A Practitioner's View of Children Making Spiritual Meanings in Bereavement

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Abstract

Little attention has been given to how bereaved children make meaning after the death of someone important to them and how they manage changes in their belief systems and worldviews. Some children, even very young ones, may be challenged in their beliefs about an afterlife or the nature or existence of God. Children may be confused by differing worldviews around them at home, in school, or in their communities. Examples are offered of such crises emerging for children after bereavement and challenges this may present for the practitioner. The article calls for more research in this area to support social workers and other professionals as well as parents in helping bereaved children suffering spiritual dilemmas in bereavement.

KEYWORDS: bereavement, children, death, religion, spiritual pain, worldview

This article is written from the perspective of a clinical practitioner working with bereaved children. When faced with the death of someone important to them, children are often confronted with the realities and consequences of mortality for the first time. Some children raise concerns about the nature of life and death that are clearly very absorbing and sometimes extremely distressing for them. Some adults believe that children are not capable of thinking deeply about such issues and so cannot understand spiritual questions around life and death. Bereavement can challenge a person's beliefs and worldview. Within families, people may have very different responses to these challenges, as well as demonstrating different and extreme emotions and styles of grieving and these factors can be very confusing for children. In a world of mass media, children everywhere will be exposed to a much wider range of ideas about life and death than they would have been in the past. All children face a more complex world where they have to make some sense of the meaning of bereavement in the context in which they find themselves. The article offers an exploration of the ideas outlined above, based on clinical vignettes showing how children may be affected.

The author works in the Candle Project, a child bereavement project based in St. Christopher's Hospice in south London. The project offers bereavement support to children aged 0 to 18, offering sessions individually or with families on a short-term basis, with the option of attending a group. Children and young people come from all sections of the surrounding area and bereavement may have been caused by illness or sudden death, including murder and suicide.

LITERATURE REVIEW

While there is recognition of the spiritual pain and spiritual needs of adults (Callahan, 2009), many adults appear to be uncomfortable addressing such questions in relation to bereaved children. Yalom (1980) noted "a marked discrepancy between the importance of death to the child and the attention accorded death in child development scholarship" (p. 75). Kenyon (2001) reviewed 60 years of research into children's conceptions of death but, while acknowledging that culture and religious practices can affect how young children understand death, she focused on defined cognitive processes. In the case of very young children, whose life experience has not yet allowed them to appreciate cognitively the finality and irreversibility of death, some adults deem it inappropriate to discuss it with them. For some, the corollary of a young child's limited understanding is that it is wiser not to address it with them and to exclude them from rituals and family events surrounding the death.

Bowlby's (1961) work on attachment patterns laid a foundation for recognizing the detrimental physical, emotional, and spiritual effects of loss and separation on very young children. Silverman (2000) and Dyregrov (2008) have argued that very young children, even if they do not have the language or memory functions yet to articulate this, will experience the death of someone close in a variety of physical and emotional ways. This may take many forms—including clinginess and reluctance to leave carers, regression to earlier behaviors, sleep disturbances, and angry tantrums. There is then an argument that it makes little sense to exclude the youngest from rituals and co-remembering activities (Way, 2010) because, as these authors argue, even the very young are aware and disturbed by bereavement and need age-appropriate support in making sense of the experience.

The major studies of children bereaved of a parent such as the Child Bereavement Study (Worden, 1996) and Christ's (2000) discussion of the effects of bereavement on different aged children, did not place much emphasis on spiritual aspects of meaning making in bereavement and focused more on the role of ritual as a social support. Within a Christian tradition, Hay and Nye (2006) researched spirituality in children yet devoted very little attention to a discussion of the impact of death.

THE ROLE OF RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY IN BEREAVEMENT

Klass (2006) suggested that a definition of religion includes "encounter or merger with transcendent reality" and "a worldview, that is a higher intelligence, purpose, or order" that gives meaning to the events and relationships in our lives. It also involves a community in which "transcendent reality and worldview are validated" (p. 283). Different religious and spiritual traditions share some common aspects in offering opportunities to:

- Think in terms of a transcendent reality

- Share a worldview with others

- Share a sense of belonging to a community of belief

Bereavement holds the potential to be very unsettling as any or all of these components can be challenged, leading to a loss or clash of worldview, or internal confusion about spiritual beliefs.

