EDITORIAL

Bereavement Care **is an international journal for all who care for the bereaved. Founded 12 years ago as an in-house journal of the UK national voluntary organisation Cruse, it has since changed its character to appeal to a much wider readership in all parts of the world and has set up a Board of internationally distinguished Advisory Editors.**

Bereavement Care **aims to provide impartial and unbiased information and guidance to counsellors and others about the psychological, social, spiritual and other needs of people bereaved by death. It is not committed to any one sectarian or theoretical dogma, nor does it promote any particular method of counselling or therapy.**

To keep our readers up to date, *Bereavement Care* publishes summaries or full reports from recent scientific literature and reports from major conferences in a jargon-free style accessible to the intelligent layman. Our reviews of books and audio-visual materials will be of special interest to those who organise teaching programmes or who stock libraries.

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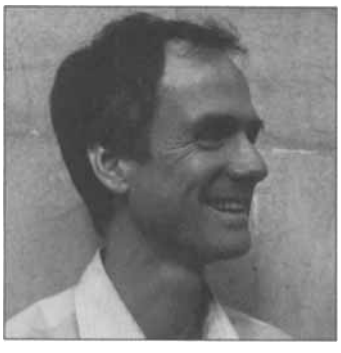
War Graves Pilgrimage[1]



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In the past two decades there has been an extraordinary growth in pilgrimages to overseas war graves. This article seeks to ask what this means for the bereaved and for veterans. Are they somehow making up for the funeral that, for them, never was? And how does the experience affect their grieving?

PHYSICAL AIDS TO MOURNING

The funeral, by finally dismissing corpse and coffin from this world, brings home the finality of death. The painful physicality of the coffin's presence and its tangible and visible removal from our sight in crematorium or burial ground is one of the most effective ways in which denial, a common early defence mechanism against the shock of bereavement, is ended—thus enabling the mourning process to begin. In the months and years afterwards, many bereaved people regularly tend the grave—another physical reminder of the one they love. Both the funeral and tending the grave can be particularly important in the case of sudden or premature death.

So what happens when there is no funeral, or the family are unable to attend it, or when the grave is overseas? This is the situation of the vast majority of British servicemen who died in World Wars I and II. Unlike the Americans who do their utmost to bring their war dead home, we British have buried our fallen more or less where they fell. In the immediate aftermath of World War I, this was in the face of considerable opposition from bereaved families, but the male military desire to be buried with comrades won out over (largely female) kin's need for a funeral to attend and a local grave to care for. (This is now changing, however. Most of the Falklands dead were brought home, and repatriation was the norm in the Gulf War.)

EDITOR'S NOTE

The death of a loved person faces each one of us with a dilemma: do we 'write-off' the dead person (like a bad debt), forget that they ever existed and carry on without them; or do we turn towards the lost person, cherish the memories that are left and find new ways of building them into our lives? Most people choose the latter course despite the difficulties and pain that it involves.

The problem of finding meaning in a loss is particularly great when the loss was sudden, violent and untimely or when the body of the dead person is not available to 'bring home' the reality of the death. This is often the case in times of war and it can delay or protract the work of mourning. In this paper Tony Walter describes and explains the value of pilgrimages to the graves of those who have died at war. These are an opportunity for the bereaved to tackle unfinished psychological business, which may then be continued and completed with the help of a counsellor.

The rise and fall of pilgrimages

Around the world, there are 2,500 military cemeteries managed by the Commonwealth (formerly Imperial)

War Graves Commission (CWGC). During the 1920s, many thousands of widows, mothers and veterans visited the battlefields and war cemeteries of Flanders and northern France, and even as far afield as Gallipoli. Occasionally they went under their own steam, but more usually they were organised in mass parties by the British Legion and other voluntary societies, or by Thomas Cook Travel. Pilgrimages after the World War II were fewer, perhaps in part because of the less accessible locations of many of the graves, and, by the late 1950s and early 1960s, interest in overseas war graves had reached an all-time low. By then, neither commercial operators nor charitable organisations were arranging regular visits, while personal enquirers seeking the whereabouts of a grave from CWGC reached their nadir of less than 1,500 per year.

