Tackling children's primitive fears during the grieving process



Mary Turner CQSW MSc BACP(Reg) UKCP(Reg)
Psychotherapist and Consultant
Noah's Ark Children's Grief Support Programme, Malvern, Worcestershire, UK

Primitive fears arise from deep inside us, and seem fundamental to the human experience. This paper focuses on how bereavement can exacerbate these fears for children and the importance of addressing this issue. Unfortunately, instead of containing young people's anxieties, our society often does the opposite and adds to their burden of distress. Here suggestions are offered as to how we can all help, on an individual and collective basis.

When I was a child I thought that at night there were wolves and foxes under my bed, and monsters outside the window. I also knew at some level that this was crazy thinking, and so I lived for years in my anxious world, not telling anyone about these things. I now know that such terrors in childhood, and indeed on into adulthood, are common experiences.

I know because many people, clients or otherwise, tell me when asked that they have experienced variations on this theme as children. Films, television programmes, video games, books and magazines are full of material born from this fearful place.

> In the desolate depths of a perilous place
> the bogeyman lurks, with a snarl on his face.
> Never dare, never dare to approach his dark lair
> for he's waiting...just waiting...to get you.
>
> In that sulphurous, sunless and sinister place
> he'll crumple your bones in his bogey embrace.
> Never never go near if you hold your life dear,
> for oh!...what he'll do...when he gets you!

From 'The Bogyman' by Jack Prelutsky[1]

PRIMITIVE FEARS

Freudian analytical thinking would refer to such thoughts and images as surfacing from primary processes that are out of reach of conscious processes[2]. Primary mental processes arise from the unconscious and are 'that aspect of thinking based on symbol and metaphor, on irrational connections among ideas, and not heeding the rules of reality and social communication'[3].

Many grieving children and young people disclose magical thinking processes when facilitated to express them. These processes are born out of primitive anxiety and a lack of knowledge of reality and true cause and effect. CS Lewis gives us a good example of such magical thinking when, in one of the Narnia stories, he has the child save his mother's life with a magic apple[4]. This form of thinking can be incapacitating: many children tell me how they are trying to keep the world and their carers alive by their own single-handed efforts.

> John aged 11 was referred to me following the death of both of his parents from cancer. His stepmother described a general concern that John was very withdrawn, and failing in every aspect of his schoolwork. The teacher said she had 'given up' on John: every attempt to get him to concentrate failed. John was able to tell me that he was prevented from thinking about anything other than keeping his remaining family alive. 'I think all the time about everyone, and think that they are still alive. If I stop then they might die.' Later he was able to tell me, with great distress, that he could control everything in the world with his thoughts, and that he was trying to protect everyone from his anger. 'If I think a bomb is about to drop on us, then it will.'

In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud compares the creation of totems by 'primitive men' to the primary processes of children. 'We misunderstand primitive men just as easily as we do children'[5]. The making of totem poles, for example, to keep evil spirits at bay, is not dissimilar to the vast array of defensive processes and behaviours adopted by children in modern societies.

> 'Whenever I walk in a London street
> I'm ever so careful to watch my feet;
> And I keep in the squares,
> And the masses of bears,
> Who wait at the corner all ready to eat
> The sillies who tread on the lines of the street,
> Go back to their lairs...'

From 'Lines and Squares' by AA Milne[6]

A Jungian perspective explains primitive fear as originating from our collective memories of primal fears, the traces of which have passed on within our minds down all the generations. Ancient, archetypal fears are those of monsters, spirits, wild animals, volcanos, being haunted by the dead, and other overwhelming terrors. Jung had comments of his own to make about his contemporary society which hold even more true today: 'Terrors that stem from our elaborate civilization may be far more threatening than those that primitive people attribute to demons'[7].

We now know that humans have an

EDITOR'S NOTE

Many of the children referred to the Traumatic Stress Clinic, London, who have lost both their parents because one killed the other, try to protect their new carers (grandparents, aunts, fostercarers) from being troubled by their worries and fears. Using primitive ideas, including omnipotent fantasies, they may believe that something they did or said brought about their family tragedy and that therefore they are responsible for, and capable of, keeping alive the new guardians. Mary Turner addresses the task of helping to heal the hurt mind. Fairy stories in which the hero or heroine kills monsters, performs brave tasks, and survives dangerous situations, can help children to overcome their own 'monsters'. This is a paper that will aid counsellors working with bereaved children who need guidance on materials and techniques to use.

ancient part of their brain, sometimes still referred to as the reptilian brain, responsible for the primitive, and potentially life saving, mechanisms of fight, flight or freeze[8]. Coward suggests that 'the most advanced brains incorporate and develop on top of the capabilities of more primitive brains'. He suggests that our brains 'are organised to recognise in the raw sensory input patterns that we can use', and that our brains process data in a 'cascade of pattern recognition'[9]. Recent scientific study of the brain continues to grapple with the fact that 'in early life, children with no prior experience of snakes or any bad experience of the dark seem nonetheless to have innate fears, among them snakes and the dark'[10]. Perhaps primitive fear originates from these ancient pathways and patterns within the brain.