Griffiths and Griffiths (as cited in Walsh, 2008) understood spirituality as transcendent beliefs and practices that may be experienced either within or outside of formal religious structures and involving an active investment of internal values. They suggested that it fostered a deep sense of meaning and connectedness with oneself and with others (p. 63). Berger (1967) argued that religion "must find ways to account for the terror of death and to organize the anomic aspects of death into a meaningful worldview" and that ritual serves to "bind communities in a collective understanding of the meaning of death" (p. 132). Meanwhile Doka (1993) argued that bereaved persons may simultaneously struggle with two losses, "the loss of the deceased and the loss of their own beliefs." He argued for a fifth task in bereavement, to "rebuild faith and philosophical systems that are challenged by loss" (p. 191). The author argues that children and young people are faced with the same tasks as adults following a significant bereavement.

This is not a very relevant issue for everyone, however. The research of Davis, Wortman, Lehman, and Silver (2000) suggested that a significant minority of the bereaved did not seek meaning in the death and they appeared to adjust to it as well or better than others who searched deeply for significance in it. This mirrored Walker's (2000) finding that many of the 85% who expressed a belief in an afterlife did not appear to be very deeply concerned about this and did not use it as an important strategy for reorienting themselves after bereavement.

THE INFLUENCE OF THE MEDIA ON CHILDREN

In the 21st century children have access through television, films, books, and computers to a much wider range of ideas than they have had in the past. Different media forms may have powerful influences on the development of worldviews. For example, Christ (2000) found that most bereaved children believed their deceased parent "watched them from heaven" (p. 81), an idea which Malcolm (2010), following a qualitative analysis of children's stories of death and bereavement, suggested was fostered in children's storybooks. She concluded that this provided a view of the way North American children are offered cultural beliefs about heaven and an afterlife. Broadly, the children's books conveyed that heaven offered a continued existence to the deceased and that there is no significant change from life on earth. In heaven, cats lounge on angels' laps, dogs chase ducks, children play, parents watch over children, and grandparents look forward to the arrival of their grandchildren in the fullness of time (p. 70). Cox, Garrett, and Graham (2005), studying the influence of classic Disney films,

found they sent mixed messages about death that may be confusing to many young children, though they may provide useful starting points for adults to discuss death with children. These and other media messages may be powerful influences in forming children's views.

RESEARCH RELATING TO CHILDREN

Very little research in the area of bereavement and spirituality appears to focus on children. Lansdown (1995) reviewed the literature in the area of children's concepts of death and Lansdown, Jordan, and Frangoulis (1997) investigated children's understanding of heaven and an afterlife in an inner city London suburb. The voices of the 5- to 8-year-olds and their concerns come alive in his reporting of the research. The responses, which surprised many, showed that, contrary to customary cultural assumptions about heaven as a good and desirable place to go to after death, some children thought it would be boring while others had serious concerns about whether heaven was a safe place. The researchers argued that developmental age was not the sole factor influencing children's understanding of life and death and that their worldviews were also very important. The authors noted that "we should not assume that 'Gone to heaven' is an answer in itself. It may raise many problems which would need some time to unravel" (p. 19). Thus this research challenges a commonly held view that children will understand heaven as a good place and find comfort when told that the deceased has "gone to heaven." It questions the idea of a simple developmental progression to a "mature" understanding of death and what may or may not follow it.

AN ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVE

The following situation was described to the author by a young teacher in an east London school and demonstrated that questions of death and mortality do enter the everyday experience of young children. The teacher was shepherding the 6-year-olds out to play, looking forward to a coffee break herself. Suddenly there was a disturbance in the line and a very agitated Anton rushed up to her saying, "Are we going to die, Miss? Asad says we are going to die!"

She looked calmer than she felt as she dismissed the others and talked gently and reassuringly to the two boys. She told them that, although yes, all living things will die one day, just like the dead bird they discovered in the playground last week, it is mostly old people who die at the end of a long life. She did not think they need worry now. The boys then charged off for a game of football and she hastened to her coffee break.