Since the 1970s, the situation has changed dramatically. Enquirers to the CWGC have steadily climbed, to—in 1990—28,000.[2] Commercial operators began offering war grave tours in the late 1970s, and by 1991 the six leading companies were offering 163 overseas tour departures.[3] In 1985, the British Legion started its War Widows Scheme, which enables widows who had not done so before at public expense to visit their husband's grave or memorial overseas. Seven-eights of the scheme's cost is borne by the government and it runs until 1995.[4] By 1991 the Legion's pilgrimages had attracted 5,000 people of which 1,850 were sponsored widows.

Who goes?

A wide variety of people go on battlefield tours and pilgrimages, including military historians, family historians, school parties and tourists. Of the pilgrims proper who have an intensely personal reason for going, there are three main kinds: veterans, family members who knew the deceased, and family members too young to have known the deceased (but who may feel bereaved in their own way, for example, of a father they never knew).

Veterans, especially if they travel with an ex-serviceman's organisation, may go in part for the camaraderie of being with those who knew what it was like. Throughout history, soldiers have often felt that it is impossible to share their experiences with those who were never at the Front, and they often value simply being with those who know. Other veterans may travel specifically to visit a particular battlefield. One of the peculiar things about the Front-line is that your time there may have transformed your life, yet for much of that period you may have had little clue where you actually were or even what you were supposed to be doing. One soldier, for example, was captured within hours of landing in Italy in 1944, spending the rest of his war as a prisoner. He had no idea of where in the darkness of the night he had been, little idea of what he had been meant to do, or what had led to his capture. It was only on a battlefield tour 40 years later that he could walk the ground in daylight and piece the jigsaw together.

'It's as though their memory has been buried in the desert sand all those years, preserved and ready to be brought up for inspection at any time.'

(Leader of a pilgrimage to El Alamein)

But in many locations, the landscape has changed beyond recognition. One man who has accompanied aged veterans to Flanders in the 1980s wrote: 'It is indeed sad to see a visiting veteran, trying to recognise a familiar area, now blanketed with grass and trees, which in his mind was trenches, mud and shell-holes.'

Bereaved family members, too, may value seeing the actual battlefield. It is difficult for women at home to have any idea of what conditions were like for their loved ones. Vera Brittain[5] corresponded with soldiers in the trenches in order to ascertain exactly how her fiancé, and then her brother, died—where were they hit? Did they suffer? What were their last words? She, and thousands like her, were often given highly heroic accounts in order to ease their grief. But visiting the battlefield after the war can also clarify . . . or confuse.

Overwhelmingly, however, the bereaved come to see one thing: the grave. Or if there is no grave, the inscription on the memorial. One widow at the Menin Gate memorial in Flanders, speaking in 1927, speaks for all: 'I felt I wanted to kiss my son's name when I saw it. I feel so happy to have seen that name.' It's as though the physicality of the place and the carved name make real that which the funeral would have made real. Until then 'it's something I could never quite believe.'[6]

The inscribed name can deeply affect even family members too young to have known the deceased. Timothy Pain wrote in the *Guardian* of his visit to the Menin Gate in search of his grandfather's name: 'A.T.R. Jones. Those letters had been carved over 60 years ago and never once in all those years had anybody gazed at them with such love and sadness. Somehow those stone letters transferred Alfred from a fading photographic image, from a phantom unreal figure, into a flesh and blood man who had lived, fought and died in a far-off country.'[7]

Time and again, pilgrims talk of their life being completed: 'I've had the dearest wish of my life.' 'We have had a great yearning fulfilled in having seen the last resting place of our beloved sons.' 'I came all the way from home for this: now I can die content.'[8] These comments from 1928 are echoed in the words of a pilgrimage leader in 1991:

> We had a woman who went to her husband's grave on the Somme. She last saw her husband at a station in Northumberland; she last waved goodbye, pressing a little handkerchief and a Bible into his hand, in 1915. She went to her husband's grave for the very first time, ever, in 1988 or 1989. She was aged 93. We wrote to her last year . . . never had a reply. Then this year, we had a reply from the executors, saying that she'd passed away six months after the pilgrimage and that she had talked of nothing else.

