

# PARENTS' BEREAVEMENT SUPPORT GROUP



Social Work Department  
Royal Children's Hospital

SEPTEMBER 2004 NEWSLETTER

*Welcome to the September newsletter of the Family Bereavement Support Programme. We hope that through the newsletters and groups of the Programme, you will find connections with others and sources of information, support and encouragement to help sustain you as you grieve for your child.*

## **A Culture of Grieving? : How Family and Community Beliefs and Practices can Influence the Expression of Grief.**

We warmly welcomed all parents to the September group. In particular we acknowledged those who were coming to the group for the first time. The group, we described as a time and space where parents may *safely talk* about their child who has died and share their experiences with others. *What is spoken about and how much is shared* is decided by parents. This will depend on what they feel comfortable with. Participation, sometimes, may be by listening only. It was mentioned that some notes are taken to help write the Newsletter (without names).

We also warmly *welcomed* Ms Sherron Dunbar, Social Worker and Social Work educator to explore the theme of tonight's group. This theme had come from several discussions in the parent group earlier in the year. Parents had spoken about how at times they felt their expression of grief or *doing things their own way* was being challenged by relatives and friends *interpreted* their culture. Tradition and practices placed constraints *on what the parents could do and how they should be*. They had been put in positions where they perceived there was a need to defend their

decisions. Some of the examples that had been given in previous groups included funeral arrangements, cemetery visits and how anniversaries should be spent. To guide the evening's discussion, Sherron wove together reflections from her work over many years with people from diverse cultures and backgrounds, her advocacy role in the area of immigration, personal experiences and recent conversations with members of several different cultural groups. For many years Sherron worked in Springvale. Springvale she described as "multi-lingual, multi-faith and multi-cultural". In Springvale, Sherron has seen how people "live, learn and share together".

Sherron began by expressing to the parents present in the group, "my compassion and feelings for you". Sherron acknowledged and honoured the group members' experiences as the parents of "children who shouldn't die". During the evening Sherron said that a "common feature" throughout all cultures is that "no-one excepts the death of a child... nevertheless all deal with it in whatever way it comes".

In preparing for the evening, Sherron had been considering how death is responded to in a number of communities and in particular the community and personal rituals that follow a death. Within this, Sherron was to emphasize during the evening that there would always be different experiences for members of communities. "Not true of everyone and can't be the whole culture... the world is on the move...(we are) in this globalized world of constant movement". As Sherron said during the evening it is "No value to say true for all". The parents in September's group came from Chinese, Malaysian, Greek, Lebanese, Indian and Anglo-Saxon ethnic backgrounds and carried with them a number of faith and philosophical traditions. These included Buddhism, agnosticism, Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, and atheism. Through the evening's conversation, we were reminded of the essential personal and individual nature of grief and how this influences beliefs and rituals.

Recently Sherron had spoken with an Indian Fijian Muslim woman about the rituals conducted in her community following a death. The woman had explained that in the Muslim religion the burial needed to take place before sunset of the next day. Sherron then asked whether there were any Muslim members of the group who would like to comment on this. An aunt who had accompanied her sister to the group, explained that the burial should take place "**as soon as possible, within 24 hours**". She said we believe "**if the body is above sea level it will suffer...death is beautiful because they meet God...but the longer they ( person who has died) stay above ground, it is painful**". She continued, when children die, it is believed "**they go straight to heaven**". The aunt explained that the "**child in heaven will help the parent when they die...they meet them**". The woman with whom Sherron had been speaking, had talked also about the depth of the ground for burial as being significant. There needed to be a space to shield the body from the earth and enough space for the body to sit and to be greeted by the angels. The angels would take its soul to God.

Later in the evening the aunt in our group spoke more about her family's religious beliefs and the role they play in family life. She said that her mother was Greek and her father was Lebanese. For her family religion, Islam rather than nationality was the most significant influence in their lives. Religious faith rather than national traditions offered guidance for her grieving family. "**Within the religion, she explained, "it's not good to grieve for a long time... things come from God and we're not to question God"**". She emphasized that there "**is not a set time for grief, grief is forever but you make them (the person who has died) suffer by your suffering, you actually hurt them. If you love them you smile**". She went on to say "**of course it doesn't happen that way**". However that was belief and hope behind these principles. She remarked that although it is believed that "**it's not good to mourn but you do always feel grief, sad and angry**". In some cultures, Sherron explained burial shortly after death is to allow (the mourner) "to move on with their grief".

A mother whose background is Indonesian and Chinese spoke about how when a person dies their possessions in a miniature representation are put with them into the ground with them and various items are burned on an altar. She explained that "**for thirty days food is placed on the altar and every day prayers for the next life are offered...for sixty days food offering continues and prayers said but not all the prayers. The spirit goes. After a hundred days it stops**". Sherron commented on the beauty of these practices. She observed that most cultures "want the best for the soul". Later reflecting on her experiences the mother remarked "**to follow ritual is good but when a hundred days are finished, you don't talk, you don't mention it...it's very harsh**".