The teacher later wondered where the question came from for it could have many meanings. The evening news was constantly reporting war and death in the Middle East, where Asad has relatives. Was he pondering this? Had a relative of his died recently? Someone with a fundamentalist Christian religious following in California had

issued a much publicized prediction that the world would end at 6 pm 2 days later. Had Anton heard adults talking about this? And was it appropriate for their teacher to be talking with the boys about this?

The episode raised questions for the author. Are children, even young ones, capable of thinking about existential questions? What kinds of assumptions lie behind the questions? What response should social workers and other professionals give to bewildered parents who are asking what to say when young children ask where they can get the bus (or plane or rocket) to heaven? In bereavement sessions in the Candle Project, one parent reported that her child wondered whether God was cooking his father's dinner. A 5-year-old whose father had been murdered drew a graphic picture of a gunman continuing to chase his father in the sky, in heaven. A mother described her distress when her teenager railed furiously against the unfairness of the death of his grandfather. Behind each question and statement lay questions and powerful assumptions about life and death and a possible hereafter.

The small episode in school quoted above prompts wider questions for those offering support in bereavement. How are children's descriptions of their experience in bereavement listened to? How does this compare and connect with thinking about adults' experiences of changes in their worldviews following a significant death? Who should be supporting children's spiritual questions and what kinds of discourses and thinking might lie behind such support? For some children, resolution of such dilemmas may be important in establishing continuing bonds (Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996) with the person who died and adjusting to changed circumstances following bereavement.

A child's experience is unique and s/he will be using a cocktail of experiences, discourses, and beliefs to make meaning of a bereavement experience. As noted by Christ (2000), bereavement is a cascade of events, not something happening at one point in time. Children and young people will sometimes need support at critical times in the bereavement process to find routes through dilemmas in ways that make sense to them. There can therefore be no right answers, only supportive adults to listen and help with the meaning making process.

SOME EXAMPLES FROM CLINICAL PRACTICE

Bereavement as a Challenge to One's Relationship With God

Whatever the dominant discourses about beliefs in a family or community, the death of someone important confronts us with a shock. For some, the shock will impact more on their concrete and practical plans for the future. For others it may have a profound impact on their sense of the meaning of life and death. In my experience, even some very young children wrestle with similar issues, trying to make sense of a death. For them, the lack of coherence between their worldview and their experience of current reality is deeply distressing.

For 5-year-old Jordan, the death of his father drew attention to inconsistencies in the way he perceived the world. It was Easter time and he attended a small church school where the current seasonal emphasis was on the death and resurrection of Jesus. A very thoughtful and reflective child, Jordan was trying to align his understanding of a just and benevolent God, who had restored life to his own son, with a deity who had allowed the death of Jordan's father. This questioning of God's authority and intentions seemed to connect to other authority figures as well. His play focused very much on doctor-patient relationships, apparently working out how doctors succeed or fail to "make people better." He attempted a resolution to this dilemma by announcing that he had bargained with God in order to bring his father back to life. His mother told him sadly that this is "not really how it works" with God.

This response might be viewed as the beginning of a process of a child's ongoing negotiated meaning-making that would continue as he grew older in a dialogue with his God and with his mother about the nature of death and of God. Within the session, the author placed emphasis on valuing Jordan's experience of prayer and his relationship with God while also conveying that, in common human experience, people do not come alive once pronounced dead, however much one might pray for this to happen.

Bereavement Destroying the Religious Belief of One Family Member While Reinforcing the Belief for Another

In her midteens, Elisa's 3-year-old cousin had died nearly a year before and she was deeply distressed. She was struggling to concentrate in school and her performance in recent exams had disappointed and distressed her deeply. She was not sleeping or eating well. Her mother Jane described her concern that Elisa was no longer confiding in her in the way she used to do. Elisa was participating less in family life and, though she had been an enthusiastic member of the church youth group, she appeared to have lost interest and be drifting away from some good friends there. This was in turn impacting on her energies in school and affecting her self-identity as an able and successful student. When I met them, Jane described her very deep sorrow at the sudden and unexpected death of the 3-year-old who had lived near them and been part of their lives. For Jane, the months since the death had challenged but then strengthened her faith and growing belief that "God has His plan for us, but we don't know what it is or understand it."

