REVIEWS

VIDEO

BEREAVEMENT IN LATER LIFE

Ann Webber, Jo Marcus. Ipswich, UK: Concord Video and Film Council Ltd, 1992. £40. One video, running time: 35 minutes.

Bereavement in Later Life provides an excellent summary of many aspects of the grieving process through the experiences of older people. Its focus on issues which particularly affect older people makes it unique among training videos, although the themes reflect much of the audio tape material in the Open University (OU) *Death and Dying* package (K260), *Working with Older People* (P654) and *Mental Health Problems in Old Age* (P577). It is accompanied by a Tutor's Notes pack, which recommends using parts of the video for 1 1/2 hour training sessions. These are ideal for training programmes or run together as a special study-day looking at the needs of older bereaved people. The video and tutor's notes would certainly be useful for courses for health professionals, social workers, NVQ students or any group studying the OU courses listed above.

The video takes the form of well-conducted interviews with older people talking about their bereavement experiences and brief professional comments by Dr Colin Murray Parkes. The interviews are moving, illustrate the stages of grieving and challenge the myth that a bereavement is somehow less important to or more accepted by older people.

Special areas of interest are also covered in the video. The effects of losing a child later in life, either through terminal illness or sudden death, are illustrated by a case history of a bereavement through the sinking of the *Herald of Free Enterprise*. Anticipatory grief is examined using a case study of the loss of a spouse with dementia. Problems of living alone and practical difficulties are also well-covered. The experience of Tina from Grenada provides a cultural discussion, although this section could have been more fully developed.

This video provides excellent training material for use in a variety of ways with a variety of groups and is recommended viewing for anyone with particular interests in bereavement issues of older people.

Liz Smith
Elderly Care Manager

BOOKS

THE TIBETAN BOOK OF LIVING AND DYING

Sogyal Rinpoche. London: Rider, 1992. £16.99 hb.

To the Tibetan Buddhist, life is a painful necessity on the way to enlightenment, an illusion or shadow through which we must pass, in successive incarnations, in the hope that we shall eventually achieve nirvana. Each incarnation holds the possibility of being an improvement on the last, but it can also be a decline. To ensure ascent rather than descent, we are urged to meditate, recite prayers and mantras and engage in compassionate acts. The aim of the meditation is to prepare ourselves for the transition of dying, a series of steps of 'bardos' through which we must pass as we leave one body for another.

The way a person dies is, therefore, of great importance, and Tibetan Buddhists spend a lot of time thinking about dying and helping each other to die. The author of this book, Sogyal Rinpoche, is an expert. Raised from the age of six months in a monastery in Tibet, he is said to be the reincarnation of Terten Sogyal, a renowned mystic, and has achieved the status of Rinpoche (Master) after long study. He left Tibet when the Chinese invaded in 1959 and, after studying at universities in Delhi and Cambridge, began the task of interpreting Tibetan Buddhism to Western readers. He writes very well but the task is a difficult one and the Western reader may well find the intellectual effort and, let it be said, the author's hushed tone as he introduces us to yet another rinpoche, buddha or boddhisattva somewhat exhausting.

Sogyal Rinpoche rightly points out that we in the West know a great deal about keeping people alive but very little about helping them to die, and nothing at all about continuing to help them when they are dead. He cites Raymond Moody's studies of 'near death experience' as evidence and goes on to provide us with a complex 'sacred technology' of dying. The culture gap is, of course, enormous and I, for one, found my credulity stretched by the suggestion that the family of the dying should be excluded from the bedside of the dying patient in case they disturb his or her peace of mind.

At the moment of death, consciousness must leave the body through one of the nine orifices. The dying patient should adopt the 'sleeping lion posture' in order to block all of these orifices except the anterior fontanelle. When an adept dies, the force of expulsion may be so great that the pieces of bone explode out of the top of the head. The body of an accomplished practitioner may disappear in a rainbow of light leaving only their hair and nails behind.

Alongside the magic and miracles, there are many ideas in this book which make good sense and a few which carry profound implications. The reader can but get a taste of these from a few extracts:

'Follow, with complete sincerity, the path that inspires you ... The master's task is to teach us to receive, without any obscuration, the clear messages of our own inner teacher.'

