

BOOK REVIEW

BEREAVEMENT: PERSONAL EXPERIENCES AND CLINICAL REFLECTIONS

Edited by Salman Akhtar and Gurmeet S. Kanwal

London, UK: Karnac, 2017. 240 pp.

This book skilfully weaves together the personal and the professional. The idea for it emerged from a conversation between Salman Akhtar and Gurmeet Kanwal soon after each of them had experienced the loss of someone significant in their lives. In sharing their sorrow, they report stumbling upon intriguing questions they were unable to answer: Does the grief over losing one's mother differ from losing one's father? Can children mourn? What does "resolution" of grief mean? These are all meaningful questions for psychotherapists.

Akhtar and Kanwal enlisted six colleagues, all distinguished US-based psychiatrists and/or analysts, to help in elucidating answers to their questions—resulting in this edited volume. Akhtar and Kanwal asked people to write about one particular loss, drawing upon personal experience and clinical understanding. The result is that the chapters explore the deaths, respectively, of a mother, father, sibling, spouse, child, and pet. The book opens with Akhtar providing a fairly technical analysis "Bereavement: the spectrum of emotional reactions" and ends with Kanwal's thought-provoking closing chapter.

It is hard to know where to start in reviewing this volume. Perhaps the fact that I read the book in one sitting, spending most of a gloomy Sunday in its fine company, gives a sense of its compelling nature. I rarely read a book in one sitting these days, but this one aroused my curiosity as I moved between the words of these courageous people sharing their grief and depth of knowledge and experience. I became more intrigued by the nature of bereavement, perhaps rather like the conversation between the editors, Akhtar and Kanwal, soon after each of their losses.

Two chapters stand out for me: "Death of a mother" by Kerry Malawista and "Death of a spouse," by Ruth Livingston.

I was greatly impressed by Malawista's approach, which consists in sharing three vignettes from her experience of her mother's death, interspersed with analysis of the vignettes drawing upon her clinical experience and the work of others. She manages beautifully to move between painting a picture of moments from her loss and stepping back to comment on the nature of a child's grief and the loss of a mother, before entering into the next moving vignette. There is much here for psychotherapists to reflect upon in order to develop a rich, nuanced appreciation of death and its aftermath; wonderful personal writing starts to inspire political action, a movement beyond textbook description of grief.

Livingston shares her experience of the death of her husband Bob. She is courageous enough to share her heart ("stay, stay awhile") and her clinical experience, amazingly bringing both seamlessly together. She acknowledges how hard it is to write the chapter, during the first year after her husband's death. There is a real humanising of psychotherapists offered here. More writing of this nature is called for; death is a universal experience.

All of the chapters had heart-stopping moments: Thomas Wolman's crying as the poetical *kaddish* was said during his father's burial, Frederick Lowy's remembrance of his "vibrant, outgoing, wilful, frenetically energetic sister," Ann Smolen's poetry as she remembered the loss of her son Alex, and her insightful exploration of Freud's personal journey and how his views changed following the loss of his daughter and grandson.

I was gladdened by the inclusion of the chapter about the loss of a pet, by Christie Platt. It would have been a major omission, had there not been some mention here of other-than-human life. People we meet in the therapy room often suffer such losses, and frequently experience how the meaning of a pet's death is underestimated by others—this is an aspect of death meriting more politicisation. Platt lovingly explores dog nature, human nature, Freud's relationship with his chow dogs, concluding that “our relationship with our dog was never about ideas; it was always about love.”

The aspect of this book which I found most helpful—reassuring, even—was not feeling so alone with the feelings that bereavement brings; personally and therapeutically. The sentence which leapt out at me in this vein was from Malawista, writing about the loss of her mother at the age of nine: “Something wasn't quite right, but I had no words to go with the feeling.” In very different ways each contributor captures the strangeness—yet familiarity and universality—of grief.

Whilst the more theoretical aspects of the book were helpful in terms of revision, it was the personal glimpses and reflections which I found most useful. This might say more about where I am than about the book itself. I jumped at the chance of reviewing “Bereavement,” as I am currently in the thick of writing the story of the deaths of my grandfather and great grandfather in World War II and the ensuing familial sorrow and splits, from the point of view of my family's main “characters.” Four of my friends died last summer and autumn: three humans and a much-loved, recalcitrant pet. So it may be personal to me that I mainly appreciated the personal reflections.

Hoffer and Buechler, reviewers on the book's back cover suggest that this book would be useful to lay people and those in the “helping professions” alike. I would disagree with the comment about lay people, as much of the content assumes a knowledge of Freud and psychoanalysis which might be challenging for non-therapists who are unfamiliar with the language and conceptions of this modality. Having said that, I personally appreciated very much revisiting Freud's “Mourning and Melancholia,” referred to by many of the contributors.

I would recommend this book to people who are particularly interested in exploring bereavement. I have a few criticisms; I am glad Kanwal acknowledges that an omission from this book is the death of a friend. I would have appreciated that inclusion, acknowledging the significance of losses beyond those of family (counting pets as family). I would also have appreciated more content about the systemic and culturally conditioned aspects of bereavement. These are mentioned, but rather in passing. There could have been more of a political edge to the work.

In conclusion, this book is a gift. It makes a vital contribution in giving us a glimpse into the most heart-wrenching of human processes. It is a gift that these contributors shared their reflections, theoretical knowledge, and clinical experience. Ultimately, it seems to me a book about love and hope. In Livingston's words: “We do go on. We don't know how we do it; we just do. Stay tuned.”

Kamalamani

Psychotherapist and ecopsychologist, Bristol, UK



Kamalamani is a body psychotherapist, ecopsychologist, supervisor, and facilitator with an interest in how therapy is shaped by its social, political, ecological, and cultural context. Having practised Buddhism since 1995 she is also curious about the interface between therapy and Buddhism. Previously a steering group member of Psychotherapists and Counsellors for Social Responsibility, Kamalamani was also editor of *Transformations*. In addition to several journal articles she has written two books: *Meditating with Character* (Mantra Books, 2012) and *Other than Mother: Choosing Childlessness with Life in Mind* (Earth Books, 2016) and is currently working on her third. She facilitates ecopsychology and wild therapy workshops and retreats.