It is hypothesised by Van der Kolk[8] and others that when the human brain is overstimulated by fearful, threatening or worrying emotional arousal, it reaches a point when it is no longer possible to integrate incoming sensory information. The fight or flight or freeze mechanisms (the sympathetic nervous system) get stuck in a rigid state out of which is born primitive anxiety, magical thinking, somatisation and acting-out behaviours. It becomes difficult to make sense of the world other than from this altered perspective, so the brain is unable to process the alarming and arousing data and the individual becomes trapped in a frightening or anxious or dissociated place (as in Turnbull and Gibson's 'concrete box'[11]). Depression and aggression may develop from this.

> Anna aged six was referred to me with severe behavioural difficulties. Her brother was dying of leukaemia. She told me that there was a fire burning outside her bedroom door every night, and monsters coming through her bedroom windows. She also thought that only her keeping silent about her fears would save her village from destruction in a terrible storm 'that would mix with the electricity and cause fires that would burn everything down, and the river would drown the ambulance people when they tried to come to the rescue.' (See cover picture.)

Primitive fear and anxiety is likely to be present when coping mechanisms have been overwhelmed. This might be because the individual is not sufficiently developed to manage such levels of anxiety, or because he or she does not feel safe enough and heard enough within the immediate family setting, or because wider society is failing to offer comfort and understanding. Frequently a combination of these factors makes life for the grieving child very hard to manage.

BEREAVEMENT AS TRAUMA

Surely all close bereavements in infancy, childhood, and adolescence are traumatic? Freud defined a traumatic situation as one where 'external and internal, real and instinctual dangers converge'[12]. The infant, the child and the adolescent are all dependent on their close relationships to provide them with the soil from which the developing sense of self-identity can grow. A close bereavement can, in itself, be a threat to our sense of self because we are programmed to internalise intimate caregivers into our self structures. And so an early bereavement, particularly in infancy and childhood but also during the teenage years, can be profoundly threatening to our developing sense of who we are.

The child's deepest terror is of losing the person or people with whom their developing identity and sense of safety are inextricably bound. In the experience of a close bereavement the internal and instinctual fears of the child do indeed converge with real and external danger to the sense of self. 'Traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection and meaning...they overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life...they confront human beings with the extremities of helplessness and terror, and evoke the responses of catastrophe'[13].

Under stress we all become prey more easily to primitive fears, and we may regress. How much more so the young person who also has the reality of death and dying to try to understand?

> Sally was eight years old and her father had just died. She drew pictures of him beneath the earth, with a huge yellow sun, and lots of flowers. 'I have drawn a big sun and lots of flowers to try to warm him up, and to make him feel better. Daddy has yellow hair in the picture and his mouth is open because that's what you look like when you've died. He is between Good and Bad and I don't know where he's gone.

> Tom was 11 when he was referred with obsessive behavioural difficulties. His stepfather has died. He whispered to me at last that he was trying to be very good because he knew his stepfather was watching him to check up on him. He carried a lizard's claw lucky charm to keep him safe, and kept a whip under his bed to help him keep his mother safe from attack in the night. He watched adult horror films to 'try to prove I'm brave enough to not be afraid of the bad things'.

THE DISTRESSED CHILD AND THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA

> 'Children's concerns about death are pervasive and exert far-reaching influence on their experiential worlds. Death is a great enigma to them, and one of their major developmental tasks is to deal with fears of helplessness and obliteration.' Yalom[14].

My contention is that we are collectively failing to help our children with the task outlined above. Perhaps as adults we are so overwhelmed ourselves by this issue that we have no resources to help our youngsters, constantly returning to the subject of death as if in an attempt somehow to face, and to accommodate it.

In contemporary society young people are bombarded with death-related material from an increasingly wide variety of sources, both aurally and visually: a double dose of sensory input. Many watch television or videos every day, often unsupervised and in their bedrooms.

> Jim was 15 when his mother died of a progressive illness that lasted half of Jim's life. His father worked long hours and Jim spent a lot of time alone in his room watching television. Because he could not sleep, Jim watched horror films, and became generally fascinated by horrific material. He told me that he lay awake terrified waiting for his mother to appear in ghost form in his room. He also eventually told me that he believed there was a man with a gun pointing at his head all the time lurking in the field across the road from his bedroom. Jim had been creeping around with his head below window level. He could not concentrate, and was acting out his difficulties in challenging behaviour towards the teachers. He had kept his terrors to himself in the belief that to disclose them he would create more fear and damage.



