



Who I am

Charlotte Rampling (with
Christophe Bataille)

Translated from the French
by William Hobson

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This sensitive, moving and poetic biographical essay will be of particular interest to readers of *Bereavement Care* because of the losses not only in Charlotte's own life but in those of her antecedents over two generations. Those familiar with John Bowlby's works will understand how each loss influenced the coping strategies of the next generation and created a family pattern.

The story emerges in fits and starts in a series of meetings between the two authors, both of whom are a tad afraid of each other, and treading cautiously to reveal a life that has been haunted by mysteries and evasions. These start two generations back when Charlotte's paternal grandfather was killed in Basra during WW1 leaving his widow penniless with three children to bring up. The widow kept her two younger children while passing Charlotte's father to an elderly grandmother who promptly sent him to boarding school at the age of 7. Like many deprived children, father developed a close attachment to his younger brother and both sons joined the military at the onset of WW2. The brother was killed when his Lancaster bomber was shot down in 1945 but father stayed on in the Royal Artillery and eventually became a Colonel.

Charlotte was born in 1946. Her father was abroad and mother preoccupied with Charlotte's 3 years older sister, Sarah, who was seen as delicate. Mother, from a prominent family, was 'a butterfly by day and a princess by night'. She later apologised for never being there for Charlotte. 'My mother takes me in her arms, kisses me briefly as if there is not time, no lasting happiness, no promises for the girl who clings to her dress, searching for a way to be loved'.

Of her father she writes 'We watch a soldier in uniform come through the door. His face gaunt from many horrors.

Our father has come home. He looks at us but he doesn't see us. He talks to us but cannot find the right words. Tired of his inadequacy he retreats into silence'. He never talked about the war 'It was a time when you didn't ask questions'. Being in a military family, Charlotte changed homes and school every few years and regrets losing her friends each time. But she got close to her sister. In her teens the family moved to allied headquarters in Fontainebleau and at school 'Nobody spoke English', but soon the family is together and 'All childhood is bathed in light'.

Sarah was given a 21st birthday present of a trip abroad with a girl friend. Their tour took them to New York and Acapulco where Sarah met and, a week later, married a rich Argentinian cattle rancher. 'My mother was frantic. She couldn't bear the thought of Sarah being so far away'. Three years later Sarah gave birth to a premature baby son and then died. 'With Sarah everything went out of [my mother's] life'. When Charlotte tried to comfort her, she fell unconscious.

Lies were told but three years later her father told Charlotte that Sarah had killed herself. When Charlotte asked him why he would not tell her mother he said 'It would kill [her] if she knew'. Charlotte still wonders if her mother was protected or poisoned by the lie. Father set Charlotte free to go out into the world and not look back. He continued to care for mother until they both died in old age.

Charlotte, as the world knows, became a brilliant actress. It seems she had learned, at an early age, to keep her feelings to herself. 'The laughter and the tears become indistinguishable. We lock them away. For the Ramplings, the heart is a safe. Kept by generations, the family secret becomes a legend. We only know how to keep silent'. But she adds 'One night I woke up screaming. I saw Sarah's death in a dream. And my scream became lost in time, until today...', the day when she told her story to Christophe Bataille. She never visited the cattle ranch in Argentina, but later, her son did, met Sarah's son, and 'those two men, sitting on your grave in silence, have brought my poem to an end'.

There is very little about her life as an actress, about her mental illness or about her relationship with the men in her life, but we learn important things about how Charlotte Rampling became 'Who I Am'. ■

Colin Murray Parkes

Editorial Board, *Bereavement Care*