

Derek Nuttall writes:

Bereavement takes us into unfamiliar territory, practically as well as emotionally. There are many practical consequences to be faced, some so foreign they cause panic and fears of never being able to cope. Much depends on how many of our partner's skills we learned before bereavement and seeing the struggle we have later is a very strong argument for such an exchange of skills. Many resist this, for all kinds of reasons, but we make things worse for ourselves later if we do.

Cooking is something I have problems with. I have little interest in it, can cope only with the most basic of tasks and create either jokes or an evacuation by the family when I attempt it! It is a pity because meals are so important. Like other functions eating satisfies physical needs but represents and symbolises deeper things as well, especially for a family. A permanent gap at the meal table is a great loss and eating alone lacks the satisfaction and stimulation of shared occasions. The food itself and the pleasure of preparing it are less interesting too very often.

I recall a widower talking with pride and excitement of the first invitation he issued after his wife's death to friends to join him for a lunch he had prepared without help. It worked very well and although there would no doubt be painful memories around the table, it gave him a sense of achievement and marked another step forward. It was an illustration that in bereavement recovery often consists of achieving goals that previously were insignificant but now seem well out of reach. To re-phrase—a small step for most of us but a giant step for the individual concerned.

Caring for the bereaved includes inviting them to share meals or coffee, or stronger beverage, with us and responding to their invitations to do the same. Some Cruse Branches arrange Sunday lunch time groups and encourage shared meals at Christmas time. Sadly many widows find fewer invitations coming their way after the husband's death and we need to do all we can to encourage people to keep them, and widowers, on the guest list or make sure the habit of popping in for a cuppa is maintained.

Caring for the bereaved includes encouraging them to invite others in for a meal or drink and being around to bolster the shaking confidence before and to share the sense of achievement afterwards.

Caring for the bereaved also includes providing some tools for the job. Cruse's Fact Sheet **'Household Guide for Widowers'** is a useful tool. We hope the new **Cookery Book,** to be published next year as one of the features of our Silver Jubilee, will be another. It will have a number of distinctive features, including local and regional recipes for all over Britain, but above all it will be an encouragement to cook and share.

In the ancient Old Testament story, out of which came the name of Cruse, the breakthrough for the widow and her bereaved son came when they shared food with another person.

We want our new Cookery Book to be original and readers can help by sending in a favourite regional local recipe or menu, especially one dug out of the memory or with unusual — but edible — features. Please send them to Cruse House.

Harsh transition to a new way of death—

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In grief there is a retreat into the internal familiar world, a partial reflection of the very world the refugee has lost. It is the new adopted country that begins to appear callous and unappreciative of the needs of the dead man. Funeral customs comfort those left alive. They are also procedures to aid the dead person. Prayers, consecrated ground, proper conduct: they provide a ritual allowing the dead to become "forever gone".

Special divination is commonly involved in choosing the grave site and Mui's elderly mother wanted the grave to be dug pointing south. The cemetery superintendent pointed to the alignment of the other plots on the hillside and said it could only be south east. In vain the family pleaded and then they wandered off to survey the cemetry. Some land laid aside and consecrated for Roman Catholics was a better choice, the elderly mother said. The superintendent said that only unconsecrated ground was available. The family was evidently worried that the man's soul and body would not get the full benefit of a proper final rest. The grave should not remain unmarked, but to their consternation the vast amount this burial was costing would not include a gravestone. Was the superintendent certain that the site of the grave would not become lost? He replied that wooden crosses and concrete headstones were not allowed, but the family could make their own gravestone, so long as they used marble or Portland stone.

Culture betrayed

Perhaps it is common to most cultures that a man is not "dead" until he is buried. We cannot know whether the compromise here achieved has laid the dead man's soul and his widow's mind to rest. A key rite of passage improperly done, and the refugee can turn neither to the sanctuary of the mother culture which feels so betrayed nor can she find comfort in this new strange set of procedures. She remains dislocated.

The refugee worker must operate in this possibly unsatisfactory dialogue between cultures much of the time. The worker's understanding of language and behaviour often lacks the finer interpretation of the silent inner world of practice and custom. Interpreters have to cope with the grossness of the translation, the clumsy transliteration that attempts to satisfy one or other party, but seldom both.

Still dislocated

Mui, as an adult refugee, had internalised the funeral practices of her Sino-Vietnamese culture. The experience of flight from Vietnam and resettlement in Britain witnessed the loss of most of the external expressions of her sense of identity. Now with her husband dead she must also make the step from wife to widow. She must grieve for her husband when her grief for her homeland was not completed. And amidst this personal trauma a vital rite of passage spoiled by unhappy compromise. Mui remains dislocated, and will perhaps never settle as a widow in the way that, as a wife, she might have succeeded.

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