'You cannot harm anyone else by talking about these things, however silly or bad or frightening they are to you'[17]
Drawing © Bob Thomas

Stories that are read to children may be frightening, but at least there is a story-teller to intermediate, and help the child to process the material. Bruno Bettelheim suggests that 'fairy tales get the message across to the child that a struggle against severe difficulties in life is unavoidable, but that if one does not shy away, but steadfastly meets unexpected and unjust hardships, one masters obstacles and emerges in the end victorious'[15].

If we leave children to sit by themselves in front of TV screens, computers and the like, we do them a twofold damage. Firstly we put them at risk of being overwhelmed with too much frightening material which they are unable to process. Secondly we may allow a generation of children to become as attached to the VDU as they are to other human beings, perhaps endangering their ability to form loving and lasting human attachments.

HOW WE CAN HELP

This can be summarised by four interrelated concepts: **containing, explaining, naming** and **framing**.

Containing

Containment, to use the term coined by Winnicott, refers to the provision of a safe space where psychological material can be prevented from overflowing or leaking[16]. Without this the brain processes can be overwhelmed, as already described, leading to a sense of being out of control and afraid. Containment needs to be offered to children and to their families on an individual basis, but there is also a task for the wider community, and indeed at societal level.

Parents and caregivers need to be supported themselves both practically and psychologically. They are the child's source of safety and stability, so anything that can be done to enable a grieving parent to continue to function will help contain the distress of the child.

Children also need to know that their experience is also being contained within their immediate community.

> Susie was only four when her Daddy died. When she started school the following month her mother talked with her and her new teacher about what had happened. Susie and her mother drew a picture together, putting Susie in the centre surrounded by a circle of all the 'helping people' in her life. Susie then talked about this picture with her teacher.

On a wider plane, there are, I believe, important questions we should be asking ourselves as a society about how we overload our children's minds with shadowy material, without the wherewithal to contain it. Demands of the school curriculum, and family pressures, can increase the burden. We need to be mindful of children's need to play, to rest and to reflect.

Explaining

It is important that we all acknowledge the manifestations of trauma and grief, and the fact that they can affect us whatever age we are. Normalising can be very reassuring, provided it is not experienced as denying the reality of the child's distress. When young people have some understanding of what is happening to them, they are better equipped to deal with it; fears and anxieties can be calmed by being put into a context.

> Peter was 13 when his father died. He was incapacitated by his grief, unable to think straight at school, and afraid of every shadow on the wall. An explanation of how grief can affect us helped Peter to make sense of his experiences, and to process them.
>
> Sarah found it very reassuring to have a supportive adult read to her. 'Sometimes we have worrying feelings, or thoughts, or questions, or nightmares. They stay inside us and we don't know whether to talk about them or not'[16].

Often it is important to explain to parents, teachers, and other significant adults what the child is experiencing in relation to primitive anxieties:

> Shaun, aged 5, was referred after the death of his mother. He was afraid of robbers and ghosts in his bedroom, and also said that his mother came each night to check his room was tidy. We explained this to Shaun's Dad, and enlisted his help in reassuring Shaun that the bedroom was quite safe and that his mother was not checking up on him.



One of Lucy's monsters

Naming

'It would seem that if a fear, rational or otherwise, can be somehow acknowledged, faced, or "given a name", then something healing can begin to take place'[17]

> Lucy's mother took her own life when Lucy was six years old. Lucy told me that there was a lion on her roof, and crocodiles under her bed. And there were terrible monsters in the airing cupboard. I was careful to tell Lucy that, whilst I believed how bad she felt, it was not really true about the scary things, but we could 'zap' them by talking about them and telling them to go away. This worked after a few attempts.

Children are often spellbound by their fears until we help them free themselves. There are many references in fairy tales to how the facing, or naming, of feared things breaks the spell. JK Rowling provides a contemporary example of this when Harry Potter is taught to face his most dreaded fear with the speaking out of 'riddikulus'[18].

When anxieties are given some identity, the brain can begin to process, or repattern, the material so that it can lose its hold. Naming can be done verbally, but I often use drawing, stories, or bibliotherapy to help children express themselves, as in the drawing below.



