

Psycho-spiritual transformation through bereavement

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Introduction

In western societies, medical care has not encouraged death and dying (Walter, 1994) to be seen as spiritual transitions or passages of the soul. Neither have bereavement and grief (Valentine, 2006) been recognised as a spiritual process. We feel that there is a strong parallel between the process of dying as a spiritual journey and that of grieving as a spiritual process. Different cultures and religious traditions have recognised dying and death as a sacred spiritual journey involving a powerful process of transformation. Palliative care, too, includes physical, emotional, social and spiritual care (Walter, 1994). There is also a body of literature, including Sogyal (1992), Kearney (1996), Longaker (1997), Dowling Singh (1999), Anderson (2001), Dalai Lama (2002), Stanworth (2004) and Fenwick (2008) about dying and death as a spiritual and sacred journey. The bereaved, however, are not commonly or openly regarded as being involved in the midst of a spiritual experience, and their grief understood as soul pain.

In this paper we look at the psycho-spiritual dimension of the grieving process through the lens of extraordinary experiences and the sense of transformation research participants told us about when talking about their experience of bereavement and grief. We draw on a pilot study we conducted in 2009 of fourteen subjects. With the exception of one, we deliberately chose people who we thought had a spiritual outlook on life. They came from a white, professional, middle class background, except one who was Maori and working class. There were eleven women and three men, between the ages of 39 and 70. All were brought up within the Christian tradition. Three were still active Christians. One had become an atheist. One had become a practising Buddhist. The remaining nine did not feel a particular connection with their faith but had a spiritual outlook in life.

Extraordinary Experiences

All but one of the research participants reported having extraordinary experiences such as precognitive dreams, deathbed visions, death coincidences, and after-death experiences before, during and after the person died. Participants spoke about these experiences with a sense of wonder, pleasure, excitement, and joy. Most had not felt able to talk to anyone about them before. Talking about them to us, within the context of their experience of grief, was deeply meaningful to them. They felt comforted by the experiences and were reassured that death was not the end.

Two people reported premonition dreams of impending, sudden death. Rose, whose father died of a heart attack, said:

'Before my father died he had a dream. He was flying on an ironing board, a bit like a surfboard over the steeple of the village church. He was extremely happy and laughing in his sleep.'

Shortly after, when he was dying, he was taken by air ambulance to hospital and strapped to a board very much like an ironing board and the helicopter flew over the steeple of the village church, the route he had described in his dream. Rose says:

'If there's a grace or a gift, I think that insight has been a gift. Although this on one level is an incredibly sad event, possibly there is some dimension of what's happened that's joyful, or happy, or meant to be. I just find that quite consoling, that perhaps there is a deeper meaning or almost a predestination about the time of one's death, and perhaps we can sense it and feel it.'

Several people told us about deathbed visions and dreams which they, rather than the dying person had experienced. Whilst some had precognitive dreams which made them very frightened because the deaths were not expected, subsequently they felt comforted by these dreams.

Miriam had a number of deathbed visions as her husband was dying of cancer. She would see people standing by his bedside and knew they were 'from the other side'. She would describe them to her husband who recognised them. She says:

'One of his best friends was a man called Martin. I had never seen... in fact I had never seen any of these people, I had never seen photographs of them, I had no idea who they were but they just kept appearing by his bedside. Martin was a regular visitor. As the time of his physical death became more imminent these experiences became more frequent.'

Several people talked about death coincidences, and Rachel's was unusual because it seemed to describe something like a portal. It is also shocking because it is a vision of a violent death, of a murder. It happened during the night while Rachel was asleep in her bed at home. She says:

'The night Gary died, something woke me up. In the darkness of my bedroom, there was a large hole and in that hole was a scene where Gary was arguing with another man. He put his hands in his pockets and said, 'Fuck you' to the man – he then turned his back on the man to walk away. I saw the man pick up a lump of wood and move to hit him from behind. I dived across the bed and threw my arms around the man to try and stop him from hitting Gary, but my hands went right through him and I couldn't stop it. I was screaming, 'No don't,' but I could hear the sound of the blows as he hit Gary. I fell back crying and was blocking

my ears and had my eyes shut so I couldn't see or hear what was happening. When I opened them the scene had gone and Gary was standing beside my bed with his head hung forward. I reached out to him but he disappeared. I dismissed the whole thing as a nightmare. However they found Gary's body five days later and he had been dead five days – the cause of death – hit from behind (over 37 blows) - with a lump of wood, so it wasn't a dream – I was there somehow. '

