A SPECIAL SCAR* (2nd edn)

Alison Wertheimer

London/New York: Brunner-Routledge, 2001, 270pp. £15.99pb. ISBN 0 415 22027 0

Suicide is a complex act shaped by many different factors. It challenges and defies our most deeply held beliefs that human life is a precious thing. The person who commits suicide has been released from their pain, but the bereaved may inherit the pain with the added burden of trying to understand their conflicting feelings about the deceased.

Though usually carried out in private, most suicides have far-reaching repercussions so that that the death soon enters the public domain, bringing additional problems. Alison Wertheimer has lived though this process herself, as her sister took her own life. In this new edition of her established classic she has undertaken a major update and added to the content, offering new ways of coping with these traumas. Despite the difficulty of the subject, the material presented is not overwhelming because it is divided into small, manageable sections.

As before, the main part of the book follows the painful experiences of 50 survivors of suicide, showing how they have learned to live with the aftermath. Their grief is personal, but they have some shared thoughts, feelings and experience and their collected histories form a well-worked and thoughtful account of the pain and problems resulting from this death. For the new edition, excellent information about group work with the survivors of suicide has been added. Also new is a chapter on counselling the bereaved, with some revealing case histories. One of the important points made here is that clients can delay the counselling process by focusing on unanswerable 'Why?' questions, perhaps subconsciously avoiding their own feelings. Alison writes from the perspective of a psychodynamic counsellor, but she uses language accessible to all so that any counsellor, bereavement worker or bereaved person would gain knowledge and understanding from reading this section.

Though I regret the price hike, this is the best book on suicide on the market at the moment. It crosses many barriers and I feel it should be read widely, not only by bereavement professionals and volunteers, but also by bereaved people and others wishing to know more about this difficult subject.

Josy Williams

Trainer and Suicide Group Leader

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

DEATH, MEMORY AND MATERIAL CULTURE

Elizabeth Hallam, Jenny Hockey

Oxford, UK/New York: Berg, 2001, 249pp. £14.99 pb. ISBN 1 859 73379 4

'Far from being invisible, past generations, dead friends and lovers remain manifest – through well-worn garments, letters, photographs, flowers, residual drops of perfume, funerary sculpture... Material culture provides the deceased with a powerful presence within the here and now.' I am entirely in sympathy with the basic premise of this book. Though dying people may be shunted into side wards and though bereaved people may find certain kinds of conversation taboo, nevertheless death, the dead and the past are all around us in our material world.

Recent bereavement theory points to continuing bonds between the living and the dead, so mourning entails creating memories out of the fragments that a person leaves behind. This book reminds us that objects and how they are used tell us as much as do words about how this remembering happens.

The book is indebted to two recently fashionable areas of scholarship – the study of material culture and the study of historical memory. The authors bring these two fields together in the context of death, showing how we remember the dead through a whole range of material things. It is a book that was waiting to be written. Unfortunately, it displays a degree of abstraction, repetition, generalisation and theorising unlikely to appeal to most readers of this journal. The more accessible sections include detailed discussions of relics, jewellery, photographs and other mementoes.

Tony Walter

Reader in Sociology

DYING, GRIEVING, FAITH AND FAMILY

George Bowman III

New York: Haworth Press, 1998, 152pp. $19.95. ISBN 0 789 00263 9

George Bowman III has spent many years in hospital and hospice ministry, as well as being a supervisor of chaplains in the USA. During this period he was very involved in supporting people who were, or had been, suffering loss. This led him to recognise that family systems theory has much to offer in understanding the dying and the survivors. He also believes, as a Baptist minister, that there may be a link between a person's family dynamic and their faith journey as an individual and as part of a family unit. Much of the text is devoted to the exploration of these links from a practical and theoretical stance.

The book looks at the issues from a professional and personal perspective. The author has had cancer and his own reactions to diagnosis and treatment inform the text at various points. The theory is heavily influenced by the work of Elizabeth Kübler-Ross and the author acknowledges the lack of focus on issues such as AIDS and the pastoral care of children. However, the final chapter does look at a range of religious resources and rituals from within the Christian tradition.

While there is much of value in exploring faith and the family dynamic in the face of death, one of the main weaknesses of the text is the lack of reference to much of the recent research. There is no reference to the work of Parkes, Walter, Stroebe or Worden. Neither is there much discussion of non-religious spiritual needs, as everything is channelled into a religious response. I hesitate to commend this book to a palliative/bereavement care readership in view of this narrow approach to the topic. It is, however, a very powerful testimony to the faith journey of one man and his family in the face of several serious life crises and, as such, has great value.

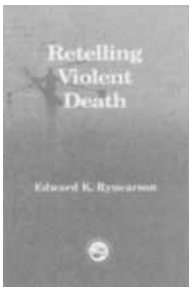
Peter Speck

Trust Chaplaincy Team Leader

RETELLING VIOLENT DEATH

Edward Rynearson

London/New York: Brunner-Routledge, 2001, 164pp. £14.50 pb. ISBN 1 583 91363 7



Despite its intimidating title, the book is presented in a clear, attractive format with a brief summary introducing each chapter. This enables the reader to select areas of immediate interest without needing to read from cover to cover. The central theme is the value of restorative retelling which enables the bereaved person finally to come to terms with life.