By Jim, aged 15. Giving fears an identity by drawing them can help a young person release anxious feelings

Framing

Experiences of loss, grief and bereavement in contemporary society need to be given a frame or context. A century ago, Van Gennep drew attention to the need for rituals as ways of helping us through one phase of life and into the next. 'Mourning is a transitional period for the survivors and they enter it through rites of separation and emerge from it through rites of reintegration into society'[19]. We now know that children should be included in the thinking, planning, and attendance at funerals, if they so wish.

However the experience of grief affects us all for months and sometimes years, and society does little to acknowledge and accommodate this. The experience of separation and reintegration is an ongoing process which may last a lifetime. Rites of passage are devised to provide us with markers along the path of human life, and therefore to help us to feel less lost. And to feel less lost helps us to feel less afraid and anxious. At the end of his journey Bilbo in Tolkien's famous tale, *The Hobbit*[20], returns home. He has faced his terrors.

> 'Roads go ever ever on
> Under cloud and under star,
> Yet feet that wandering have gone
> Turn at last to home afar.
> Eyes that fire and sword have seen
> And horrors in the halls of stone
> Look at last on meadows green
> And trees and hills they long have known.'

To protect confidentiality, drawings used in this paper are either reproduced with the permission of a Gillick-competent child, or have been altered in order to avoid recognition whilst honouring the content.

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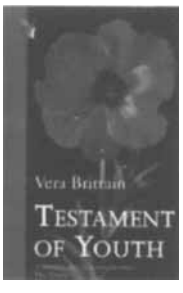
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BEREAVEAVEMENT IN LITERATURE

TESTAMENT OF YOUTH

Vera Brittain

First published in 1933. 1992 edition, London: Virago Press, 661pp. £9.99 pb. ISBN: 0860680355



In this first volume of her autobiography, Vera Brittain describes her childhood and, centrally, her personal experiences of the First World War. I read it some years ago after watching a dramatisation on television and, to date, it is the book which has made the deepest and most long-lasting impression on me.

Vera's studies at Oxford were interrupted by the war and in 1915 she enlisted as a VAD nurse. Rowland, her lover, was sent to the front in March of that year and expected home on leave for Christmas. Instead, Vera learned on Boxing Day that he had been killed in action.

She describes her desperation as she gradually pieces together the details of how Rowland was killed, wondering why he had gone 'so boldly, so heedlessly, into No Man's Land' when his Christmas leave was so near. 'Hardest to bear, perhaps, was the silence...The growing certainty that he had left no message for us seemed so cruel, so baffling.' She found herself resenting the demands of her work: 'the increasing consciousness of loss and frustration filled me with impotent fury and resentment.'

Sent to Malta to serve as a nurse Vera was, for a year, able to enjoy life. She writes of 'a interval of heaven...in which, for the time being, I came to life again'. However in 1917 a close friend, Victor was blinded by a bullet. Vera visited him in London and considered marrying him before his condition deteriorated and he died. Another close friend, Geoffrey, was killed by a sniper. Then, back at home in June 1918, she heard that her brother, Edward, had been killed.

That night she crept downstairs to look at his portrait, 'And suddenly, as I remembered all the dear afternoons and evenings when I had followed him on the piano as he played his violin, the sad, searching eyes of the portrait were more than I could bear, and falling on my knees before it I began to cry "Edward! Oh. Edward!" in dazed repetition, as though my persistent crying and calling would some howbring him back.'

After this life itself seemed unreal. Vera endured 'a period of isolation more bleak, more complete and far more prolonged than the desperate months in 1916 which had followed the death of Rowland...From June 1918 until about April 1920, I knew no one in the world to whom I could speak spontaneously, or utter one sentence completely expressive of what I really thought or felt.' She was 'enormously, interminably tired' and went on living only 'because it was less trouble than finding a way out...'.

After the war Vera travelled to Italy to find the small mountain-top graveyard where Edward was buried, and to France to visit Roland's grave. She completed her studies at Oxford, became involved in politics and pacifism and, later, engaged to be married. But she found it very difficult to make this commitment, afraid to become vulnerable to loss again, afraid that in accepting a new relationship she might 'destroy yet again' those who had died. She dreamed of Rowland, miraculously alive, and felt torn by her loyalty to the dead: 'So long, I knew, as I remained unmarried I was merely a survivor from the past – that war-time past into which all those whom I loved best had disappeared. To marry would be to dissociate myself from that past, for marriage inevitably brought with it a future.' Finally she does finds the courage to move forward and marry.

Each page of this book is passionately written and vividly conveys Vera's emotions and thoughts. Her poetry and correspondence, and those of Rowland, are moving and poignant. Vera's daughter, Shirley Williams, the SDP politician, has expressed the hope that new generations will 'discover the anguish and pain in the lives of these young people...and, in discovering, will understand.' I certainly did.

Martin Newman

Consultant Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist