

Derek Nuttall writes:

In some of my recent talks I have heard myself saying "When our turn comes to die maybe it won't be so bad for us", and "When we have to grieve maybe it will be better for us—there will be more help available". Based on the interest in and concern for the dying and the bereaved that is being shown these days, this does seem to be the likely outcome of the slow lessening of the taboo about death that we are witnessing. There's a lot of evidence: the growth of the hospice movement; the greater ability to control pain; more open discussion about death; the increase in courses and conferences; the growing library of written material; the expansion of Cruse, and many other things. I know the ice is only just beginning to melt, and that we've a long way to go before our society is able to feel comfortable when discussing death or when involved with the dying and the grieving, but there are many signs to encourage us. The interest needs channelling, harnessing, so that it is used to increase our ability to care for those who are dying and bereaved. At least, however, and at last, the tide seems to be running our way.

I hope it's true—that our own death and grief will not be as lonely or as devastating as many in the past. I also know that when it happens personally it can bowl over the experienced healthcare professional or counsellor just as heavily as those with no involvement in the care of the dying or bereaved. We are helped to tolerate other people's grief, yet although we feel something of its pain, especially if it mirrors our own losses, past and anticipated, ultimately it is their grief and not ours. When it's our loss, when it's the most important person in our world who has died, then in spite of all our knowledge and experience we join the ranks of the bereaved just as bewildered as everyone else. We may know all about the process of grief, the fluctuating moods, the array of responses, the time it takes, the help available, but all of this may fail to reach through to bring comfort.

This throws up the questions—how able are we to support a colleague when there's a personal bereavement? How much do we allow those who are supposed to look after us—doctors, clergy, nurses, etc.—a chance to grieve? How easy do we find it to ask for help for ourselves? Sometimes experienced carers feel they have to be "the professional" or "the counsellor" to the rest of the family when bereavement comes, defending themselves against their own grief by being the controlled carer and organiser. When we are bereaved we should be allowed to be ourselves, not what others think we should be, and if our way of coping is to keep up the professional approach for a while, well and good, providing it doesn't prevent us working through our grief. If you hold elastic taut for too long, it sags when released, unable to function properly. A question often facing the carer is whom to do our grieving with.

There is a related question. How far should we show our emotions in the company of the dying and the bereaved? Is it all right to cry in front of them? Do we show our own feelings of helplessness? The answer must be that it depends on circumstances and the individual. Two closing comments, however. If our tears are spontaneous and don't overwhelm us they will surely "connect" with the dying and bereaved in a way nothing else can, and they may release necessary tears in others. Expressing feelings of helplessness, or simply having them, may communicate themselves to the other person, and cause them to feel even more out of control. On the other hand they may add to the relationship and provide a basis for more discoveries together.

MY DAD'S DEATH BY ANNELIE

In response to Derek Nuttall's appeal for personal accounts of teenage bereavement in Bereavement Care, Vol. 2, No. 1, Annelie who is 16 now, sent Cruse her reflections about her father's death five years ago. Talking may not be easy, as she indicates, but setting down her thoughts on paper has been a great help to her.

My dad died when I was eleven; I am now sixteen. He had been seriously ill for a year or so from cancer. He had to have radiation treatment every Monday which made him feel even worse. I knew he was ill and his awful coughing used to get on my nerves and I used to desperately wish him to get better soon. I was convinced he would get better; somehow my mind would accept nothing else.

Two weeks before his actual death, when he was almost bedridden at home and we had a nurse, my mum quietly told me that dad would not have much longer to live. Maybe she expected me to cry, but instead I just accepted it calmly. For some reason my mind shut down. When I tried to think about it all I was faced with was a blank—my mind was protecting itself.

The day of my dad's actual death was very confusing to me. One minute I had a dad, the next he was gone, and our family was one person less, rather unwhole and lonely. At about six in the morning my mum woke me up to tell me that dad wanted to see me. I went to his bedside and held his hand tightly. What was happening to my daddy? He looked so unlike my dad. He smelt of illness, and death could be seen creeping into his features. I heard that my brother was on the way home. It was getting late so I dressed for school and prepared to leave, and my mum had to tell me quietly that dad would die some time this afternoon and I could not go to school for a while. With complete incomprehension I undressed again and sat with the rest of my family around my dad. A couple of minutes before my dad's actual death he told my mum that he was going to die soon. We all knew anyway. We each held a part of him, me his hand, and waited for the moment. He told us to look after mum and then his breathing got shallow and slow and soon ceased altogether. I need not have listened to breathing or felt his pulse to know he had died, for I could tell a warm, living hand from a dead one.

It was not long before our tears stopped and a numbness settled over everyone. My mum calmly helped the nurse to prepare my dad to be taken away. The next couple of days I simply cannot remember. That just goes to show the extent of numbness. For all I know I could have sat staring into space all day and all night. The funeral was a bit seedy with no feeling or meaning in it—totally pointless really.

I have learnt to cope with life now, just as my dad would have wanted us to. I still think about him a lot and cry sometimes, but life goes on. The only thing that I find difficult is the way other people react to such a close death in the family. Sometimes you have to mention it, which I do not like doing because people get really uncomfortable and shy away. Really I would love to talk about my dad for hours on end, but I never have because nobody wants to know. They seem to think that it is wrong. I do not think that it is because they are not interested—it is because they are scared—scared stiff of illness and death. I can accept their reactions though, because I used to be scared as well, but now it does not bother me.

It is only me and my mum at home now, so I feel I have to look after my mum, though I still go out a lot and have a boyfriend. My mum feels she has to be doubly kind to me because I do not have a dad. I respect her concern and never take advantage of her which I could do easily. My mum has aged a lot as people always do when they suffer a tragedy. It makes me wonder how she has coped so well. It must be the most awful thing to happen.

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Printed by E. H. Baker & Co. Ltd., 86 Lower Mortlake Road, Richmond, Surrey TW9 2JH. Ref. 72578