

# Editorial

## Jacqui Stedmon

Grief finds expression in many ways; through words, between moments of speech and without words altogether. Feelings of grief can be channelled through therapeutic talk, creative artwork, poetry, theatre, acts of remembrance and, most recently, via social media. This issue of Bereavement Care explores the many and varied ways in which bereaved people can express what needs to be expressed.

When 69 people, most of them young, were shot dead on a peaceful island in Norway, the 'whole' Norwegian society was moved to signal collective concern. The public health authorities mobilised a pro-active plan for psychosocial intervention led by the Center for Crisis Psychology. Atle Dyregrov and colleagues describe how four weekend gatherings were provided for bereaved family members that created a new peer group, forming a 'family of the bereaved'. A tentative evaluation showed that those attending greatly valued these opportunities to connect with others in the same situation. The program also aimed to empower those bereaved to cope.

A number of other contributions also highlight the value of exploring grief with those sharing similar experiences. In a very different cultural context our Spotlight on Practice describes a therapeutic art and writing project in the UK. When a primary health practice sought a therapeutic alternative for bereaved patients in Bristol, the Shadow into Light project was conceived. This ten week course was run by a team consisting of a poet, an artist and a counsellor. Participants were encouraged to explore their narrative journey through grief using words and images to investigate and express feelings and develop new coping mechanisms. Evaluative feedback again confirmed that mutual support and understanding cemented bonds within the group.

The potential for grief support groups to bring together those in the same boat, so to speak, is echoed in Laurel Hilliker's paper. She reports on qualitative research which gives meaning specifically to the experiences of the younger generation of widowed 'baby-boomers' attending grief support groups in America. Again consideration is given to the cultural context; this cohort were raised against a shifting social landscape that saw the decline of religious belief systems alongside the growth of technology. As expected a strong theme emerged of the importance of the support group as a 'safe haven' where strong emotions could safely be expressed. However, participants also found some aspects of this focus on loss, repeatedly telling their sorrow-laden stories of death over and over, psychologically challenging. Repetitious loss narratives apparently did nothing to repair their fractured sense of self identity. Sharing a 'coupled life style' made the psychosocial

transition to widowhood especially problematic, with a stark sense of 'us' being reduced to 'me'; but then who am 'I'? Hilliker recommends that group work needs rebalancing to address restoration-oriented stressors so that both present and future personal narratives can be meaningfully constructed.

In our First Person contribution Dave Goodey shares his own inspirational journey through bereavement, determined to make something positive out of the untimely death through cancer of his wife, Emma. Setting off on a 'bicycle made for two' with Lotte, their pet cocker spaniel, Dave travelled a route that joined two of Emma's favourite places (the island of Hvar in Croatia to Hampshire in England) and raised money for her favourite charities. The journey itself offers a metaphor of uphill struggles and triumph over adversity. Yet most of all it maps out the strength of Dave's continuing bond with Emma.

For me, Dave's journey conveyed a sense of dealing with grief without words in much the same way as the theatrical plays discussed in this issue's Bereavement in the Arts. Two different productions examine the influence of grief on family relationships. The absence of dialogue results in powerful emotions being communicated through physicality, touch and movement, leaving space for the audience to project personal meaning into the characters. We are reminded of the embodied nature of grief.

Returning to the theme of 21<sup>st</sup> century technology, Bereavement Round-up explores a series of papers that highlight the potential for creating digital legacies. In the last ten years social media has opened up the possibility for grief work to be performed in online space as well as in the real world. Personhood can be extended beyond the grave by some form of digital afterlife. This calls for all those working to support people both before and after bereavement to be familiar with increasingly sophisticated digital tools that offer virtual new age immortality.

Finally the theme of power, and how it can be unwittingly abused, runs through a number of articles. Sarah Carr returns to Broader Horizons with more lessons from linguistics, this time advising on how greater clarity can be achieved through sentence structure. Her key point is that vulnerable people may be excluded from receiving bereavement services if we fail to communicate written information in an easily accessible style. Hilliker also reflects on the power group facilitators hold to enforce definitions of grief and bereavement on others, at worst imposing normative structures on individual pathways. We are cautioned of the potential control bereavement workers have to bring benefit for some at the cost of others. ■