Spirituality, loss and grief

The double-edged sword



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Spirituality, with its rituals and beliefs, can be a powerful elixir at times of loss. Its ritual can provide structure and succour; its beliefs may offer comfort and consolation. Yet, like many powerful tools, it can have both constructive and destructive aspects. This article explores the ways that spirituality can both facilitate and complicate bereavement, and offers suggestions about how we can help bereaved people to use their spirituality effectively as they struggle with grief.

Both clinicians and novelists have explored the extraordinary pain that bereavement can bring, describing in vivid detail the psychological trauma, the social loss, and the existential ache that can accompany significant loss. Spirituality may promise reunion and resurrection, yet also haunt the bereaved with fears of retribution and damnation. To some it may offer forgiveness, while in others it exacerbates guilt. Its rituals may comfort some and trouble others.

But spirituality, whether expressed in a theistic religious system or a philosophical system, is likely to be part of the bereavement process. Just as dying has a spiritual dimension, so does death and bereavement. Questions about the value of the deceased's life and the meaningfulness of the survivor's existence in the face of loss have an inherently spiritual character.

SPIRITUALITY DEFINED

Spirituality is elusive and difficult to define. It is one of those terms that everyone uses, but on whose meaning few would agree. The International Work Group on Death, Dying and Bereavement reminds us that 'spirituality is concerned with the transcendental, inspirational and existential way to live one's life...'[1]. Miller[2] describes the dilemma in defining spirituality:

> 'Spirituality' relates to our souls. It involves that deep inner essence of who we are. It is an openness to the possibility that the soul within each of us is somehow related to the Soul of all that is. Spirituality is what happens to us that is so memorable we cannot forget it, and yet we find it difficult to talk about because words fail to describe it.

Miller also differentiates spirituality from religion, reminding us that, while religion draws from spirituality, for most of us it remains only a part of our spirituality:

> Spirituality is the act of looking for meaning in the very deepest sense, and looking for it in the way that is most authentically ours. Now 'religion', on the other hand, works in a different way.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Many bereavement counsellors are so afraid of saying the wrong thing that they say nothing at all to their clients about religion and spirituality. Clients may be similarly inhibited and, as a result, spiritual issues are often ignored. This is a great pity for there are few major bereavements that do not constitute a spiritual crisis and, while it is inappropriate for counsellors to proselytise, that does not mean that the whole subject is taboo.

In this paper Ken Doka grasps the nettle and points to both the problems and the possibilities for spiritual growth which arise following bereavement. He goes on to suggest ways in which counsellors can foster communications and give effective help.

While spirituality is necessarily very personal, religion is more communal. In fact, if you take the word back to its origins, 'religion' means 'that which binds together', 'that which ties things into a package'. Religion has to do with collecting and consolidating and unifying. Religion says: 'Here are special words that are meant to be passed on. Take them to heart'. Religion says: 'Here is a set of beliefs that forms a coherent whole. Take it as your own'. Religion says: 'Here are people to revere and historical events for you to recall. Remember them'. Religion says: 'Here's a way for you to act when you come together as a group, and here's a way for you to behave when you're apart'. Now religion is a natural outgrowth of spirituality. All major religions began as intensely meaningful spiritual experiences, first within a single individual or among a small group of people, and then among a larger group, which became larger still, because something had happened, something was real, and it attracted people.

This definition is critical because it reinforces the concept that religiousness and spirituality are distinct. The latter is far broader, for it refers to all the ways we invest life with meaning, including theistic beliefs, philosophies, and ideologies. Spirituality is universal: while individuals may or may not have religious beliefs (ie adhere to an organised set of doctrines), spirituality is inherent.

PROBLEMS WITH SPIRITUALITY AND GRIEF

Spirituality affects grief in a number of ways.

Emotional expression

Many emotional reactions to grief may have spiritual components. Anger, for example, can be a cosmic anger, directed against God or other powers, decrying an unfair or random universe. Similarly, guilt can have a spiritual component, a sense that the loss is punishment for feelings, thoughts or behaviours.

