

Eighth International Conference on Grief and Loss

By Bill Folkerts

“THE ROOTS OF RESILIENCE”

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As a lecturer in Grief Counselling at Tabor College, Hobart, and a hospital social worker, last July I had the opportunity to attend this conference, held at the Melbourne Hilton. The first thing that struck me was to see nearly 600 delegates gathered for this event, drawn from various nationalities and backgrounds including counselling, academia, nursing and medicine, chaplaincy and others. Sure, this was a major international conference, featuring some leading world authorities, but it highlighted to me the amazing growth in this area since the groundbreaking work of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross a short 40 years ago!

The overall theme of the conference was “Consequences of Loss: Resilience and Complications in the Grief Experience”. Having a background in some of the traditional approaches to grief (Kubler-Ross’ five stages and more recently Worden’s four tasks) it was good to be exposed to a wide range of current thinking on the subject. Major speakers included George Bonanno speaking on his work on resilience. In his work with survivors of 9/11 as well as bereaved spouses he found that as much as half the study population displayed few grief or trauma symptoms in the months after the loss of their spouse, or their direct involvement in 9/11. The dual process work of Margaret Stroebe and others also showed that grieving people have two tasks: dealing with the loss but also dealing with daily living and its demands. In other words, people’s focus and energies are typically not fully given over to the ‘grief work’, but also to the ongoing demands of family, work etc. The work of Robert Neimeyer on meaning-making highlighted the importance of people’s belief systems; the circumstances (eg traumatic or otherwise) of the loss, and various psycho-social factors in determining how they will respond. (He also conducted a pre-conference workshop, which I wasn’t able to attend) Attachment theory was also represented by Israeli researcher, Mario Mikulincer, highlighting that attachment patterns from

childhood were a key determinant of how people deal with personal losses.

The implications of these findings are that not everyone fits into neat or predictable patterns in how they grieve; at times it is ‘normal’ or necessary for people to delay or moderate their grief ‘work’ because of other demands. Also, people often have inner resources (resilience) or support systems that will help them cope with grief and loss with apparently minimal disruption. The ‘absence’ of grief in such cases need not be pathological.

One other interesting plenary speaker was Holly Prigerson, who made quite a strong case for what she classified as ‘Prolonged Grief Disorder’ being included in DSM-IV. Her research led her to identify a set of symptoms, which, if exhibited consistently six months after the loss, would constitute prolonged grief disorder. Audience reaction to this was mixed, with some feeling that problems with grief and bereavement should not warrant inclusion as a mental disorder.

A highlight to me were the ‘Personal Perspectives’ – the stories of bereaved people which started each of the plenary sessions. The conference was opened by Walter Mikac, who lost all his immediate family in the Port Arthur massacre. Then there was a woman who lost a new-born baby, a woman who lost her partner through suicide etc. While these were generally not recent losses, the stories were still profoundly moving, and highlighted that the impact and feelings associated with the bereavement were ongoing. They also reminded us of the major rearrangement of life necessitated by such losses; the vital role of supportive others; and the finding of meaning in these events as people moved on and reinvested their energies in positive directions (eg working with support groups, taking up a relevant cause, or in becoming a more empathic, compassionate person).

Altogether a great opportunity to hear some top international speakers, as well as some great initiatives on the local Australian scene. Then of course there were the opportunities to network and meet people from varied work and national backgrounds. The organization of the conference was exemplary, and was a credit to the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement as the organizing body.

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