Framing

Experiences of loss, grief and bereavement in contemporary society need to be given a frame or context. A century ago, Van Gennep drew attention to the need for rituals as ways of helping us through one phase of life and into the next. 'Mourning is a transitional period for the survivors and they enter it through rites of separation and emerge from it through rites of reintegration into society'[19]. We now know that children should be included in the thinking, planning, and attendance at funerals, if they so wish.

However the experience of grief affects us all for months and sometimes years, and society does little to acknowledge and accommodate this. The experience of separation and reintegration is an ongoing process which may last a lifetime. Rites of passage are devised to provide us with markers along the path of human life, and therefore to help us to feel less lost. And to feel less lost helps us to feel less afraid and anxious. At the end of his journey Bilbo in Tolkien's famous tale, *The Hobbit*[20], returns home. He has faced his terrors.

> 'Roads go ever ever on
> Under cloud and under star,
> Yet feet that wandering have gone
> Turn at last to home afar.
> Eyes that fire and sword have seen
> And horrors in the halls of stone
> Look at last on meadows green
> And trees and hills they long have known.'

To protect confidentiality, drawings used in this paper are either reproduced with the permission of a Gillick-competent child, or have been altered in order to avoid recognition whilst honouring the content.

This paper is based on a lecture given by the author at a Mole Conference held in London in 1999 on the subject of helping grieving children. The author would welcome comments by email: maryturner.psychotherapist@ukonline.co.uk

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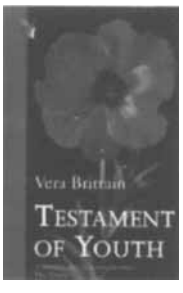
BEREAVEAVEMENT IN LITERATURE

TESTAMENT OF YOUTH

Vera Brittain

First published in 1933. 1992 edition, London: Virago Press, 661pp. £9.99 pb. ISBN: 0860680355



In this first volume of her autobiography, Vera Brittain describes her childhood and, centrally, her personal experiences of the First World War. I read it some years ago after watching a dramatisation on television and, to date, it is the book which has made the deepest and most long-lasting impression on me.

Vera's studies at Oxford were interrupted by the war and in 1915 she enlisted as a VAD nurse. Rowland, her lover, was sent to the front in March of that year and expected home on leave for Christmas. Instead, Vera learned on Boxing Day that he had been killed in action.

She describes her desperation as she gradually pieces together the details of how Rowland was killed, wondering why he had gone 'so boldly, so heedlessly, into No Man's Land' when his Christmas leave was so near. 'Hardest to bear, perhaps, was the silence...The growing certainty that he had left no message for us seemed so cruel, so baffling.' She found herself resenting the demands of her work: 'the increasing consciousness of loss and frustration filled me with impotent fury and resentment.'

Sent to Malta to serve as a nurse Vera was, for a year, able to enjoy life. She writes of 'a interval of heaven...in which, for the time being, I came to life again'. However in 1917 a close friend, Victor was blinded by a bullet. Vera visited him in London and considered marrying him before his condition deteriorated and he died. Another close friend, Geoffrey, was killed by a sniper. Then, back at home in June 1918, she heard that her brother, Edward, had been killed.

That night she crept downstairs to look at his portrait, 'And suddenly, as I remembered all the dear afternoons and evenings when I had followed him on the piano as he played his violin, the sad, searching eyes of the portrait were more than I could bear, and falling on my knees before it I began to cry "Edward! Oh. Edward!" in dazed repetition, as though my persistent crying and calling would some howbring him back.'

After this life itself seemed unreal. Vera endured 'a period of isolation more bleak, more complete and far more prolonged than the desperate months in 1916 which had followed the death of Rowland...From June 1918 until about April 1920, I knew no one in the world to whom I could speak spontaneously, or utter one sentence completely expressive of what I really thought or felt.' She was 'enormously, interminably tired' and went on living only 'because it was less trouble than finding a way out...'.

After the war Vera travelled to Italy to find the small mountain-top graveyard where Edward was buried, and to France to visit Roland's grave. She completed her studies at Oxford, became involved in politics and pacifism and, later, engaged to be married. But she found it very difficult to make this commitment, afraid to become vulnerable to loss again, afraid that in accepting a new relationship she might 'destroy yet again' those who had died. She dreamed of Rowland, miraculously alive, and felt torn by her loyalty to the dead: 'So long, I knew, as I remained unmarried I was merely a survivor from the past – that war-time past into which all those whom I loved best had disappeared. To marry would be to dissociate myself from that past, for marriage inevitably brought with it a future.' Finally she does finds the courage to move forward and marry.

Each page of this book is passionately written and vividly conveys Vera's emotions and thoughts. Her poetry and correspondence, and those of Rowland, are moving and poignant. Vera's daughter, Shirley Williams, the SDP politician, has expressed the hope that new generations will 'discover the anguish and pain in the lives of these young people...and, in discovering, will understand.' I certainly did.

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