That isn't really how it works

Discussing questions of life, death and afterlife with bereaved children and young people

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Abstract: Bereaved children today are likely to encounter a vast plurality of beliefs, often conflicting and deeply held, about what may or may not happen after death. Practitioners working with bereaved children may find their own personal and professional understandings and beliefs challenged – not just about death and what follows but also about children's cognitive capacities. In this article a bereavement counsellor draws on her own work to emphasise the importance of keeping an open mind and a willingness and curiosity to explore with children their thoughts and beliefs about life, death and afterlife, in order to help them create a narrative that is meaningful and helpful to them.

Keywords: Children, death, afterlife, worldview, culture, meaning-making

I work as a bereavement counsellor with the Candle bereaved children and young people's project at St Christopher's Hospice in south London, UK. This article seeks to capture my reflections, in supervision, on my responses to the views about death and afterlife expressed by some of the children and young people with whom I work, and how these can challenge some of my own beliefs and conceptions.

Elisa was 14 when her three-year-old cousin died. She came to see me with her mother, and I asked myself what sense this family, who had always been very active in the church community, were making of the death of a three-year-old. Her mother had explained her own strengthening belief that: 'God has His plan but we don't know what it is or understand it.' She said that this helped her a great deal, but that Elisa viewed things differently. Elisa told me, through her tears, that she would like to believe this but, when she was lying awake thinking about the unexpected death of her little cousin, she could make no sense of a God who would allow this. She was furious with a rage reminiscent of the railing of Job against 'the Almighty who has made my soul bitter'. I responded that bereavement changes many things in our lives and it can be immensely confusing when individual family members have such different responses to it.

Jordan, aged five, spent most of his Candle session playing out the doctor's role with the medical kit and toy ambulance, checking my pulse and his mother's blood pressure. Later his mother reported that he had told her he had made a deal with God: God would restore Daddy to life, as He had done with His own son, Jesus. Jordan attended a church school and it was Easter time. His father had died three years before when Jordan was two. He was now trying to make sense of a worldview in which a rational, caring deity could allow these terrible things to happen to Jordan's father but, as he had learned in school, had made an exception for His own son. When Jordan announced to his mother that he had bargained with God, his mother had tried gently to explain 'that isn't really how it works', and I tacitly supported her approach.

Later, in supervision, I reflected on my responses to these children. Received wisdom might regard Elisa as a teenager appropriately engaged in questioning her view of the world and Jordan as developmentally too young to grasp these existential issues. I began to question how theories of child development and continuing bonds had informed my responses to these children.

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Children and young people today are exposed to a wealth of different belief systems, through increasing travel, new technology, and particularly perhaps in our multi-cultural inner city playgrounds. For many this can add great richness to their lives. However, in bereavement, when children and young people may find themselves having to revise their assumptive worlds and life narratives and meanings, such a plurality of understandings of the meaning of death and views about afterlife can add another complicating dimension to the mourning process.

Some theorists propose that young children are exempt from this process, lacking the developmental abilities to engage with it. In supervision, I reflected that I had felt able to acknowledge Elisa's position in relation to her God but that, by tacitly supporting his mother's response, I had challenged Jordan in relation to his. Yet if I recognise that Jordan has a direct relationship with his God, he is entitled to dialogue with him in any way he wants. I might offer the voice of my experience based on conventional wisdom, but I should not presume to know his God better than he does.

My assumption was that Jordan was trying to understand how a just and good God had allowed his father to die, and was also trying to make sense of how his father's doctor had failed to make him better. From Jordan's perspective, key authorities in positions of power to prevent his father dying had been unable or unwilling to do so. His play suggested a developing internal relationship with God and a wider cosmology in which mysterious and wide-ranging possibilities were showing themselves.

Universal questions

Some teenagers do not feel any need to engage in any depth with issues around the possibility of existence beyond death. Andrina, aged 15, talked briefly about her mother in heaven in relation to a recent stage performance in which she had taken part at school and her own aspirations for the future. This seemed to be a fairly one-way interaction, with her mother taking an interest in Andrina's earth-bound activities. When I enquired gently about where or how she imagined her mother to be, she responded as though she was stating the obvious: 'My mum's in heaven and God looks after everyone so she's ok, yeah?' I could be confident that wider questions were not troubling Andrina; she was developing a continuing bond with her dead mother without being troubled by questions such as what her mother was doing when she wasn't intervening in Andrina's life.

