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reflection

On Bereavement: Studies of Grief in Adult Life by Colin Murray Parkes

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The first edition of Colin Murray Parkes' *Bereavement: Studies of Grief in Adult Life* was published in 1972, coinciding with the first year of my studies towards a degree in psychology at the University of Liverpool. These were the high days in psychology of 'positivist empiricism'. We were concerned for our subject to be taken seriously as a science, and aimed to do this through the development of an experimental evidence base for the application of psychology, lest we be dismissed as mere armchair philosophers. Secretly, however, many of us students were somewhat disappointed to find that our subject disaggregated people into small parts. We spent our time on topics such as list learning of nonsense syllables or the pecking behaviour of pigeons, but harboured a wish to know about people and what makes them tick. Colin Murray Parkes' book, with its holistic narrative descriptions of bereaved widows, fed this desire to think about people as whole – feeling, thinking, reacting – beings. The descriptions of bereaved women, in their social, cultural and family contexts, brought the phenomena of bereavement alive in a way that a dry textbook could not have done. This concentration on detailed individual descriptions presaged the phenomenal increase of interest in phenomenology and understanding of subjective experience that followed over the next 20 years but, at the time, it was rare.

The power of personal vignettes was demonstrated by my experience some years later when, as a recently qualified clinical psychologist, I turned to the book to help inform a workshop I had been invited to deliver to care staff who worked with older people. Being young and naïve, I had not appreciated the impact Colin's rich descriptions might have on a predominantly middle-aged audience of women, many of whom dissolved into tears as I spoke. Since those days, I have hopefully matured in my approach to teaching but have continued to draw on material in the book. Similarly, later editions of the book have reflected the maturing range of research and theory about bereavement. They retain the descriptions at their heart but the wider context has been updated to ensure the book retains contemporary relevance.

Sadly, my first edition walked from my shelves many years ago, no doubt lent by me to an enthusiastic trainee clinical psychologist who now has it on their own shelf, unless it has been, in turn, passed on to another. Re-reading my third edition, in addition to the rich descriptions, I was struck by the scholarly integration of material spanning arts and science, drawn from historical and literary sources, as well as psychiatry, psychology, sociology and ethology. I also noticed the author's voice coming through in the text, with a gift for demystifying the complex, making ideas accessible. He discloses valuable lessons from personal experience, expressed in an unassuming way, which offer wise advice to those of us who work with those who have experienced loss.

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