

# Editorial

**Alison Penny**

Cultural norms for grief vary, between the past and the present, and between different communities. According to the most recent American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual: 'an expectable or culturally approved response to a common stressor or loss, such as the death of a loved one, is not a mental disorder'. But we also know that many people's reactions don't conform to cultural expectations about who should be mourned, by whom and how.

Kenneth Doka's recognition of the phenomenon of disenfranchised grief (1989) put a name to the experiences of those who cannot share the full extent of their loss. These disenfranchised mourners are not only denied support, but also a voice or vote to shape the 'culturally approved response' to a loss. This makes it all the more important to tell their stories. In this edition, we explore some forms of grief whose disenfranchisement has endured, and some whose recognition has changed over time.

Therapists whose client dies by suicide can be seen as doubly disenfranchised: by the stigmatising nature of the death and by the unclear role which they play after the death. Jane Clark explores the difficulties therapists can face in participating in public rituals following the death, and how those in her study made use of linking objects to manage their private grief, ritualise their loss and maintain a bond with their client. These practices arose in part because of the limitations of supervision, which did not always allow the therapists to explore the death and what it meant to them.

If supervision is not always an enfranchising experience, what hope is there for an environment which we would actively expect to be repressive, such as prison? Janette Masterton's analysis of counselling sessions with her client Craig shows how imprisonment thwarted and complicated his response to multiple losses. That Craig was bereaved suddenly and violently, just days after his sentence began, makes his story particularly acute. Masterton describes in painful detail Craig's struggle with guilt, isolation and fear, and the challenges of working therapeutically with a client whose grief is profoundly disenfranchised. She ends with some simple actions that prison staff could take to acknowledge and support grieving inmates.

Pauline Boss and Janet Yeats also look at how therapeutic goals change when grief is disenfranchised. Their specific focus is on ambiguous grief, in two forms. The first arises when a close person is missing – physically lost but psychologically present – and the second occurs when the close person remains alive but is lost to dementia, obsession or depression. In these situations where the loss has no resolution or finality, they suggest that 'the therapeutic goal

shifts to resiliency'. Their article outlines questions that can be used to help clients explore how their ambiguous experience affects their family roles, rules and rituals.

In his piece on the Japanese response to the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami, Colin Murray Parkes alludes to the ambiguous losses experienced at a family and community level following disaster. These include the uncertainty of a fisherman about when he will be able to return to the sea, and the difficulties faced by communities whose authorities prioritise their re-housing in different ways. Parkes' observations on the community relief efforts are interspersed with the parallel story of hibakusha: survivors of the atomic bomb in Hiroshima. More than sixty years after the dreadful experiences they endured, hibakusha began to share and publish their stories, as a duty to those who died as well as an enfranchisement of their own previously hidden grief. He ends on a note of hope that the learning from hibakusha's stories and from the care provided to communities after Tohoku will help us in 'responding effectively to some disasters and preventing others'.

Charlotte Darlington also discusses how a greater understanding of past losses can inform the present. Her profound response to a place of death – the battlefields of Flanders – opened possibilities not only for empathy with those bereaved during the First World War, but also for reflection on her own grief for a friend. In Kate Taylor's equally personal piece, we see how norms change over time about which deaths can be mourned. She describes how her mother, whose first child was born and died in June 1927 'lived in a different era when if babies died they were never mentioned again'. Having pieced together her baby sister's story, Kate poses the question of whether her mother would have wanted her daughter to be included in the family tree: 'I think she would be pleased that I have raked up the past.'

The question of who gets included in the family tree or history is also discussed by Rosemary Mander and Rosalind Marshall in their analysis of the seventeenth century family portrait of Ole Worm. There is room in this painting for the patriarch to be surrounded by his successive wives and many children: both those who died and those who survived. The painting is a representation of how bonds with those that have died can be accommodated alongside bonds with those who live (and vice versa).

Listening to the voices of past grievers, and learning from those whose stories are hidden today, expands our understanding of what it is to love, to lose and to live on. Enfranchising these experiences will help us in the task of broadening the 'culturally approved response' to death. ■