Sherron has observed that in many cultures, including cultures which have their origin in Christianity, there is a need for cleaning and preparing the body. Sherron shared with the group some of her recollections and images following the death of her brother. Sherron was 12 years old when her 8-year-old brother, Jimmy had died in the 1950s following a

tonsillectomy. She recalled how he had been prepared for burial and was dressed in white. The memory and picture of how he had been just day before remains in Sherron's mind's eye and contrasts with this.

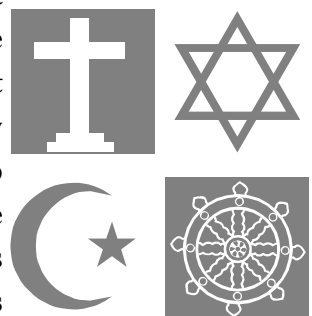
Sherron explored how the three religions Abrahamic religions Christianity, Islam and Judaism believe in the same line of prophets. Each of these religions have particular understandings of what happens after death. These religions do not believe in reincarnation. They each hold different views about the nature of the afterlife. "Belief" Sherron commented "doesn't mean it's true...and not everyone would believe this even if they were members of a particular faith".

To illustrate further the universal yet very individual nature of grief, Sherron had brought with her the paper from last Saturday. (Like others Sherron had noted recently there have been so many poignant images of grieving children and parents from the terrorist tragedies in and Jakarta and Beslan.) The paper carried the photograph of a young girl in Jakarta at the funeral of her friend. She felt the picture and an expression of her grieving friend holding it captured so much meaning. The girl was participating in the funeral rites of her culture. As we looked at to the picture Sherron said whatever the cultural context, "the grief is within (her) and it's gone through".

In many cultures *beyond the Western world* grief and mourning "are often vocal and communal and expressed by the community." However, in Western Christian culture, "mostly it's get on with it, keep it inside" Sherron observed. "**Many Australians**" a mother commented "**don't know what to say so they'll sweep it under the carpet**". While another said "**I had to bring it out, people said I didn't want to make you feel bad, but I feel bad all of the time**". Parents in the group Sherron reflected had endured "hard lifetimes". She emphasized that whatever cultural practices there are it doesn't prevent people going through grief.

In Christian countries in Europe, Sherron described

how All Souls Day, the second of November, is a time for great ritual practices and socializing. Those who have died are utmost in people's minds and hearts. Graves are decorated and services held. A father ventured "**now you can invent your own rituals**". For example a father, especially on Thursday mornings, vividly remembers "a larger than life boy". As each Thursday (and there have been 21 so far) is an anniversary. It is the morning of his son's death. Thursday will always hold that new meaning. Or for another father his ritual is acknowledging across the room the urn containing his son's ashes. In hearing this a mother said that "**in my religion ashes would be scattered in the air or water**". However, she and her husband had decided to bury the ashes of her son in the garden area of the cemetery. His father explained in this place there is "**earth, the air and the water, we didn't want to lose him, it's the last bit of him, we wanted his soul to go free. But one side of the argument that the soul is always free**". The family had been asked by the son's grandparents to take part of their ashes to the countries where his grandparents lived. Whilst these countries had great meaning for the son who had died, and he had enjoyed good times there, his parents decided against this. They wanted to have a place they could connect with and visit. "**I can go and sit in the garden**". As group members shared the decisions they had made concerning their child, a mother spoke about how she had initially thought of scattering portions of her daughter's ashes in places where she had been especially happy. However when someone said "**you're not going to split her up are you**" she changed her plans. "**She is still in my room**". To this another group member replied "**our religion would just not allow that...not to have an urn in the house**". One couple had decided their son's ashes should be with them at home. "**Then he can be with us and we won't leave him behind (if they move house). You need to be flexible for the unknown future**". His mother said "**he's always**





**with us.** To this his father added (with the ashes) **“he can be with us forever”.**

As the decisions parents made were shared, the group affirmed they were **“not odd”.** The sense of the group was that parents need to make

decisions that they feel they can live with. Sherron said “you are free to do what you want to do, what you need to do.” Sherron contends “there can be positive and negative aspects of all practices. We are lucky in this country that we can find our own ones, no-one forces us, we can make our own, ones which feel right to us”. A father in the group remarked that it seems to be an **“Australian thing to respect that”.**

Sherron described how in many cultures in Asia and Africa death takes place in rural areas and the “knowledge of death (amongst community members) is immediate”. Other members of the community are aware of the families’ grief and their needs. Old, familiar practices mark the death. Sherron explained “as much as possible is done for the grieving family...others take responsibility for a time”. Although mourning practices will vary across communities, “often people will bring food to the family”. Sherron asked group members what their experiences of the community had been in their grief. A father, who is Indian and a Hindu, said, **“definitely (we had) support from the community, friends dropped everything because our immediate family is overseas, they came quickly but the friends were on the phone and told others...we weren’t in any condition to talk...and the community support was huge”.** The father went on to say how **“food is important in our culture”** and that his family had been cared for in this way. There were some smiles and nods between group members who likewise had relatives and friends bring them food.

