

Teenage Bereavement: Some Spiritual and Moral Issues

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Abstract

When people die, it is quite common for the bereaved to think about where they have gone and to maintain links with them in some way. Traditional beliefs about 'heaven' and 'hell' may be revised and other ideas about spiritual community are often explored. In this talk, I shall discuss some of the responses from 11-17 year olds to the questions 'Why do people die?' and 'What happens after death?' I shall also discuss their religious affiliations, belief in God, having a sense of the presence of the deceased, and the development of personal qualities related to bereavement, such as attitudes towards other people.

The religious, the spiritual and death

It is useful to remember that there is a difference between the 'spiritual' and the 'religious.' People working within the hospice movement may be in a good position to remind us of this distinction, since they encounter the beliefs of dying people and their families every day. Living in the face of death often forces people to re-examine what they believe and what kind of person they are.

Spiritual is often confused with 'religious.' Religious, however, means pertaining to a religion, i.e. a framework of theistic beliefs and rituals, which give expression to spiritual concerns. While everyone has a spiritual dimension, in Britain today only a minority practise a formal religion. Hence, although people commonly say, 'I am not religious', they do not say 'I am not spiritual.' (See *Working Party on the Impact of Hospice Experience on the Church's Ministry of Healing (1991)* pp 151-2).

The American rabbi, Earl Grollman, who has written many useful books for children and teenagers¹, comments in *Straight talk about death for teenagers* (1993, p. 83) about the experience of being bereaved at a young age:

'Before the death of your loved one you may not have given a lot of thought to the theological problem: 'Why do good people suffer?' Questions about life after death may not have seemed important. Death often changes life's meanings. You may now want to search for a spiritual response to the sorrow you feel'.

Spiritual and moral issues

Much has been written within education attempting to clarify issues concerning spiritual and moral development in young people (National Curriculum Council, 1993/1995; Ofsted, 1994; Wenman, 2001; Winston, 2002). My view is that spiritual and moral responses do not exist in their own right but depend on the body, mind and emotions for expression. In order to do this, we use our body and the five senses, our knowledge and skills, our socially and culturally constructed attitudes and opinions, and our experiences and interpretations of our emotions, feelings and moods. Thus, our spirituality may be expressed through thinking that considers concepts such as holiness and respect, feelings defined as adoration or awe, or actions such as fasting and praying. Similarly, our morality may be expressed through thinking about ideas of justice or mercy, feelings that can be described as love and shame, or actions such as keeping rules and treating others as you would wish to be treated yourself.

Bereavement experiences of 98 'non-clinical' teenagers

It is useful to have in mind the five causes of death as defined in the western world:

- natural and expected (usually old age);
- natural and unexpected (any age);
- accidental (sudden at any age);
- suicide (sudden at any age);
- murder (sudden at any age).

In my research into exploring teenagers' experiences of bereavement and their response to such an event in spiritual and moral terms, I worked with a non-clinical population of 98 teenagers. Using school, youth work and university contacts, I asked seventeen 14 -15 year olds (5 F & 12 M) and seventy-two 11-12 year olds (46 F & 26 M) for information using questionnaires. I also interviewed four 16 -17 year olds (4 F: Rita, Sheila, Thelma & Verity) and five 11-16 year olds (2 F & 3 M). As the four female 16-17 year olds whom I interviewed contributed most information, this talk will focus on their responses while comparing them with the larger group of 94 teenagers.

Sheila, whose mother committed suicide at home when she was aged 3 - 4, was 17 when I interviewed her. Rita's older brother died in a road traffic accident when she was 6, and her father died in a railway accident when she was 8. Her paternal grandmother had died a few months before I interviewed her, aged 16. Thelma's older brother died in a road traffic accident when she was 13, and she was 16 when I interviewed her. Verity, whose newborn sister died when she was aged 12, was 17 when I interviewed her. By contrast, of the eighty-three 11-15 year olds who told me about their bereavements, only 3 indicated they had lost a parent and only 8 a sibling. However, 86 had lost a grandparent and 23 had lost a friend.

In this talk I shall explore: (1) religious affiliations; (2) belief in God or a divine spirit; (3) having a sense of the presence of the deceased; (4) changed views about life or personal qualities as a result of bereavement; and answers to the questions (5) 'Why do people die?' and (6) 'What happens after death?'

1. Current religious affiliation

Nowadays many people who call themselves 'Christian' only attend church for rites of passage – mostly funerals – or in moments of crises. In line with this trend, 57 out of seventy-two 11-12 year olds gave no reply to my question about current religious affiliation. Of the remaining 15, 10 replied "Christian"/ Sunday school/ church/ church choir/ church youth club, 2 replied Jehovah's Witness, 1 replied Buddhist and 2 said they didn't know.

Sheila, aged 17, who has been bereaved of her mother for about 13 years, is a fairly typical example of many people who occasionally attend church without accepting any of its teaching.