For Elisa, however, faith was lost. She would like to believe as her mother did but could not get past the question of why God would allow a 3-year-old to die. Her worldview was shattered and this was affecting many areas of her life. The daily and weekly rituals around church life, praying and meeting with friends of her own age, were meaningless now. The connections between her and other family members that were bound up in assumptions of religious life and practice now seemed alien. The shattering of her beliefs was affecting every area of her life and was deeply distressing for her mother who was unable to share her view. Elisa's dilemma was that her experience did not match her expectations of God as just, fair, and reasonable.

The bereavement sessions focused on validating different experiences within a family, acknowledging that people grieve very differently. Practical suggestions were made for supporting the mother-daughter relationship, valuing what each brought to it. In this instance the teenager showed distress through less confrontational ways but many teenagers respond to similar kinds of upset through anger and aggression when beliefs are challenged by bereavement.

Different Belief Systems Creating Confusion

Bereavement can highlight the complexity of worldviews in the community and their differences and inconsistencies. Children living in large multicultural cities may meet these ideas through contact with different family members, schoolmates, neighbors, or clubs as well as any formal religious or spiritual teaching that may be given. This adds to the often rich and interesting experience of multicultural city life but may also increase a child's deep confusion following bereavement.

Joshua was confused and distressed after the death of his grandfather. His grandmother belonged to the local Christadelphian church and had told him that she looked forward to rising from the dead at the appointed time with her dead husband. His father, however, described this as "rubbish" and told him that no life exists after death so he should just enjoy the present. His mother was not very willing to engage in the discussion at all, saying she had more pressing concerns at the time. He confided these dilemmas to a kind and concerned teaching assistant at school. With the best of motives, she explained her own devout religious beliefs in an attempt, as she saw it, to correct his view. She was very confused and distressed herself when he responded very angrily to her attempts to help him. In this instance it was the teaching assistant who approached the author and, following discussion, she returned to the child and talked with him and his family about the reasons for his distress.

Fear of Ghosts and Spirits

Children may be comforted or frightened by ghosts. A significant number of children and adults report experiences of seeing or hearing the deceased after death. This may be in dreams or a sense of the presence of the dead person (Christ, 2000) but can also be experienced as a very physical sense of seeing or hearing (Valentine, 2009). For most this may be surprising but often proves to be helpful, comforting, and supportive of continuing bonds with the deceased. However, this is an area that children and adults may feel tentative about sharing for fear that mentioning it may invite denial and scorn on the part of listeners. Walter (2008) notes that some conversations about the dead are very active in the culture but are not seen as acceptable in particular contexts.

Ghosts and the fear of ghosts can be both real and frightening for some children. For example, 5-year-old Tamika was the eldest of three children whose parents had separated after verbal and physical violence which Tamika had witnessed. There had not been any contact with her father, but when he died, relatives gave her a photo as a

gift. Her mother was unwilling to have the picture in the living room and found it difficult to talk to Tamika about her father but felt she should encourage her daughter to remember him and suggested she keep the picture in her room. In the weeks that followed, Tamika experienced nightmares and became eneuretic. Her mother noticed that the photo was always placed face down. When the conversation was opened up, Tamika volunteered that she was fearful that her father's ghost could somehow come alive through the photograph. This so terrified her that she felt unable to go to the toilet alone.

In this situation the author facilitated a discussion between Tamika and her mother about photographs and they concluded that a person could not come into a home in this way. We focused on rehearsing going downstairs to the toilet and Tamika practiced during the day at home. They later reported that she was no longer anxious about going to the toilet in the night.

