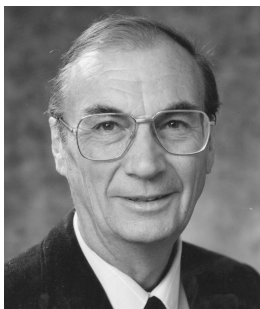




The Descent from the Cross

Rogier van der Weyden (1399–1464)



Colin Murray Parkes

OBE MD DPM FRCPsych
Life president
Cruse Bereavement Care
cmparkes@aol.com

Colin Murray Parkes reflects on the lasting resonance of the 15th Century altarpiece *The Descent from the Cross*, by Rogier van der Weyden.

With all its rich colours and fine drapery, Rogier van der Weyden's *The Descent from the Cross*, painted c.1435, is not a pretty picture. No distant landscape distracts our eyes from Golgotha, the place of the skulls. Nine living and one dead person are jammed together in a strange-shaped box. They pull our eyes this way and that. They and we are all trapped. More vivid than a textbook on bereavement, this picture can still teach us much about the physical, emotional, and social consequences of a death.

Despite the central position of his body, this picture is not really about Jesus. He is not there. His lax body is a vestige of the man; it echoes the pain and suffering of his recent crucifixion and we regard it with pity and respect, but it is his family and friends who occupy our attention. As long as people are dying, they are the focus of care, but the moment they die their troubles are over while the troubles of those to whom they are attached may be just beginning.

And despite the distance in time and culture between van der Weyden's world and ours, the picture of grief he portrays is much like the grief we see today. This painting shows, more clearly than any sociological study, the cost of love and the universality of grief.

Most prominent is Mary, the mother of Jesus, whose pallor and posture echo the posture of her dead son, making her appear as dead as he. This is no histrionic show of grief, but clear

evidence of a physiological collapse that cannot be counterfeited. Mary is certainly fainting, and may be dying – the artist will have been aware of the traditional belief, confirmed today, that we can die of a broken heart. Her evident distress evokes the sympathy of the people around her: St John, the disciple to whom Jesus had entrusted his mother, supports her, and her two half sisters look on, helpless, each grieving quietly. Mary does not return their gaze, her eyes are closed but tears fall down her cheeks; her grief is within, she is alone. The other men are busy, each playing their part but with tears in their eyes. Nicodemus, a sympathetic Jewish lawyer, and the wealthy Joseph of Arimathea, in his best embroidered robe, look preoccupied as they carry their precious load. The stiff upper lip, it seems, was not confined to the 20th century.

On the right, the reformed sinner Mary Magdalen stands alone in this crowd. Her body is bowed with misery and, fingers clenched together, she struggles to contain her anguish.

Between them these people exhibit the range of human grief. Why does the artist dwell on this most painful moment? Ten life-like and life-sized figures are crowded together and force themselves on our attention at a moment of intense emotion from which we too cannot escape. Bereavement volunteers and other caregivers may reach out, like John, to hold the stricken mother; medical and funeral staff may want to help the men who struggle to carry the dead Jesus; others may identify with the helpless half sisters standing by, or with the Magdalen, isolated and alone.

The altarpiece was probably painted for the Great Archers' Guild of Louvain. It soon became one of the most famous



The Descent from the Cross (c.1435) Rogier van der Weyden © Museo Nacional del Prado – Madrid (Spain)

paintings of the 15th century and, in time, evoked the pity and sympathy of the world. The artist, by focusing the attention of viewers – Christian and non-Christian alike – on the family, makes each of us part of that family.

We see how grief both separates us, for we are existentially alone in our grief (no one else can replace the one we love), and draws us together, for we are all made vulnerable by grief

and need the protection and care of others at this time. Van der Weyden reminds us that grief is inescapable and frighteningly lonely, and that it is also a time when the unintrusive presence of others less stricken than ourselves may help us to survive. And that is all, for in the early stages of our grief we may find no hope for the future, no resurrection, no planning, no angel waiting with a crowbar to roll back the entrance to a rocky tomb. ■