In contrast, five-year-old Rees, busy in the Candle project playroom, with great economy of artistic style sketched himself looking up at heaven. He explained that he was looking up at his father in the sky 'with a sad face' and added: 'The gunman is in the sky.' His was a world in which his father was at risk of further dangers in heaven, following his death on earth. It was clear that the fears were very real to Rees. This was an abrupt reminder of the findings of Frangoulis, Jordan and Lansdowne's research (1996), and their conclusion that we cannot assume children understand heaven as a good and safe place after death.

Understandings of death

Yalom (1980) quotes Freud's conviction that 'the young child does not grasp the true implication of death'. In this view, the child, even at age eight or nine, knows little (and hence fears little) about death. In a very rich chapter packed with research and client clinical material, Yalom argues that 'children go through an orderly progression of stages in awareness of death and in the methods they use to deal with their fear of death' (p76). He draws on Piaget's theories relating to developmental stages of understanding in children, arguing that, until children move from the concrete operational stage and develop the capacity for more abstract thought, they will not 'really' understand the meaning of death.

Yalom's position is that death causes anxiety and needs to be approached in a 'rational' way to gain the 'truth'. He regards life (Yalom, 2008) simply as a series of 'random events' (p10) that occurs between two states of non-being – the time before our birth and the time after our death. He rejects 'religious consolation', saying: 'My work is rooted in a secular, existential world-view that rejects supernatural beliefs.' In an increasingly secularised world, this may appeal as the voice of common sense. Yet, reflecting on conversations with Elisa, Jordan and Rees, I am left feeling that, for many bereaved children, that isn't really how it works for them.

Continuing bonds

The notion of continuing bonds (Normand, Silverman & Nickman, 1996) has had a profound influence by inviting us to think about ways in which the bereaved can reconnect with the deceased. In relation to bereaved parents (but I would argue that many of his comments are relevant to bereaved children), Klass (1999) recognised that: 'Inner representations of the dead and continuing bonds are not simply individual matters. They are maintained and reinforced in families and within wider social systems' (p41).

Klass argues that bereavement can bring about major changes in a family's physical environment, status and place in the world. For some it can also bring a vast change in their worldview (p126). Erikson (1963) proposes that worldviews are based on the most elementary feelings and earliest human experiences. For some children bereavement may prompt questions about how the universe functions and how humans can influence their destiny. Neimeyer (2001) argues that bereavement involves a fundamental revision of meaning systems and life narratives. However, as Valentine (2009) observes, this western view of continuing bonds tends to focus on one-sided inner representations of the deceased. In Japanese traditions, grief is seen 'less as an internal state and more as something people do' and there is 'concern for the body

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and well-being of deceased loved ones'. The presence of the deceased is experienced as tangible, and their relationship with them as reciprocal.

What do adults believe?

In a study of healthcare workers and students in New York, Walker (2000) found that 13.6% did not believe in life after death, but 85% believed in the possibility of an afterlife. In many cases, as with many of the families I meet, these beliefs were unspecific – the study participants were expressing a general hope for a continued existence after death. However more than half (53%) of Walker's subjects expressed a belief in a particular kind of afterlife: 'some version of the incarnation or transmigration of the soul'. This belief in reincarnation was expressed across all religious identifications in the study, including Catholic, Protestant, Jewish and Muslim faiths.

Rosenblatt (1997) reminds us that, in most traditional societies, death is not seen as a transition into nothingness but a passing on to some other state. The original purpose of many death rituals was to facilitate this transition. Some traditions, such as Christadelphians and Jehovah's Witnesses, are very specific about what happens after death. Fundamentalist traditions tend to offer complete certainty about an afterlife. Spiritualist churches offer a particular and very personal connection with the dead (Walter, 2008), in their belief that the living can communicate with them via a medium.

Different cultures have different traditions on how the bereaved should relate to the dead. Gire (2002) argues that cultures vary even in their definition of death. For example, in some South Pacific cultures there is a belief that life departs the body in sleep and illness. In some cultures it is seen as dangerous even to name the dead person. By contrast, a Thai teacher colleague whose home I visited in Thailand introduced me first to her living family, then to the family shrine inside the home and then to the ancestors who were housed in a beautiful doll-sized house in the garden. Her generation in her community maintained a very respectful relationship with the dead. Ancestors were honoured and attended to, especially on birthdays and family days, but were firmly located outside the house so as not to disrupt the life of the living. Her continuing bond with the dead was intricately woven into her daily routines and gave meaning to community life.