Religious and spiritual views may impede emotional expression. Bereaved people may be constrained by their beliefs and unable to show certain emotions, feeling that these are unacceptable. For example, a bereaved mother felt considerable relief over the loss of her child after a long terminal illness, but she had a

difficult time acknowledging this feeling since she felt guilty about it and fearful that its expression might result in further divine retribution. In some cases the bereaved may not want to admit to grieving, fearing that the very expression of grief denies the validity of their faith and its promises, such as the belief in an afterlife. In both situations, counsellors must be careful not to challenge that faith but to help the bereaved to explore ways that they can express feelings within the context of their own religious tradition.

Loss of meaning

Spirituality is also entailed in one of the critical themes in grief – the loss of meaning. Certain losses may shatter assumptions, causing individuals to question or reassess their sense of self, their relationship with others or their spiritual beliefs.

It should be clear that not every loss causes a crisis of meaning. For example, the death of a 95-year-old man, painlessly perhaps, from pneumonia may reinforce the beliefs that people grow old, and drift into death. However if that same man died from a brutal attack or alone, decomposing in an apartment, or after a long painful illness, survivors might struggle with a sense of the unfairness or meaningless of the death. Certain losses such as traumatic, painful or out-of-sequence deaths, like that of a young child, are likely to challenge a sense of meaning.

In some cases, the very nature of spirituality and personal faith can be questioned after a death. C S Lewis, a writer well known for his religious beliefs, struggled with his faith when his wife died an agonising death from cancer. In his journal, *A Grief Observed*[3], Lewis protests:

> Meanwhile, where is God? But go to Him when your help is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face...Not that I am (I think) in much danger of ceasing to believe in God. The real danger is of coming to believe such dreadful things about him.

Thus, bereaved people may struggle with two losses simultaneously – the loss of the deceased and the loss of their own beliefs. In resolving grief then, both will have to be addressed.

These struggles of faith can be difficult on a number of levels. They can not only remove a potentially significant source of comfort but also separate the bereaved from both rituals and a community of faith that could possibly provide solace and support.

SPIRITUALITY AS A SUPPORT

While spirituality can be challenged by loss or even complicate the grieving process, it can also provide great support in loss. It does this in four major ways.

Answers and solutions through belief

Beliefs, of course, remain the heart of the matter, for they speak to the existential issue of 'Why?' – Why did he have to suffer? Why did she have to die? Why am I in such pain? What will happen to the person? What will happen to me? Each religious tradition or spiritual/philosophical system may have different ways of addressing these issues, even multiple ways within a tradition. But every tradition somehow addresses the issue of death, grief and loss.

Sometimes these belief systems will provide comforting answers, but sometimes they will not. The faith may be too fragile, or too rigid, to overcome the adversity. For example, one client's belief was that good deeds would be rewarded. When her husband was shot and mugged stopping to assist what he believed was a disabled car, her faith was shattered.

For others, the belief system itself may be a source of spiritual pain. For example, many religious beliefs see suicide as an unforgivable sin and offer scant comfort to survivors. In such cases, caregivers may find it helpful to adopt the two following strategies. First, it is necessary to understand, as stated earlier, that faith and tradition alone do not constitute a person's spirituality. Caregivers must explore the 'faith themes' that underlie their clients' beliefs, such as a perspective of a punishing God. Secondly, once these themes are understood, they may find it helpful to consider together other ideas that are illustrated within the client's own religious traditions and services. For example, a Christian whose son had committed suicide believed that he was damned. However, he was greatly helped when directed to a passage in the Bible (Hebrews 11:32) reminding him that Samson, who had also committed suicide, was listed among the faithful. Often this reframing is best done by someone who shares that tradition.

Belief systems may also support an ongoing sense or connection, a belief that we will be reunited in an afterlife or that the deceased's presence can still be experienced in this life. Such beliefs can provide a sense of comfort, mediating the loss.