In the first part of the book Rynearson explains his concept. He relates, very movingly, the effect of his young wife's suicide through drowning. Although his background as a psychologist is relevant, it his personal experience that makes an impact. Some chapters, for example 'From incoherent to coherent retelling', are written in a style more suited for a professional clinician than a reader with limited experience of bereavement issues.

We come to recognise several key words associated with restorative retelling such as flow, resilience, chaos, intervention and coherence. The strong use of water imagery reflects on the author's life. We sense the strength of undercurrents of grief and despair but also the realisation that in order to reconnect with life, bereaved people must make their own journey to safety. Retelling, with the guidance of an experienced listener, should help them to finally reach a safe haven.

Part Two offers strategies of intervention. Structures and processes are introduced together with the goals and possible obstacles. Although these are probably of more interest to professional clinicians, the appendix outlines group sessions which could be adapted for use by a bereavement worker. Later chapters cover more specialised intervention and examine previous work, referring to Freud, Janet and others. The chaper on 'Retelling the literature on violent dying' suggests Rynearson is less convinced by some of the more recent research and treatment of violent death.

Retelling Violent Death offers valuable insight into issues following traumatic death; it is also a rite of passage for the author himself. BC

Shirley Hill

Bereavement counsellor, trainer and supervisor

ABSTRACTS

Parents' perceptions of adolescent sibling grief responses after an adolescent or young adult child's sudden, violent death

Lohan JA, Murphy SA. *Omega* 2002: **44**(1); 77-95

This article reports the findings from parental responses to an open-ended question about the difficulties faced by surviving adolescent children after the death of a sibling. The reactions of the bereaved fathers and mothers are compared, revealing their differing perceptions of how the children have coped. The authors conclude that further research is needed to understand the sibling grief process following violent death, and to develop nursing interventions to support bereaved families. The article is somewhat inconclusive, since, as the authors comment, the study does not distinguish between reactions caused by the loss of a sibling and those resulting from the manifold problems of adolescence.

ABSTRACTS

Grief experiences of women in prison following the death of a loved one

Ferszt GG. *Illness Crisis and Loss* 2002; **10**(3): 242-254

The loss of a loved one can be devastating in the best of circumstances. Women in prison are faced with a unique challenge when they experience such a loss, yet little is known about the grieving process through which they pass. This interesting article examines the experience of three American women who suffered the death of a significant person while they were imprisoned: their isolation, the absence of emotional support from family or friends, the lack of privacy in which to grieve, the humiliation of being taken to view the deceased in shackles, handcuffs and prison attire, the inability to take part in burial rituals, and their fear of expressing their emotions because of the threat of disciplinary action. The context of the prison, by complicating the grieving process, resulted in disenfranchised grief. The author believes there should be further exploration of the grief experience of incarcerated women.

Disenfranchised grief in stepfamilies

Gerrard I. *Grief Matters* 2002: **5**(1); 11-14

The author of this thought-provoking article is a family therapist. On the basis of her experience she explores the idea of disenfranchised grief in stepfamilies. In the initial phases of a stepfamily creation, children's grief can be largely unrecognised or completely denied by adults in the family. She cites possible reasons for this, not least the fact that children are more likely to be further back in the grieving process than their adult counterparts. Moreover, their grief is exacerbated by their sense of powerlessness. Nor is it an easy situation for the parents. Children and parents alike may experience losses that are 'hidden', and are often suffered silently. It is suggested that counsellors and educators should become familiar with such hidden losses, so that they can help stepfamilies not only to survive but to reach their full potential. The need to incorporate the past while also moving ahead is seen to be crucial in the resolution of grief for stepfamily members.

Grief resulting from euthanasia and natural death of companion animals

McCutcheon KA, Fleming SJ. *Omega* 2001-2002: **44**(2); 169-188

Everyone who has ever owned pets knows how important they are in our lives. The death of a pet, like other losses, requires that the bereaved should adjust to the consequences of that loss, which are often severe. This study investigates the influence of a number of variables on how one reacts to the death of a companion animal, such as the cause of death (euthanasia or natural), the gender and age of the owner, the type of pet and the time since the loss. There was material here for an interesting article. Unfortunately it fails to live up to expectations, partly because the results are often inconclusive and contradictory, but mainly because it is dry and without human appeal, lacking the anecdotal, first-hand evidence which would have been appropriate to the subject matter.

A personal journey through grief

Pathy MA. *Illness, Crisis & Loss* 2001: **9**(4); 381-394

In this personal journey of grief, the author compares and contrasts her grief reactions and process of mourning at two stages of life. The first death, that of her father, occurred when she was thirteen; she had no help in resolving her grief, which led her to two suicide attempts and chronic depression. The second death, that of her best friend, occurred 48 years later, and catapulted her back to the time when she lost her father. This time she buried none of her feelings, and there was catharsis and healing. The author concludes that, while all losses are traumatic, the consequences of a childhood loss are more bewildering and devastating than at any other stage of life. For a child, the death of a parent is a loss that is forever. BC

Sheila Hodges and John Bush

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CANCELLATION OF CONFERENCE

It is much regretted that the International Conference on Death and Bereavement in Contemporary Society which was to have taken place in Belfast on 25-29 July 2003 under the auspices of Cruse Bereavement Care, has had to be cancelled.

A possible alternative venue and date is being explored and will be announced in these columns