'I'm not Christian; I'm not religious either. Some people think that's bad but again, it's my life, it's my views... I quite often do go to church, Christmas, Christian events. But I'm not religious – as far as I don't believe that Jesus has got a message for us all – any of that. I don't believe in that at all.

2. Belief in God or a divine spirit

Sixty-five 11-15 year olds (46 x 11-12 year olds & 19 x 14-15 year olds) answered statements about belief in God.

Eighteen (15 x 11-12 years & 3 x 14-15 years) stated, 'I believe that God exists and takes care of us.'

Eleven (8 x 11-12 years & 3 x 14-15 years) stated, 'I believe that God exists but does not affect our daily life.'

Twenty-eight (17 x 11-12 years & 11 x 14-15 years) stated 'I believe that God may exist but I am not sure.'

Eight (6 x 11-12 years & 2 x 14-15 years) stated 'I believe that God does not exist.'

Rita's mother started taking her to church not long after her father's death, eight years before I spoke to her. Although she no longer attends regularly, she said:

'I didn't know much about God to start off with when I was young – maybe that's why my mum got involved in it [church]... It was really blurry to start with – and then, as I say, at times I had, you know, I thought, well maybe it's just God saying – that they should be with Him. And then, other times, I just think, well, why did He do this thing really? I don't know'.

Thelma, whose 17-year-old brother had died about three years earlier, said:

'I don't believe in God... When he [brother] died my faith totally went – not that I had much before. But that, like everyone [grandfather, grandmother and father's uncle] dying and then *he* went. And I thought, 'Well, if there was something, why take all the family?'

3. When God or divine spirit might be near

Seventy teenagers responded to a number of statements about when they thought God or a divine spirit might be near them. The three most popular choices were:

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|------------------------------|------|---------------------------------------|
| After someone close has died | = 52 | (41 x 11-12 years & 11 x 14-15 years) |
| When someone is dying | = 51 | (40 x 11-12 years & 11 x 14-15 years) |
| When I am sad or upset | = 48 | (39 x 11-12 years & 9 x 14-15 years) |

If a person who is not bereaved of anyone significant experiences 'a presence', I think she or he is likely to attribute it to God or a divine spirit, while a bereaved person may well attribute it to the deceased. Sheila and Verity, both aged 17, spoke about their experiences of such a presence.

Sheila believes it was her mother:

'One thing I always like to think is that she's watching over me... It's not necessary that she's always there but somehow it comforts me to think that she *is* there... There's times I can swear I've turned around and she's been there, maybe not that I could see her but she was – she was sort of *there*. Um, I don't know how to explain it'.

Verity believes her sister is watching her.

'I know it sounds strange but I always think I'm going to see her again. I mean I believe there's a heaven, that's just the way I've been brought up.'

Sometimes I try and picture her and I think she's watching me ... I sort of imagine her with long gingery-blond hair, really light, sitting in a big white place. I just imagine her growing up as the years go by'.

4. Changed personal qualities or attitudes towards life

Rita, who has experienced the death of three close family members, two by sudden death, says:

'[Bereavement] has definitely made me more aware of people's feelings. Maybe about death, but in general... I don't just come out with a real insensitive question – I don't now because I think, 'Well, that might just hurt them or they might be worried about this'. So I think it has made me more sensitive in that area'.

Sheila, whose mother committed suicide, says:

'[Life is] a challenge. It's there to be lived, it's not there to sort of dawdle past you and I like to think that I do take advantage of it. Saying 'What's the purpose of life?' everyone's got different opinions on that one. My opinion: live for the moment. If you want to do something, don't let – within reason – don't let anyone hold you back'.

By contrast, Verity, whose younger sister only lived for a short time, says:

'Life just seems a real drag to me, I'm sorry. Some days it's good. I'd like to have something that I know I can work or live for but if I haven't I just wonder what the hell am I doing it for. What's the point?'

Only 21 out of seventy-two 11-12 year olds answered the question about whether or not they had changed views about life or changed personal qualities following bereavement. Seven were positive responses either about themselves (e.g. 'to be more healthy') or about other people (e.g. 'I understand what they feel like'), while another 7 reported negative attitudes about themselves (e.g. 'Not my cheerful self'). A further 7 answered 'yes' to the question but gave no examples.

5. Explanations received about why people die

Twenty-five 11-12 year olds and ten 15-16 year olds told me about the explanations they had received from adults about the death of a loved one. The most common explanation, given to 19 of them, were specific medical reasons (e.g. cancer, heart attack), while the next most popular, given to 10 of them, were age or natural causes (e.g. old, died in sleep). Eight of them were given general medical reasons (e.g. ill, didn't grow properly) and 3 were told the death was an accident, either on the road or at home. Two 11-12 year olds, however, were given reasons that were religious/spiritual or moral (e.g. wouldn't have any more pain; would be in heaven now). Rita and Thelma were both told their loved one's deaths were accidental; Verity was given a general medical reason that her sister was too ill to live, and Sheila was told her mother committed suicide.