'I have been amazed again and again by how, if you just let [dying] people talk, giving them your complete and passionate attention, they will say things of a surprising spiritual depth, even when they don't think they have any spiritual beliefs. Everyone has their own life wisdom, and when you let a person talk, you allow this life wisdom to emerge. You can help people to help themselves by helping them to discover their own truth, a truth whose vividness, sweetness and profundity they may never have suspected. Your task is never under any circumstances to impose your beliefs but to enable them to find these within themselves.'

Whatever one may think of the peculiar beliefs of Tibetan Buddhists, no reader will doubt the open-mindedness and compassion of these sentences, yet they do seem to conflict with other passages which emphasise the importance of learning the Tibetan way of dying and following the long tradition of the masters. Without these, it is implied, there is little hope of personal enlightenment. As the Buddha said, 'I have shown you the way to liberation, now you must take it for yourself.'

Coming, as it does, from a culture that is quite different to that in the West, it is not surprising that there is a large philosophical, linguistic and conceptual distance between Tibetan Buddhist and Western thought. Sogyal Rinpoche, the Dalai Lama (who writes a foreword to the book) and other Tibetans who have taken refuge in the West are struggling to learn our ways. It would be surprising indeed if they had nothing to teach us.

Colin Murray Parkes
Consultant Psychiatrist

ETHNIC VARIATIONS IN DYING, DEATH AND GRIEF: Diversity in Universality

DP Irish, KE Lundquist, VJ Nelsen (eds). Washington DC and London: Taylor and Francis. 1993. £17.50 pb.

This book reflects both the fascination and the frustration of its topic, the ways in which people from different cultures think and behave when faced with death and bereavement.

Written by a multi-cultural mix of fifteen authors most of whom live in Minnesota USA, it is a mixture of anecdotes and general accounts of a wide range of cultures. The choice reflects the range of ethnic groups in Minnesota, thus the Lakota Indians, but no other native American tribe, are discussed, so are the Hmong of China. These cultures, which will rarely be met in other Western countries, occupy more space than the entire section on Islam and there is no mention of the native populations of Australia, New Zealand or Africa.

Excellent chapters by Paul Rosenblatt (whose own book *Grief and Mourning in Cross-Cultural Perspective** is a fascinating summary of anthropological studies) and by Hosea Perry (on the mourning and funeral customs of African Americans) help to offset the lack of balance and to make this a thought-provoking and worthwhile addition to the literature on bereavement.

Colin Murray Parkes
Consultant Psychiatrist

* Rosenblatt PC, Walsh RP, Jackson DA. Grief and Mourning in Cross-Cultural Perspective. New Haven, Conn., USA: Human Relations Area Files Press Inc., 1976.

FINAL GIFTS: Understanding the Communications of the Dying

Maggie Callanan, Patricia Kelley. London, UK: Hodder and Stoughton, 1992. £8.99 pb.

I tried hard to think of the intended audience for this book, which is by two hospice home-care nurses in the USA. It is not suitable for professionals in the palliative care field as it consists largely of anecdotal accounts of the deaths of the authors' patients. Nor is it suitable for relatives or carers of terminally ill patients. The content features several 'near-death experiences' and patients' attempts to communicate these – which is not helpful to readers whose relative does not have such an experience. And I cannot see the value of the book to a bereavement counsellor, other than that it is of general thanatological interest.

The authors have clearly been deeply moved by sharing the feelings, thoughts and visions of dying people. They use case histories to illustrate how those nearing death use symbolic language to describe their experiences, feel that they are in the presence of people who are no longer alive, know when their death will occur and choose their time to die. But my conclusion has to be that the book was written mainly for the authors' benefit.

Frances Kraus
Principal Hospice Social Worker

LIVING WITH DYING

David Carroll. New York: Paragon House, 1991. £11.50 pb.

The title gives the impression that this is another textbook for the professional carer, however this book is written for the family and friends of a dying person. It covers a multitude of topics, both practical and emotional, and provides guidance in dealing with numerous problems.

The book is written in the form of

questions and answers and it is obvious from the depth of information and the range of topics that the experiences of those caring for dying people have been combined with professional knowledge to create this comprehensive manual of caring.

