

Editorial

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As an editor of *Bereavement Care* from its inception, I was recently offended to hear our journal referred to as ‘... a magazine, not an academic journal’. By this they meant that no academic journal can be intelligible to the lay public. The editors of *Bereavement Care* contest that view. We believe that it is possible to write for the intelligent lay person, as well as for the members of the wide range of academic disciplines who care about bereavement, without sacrificing academic principles. All our leading articles are subjected to peer review, abstracts are provided for publication in academic databases, and all authors are expected to provide fully referenced evidence in support of their claims. Our least ‘academic’ contributions (Spotlight and First Person, for example) are based on and reflect a sound understanding of current bereavement theory. This said, we do not see the need to emulate the drab formats and pretentious jargon of those academic journals that mistake obscurity for wisdom.

This is an exciting time for bereavement researchers and practitioners: many ideas, that may or may not be entirely new, are now receiving the attention that they deserve, and are giving rise to a new cohort of promising interventions and therapies. The sheer multiplicity of new ideas and therapies may well bewilder those who thought that all that was needed by bereaved people was a shoulder to cry on. We need people who can guide us through the complexities of research findings and academic language. That is what *Bereavement Care* is for, and in this issue we are privileged to have the guidance of some of the luminaries in our field.

In a seminal paper, Robert Neimeyer combines the skills of researcher and clinician to clarify the implications for future practice of recent advances in bereavement research and theory. His conclusion, ‘... that we are most helpful in our intervention efforts when we offer them to those who are suffering substantially’, is most reassuring.

In a world in which adults are unsure about the meaning of death and what happens to dead people after they die, it is hardly surprising that children can be equally perplexed. Patsy Way points to the ‘vast plurality of beliefs’ that are likely to colour the answers young children receive to their questions about death and dying in the multicultural societies of the western world today, and relates examples from her own work with children and families to help us to engage with them in their search for meaning.

Bearing in mind the variations in assumptions about death and bereavement within our own culture, how can we help

bereaved people from other cultures? Tony Walter, professor of death studies at the University of Bath and probably the leading sociologist in our field, presents a checklist of questions that will not only help us understand the ways in which bereaved people from many different cultural backgrounds view death and bereavement but also raise our awareness of our own basic assumptions.

Walter asks: ‘Should we let go of the dead, or continue to relate to them, or turn them into ancestors?’ Some answers to similar questions are examined by two other contributors in relation to memorialising the dead. Brian Cranwell explores the issue of the disposal of ashes in western, Christian burial rituals, and how to distinguish between the healthy maintenance of continuing bonds with the deceased and an unhealthy reluctance to let the dead person go. Jill Sanders’ Webwatch column takes a critical look at the emerging phenomenon of memorial websites.

Pursuing the same theme of the application of new technology to bereavement care, Merydawilda Colon and Allison Sinanan argue that social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook can be usefully incorporated by bereavement counsellors in their therapeutic work with young people. Indeed, drawing on their own work, they have found that, ‘far from distracting attention, allowing adolescents to have their computers on during bereavement counselling visits has been enlightening and helpful’.

Another way of explaining ourselves to ourselves is by means of creative writing. In this issue’s Spotlight article, Jane Moss outlines a structured way of facilitating such self-analysis. She developed and piloted this with the bereavement counselling service at a hospice in the UK. Systematic evaluation is needed but, based on feedback from participants, she argues that this structured approach is more likely to reap benefits for bereaved people than undisciplined self-expression. Participants ‘welcomed the use of the themed exercises because they could gain insight into emotions and explore other feelings and experiences than those that currently preoccupied them in their grieving processes’.

Last in this editorial, but first in this issue, Bill Bytheway’s academic research interests motivated him to explore the lasting impact of his teenage brother’s death on himself and others. In a moving contribution to our regular First Person reflections, he describes why and how he came to make contact with some of his brother’s schoolmates more than half a century later, and what that has meant to him. ■