

of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me'.

Some writing is of value in objectifying and articulating our thoughts and feelings. This is particularly true when our patients are concerned with matters of life and death. If the psychiatrist's concern and tolerance for the patient's spiritual and religious position is added to this, the usefulness of literature is given another dimension. We all, ultimately, have to face our own death and the process leading to it. Whatever spiritual resources we have, that is when we will call upon them. Eventually, we all become patients. Much in literature helps us and our patients prepare for and integrate our thinking about the deaths of those close to us and of ourselves.

INVITED COMMENTARY ON Death and dying in literature

John Skelton's paper (2003, this issue) reminds us that literature can put into words thoughts and feelings which we might otherwise be unable to think or articulate. This is an important attribute and one which we can make use of in our attempts to help patients and families faced with life-threatening illness. It might also help those who have been bereaved to find meaning in what seems like a meaningless experience.

Such literature is a fruitful source of quotations that can be used to bring comfort and reassurance at funeral and memorial services. A useful review of these is Ned Sherrin's (1996) anthology *Remembrance*.

One of the most popular quotations is from Henry Scott Holland:

'Death is nothing at all... I have only slipped away into the next room. I am I and you are you. Whatever we were to each other that we are still. Call me by my old familiar name, speak to me in the easy way which you always used. Put no difference in your tone; wear no forced air of solemnity or sorrow. Laugh as we always laughed at the little jokes we enjoyed together. Play, smile, think of me, pray for me. Let my name be the household word that it always was. Let it be spoken without effort, without the ghost of a shadow on it. Life means all that it ever meant. It is the same as it ever was; there is an unbroken continuity. Why should I be out of mind because I am out of sight? I am waiting for you for an interval, somewhere just around the corner. All is well.'

References

- Evans, M. & Greaves, D. (1999) Exploring the medical humanities. *BMJ*, **319**, 1216.
- Greyson, B. (2000) Dissociation in people who have near-death experiences: out of their bodies or out of their minds? *Lancet*, **355**, 460–463.
- Guterson, D. (1999) *East of the Mountains*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Powell, A. (2001) Spirituality and science: a personal view (editorial). *Advances in Psychiatric Treatment*, **7**, 319–321.
- Sims, A. (1994) Psyche – spirit as well as mind? *British Journal of Psychiatry*, **165**, 441–446.
- Skelton, J. (2003) Death and dying in literature. *Advances in Psychiatric Treatment*, **9**, 211–217.

Andrew Sims Editor of *Advances in Psychiatric Treatment* (1993–2003). Past-President of the Royal College of Psychiatrists (1990–1993) and Emeritus Professor of Psychiatry in the University of Leeds (correspondence: Church Farm House, Alveley, Bridgnorth, Shropshire WV15 6ND, UK).

Most find this helpful, but some have criticised its failure to accept the need for grief. Whatever faith we may have in the prospect of reunion in the hereafter, many would agree with the widow who insisted to me, 'I want him now'. It is this urgent necessity which makes parting so painful.

Singing and laughter both enable expression of intense emotion in ways that make it tolerable. It is no coincidence that death has provided humorists with ways of helping us to think the unthinkable.

Woody Allen is a rich source,

'when you're dead, its hard to find the light switch';

'Death is an acquired trait' ;

'I don't want to achieve immortality through my work, ... I want to achieve it through not dying'

as is Dorothy Parker:

'Time doth flit,
Oh shit!'

and

'Drink and dance and laugh and lie
Love, the reeling midnight through,
For tomorrow we shall die!
(But, alas, we never do).'

Missives such as these are both cathartic and an antidote to the pomp and solemnity of death.

Bibliotherapy is the use of books as therapy and there are several that can be recommended to people faced with death or bereavement. Some, such as *Charlotte's Web* by E.B. White (1952), aim to educate children about death. Lists of such books, for children of various ages, can be obtained from Winston's Wish booklists for children aged 0–6 years, 7–12 years and 13–18 years (available from Winston's Wish, The Clara Burgess Centre, Gloucester Road Hospital, Great Western Road, Gloucester GL1 3NN). For helping bereaved adults, Alida Gersie's book *Storymaking in Bereavement* (1991) contains 50 folk tales and suggests ways in which they can be used. It also cites many other literary treatments of death-related issues. More systematic is *The Oxford Book of Death* (Enright, 1983) and an anthology for those who grieve, *All in the End is Harvest* (Whitaker, 1984).

I conclude with an extract from one of my favourites, a work of fiction which carries the reader on a journey through grief. This is Susan Hill's *In the Springtime of the Year* (1977: p. 135).

'Without any warning, the tears rose up and broke out of her, and Potter sat on his chair saying nothing,

and yet being a comfort to her, taking some of the grief on to himself. She wept as she had never wept before in front of another human being, and it was a good thing to do; it was more value than all the months of solitary mourning. It brought something to an end.'

References

- Enright, D. J. (ed.) (1983) *The Oxford Book of Death*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gersie, A. (1991) *Storymaking in Bereavement*. London: Jessica Kingsley.
- Hill, S. (1977) *In the Springtime of the Year*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Holland, H. S. (1919) Sermon delivered at St Paul's on 15 May 1910. *Fact of Faith*. London: Longmans.
- Sherrin, N. (ed.) (1996) *Remembrance*. London: Michael Joseph.
- Skelton, J. (2003) Death and dying in literature. *Advances in Psychiatric Treatment*, **9**, 211–217.
- Whitaker, A. (ed.) (1984) *All in the End is Harvest*. London: Darton, Longman & Todd.
- White, E. B. (1952) *Charlotte's Web*. New York: Dell.

Colin Murray Parkes Consultant Psychiatrist at St Christopher's Hospice, Sydenham, and St Joseph's Hospice, Hackney (correspondence: 21 South Road, Chorleywood, Hertfordshire WD3 5AS, UK). Life President of Cruse – Bereavement Care; author of many articles and books on bereavement, including *Bereavement: Studies of Grief in Adult Life* (Harmondsworth: Pelican).