During the evening also Sherron spoke a little about Hindu, Islam, and Buddhism and invited parents who may be of these faiths to share their thoughts.

A father who is Hindu spoke of the soul as **“being immortal the body is a vessel, it’s temporary, a phase of the soul, the soul is indestructible you can’t kill or burn it, the body is destructible. The soul is freed into the next life.”**

For this evening’s discussion Sherron had been thinking about *death in different cultures* and the grief that is carried by those who have come to Australia from other countries. Especially her thoughts turned to those arriving in Australia from countries fragmented by civil unrest and violence. At this time most of those migrating to Australia come from African states and in particular Sudan. The people of Ethiopia and Eritrea, fleeing lands scarred by years of conflict and hardship have come to Australia through Sudan. They have experienced “dislocation, persecution and the loss of family, friends and community”. Their stories are of multiple losses, family, children, country; the known and familiar. On their journey to a safer land many people from the African states have “never been allowed to talk about their grief or to tell their story” Sherron reflected. Circumstances have meant they could “not talk or present them to others”. They have been distressed when bureaucracy records their loved one as “deceased”. There was a sense of deep empathy amongst the group for those who had lost so much and a connection with their sorrow of not being able to share those they love with others.

Sherron shared some of the story of a bereaved Sudanese woman she knows. When the woman was grieving for her sister, she was supported physically and emotionally by members of her local community. They groomed her, they fed her, and they sat with her. In the Sudanese culture, Sherron told the group, when people are sad and depressed it is believed that the feeling can be loosened by touching and grooming. There is also a belief that when there is suffering being immersed or bathed can overcome these emotions. The significance of water and cleansing mentioned earlier echoed in these comments. Water is a symbol in many religions.

Sherron encouraged parents in the group to share some of their thoughts, experiences and questions and to *take the discussion where they wanted*. Sherron did not want to feel that parents were being “muzzled in any way” in tonight’s group. To this invitation a father spoke about how for many years concerning matters faith and religion; **“I’ve been on the fence, I thought of it as self comfort to deal with hardships of life...my parents are very religious Christians. With the birth of my son and I steered to religion. When he passed away I began to think about heaven, seeing him again in the afterlife...if I am an atheist or agnostic then the death of my son is the end, (there is) nothing...so I have been thinking about what I believe. ... I’ve gone into thinking about it, thinking about my commitment or convictions, maybe it’s wrong, it’s me clinging to a hope that I’ll see him again, is it all false?”** The father like so many other bereaved parents had posed an essential yet unanswerable question. As Sherron said “I don’t know. In reflecting on what the father had said, it was acknowledged that exploring the spiritual is part of human. “The spiritual dimension is part of the self” Sherron said. In responding to him Sherron said “go well in your search, your son has opened doors for you”. To which the father replied **“he has taught me certainly”**. His partner added **“we can say that now, not twelve months ago”**.

Later in the discussion another father was to say **“if anything helped me to get through the days, it was religion. Saying goodbye in the religious context...what the priest said was helpful...gave me my strength back. Without it I’d have nothing to hold to”**.

Significant life events, Sherron suggested may precipitate “a spiritual search”. Sherron shared how in her own life she has experienced this. Often in a crisis people will return to “old familiar ways” or they may take “elements of the practices they have found helpful”. They will *use* what they feel comfortable with, what matches their experiences,

rejecting that which *no longer makes sense* in their life.

Over the years with the people she has been in dialogue with, Sherron has asked in various ways *do you survive?* Very often she has been told “I pray, I have to have a belief in something”. Time and time again, Sherron has witnessed a “determination to live, to be with people they love”. In responding to this and reflecting this strength of spirit, a group member said that she was determined **“not to turn (her son’s) death into a tragedy, and to not go on would be. We remember him for the joyous person he was and the joy he gave. If I see him again that’s a bonus but I can’t believe it”**. She did share with the group her **“contingency plan”** for her son. *If there was an afterlife* she envisioned that her son would be with a much loved relative who had died. She said **“Even if it’s not true...it’s a comfort. I know it doesn’t make intellectual sense”**. To this Sherron replied that “it didn’t have to (make sense), we are part heart and part intellect”. Another mother spoke about the visits that she and her husband make to the cemetery, where their baby son was buried. They think about their son their **“having neighbours around him”** when other children are buried in the same area. **“It helps, we have an imagination”**. To this, Sherron said “ that’s beautiful we can create poetry...not sense”.