I was interested in what use teenagers make of explanations with a religious/spiritual or moral tone. Thelma's brother had been hit by a car while crossing the road with his friends after returning from celebrating his 17th birthday. She had never really accepted the term 'accident' since she believed the driver should have taken more care

and should have slowed down when he saw people crossing. Her understanding of why she needed another kind of explanation for his death may be revealed in the following conversation:

VC: 'I'm wondering if we have to have a reason or a cause for death?'

Thelma: 'Do you mean in the sense of accepting it and saying, 'Oh, that's why they died?' Yeah, I think we do'.

VC: 'It helps, does it?'

Thelma: 'Yeah. To know why'.

VC: 'And maybe to have a medical reason helps a great deal. And, if we can't have a medical reason...'

Thelma: 'Then we search for the spiritual. Which is what I tried to do with [brother], through the books about mediums and people like that'.

6. What happens after death?

Rita, aged 16, had a fairly traditional Christian view of what happens after death:

'I think I'm going to – that when I die I will go to be with them [brother & father]. I will go up wherever heaven is – if there is one. I will go up – with them – and meet my grandmother who's also died now. And then we'll be together again'.

Thelma, aged 16, had discarded traditional Christianity and begun to think more broadly:

'I believe that there is something there. From the range of books that I read [about spiritualism] I decided that you do go somewhere – a better place. And I thought, 'Well, if we can be alive and live, why can't we go on to do something else?'

Sheila, aged 17, who has had nearly 13 years since her mother's death to think about these ideas, gave a lengthy explanation that suggest she thinks people go to the kind of afterlife they expect:

'I've been brought up with people who have died and come back again... They see the tunnel. Well if they like to believe that then surely that might be what happens to them. Who can say? This is where I think death's a secret... Others [are] laid to rest. I like that thought – if you're dead, you're dead. Um, you don't sort of stay alive until someone else dies... Maybe there's a heaven. Maybe some people do go to heaven. They sort of float up and - their souls – Maybe some people die but don't emotionally die, if that makes sense... I've always thought that people who – who are murdered – that's always swayed my belief a bit because they didn't actually want to die. So perhaps they do come back because it's not their time to go because it hasn't been naturally done... I don't believe in hell. I don't really care what people have done with their lives – well, obviously I care but I don't think that people go to hell immediately because they've murdered someone or because they've sinned... Everyone sins'.

Trends in spiritual and moral issues in teenage bereavement

I believe I detected some trends in the answers I received from these 98 teenagers.

First, there may be a tendency for some bereaved teenagers to make use of traditional Christian beliefs and practices in order to search for an answer. Sheila often attends church, Rita started going to church with her mother soon after her father's death, Verity (who was already involved in church life) related her sister's death to Christian teaching, while Thelma considered and then rejected such teaching after her brother died. None of those four teenagers currently attended a place of worship regularly, which reflects the broader picture of non-attendance by most teenagers in my sample.

Second, belief in God and concepts of a loving and just God may be challenged by bereavement. Verity and Rita accept the conflict between these two concepts but struggle with it, and Thelma rejects any notion of a loving God because of the death of three relatives close together. Overall, most teenagers are ambivalent about the idea of God's existence or that God is loving.

Third, some bereaved teenagers seem to have a definite sense of the presence of the deceased. They feel them with them at certain times, talk to them, and may imagine them getting older. Overall, in this teenage sample, though, there is uncertainty about a sense of God's presence, but a strong belief that God can or may be present at times of distress, especially around death.

Fourth, adults tend to give more medical explanations, whether specific or general, for death and fewer spiritual and moral ones as teenagers get older, but they may still offer comfort using moral notions such as quality of life and release from pain.

Fifth, having a sense of the presence of the deceased or wanting to get in touch with them may lead teenagers to explore spiritualism or accounts of near-death experiences. Many teenagers stop believing in heaven and hell – especially hell – as they age.

Sixth, there may be a tendency in the early stages of bereavement for teenagers to 'live for the moment' as they realise how suddenly death can occur and how short life can be. Some teenagers showed an increased awareness of and empathy with other people, including the bereaved and those in distress, and an emergence of clearer views about the importance and value of life itself.

In *Coping with loss for parents*, Elliot (1997, p 52) suggests:

'It is bewildering for children today that there is no generally accepted view of death or an afterlife. They hear many conflicting ideas... about the difference between the soul and the body; where the soul goes after death; how it gets out of the coffin or whether, for example, the soul of a sibling will continue to grow old in the afterlife'.

Although I believe that this uncertainty showed in some of the answers I received, I am encouraged that this same uncertainty may reflect a desire in teenagers to think things through and to reassess their own values and beliefs following the death of a loved one. Many of them have experienced the death of several people, and their ideas indicate the development of thinking about human mortality. Although many of their ideas relate to traditional Judaeo-Christian belief, some do not, and it is interesting to see where they differ. I believe their thinking is indicative of the re-examination of spiritual and moral issues that we all make throughout life as the deaths of other people present us with new views and experiences.

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Notes

1. Available through <http://thanatosbooks.seekbooks.co.uk>
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