For Rachel this was a very powerful experience. She really felt she was there and that it was not just a dream. Gary's death affected her profoundly. She still loved him, even though they were no longer together and she was married to someone else. Gary also appeared to her in dreams, and in one he seemed to be reassuring her about what in retrospect turned out to be the sudden death of her brother.

Whilst one participant did not think that his dreams had any significance, and another did not have any and thinks of dreams as being perceptions of one's mind, everyone else spoke of various experiences that they found comforting and reassuring.

Rachel recounted a very unusual experience. After she had heard of Gary's death she went to bed and cried herself to sleep. At some stage in the night she woke up and saw him sitting in her room at a table. He reached out to her and when she reached back she felt herself leave her body. Then she experienced the sensation of flying at great speed through a whole lot of lights that just flashed by. She says:

'The next thing, I was walking along a beach in the most beautiful place with him holding my hand. He felt warm and he was talking to me. Then I looked around and wondered where I was. With that, I felt a thud and woke up. The next night the same thing happened again – just him reaching out – my leaving with him, flying and the thud of return. The third night, I went to leave and a hand clamped down over my head and I couldn't get out – I remember fighting inside myself as I was desperate to be with him.'

Rachel says that as a result of these experiences, she feels that Gary had not left her and that death was not the end.

Miriam told us that after her husband's death, he kept appearing to her when she was alone at home, and they conversed. She had discovered prior to his dying that he had been unfaithful to her. She says:

...he would come, I would talk to him... I'd yell at him telling him to go away. He would go away and then he'd materialise again and be at the bedside. We had an opportunity to really confront the conflict and work together to resolve it. So our relationship actually continued post-death... There's more peace between us now. He doesn't come as often. He checks in every so often. I see him sort of standing to one side and he just watches, he lets me know he's there and he doesn't interfere and he doesn't intrude.

Transformation

The majority of people in our study had suffered major or multiple bereavements. Several felt that this had changed their lives unrecognisably. One person said the effect on her life was catastrophic as she had experienced two major bereavements within a short space of time and these led to other losses in her life. Most of them experienced deep pain and suffering.

Whilst one participant said that he didn't feel he had become a different person, others said that they had developed a deeper sense of compassion, depth of feeling and empathy. They also talked about becoming more aware of the importance of love and trying to do some good in the world. They spoke about the way in which their priorities and perspectives had changed, how they had grown and evolved, and become wiser. Some had become more aware of their mortality but had lost their fear of death.

In terms of their religious or spiritual worldviews, one participant said his belief that there was nothing after the death of the physical body had not changed. Others said that their views were challenged or confirmed, or they had deepened, developed or intensified. One said that it had given him a much more philosophical view of life, helping him to make sense of everything. They also talked about becoming more aware of a spiritual relationship with everything. This included an expanded consciousness, in which everything is moving in an energetic way and a sense of this world being penetrated by an invisible world that is directly connected to Source or Spirit. One said:

'...we are all timeless spirits whose earthly existence is but a fraction of our totality'

Grace

We asked participants if they felt they had experienced a sense of 'grace' in their experience of grief. We defined grace broadly as a transcendence of some sort, an awareness of the sacredness or interconnectedness of life, of something positive, a deep insight or a 'gift' of some kind.

One person said that he didn't think in those terms and that the concept was quite alien to him. Others said that they had experienced a universal force for good in their life; they had a sense that all is well, that there was a greater intelligence at work and they had a sense of inner peace. One had a realisation of impermanence and thought that grief is only in our mind. Many expressed a sense of unity with everything and spoke of awareness that death is not the end. They had a profound sense of humility and gratitude through all this. Miriam said:

'I feel as though I have a sense of grace in that I feel I've been blessed and in the midst of this dreadful sorrow and this catastrophic change has come a deep

insight, a deep understanding and a sacredness in life.'