Helpful spiritual practices

Spirituality encompasses everyday practices that may be of particular help to the bereaved survivor. Prayer, for example, can allow a person to express feelings and process thoughts, offering a sense of efficacy and, perhaps, a feeling of connection. Meditation may alleviate stress.

Rituals throughout the grieving process

Every spiritual transition brings with it the gift of ritual, a powerful therapeutic tool reminding us of the ways our faith speaks to loss. Rituals can structure grief, providing points throughout the time of grief at which the loss is acknowledged, be it the 'yahrzeit', or annual observance of the death in Judaism, or the anniversary mass of Catholicism. And rituals provide opportunities to mark transitions or ongoing connections, to affirm the person, or to find reconciliation.

While rituals are powerful, that power is often untapped. Though funeral rituals are generally therapeutic, much can be done to increase their value. Making a ritual personal to the deceased and the family is usually preferred by the bereaved and much more likely to facilitate grief adjustment. There are many ways that this can be accomplished. Funeral eulogies or homilies can review the life of the deceased and prayers, readings or music can be selected for their special relevance. Opportunities can be developed that will allow mourners to express remembrance or affection as, for example, at a child's funeral where mourners were invited to place items in the coffin that represented aspects of that child's life. Montages of photographs, displays of awards, 'creations' or trophies can all be ways that a funeral ritual is personalised.

Participation also facilitates grief adjustment by allowing symbolic mastery, often so important in the chaos that loss brings. The process of planning personal rituals is one way of involving mourners, but other types of participation are common such as reading, speaking, playing music or singing. Some may prefer to serve as coffin bearers or in other roles. Children should be encouraged to participate if they are willing. For one widow, the most significant part of the funeral was her great-grandson handing out flowers at the graveside. This act gave her a comforting sense of continuity.

Post-burial rituals have largely disappeared from many religious traditions and this is unfortunate for two reasons. First, they can be critical in educating both the bereaved and others that grief is a long, time-consuming process. In the Orthodox Jewish tradition, for example, there are a series of rituals, occurring over a year, that symbolically mark phases in mourning

('kaddish'). Underlying this process is an expectation that healing is slow and that communal support is essential. In contrast, in other traditions the absence of ritual beyond the funeral may suggest to the bereaved and their community that they should quietly resume their lives and resolve loss. Secondly, post-death rituals give the bereaved further opportunities to express grief in public, receive support and act out therapeutically.

Most religious and spiritual traditions provide opportunities to structure or revive such rituals. For Christians, masses of remembrance, All Saints' days or memorial days can be used to provide the bereaved with special times to commemorate the deceased. As with burial rites, these are particularly effective if they are personal to the bereaved and involve them in the ceremony.

Clinicians may also use religious traditions and rituals to design therapeutic rituals, individually designed interventions that seek to assist the bereaved struggling with grief. For example, an eight-year-old boy had considerable guilt about the fact that he had never told a deceased uncle how much he loved him. The counsellor decided that the child needed some kind of formal, public way to express that emotion, so together they designed a ritual where the child saved money and dedicated flowers in church in memory of his uncle. After the service he laid the flowers on his uncle's grave, expressing his love.

Faith communities

Finally, faith communities – ie those who come together to share a spiritual tradition – can be a valued resource after a death. Such communities may not only offer solace and a place to explore and share spiritual beliefs, but also tangible help in the form of child sitting, meals and other forms of assistance. That ministry or ongoing presence can be a special gift.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that those who counsel the bereaved will need to be well aware of both the spiritual issues that arise in the bereavement process and the rituals and beliefs that may influence the process. In taking histories, counsellors should ask about a client's religious and spiritual autobiographies, beliefs and practices. In addition to providing useful information that may later be explored, such questions also communicate to the client the counsellor's openness to discuss such concerns. Naturally, in every action the counsellor needs to communicate respect for those values and traditions. The goal of counselling is first to empower clients to use all their own strengths and resources. In the spiritual crisis of bereavement neither the counselor nor the bereaved can ignore one of the strongest resources – the sense of spirit. BC

