Manchester Area Bereavement Forum 7th Annual Conference. 16 September 2000. Manchester, UK. Application forms available from MABF, 362 Manchester Road, Droylsden M43 6QX, UK. email: grief@mabf.org.uk.

Building bridges for the future. 11th International Conference on Cancer Nursing. 30 July-3 August 2000. Oslo, Norway. Advance programme from Emap Healthcare, Greater London House, Hampstead Road, London NW1 7EJ, UK. email: ICCN2000@healthcare.emap.co.uk.

Opportunities and challenges in the 21st century. 6th Annual Counselling Research Conference of the British Association of Counselling. 20 May 2000. Manchester, UK. Further details from Angela Couchman, 1 Regent Place, Rugby, Warwichshire CV21 2PJ, UK. email: angelac@bac.co.uk.

Speaking about the unspeakable: our own mortality. London Bereavement Network training event for bereavement service co-ordinators and other LBN members. 13 May 2000. London, UK. Led by Hymie Wise. Apply, with sae, to the London Bereavement Network, 356 Holloway Road, London N7 6PA, UK. email: lbn@bereavement.demon.co.uk.

Living with dying. Workshop led by Christianne Heal. 17 June 2000. Cambridge, UK. Details from Christianne Heal, 1 Petersfield, Cambridge CB1 1BB, UK. ☎ 01223 314620.

Mole Conferences events. One day conferences. London, UK, 2000.
Suicide. 20 June. With Trish Thomas of Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide (SOBS).
Domestic violence. 18 October.
Contact Mole Conferences, 26 Church Road, Brighton BN41 1LA, UK. email: pweitz@compuserve.com.