Majorie said:

'I remember in the early hours of the morning, on occasions the gripping tension in my body would be replaced by an all-over-body experience of pervading warmth and peace. This feeling of rest, relaxation and calm was a precious 'grace in grief' experience, as the Holy Spirit gently crept into my body and spirit. Though chaos and distress rained down upon me, there would still be His peace within. This was a peace far beyond my human understanding.'

Susan told us:

'We held a memorial service in the church... and everyone was so deeply depressed and very sad... We sang quite joyful Christmas hymns and, at that moment, that was a sort of moment of grace, if I ever had one. There were beautiful lights. The church was quite dark, rich ruby colours around and there was this massive Christmas tree that was all lit up and it was just a beautiful environment.'

Conclusions

The participants in this study have described psycho-spiritual transformations that may be regarded as a rite of passage for the 'soul', spirit or 'mind'. The transformations show how an encounter with death can become an initiation into life. With the exception of one person, who was an atheist, people described forming a deeper connection with life and with themselves, integrating the personal and the transpersonal. Extraordinary Experiences (EEs) played an important role in this process of transformation.

Bereavement EEs and their helpfulness in the grieving process have been recognised, e.g. Murray Parkes & Prigerson (2010), Hallam, Hockey & Howarth (1999), Walter (1999). Reassurances may be given regarding 'the normality of such phenomena' Murray Parkes & Prigerson (2010: 216). Nevertheless, bereavement EEs have been interpreted as illusions, i.e. false perceptions, or hypnagogic hallucinations (Murray Parkes & Prigerson 2010) and in many contemporary societies, EEs of the bereaved tend not to be openly acknowledged. This makes it difficult for people who have these experiences to talk about them. Indeed the lack of acknowledgement of EEs may be damaging to the experiencer, exacerbating the sense of isolation and vulnerability that accompanies grief.

However, like LaGrand (1999), we believe that EEs can hold great potential for healing and that open acknowledgement of EEs may facilitate this process. An explanatory model of bereavement EEs going beyond 'illusions' or 'hypnagogic hallucinations' may also encourage more open acknowledgement of the phenomena. In this respect, the Tibetan Buddhist view that consciousness is comprised of gross (waking), subtle (sleep)

and very subtle (dying and death) layers, may be instructive. For example, The Yoga of Sleep and Highest Yoga Tantra, passed down through the Tibetan Ganden Oral Tradition, are practises designed to access subtle layers of mind. Tibetan Buddhism recognises that subtle layers of mind can be associated with EEs such as clairvoyance, (although the development of such abilities is not the purpose of spiritual practice) (Ken Demo 2011).

As suggested by Fenwick (2009), we see bereavement EEs as included in the continuum suggested by Fenwick, Lovelace and Brayne (2007). Referring to the subjectivity of the NDE and End of Life Experiences (ELEs), Fenwick, Lovelace and Brayne (2007) observe that:

'...the similarity between the phenomena... suggests that they form a continuum. Relatives communicating with the person are common to both, as are experiences of light and transcendent love' (Fenwick, Lovelace & Brayne, 2007: p. 322).

They have further suggested that explanatory models not limited to the medical approach to dying and death, such as scientific findings concerning non-local mind may help broaden understandings of ELEs. In our view, if bereavement EEs are included in the continuum of extraordinary experiences around death, then scientific findings about non-local mind may also help broaden understandings of bereavement EEs, and encourage more open acknowledgement of the phenomena. Fenwick, Lovelace and Brayne (2007) have persuasively argued that awareness of ELEs should be integrated into pastoral care and the training and supervision of palliative care workers. We would argue similarly that awareness of bereavement EEs should be routinely taught as part of the bereavement curriculum for health care professionals, teachers, counsellors and psychotherapists. To enhance understanding and in supporting the bereaved and those who work with the bereaved, we would also argue that alternative explanatory models of EEs should be included in the bereavement curriculum.

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