Another woman wrote, in the mid 1980s:

> My father was killed and buried in Italy during the War when I was a baby. Two years ago, when I was forty, we went for the first time to visit his grave. It was an amazing experience—after all those years I felt complete having seen his gravestone. It is difficult to describe how much it

meant then and since to me and the rest of the family. Without a gravestone, his identity would be lost.

Another woman of the same generation who recently went to Singapore with her ageing mother said that when they stood at the grave 'it was the first time our family had been together'.

Dynamics of a pilgrimage

Each pilgrimage develops an emotional dynamic. One male tour operator, asked on Radio 4 what his travellers get out of it, said:

> It's a little bit of nostalgia, a little bit of duty, but not merely that. It's as if they have to go, to relieve some sort of inner tension, some feeling, some desire. As they approach, what would seem to be the sort of crescendo, whether that be the playing of some communal hymn, whether it be 'Abide With Me', whether it be a personal wreath-laying, whatever it may be, each in their own way I think has an idea of the moment where the tension, the emotion, is released. The pilgrimage is complete, yes, they've experienced a sense of release, that they have stored up, and as they've got closer to that climax, the tension has built and then—tears seem to be the common denominator, that signify the release, and then a sort of winding down, a loosening up, a walking away, very often the fond memories: 'Do you remember so-and-so when he did this?' 'Oh gosh, and what a footballer he was', a number of stories about how good a sportsman somebody was. On the way back, there's sort of—the word levity is the wrong word—but there's a sort of lighter feeling, as if there's been a sense of relief, of a duty done, performed . . . but whether it's a cleansing of the soul, expunging a feeling of guilt, I don't really know.[9]

A female tour leader described a similar dynamic to me:

> Now it's, er, difficult to be tactful about this, but until we make the cemetery visits, those ladies are very tetchy, they're all on edge, and very demanding, ooh, get snappy with each other and with the tour leader, and the moment they've had their cemetery visit—right! it's a knees-up time! And they dance down the coach singing. And even though some of them go every year, and know what it's going to be like, it's still the same! Because some of them live from year to year, it's the highlight of their lives.

But as the destination is approached, anxiety as well as excitement stirs. As a British Legion official put it to me:

> The worry is: 'How am I going to react when I see my husband's grave? Am I going to be sad? Of all the feelings I've had over the years, are they going to manifest themselves in a colossal emotional experience at the graveside? And if not, what has happened? Have I come all this way and I'm not moved by him?' Also of course, the ultimate question is 'Where did my husband die? I've never seen the place, I can't manage it, now I can.' It closes lots of doors, skeletons out of cupboards; it completes the circle.

Arrival at the grave or memorial typically triggers an emotional response. Couriers attempt to give the pilgrim a balance of support and privacy. The pilgrim lays a poppy wreath or spray of flowers at the grave, and someone takes a photograph. British Legion pilgrimage leaders offer to take a photograph, and try to persuade the widow to be included in the picture so she can show the family back home that she was there.

As at the funeral that the pilgrimage replaces, words cannot say what is felt. Feelings have to be expressed in ritual, largely through flowers. Beyond the formal laying of the wreath, these rituals are typically initiated by the individual mourner. 'I picked a poppy near where they told me my boy was last seen'.[10] The middle-aged journalist who travelled to Singapore to see the grave of the father she had never known told me that tending the flowers on the grave felt like caring for him—something she had never been able to do in real life.

PILGRIMAGE AND GRIEF

Many describe their pilgrimage as a 'completion'. But for many it may also be a beginning—a beginning of talking with other family members about experiences, about the deceased. For example, a commando who had never talked to his children about his experiences behind Japanese lines in Burma was able to do so after attending an anniversary celebration 30 years later. Or a D-Day veteran joined a tour because his two sons had been badgering him to tell them about how he got his DSC; he was very reticent to talk about it, until he got to the actual beach and saw the location. He then proceeded to enthrall the entire party with a gripping account of the landings—his sons were, of course, over the moon.