Other Fears of an Afterlife

Different religious traditions lay more or less emphasis on rewarding or punishing experiences in an afterlife and this can raise many concerns for children. Jamilla was 11 years old and lived with her mother and two younger siblings. She knew her father had been to prison and had done "bad things" and she worried about whether, after his death, he had gone to heaven or hell, having heard adults discussing these possible destinations. In this situation, the author attempted to widen the discussion beyond either/or positions. Jamilla had heard largely negative stories about the father with whom she had not had much contact. A little research among family members broadened the picture of a man who, whatever his wrongdoings, had been energetic, generous, and fun-loving. This appeared to help Jamilla modify her view of him and allay some of her concerns for his experience of an afterlife.

DISCUSSION

One could argue that what is needed is an understanding of different religious and cultural traditions. The author would suggest that, while a broad understanding of different traditions is very useful when working with bereaved families from different cultural backgrounds, individuals, families, and communities vary enormously in the meaning they make of such ideas. It may be useful to have an understanding of different religious traditions when negotiating these areas with children and families, but even the most encyclopedic knowledge will not necessarily orient one to the particular understandings and discourses current in a family or local community, so care needs to be taken in making any assumptions. Buddhism as practiced in Thailand is very different from that in south London. Part of the strength of ritual is that it often binds many differing ideas and feelings without defining them too closely, giving a powerful sense of connection to a community and a heritage of belief which can offer meaningful opportunities to the expression of grief.

Within a belief in an afterlife, for example, there can be very differing views. In some Christian and Islamic traditions the promise of an afterlife can be understood in a physical as well as a spiritual dimension. Valentine ([2009](#)) pointed out that while Western religious traditions suggest a linear progression to an afterlife with a journeying of the soul to everlasting bliss or damnation, Eastern traditions emphasize the cycle of life and afterlife and the soul's journey through many lives. Nevertheless, her research challenges notions of typical national ways of grieving, finding surprising similarities and differences in Japanese and British culture and that patterns change over time. There is scope for tremendous confusion for children.

CHALLENGES FOR THE PROFESSIONAL WORKING WITH A CHILD

Engaging in some of these conversations sometimes deeply challenged the author's worldviews, especially when concerns focused on some beliefs that present very fearful views of realities before or after death. While trying to maintain a respectful and curious stance toward views expressed by different family members, she has been disquieted when meeting very tenaciously held views, whether expressed as a definite and absolute belief in a specific form of life after death or an equally emphatic promotion of an absence of an afterlife (Yalom, [2008](#)). Similarly, adults have sometimes taken a definitively liberal view, arguing strongly that this is the only reasonable position. Conflict between dogmatically held positions on this continuum has the potential for confusing and distressing children. Telling children that, "Some people believe X … and some believe Y" does not necessarily relieve the tension for them when someone important to them is adamant that their view is the only possible position, yet other adults proclaim alternative views of reality. Another professional, the teaching assistant described in the vignette above, described her difficulty when, from a very particular worldview, she tried to help Joshua in his dilemmas because she wanted to reduce his suffering. Her beliefs created difficulties for her also in this situation. These are the kind of tensions that arise from the richness of difference in the multiple discourses that everyone must somehow negotiate.

RESPONSIBILITY FOR ADDRESSING THE SPIRITUAL DILEMMAS OF CHILDREN

Responsibility for the spiritual care of the dying has been the focus of much discussion within hospice circles and primary responsibility has tended to move from the religious domain of chaplains and other spiritual leaders to encompass all who come into contact with patients and their families (Walter, [1997](#)). One could argue that support for bereaved children in spiritual matters should become the business of a variety of professionals, including the teacher of 6-year-olds.

Professionals particularly involved in childhood bereavement might support those talking to children by encouraging the discussion around the effects of belief systems. In relation to adults, Neimeyer (2000) argued for the complexity in this dynamic process of co-construction, which is interpersonal and negotiated over time. Beliefs and worldviews will not necessarily be logical and internally coherent. His research therefore focuses more on the social character of meaning making in bereavement and the conditions that facilitate or impede it. Davis et al. (2000) suggested that meaning-making processes tend to move from earlier questions of why the death occurred, to a later focus on finding some positive meaning in the experience. Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema, and Larsen (as cited in Neimeyer, 2000) also concluded that for the bereaved in the study, making some kind of meaning of the loss was more important than how it made sense or what benefits it brought. Similarly, Nadeau (1997) addressed the complexity of collective family strategies employed to seek significance in the death. A wider discussion of how these issues might affect children would be useful. This might help bereaved children to develop meaningful narratives about the events surrounding the death and the effects of these on their lives and worldviews. Such narratives would in turn have the potential to shape ideas, beliefs, and actions as the child moves into a future that had not been anticipated before the bereavement. The narratives might then support the development of continuing bonds with the deceased (Klass et al., 1996).