This paper uses material written by the author in 'The spiritual crisis of bereavement' in Death and Spirituality *(K Doka [ed], Amityville, NewYork: Baywood,1993, pp185-194) and in 'Spirituality in loss and grief' in* Living with Grief: Who we are, how we grieve *(K Doka, J Davidson [eds], Philadelphia, USA: Brunner Mazel, 1998, pp7-12).*

References

1. International Work Group on Dying, Death and Bereavement. Assumptions and principles of spiritual care. *Death Studies* 1990, **14**: 75-81.
2. Miller J. Spirituality. Presentation to conference on Transformational Grief. Burnsville, NC, USA: November 1994.
3. Lewis CS. A Grief Observed. London: Faber and Faber, 1961.

BOOK REVIEWS

THE SPIRITUAL LIVES OF BEREAVED PARENTS

Dennis Klass

Philadelphia, USA: Brunner/Mazel, 1999, 208pp. £20.00 pb, £49.00 hb. ISBN 0 87630 990 2, ISBN 0 87630 991 0

The palliative care literature these days often speaks of spirituality, but there is surprisingly little written on the spirituality of bereaved people. This is odd, given that many chaplains and other ordained ministers organise and chair bereavement services.

This book is refreshingly unlike most on spirituality in health care. First, it is written by neither a chaplain nor a nurse, but by a professor of the psychology of comparative religions, who for 20 years has been consultant and researcher for a self-help group of bereaved parents. Second, Klass recognises that, though the search for meaning is personal and individual, it occurs in the context of millennia of world-views and belief systems – spirituality and religion cannot be easily separated.

The death of a child challenges faith and trust, so grief becomes 'a spiritual journey, not just a psychological process'. The core of the book examines the communities within which the relationship with the dead child can evolve (though this chapter seemed to me more about psychology than spirituality), the ways in which parents find solace, and how world-views are remoulded. Klass also examines provocatively the helper's own faith and assumptions; both optimistic and pessimistic world-views have their merits, and helpers need to have become immersed in both traditions if they are to assist all clients.

There is considerable recycling of Klass's previous work; and one wonders to what extent he is writing about the USA, a peculiarly devout society, or about all western societies. But the book reports state-of-the-art research, is well-written, personal, full of case studies, practical and certainly worth reading.

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BEYOND DYING

The mystery of eternity

Ted Harrison

Oxford, UK: Lion Publishing 2000. £7.99 pb. ISBN 0745 95047 7

This book claims to be an 'investigation' of death and the mystery of eternity. Such issues have interested and challenged some of the greatest minds over the centuries; scientific, philosophical, and religious views have all contributed to the debate.

The author of this book states that the main thrust of this book is to 'examine the evidence as to what we will experience beyond the grave'. The underlying tone is religious and there are plenty of references to the Bible and other religious texts, for instance, the final sentence quotes the prayer of Jesus on the Cross: 'Father, into Thy hands I commend my spirit'. Plato and Descartes are mentioned, but their views are not fully explored. Fortunately, there is a reference list at the end.

Less helpfully, the author chooses to illustrate his themes by reference to more contemporary events such as Glenn Hoddle's comments, the Heaven's Gate cult, and Elvis Presley, as well as certain television programmes, and the inclusion of numerous anecdotes. A wide range of topics seem to be covered, somewhat superficially, at bewildering speed. There are generalisations of doubtful validity, for example, 'To all generations, and in all cultures, death brings with it the same mix of fear and hope' and 'Spring coincides with Easter and is when the world comes to life again'. Some interesting observations on blame and victims in chapter 2 are not developed. Comments such as 'Death is a journey without a life-line [or] route map', 'Our mental picture of death is full of dire warnings', and 'Sleep is like death. It is death with a return ticket' are, in my view, incorrect.

Overall, I would have preferred the author to have covered less ground in greater depth. Having read the book, I am no clearer in my mind about the mystery of eternity. BC

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