As we thought further about the discussions and tensions in families which had lead to tonight’s topic, Sherron remarked that as had been noted earlier, while some cultures may be more expressive than others about their suffering, most cultures have some ways in which grief is given form. Although as we spoke about political history and certain regimes may *‘outlaw mourning and memory’*. *History begins when the regime dictates it does. Past losses are not to be talked about. Grief is silenced.* To illustrate



Sherron described some of the actions and abuses in Cambodia under Pol Pot.

There are many people Sherron observed who will come to Australia with very “solid practices and traditions”. They come with “good luggage”. However, their children will be “enculturated differently” and affected by different influences. Several parents in the group could relate to these comments! Thus over time there becomes a distance from the set traditions which may become weaker. *This is part of the process of hybridization of a culture.* Consequently, there can be many variations to practices not only between but also within cultures. For example, in the Anglo-Saxon culture as one mother said, there can be different views about photographs of children who have died. For one set of grandparents the picture of the baby who had died was “out of sight”. While for the other *set* of grandparents the photograph of the baby was *proudly on display*. One family had received some criticism for having photographs on display. They persevered. Although photograph albums were mentioned as a way to avoid tension! As Sherron reminded us there is always the individual within a setting. In exploring the influences of other people especially parents a mother said that “distance helps”. She had had “**speeches and lectures**” from her father on what “**I should do...I want to do things in my own pace, in my own way, you are supposed to respect elders but I have my own needs**”. As another mother responded “**you have to live with it (the decisions)**”. A father reflected how he had found at his workplace there were differences in the responses of ‘**the older and younger generations**’ to him. Older work colleagues were more able to talk with him about his son who had died. Whereas the younger men could not broach the subject. Another father in the group come to the conclusion, “**if you have experienced loss, you can feel closer to the (grieving) person and if you have had children you have an affinity**”. He continued “**you expect to go first, that’s the sequence**”. Sherron said that for parents when a child dies it is like “part of the body has gone”. As we moved towards the end of this phase of

the evening, Sherron thanked the group for their generosity of spirit and their openness to her and to each other. And we thanked Sherron not only for the insights and information she had shared with the group but also for respect and understanding she had shown the parents, their children and their beliefs. In small groups over supper there was animated conversations about children, films, spirituality and memories and much more.

**“It’s been good tonight, being able to talk about him, it’s more open in a private way”.**

# *Straight from the Heart*

*We are very grateful to the anonymous parent who sent us this heartfelt reflection on the short life and her baby son and what has emerged from his death. We feel that others who hold children in their “mind, heart and soul” will be moved by this piece. Thank you*

*A sadness ripping through me*

*How can this be right?*

*Pain this intense cannot be justified*

*How can a child only just born be taken like this in the night?*

*But as I find my head*

*And slowly begin to stand*

*I realize his home is now a place*

*Where angels linger*

*The youngest of four children*

*Taken to a place where letters cannot reach.*

*Although I may not know him well*

*He had an amazing thing to teach*

*So simple, but a thing that you must learn*

*Forgive and forget, love unconditionally*

*For the person may be ripped out of your life*

*Let them be taken, when you embrace them*

*Not when you are feeling hate.*

*The fourth child, the baby*

*Will be in my mind, heart and soul*

*Although he is now in a place*

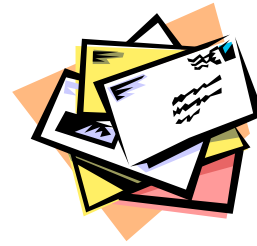
*Where angels linger.*

*Anonymous*

Contributions such as poems, letters, songs, quotations from parents, grandparents and friends are most welcome in the Newsletters. Share your thoughts, experiences and questions with others who are bereaved.

Please forward them to:

The Editor  
Parents' Bereavement Support Group  
Social Work Department  
Royal Children's Hospital  
Flemington Road  
PARKVILLE VIC 3052



Anonymous or 'author unknown' contributions are welcomed.

The next meeting of the  
Parents' Bereavement Support Group  
will be held on:

**Thursday 21 October**  
**7:30 pm – 9:30 pm**  
**Seminar Room 2, 4th Floor**  
**Front Entry Building**  
**Royal Children's Hospital**

Our guest presenter will be Ms Jan Tully, Grief Educator from Tobin Brothers Funeral Group, Community Education Programme. Jan will lead a discussion: **From Our Winter To Our Spring: Reflections on new beginnings in bereavement.**

Please join us for this evening's group.

Thank you to **Sherron**, the parents of the Parents' Bereavement Support Group, Carol, the Chief Social Worker, Jodi, Rebecca and the Volunteers Department for their enormous assistance with the creation of the newsletters and to the Social Work Department for its ongoing support.



**Jane Sullivan**  
**Author & Editor**