Connections between life and death

Children's beliefs about an afterlife are mediated by family, carers, peers, school and culture and, for some, religious community. Kenyon (2001) argues that young children, in their immature concrete thinking stage, imagine the dead as relocated in a real place connected to the world. A more mature view of the afterlife assumes disconnection and that the dead cannot 'really' engage with the living. The assumption here is that cognitive maturity brings understanding that life and death are separate, and in linear progression. One might argue, however, that this view is based on a Eurocentric belief system.

Sagara-Rosemeyer and Davies (2007) studied Japanese children growing up in a modern culture infused with a mixed history of eastern religious traditions. They explored the children's notions of a linear flow of life to death versus a circular flow that incorporates reincarnation. They found that the children's views of the kind of flow did not vary simply according to age: 'Their perception of a circular flow from life to the afterlife [was] attributed to their religious sense of reincarnation rather than their inability to separate life and death' (p242).

> Developmental age is not the sole factor influencing children's understanding of life and death … their worldviews play a part too

Similarly, in their fascinating research on primary school children in south London, Frangoulis, Jordan and Lansdown (1996) found that: 'The Piagetian-based hypothesis that the younger children would tend to declare a belief in an afterlife more than the older ones was not born out' (p122). They argue that developmental age is not the sole factor influencing children's understanding of life and death, and that their worldviews play a part too: 'It would be easy to read into children's ideas about ghosts and others coming back and say that those who put forward this view are denying the finality of death, or that they do not really comprehend the notion. In our view it is better to let the words speak for themselves and not to try to read into them.'

Are these worlds real to children?

Children have sometimes described to me hearing or seeing a relative who has died and have talked about a sensory experience that was evidently very real to them. Adults may find this strange. However, in another context, young people learn in history lessons about the Viking warlord buried at Sutton Hoo with his saucepans and weapons and gaming board to take with him to the next life, or the terracotta army in China standing guard around their emperor, or the sale of pardons by the church in medieval times, all indicating the concrete existence of an afterlife and the need to make due preparations for it. *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* (Sogyal Rinpoche, 2008) specifically recommends so doing.

Children in south London and other inner city areas may hear in the playground of other connections to the dead. A Bolivian family living in Lambeth explained to me the importance of the Day of the Dead, when their dead relatives are invited annually to descend from heaven on specially baked ladders made of bread to join the family in the graveyard.

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Families picnic in the graveyards, celebrating their ancestors and eating their favourite foods. Then the dead return by the same route and do not interrupt life on earth until the next year.

Thus many cultures, past and present, endorse beliefs in a reality beyond the grave. In these belief systems it becomes difficult to distinguish where such beliefs end and concrete reality begins. When young children say they will go looking for someone who has died in a rocket, aeroplane or ladder connecting to heaven, many adults might say 'That's not really how it works' and draw a distinction between the 'real' and spirit world, but there may be many layers of understanding behind the child's words.

Making meaning from confusion

For some children and young people, like Andrina, death and beyond are not major current concerns. Others, like Elisa and Jordan, explore their narratives within their family's belief systems. Some families offer children clear frameworks of belief to shape their thinking. Others are less focused, or family members may hold differing views.

Joshua became very confused following the death of his grandfather. His grandmother, who attended a Christadelphian church, told him that she was looking forward to rising from the dead at the appointed time. His father said there was nothing after death so Joshua should just enjoy the present. His mother said she had more important things to think about right now. A concerned teaching assistant at his school tried to help him in his distress by enthusiastically explaining her own devout religious beliefs, and was upset by his angry response.

To a degree, this is part of the rich inheritance of childhood, but some children and young people may need support from adults who are open to the new tensions in their lives created by the bereavement. Yalom (2008) takes the view that young children do not have the capacity to understand death and to attain his 'rational' conclusion of life as a progression of random events that end when we die. This position may suit Yalom's personal narrative, but for many children and adults the process is complicated, messy and inconsistent, and also a serious and important part of making meaningful narratives that frame their past, present and future lives, and creating continuing bonds with the person who has died.

Conclusion

As I listen to the rich stories told to me by families, I find myself temporarily setting aside some of my personal and professional beliefs and 'truths' in order to allow greater exploration and a richer dialogue with children and young people about life, death and the possibility of an afterlife. Children and families are amazingly resilient and resourceful; a wealth of wonderful children's literature is available to help children in their meaning-making. I particularly like *Heaven* (Allan, 2006), in which a girl discusses what heaven will be like with her pet dog, who is being called by the angels. With gentle humour the book suggests there are many ideas about an afterlife and many ways to weave our beliefs into a future relationship with the deceased. I would not wish to be more categorical in discussing questions of 'how it really works' with the children I meet. ■

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