

Not a Grief Counsellor, Not a Psychologist . . . A Spiritual Director.

This article is inspired by a series of conversations with Sue Dunbar. Sue is Director of Barnabas Ministries Inc, a not-for-profit incorporated ministry, in Canberra. We began our conversation at the annual conference of the Australian Network for Spiritual Direction. The question of grief came up and I asked Sue about her experience of working with grieving people, as a spiritual director. I came away from that conversation a little clearer about the roles different people might play in addressing our emotional, psychological and spiritual needs.

In my seven or so years as Director of Bereavement Services with W N Bull Funerals, I attended a number of conferences and workshops on grief and bereavement. Often the presenters were well known names from the United States or Europe.

Like Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, with her Five Stages, there were helpful theories or models that became associated with particular people – The Dual Process Model, Continuing Bonds, Grief Work, Meaning Reconstruction, Disenfranchised Grief . . . And there were research studies that identified groups of people who were particularly prone to Complicated Grief and other disabling conditions.

All of the above was taken very seriously, by both the presenters and many in the audience. I soon realised that I would come away from these conferences with a dull feeling of incompetence. I am not a researcher and I was often bamboozled by the arguments and counter arguments that seemed necessary to win acceptance for a theory.

What I did appreciate in my conversations with grieving people was that some of these theories seemed to make sense of their chaotic feelings. Helping people to realise that they were not going mad was an important part of our meetings. Sustaining them as they struggled with the emotional impact of loss and the finality of death, was important too. I think this is what a bereavement counsellor does.

I know counsellors, too, who come to recognise patterns in people's grief that are deep seated and distressing and persistent. They come to a stage where they believe someone needs more specialised help and refer a client to a psychologist or a psychiatrist. Such a referral may well be part of a treatment regime that allows for progressive and collaborative care. But, as Sue talked about spiritual direction and grief, I began to see that there were some difficulties with the counsellor-psychologist-psychiatrist model.

Despite the countless skilled and compassionate professionals in all three approaches to grief and grieving people, one cannot help but feel uneasy about seeing grief as a problem. It certainly is a painful and often disruptive experience in people's lives. It can be crippling and long lasting. But, the conscious or unconscious desire to alleviate or remove the pain and to cure the grief can be limited in both intent and efficacy. Sue was not saying this when I talked with her, but how she spoke about spiritual direction led me to this conclusion. The emotions and the psyche are only part of the picture. What about the soul?- that part of us that is deeper than our emotions and our pain.

Recently I was speaking with a woman who had experienced considerable grief in her life. But, professionally and personally there were signs that she was turning a corner. Things

were on the improve and she was feeling better. Then, a long standing condition flared again. There was the possibility that those gains would all be lost.

‘What have I done? Am I not meant to have peace and happiness in my life?’ These are not questions that have an answer. We all know people who are rarely assured by reassurances. These are cries of pain before they are cries for help. There was an opening. There was hope. Now the door has closed again.

Sue used this expression, when speaking of grief, ‘a door has shut’. I had the image of a door slamming, finality, violent, noisy. Sue gave the example of locking her keys in the car. There was that split second, just before the door closed and locked, of seeing the keys in the ignition, powerless to prevent the inevitable. Bang! And the long wait for the NRMA begins. We cannot turn the clock back.

We cannot go back, either. The person I was before a death or a significant loss is no more. I am not the same. Life has changed and I have changed. And, these changes bring fear and confusion and those wild, desperate questions uttered by my friend, ‘What have I done?’

They are cries from the heart to the heart. I sensed that this was what Sue was saying. She spoke of the spiritual director having ‘hospitality of the heart’. Like her image of the door closing, and the experience of finality, ‘hospitality of the heart’ called forth images, in this case of welcome, acceptance . . . patience.

I am reminded of George Herbert’s poem, ‘Love’.

Love bade me welcome, yet my soul drew back
Guilty of dust and sin,
But quick-ey’d Love, observing me grow slack
From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning
If I lack’d anything. . .

This hospitality allows a person to cry out. The welcome and acceptance enables someone to feel and know the finality of loss, the door slammed shut and all that this means. Such experiences are more than emotions and psychological crises, although they may include all of this. To know this sense of loss, to know there is no turning back is to bring one to one’s knees, figuratively and literally. To find welcome and companionship at this time is a precious gift.

If the spiritual director can maintain that ‘hospitality of the heart’ there is no anxious concern about curing or removing the pain. All the pain and confusion is given welcome. All of the person is given welcome. Then, there is the possibility of new life.

Sue’s faith is based on the foundational Christian belief of death and new life, the pattern that is stamped on our lives, deeper than DNA. But, there is no easy path to this fundamental movement. Death is always final and sometimes shocking, painful. Of its very nature, death and all those mini dyings that are part of our lives, have the door closing reality. ‘It is over. There is no going back’.

It requires considerable faith and courage to be a spiritual director. The resistance and fear voiced by the person who comes is echoed in their own life and heart. These are matters of the heart and soul. They are not to be 'cured'. They are to be lived and shared and understood.

This is the work of the spiritual director. This is a person who believes that a new self and new life can emerge from every death experience. It is a delicate and sensitive role. The spiritual director needs to affirm or witness that the upheaval of death-and-life is the source of the distress experienced by the person. Those cries have no answer. By being present and patient, loving and believing, the spiritual director can assist in the birth of new life.

The conversation with Sue has not finished. But, I think the ways in which Sue spoke about spiritual direction and grief opened up ways of thinking about this all-too-human experience. I was also encouraged and enlightened about a practice, spiritual direction, that I thought I understood.

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