Pilgrims often report great surprise at and pleasure in the care with which even remote GWGC cemeteries and graves are maintained. This care speaks volumes for the respect in which the servicemen are held and validates the grief that the pilgrim may express at the grave. This intensely private grief is affirmed by the entire setting, which can be cathartic for a person whose grief has been hidden for decades.

Disappointments may also occur. Most likely, perhaps, is the pilgrim's inability to relate what he sees to the scene as it was at the time of battle; or she cannot imagine what it must have been like.

Other pilgrimages

Throughout history, shrines have developed where saints, heroes and martyrs have died or are buried: Jerusalem, Rome, Canterbury; or indeed Dallas (John F. Kennedy) or Graceland (Elvis Presley). These last two examples, which attract hundreds of thousands of visitors, show that people can grieve the loss of a dream, or the loss of a pop idol to whom they were devoted. Focusing that grief on the tangible, physical place that symbolises so much, and going to that place in the company of countless others, both affirms the importance of one's loss and somehow assuages it. Like a delayed funeral, a delayed mourning process, it enables people to move on.

What then is the role of the bereavement counsellor? Perhaps to encourage a visit in the first instance, and to put the person in touch with those who offer tours and pilgrimages. Perhaps to enable the person to talk, once the visit has triggered memory and tongue, though this is usually best done within the family. But it may be that the visit frees the person to tackle painful issues that have been put on 'hold' for a long time, and the counsellor may have a special role in helping the person to tackle these.

References

1. A much fuller version of this article may be found in: Walter T. War Grave Pilgrimage. In: Reader I, Walter T (eds). Pilgrimage in Popular Culture. London: Macmillan, 1993.
2. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission, which is at 2 Marlow Road, Maidenhead, Berkshire SL6 7DX (0628-34221), welcomes enquiries about particular graves.
3. Most of the World War II tours are offered by: Major and Mrs Holt's Battlefield Tours, 15 Market Street, Sandwich, Kent CT13 9DA (0304-612248); Galina International Battlefield Tours, 711 Beverley High Road, Hull HU6 7JN (0482-804409/806020); and Milestone Tours, 37A Outram Street, Sutton-in-Ashfield, Notts NG17 4BA (0623-517275).
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Directive grief treatment in a group setting

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Over the past ten years we have developed a therapeutic method for people who have suffered a complicated trauma or loss so that they need professional help to work through their grief.

Nini Leick

INDIVIDUAL ATTENTION

Our method, 'directive grief treatment in groups', consists of individual, short-term grief therapy in a group setting and is geared towards people who have suffered all kinds of bereavements. They may have lost loved ones through death or divorce, been struck by severe illness, or blinded or disabled in other ways. They may be suffering feelings of loss as the parents of a handicapped child or have been the victims of violent assault, traffic accidents or natural disasters.

The method was initiated in the Student Counselling Centre, Copenhagen, and later further developed in a setting where the treatment was offered free of charge to the general public (a research and training project financed jointly by the Copenhagen Municipality and a private foundation).[1] Since 1983 we have been running intensive training programmes on it for professionals. Our method has been found useful in many different settings, such as municipal welfare offices, general hospitals, counselling clinics of the Danish Cancer Society and the Danish Society for the Blind, student counselling centres and in institutions for treatment of psychotic children.

Obviously not everyone who experiences a loss needs treatment, though even those people who are able to grieve in a healthy way may lack a network with sufficient maturity and understanding to support them through the painful grief work. A self-help group can be very beneficial for these people. However, many self-help groups are burdened, or even disturbed, by members who are suffering from pathological grief who may, typically, have suffered very

EDITOR'S NOTE

Despite all the research and counselling that has been provided for bereaved people in recent years, there is still a great need for well-conceived group work to be developed. Groups can be large or small, open or closed, structured or unstructured, directive or un-directive, selected or unselected, led or leaderless (self-help), short, medium or 'marathon' in duration. Group leaders may be psychologists, social workers or lay people with a variety of theoretical orientations. If we are to choose between these bewildering alternatives we need accurate descriptions and evaluations of each approach. In this paper from Holland the authors describe their own method of providing short, focused, directive, open groups led by two therapists for people with a range of losses.