A PLEA FOR MORE RESEARCH ON CHILDREN

Research questions could also be extended to inquire about how children make meaning in bereavement. How might culture and religious beliefs support or inhibit this? What patterns might be noted over time following bereavement? How might this affect the practices of those working with bereaved children? Kenyon (2001) focused on an assumption that a mature understanding of death involves an acceptance of its finality and irreversibility. By this measure, however, Joshua's grandmother would not yet have attained the maturity of a 10-year-old, since, in her Christadelphian worldview, she believed that she and her husband and other faithful followers would rise from the dead at an appointed time to be in heaven.

It would be interesting, 15 years on, to repeat the kind of research undertaken by Lansdown et al. (1997) in different parts of the world, including North America. Research might focus on what children can tell us about their existential and spiritual concerns in bereavement. It would be interesting to examine the experience of children in culturally and religiously mixed communities. Rural and urban environments, levels of development of technology and industrialization, and children's access to different media may all be relevant factors. Research might focus on how beliefs and meanings relating to spiritual matters in bereavement are co-created with children so that adults might be better placed to support them.

Based on a 5-year intervention of clinical research with 50 bereaved families of the firefighters who died in the World Trade Center in 2001, Christ (2010) noted that research has generally focused on "individual intrinsic factors that affect the mourning process" (p. 229). From this perspective, studies have directed attention to a person's

internal world, discussing notions such as complicated grief responses within an individual. Such research is premised on a view that the most important factors are intrinsic to an individual's personality. Christ argued that research perspectives "require an exploration of extrinsic factors affecting the mourning process as well as intrinsic factors." Her paper "considers more recently identified extrinsic factors that can temporarily delay even resilient adaptations to the mourning process" (p. 228). The widows and children of the firefighters experienced numerous additional losses and stresses such as the multiple burial and memorial services they were expected to attend and the intense media coverage. They did indeed show what might be described as abnormal grief responses but Christ argues that these extrinsic factors would account for much of this. Christ argued that research perspectives should be widened to a more comprehensive model of mourning which includes extrinsic factors.

Much research into childhood bereavement (Kenyon, 2001) has focused on a notion of developing maturity in a child's understanding of the concept of death. The vignettes above suggest many tensions arise for children from extrinsic factors in their environments following bereavement. One might then view the serious approach that some children show to questions of death and an afterlife as part of an important engagement with the difficulties they are encountering with discourses, and the influences extrinsically expressed and enforced in their families and communities. Their struggles may be described as reflecting a lack of coherence in the culture surrounding them, rather than indicating inadequacies in their internal resources or pathologies developing in their psychological state following bereavement.

In order to help social workers, parents, and other professionals to support bereaved children, the author would argue for a widening of interest to a more comprehensive model of mourning that includes extrinsic factors affecting the challenges faced by some children in making sense of their beliefs and worldviews in the process of mourning. These might include contradictory belief systems that they encounter in their schools and communities as well as the particular family circumstances that may be created by the bereavement and the resulting tensions that might invite spiritual pain, examples of which are found in the vignettes above.

CONCLUSION

The Buddha's early worldview is said to have been severely challenged when he first met death and this changed the course of his life. This article is an attempt to open up the discussion around spirituality and the challenges to children and young people when encountering the reality of death, often for the first time. The vignettes aimed to show how bereaved children share many of the kinds of challenges to their belief systems that adults do, though they may express them differently. Children's experiences of bereavement can be explored though many lenses, focusing on factors in their families, schools, and religious and social worlds, as well as intrinsic factors in their developmental understanding and adaptation to the world around them. Little attention appears to have yet been given to these issues and perhaps it is time to attend more closely to what children are saying in bereavement.

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