I found the book easy to read, although, when read straight through, the question-and-answer style can become tedious. However, it is in an ideal format for the target audience to use as a reference manual. The questions serve as an index system for back reference as and when problems emerge.

There are, inevitably, sections of this American publication, which will be irrelevant to the readers in other countries. Sources of help and information, hospice addresses and some of the practical preparations need to be read as a stimulant to enquire about the provision of these services locally.

In general the book tackles important issues which are so often overlooked. Coming to terms with death and talking about dying are discussed in a very open and honest manner. I particularly liked the correlation drawn out between the emotions of grief experienced by the carer, both before and after the death, and the dying person. The chapter on bereavement is wide-ranging and very down-to-earth in its questioning, and the answers give a reassuring and positive response. I believe this book would help the family and friends of the dying and, likewise, be a useful addition to the library of a Care Assistant.

Joan Morgan
Cruse National Development Officer for Wales

ABSTRACTS

Bereavement Network: A Community Based Group.

Kirschling JM, Osmont K. *Omega* 1992–3; **26**(2): 119–127.

In 1958 a small group of professionals working with bereaved persons in Portland, Oregon, formed a community-based group called the Bereavement Network. The organisation has since expanded to include lay persons also involved with bereavement. Members of the Network meet regularly, and they collect and disseminate information about services, such as counsellors, hospice and hospital bereavement co-ordinators, chaplains and volunteers. The Network consists of about 70 people, and is regarded as being a positive force in the community.

Family Distancing Following a Fatal Farm Accident

Rosenblatt PC, Karis TA. *Omega* 1993–4; **28**(3):183–200.

Farming is one of the most dangerous occupations in the USA and fatal accidents can lead to distancing among the families of the bereaved.

For this study, 21 farming families identified factors that had led to such distancing, mainly between spouses, children and in-laws. The article explores five such factors: blaming and fear of blame; the economic crisis that may exist when the farm operator is killed; family differences over the expression of feelings; the pre-occupation and emotional flatness of bereavement; and the role of kinship beliefs and attitudes among in-laws.

The Effect of Cause of Death on Responses to the Bereaved: Suicide Compared to Accident and Natural Causes

Allen BG, Calhoun LG, Cann A, Tedeschi RG. *Omega* 1993–4; **28**(1): 29–48.

This American study, which is partly based on an MA thesis in psychology, compares the experience of bereavement when the death was caused by suicide with that felt when death was the result of an accident or heart attack. The authors conclude that in the first case the survivors are more likely to experience guilt and a sense of responsibility, and to feel stigmatised by society. The article makes some useful points, but there are many technical terms and it is somewhat repetitive and verbose.

An Omega Interview

Silverman PR. *Omega* 1993–4; **28**(4): 251–260.

In this interview Dr Silverman, who set up a Widow-to-Widow Program, discusses the impact of death on wives and husbands whose spouses die, and on children who lose a parent.

Specifically, in her Program Dr Silverman found that widows were most helped by talking to other widows. Fewer men join mutual help groups; they articulate their loss differently, focusing less on their feelings and more on the practical consequences of what is happening. Children who lose a parent have about three times as many emotional problems as those who do not experience bereavement, especially if there were prior tensions in the family. However, this does not necessarily mean that they cannot form relationships, do well in school, and anticipate the future in a positive way.

Organizational Responses to Death in the Military

Bartone PT, Ender MG. *Death Studies* 1994; **18**(1): 25–37.

This article deals with the procedure followed by the US Army in helping individuals who have lost a family member or a friend through death in war or training. Between World War II and the present day, great strides have been made in, for instance, the way in which survivors are informed of the death, in the practical and psychological help which is available, and in the follow-up. The article is extremely interesting but can, of course, be of only academic use for non-American, non-military readers.

'A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words': A Strategy for Grief Education

Gould JB. *Death Studies* 1944; **18**(1): 65–74.

James Gould describes a programme he has instituted at McHenry County College, US, for educating students in grief education. The students are aged from 17 to 70; some have experienced bereavement, while others take the course for professional reasons. The procedure involves gathering personal data and constructing visual models describing the grief process of those taking part. The aim of this small-scale study is to help students become active participants rather than passive spectators in dealing with their own grief or with that of other people.

Sheila Hodges and John Bush

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