

(they cannot see, hear, feel, move etc). They also, I feel, cop out on the real question children want to have answered – what happens afterwards. More and more, I become convinced that heaven was invented by adults to avoid having to tell children about corporeal decomposition. As one child asked me, 'How far is heaven? Why can't mummy come back for tea if she has gone to heaven? When she went to Manchester, she was back in loads of time'. The children in all three books reviewed here which use heaven as a cop-out don't seem to have the sense to ask these important questions. **BC**

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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Dear Editors

As a bereavement counsellor/trainer and a second generation Hindu who has lived in London all my life, I would like to comment on Shirley Firth's article, 'Changing Hindu attitudes to cremation in the UK' (*Bereavement Care* 2003; [2]22: 25-28).

Though Hindus in the UK do still have issues about the difficulties of following their religion here, particularly the older generation, most people I know have accepted that it is necessary to adapt our practices – along with so much else – since moving here from Africa or the Indian subcontinent.

For instance, traditionally, women would not participate in the funeral but increasingly they do, particularly when there is no suitable male relative available. I was asked to speak at my step-brother's funeral last year. In the past, very young children had to be buried, but are now often cremated. Scattering ashes in rivers other than the Ganges is still a big compromise but in London riverboats can be hired particularly for this purpose.

Specialist Hindu funeral directors here can now arrange cremations within three days, sometimes even sooner. It can even be arranged for the congregation to watch the coffin burn. If the family does not want to wash and dress the body, the Hindu parlour can do it (the British equivalent may not perform the ceremony correctly). Hindu funeral services are preferred, particularly by older people, because of their better understanding of our culture and languages.

As Hindu families now move all over the world and form mixed relationships and friendships, the younger generation is absorbing new ideas. For many of us, the opportunity to change old rituals, create new ones or set up new services to fit in with the local practices and culture, has even been welcomed.

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The Compassionate Friends (Bristol, UK)

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The Compassionate Friends (TCF) offers support and friendship for bereaved parents and their families, by those similarly bereaved. It was founded in the late 1960s in Coventry, UK, by a young hospital chaplain barely out of training college, who was faced with trying to comfort two pairs of grieving parents, in a short space of time. The Revd Simon Stephens thought of what now seems to be such an obvious solution – he introduced the couples to each other. This was a gamble because all bereaved people react differently in grief and they could have resented what they may have seen as an intrusion on their personal world. Fortunately for all who have benefited since, this was not so; all four became the best of friends and (the three remaining) are now TCF's 'founding parents'.

Other grieving parents soon joined the original couples – a hospital chaplain has contact with numerous bereaved families – and they gradually evolved into a group which met to talk and help each other through the pain and distress that all bereaved parents have to face. The idea spread throughout the UK and small, informal groups began to meet regularly, welcoming newcomers to their meetings.

In the meantime, Simon's career took a sharp change of direction: he joined the navy, as chaplain aboard *HMS Ark Royal*. Behind this move, he had another intention – to use his travelling facility to good effect by encouraging the setting up of new groups in the places he visited. As more and more families found they could support and encourage one another, TCF expanded and there are now groups in over 20 countries, with a particularly strong following in the USA, Australasia and South Africa. Each country operates independently, but there are international 'gatherings' every few years at which all countries are made welcome. The next will be in Vancouver in July 2005. The web is particularly useful for keeping member countries in contact with each other and there are a number of TCF websites worldwide (for a review of the UK and USA sites see *Bereavement Care* 2002, 21(3): 45).

Throughout the UK, over 170 people act as official contacts, both locally and countywide, putting bereaved parents in touch with one another. The contacts are trained and they, or a bereaved parent, run monthly meetings usually held in private homes over tea and biscuits.

Here, bereaved parents, especially the new ones, can talk to others and share their fears ('Am I going mad?' is so often heard) with those who can say, 'I know how you feel'. The contacts also have good working relationships with other bereavement agencies such as Cruse Bereavement Care.

The national helpline is often the first point of contact for bereaved parents, providing support and information on their local groups. It is listed in most phone books and publicised to doctors, social services, funeral directors and the police.

Throughout the year, retreats are held at which small groups of parents come together for a quiet time away from the outside world. Annual gatherings are held in Scotland and England for all UK members; newcomers usually come with some trepidation about what to expect and are surprised at the friendly and welcoming atmosphere. All are encouraged to participate or not, as suits their needs, in the events and discussion workshops. The keynote speaker at the 2003 gathering was William Roache MBE, who plays the part of Ken Barlow in the UK soap *Coronation Street*, a fellow bereaved parent.

TCF produces and prints a selection of leaflets dealing with specific aspects of bereavement: death by suicide and homicide, death abroad and a father's grief, to name a few of the 32 currently in print. Last year 50,000 of these leaflets were distributed. For those with a greater reading appetite, there is a postal library, stocking over 1,200 titles, plus audio and video tapes. This is believed to be the most comprehensive library of its kind in the UK and is available to bereaved parents and those who have a professional interest in bereavement. Numerous articles on different bereavement-related topics by TCF members or professionals are also available. Every quarter, a magazine, *Compassion*, is published, written and produced entirely by members.

TCF does not claim to counsel or cure its bereaved parents. It seeks only to provide them with friends who may be able to understand the depth of grief they are suffering.

Contact TCF in the UK at 53 North Street, Bristol BS3 1EN; ☎ 0117 966 5202. National helpline 0117 953 9639; website www.tcf.org.uk Library contact: Catharine Pointer, 77 Rectory Lane North, Leybourne, West Malling, Kent ME19 5HD, or via the website. **BC**