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# SEND IN THE CLOWNS: THE DEATH OF A CHILD

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A beautiful, bright October evening, seven years ago, suddenly thrust its dark side forth and swallowed the life of our 16-year-old son. Christopher was dead.

Chris was what remained of our dreams of several children (three potential births surrendered to miscarriage). His death transformed that evening from beauty to horror, changing our lives forever. I have seldom found ears that could really hear my story and have never written about it before. Now, however, I want to share the essence of the experience so we, as human scientists, helping professionals, and therapists can reflect on how we might comprehend the plight of bereaved parents and help them begin to heal.

Alice Stanbach says that, in America, a few exceptionally unlucky people lose a child, although, in many other countries, parents lose children with some regularity. When parents lose children, the reality digs very deep. It bores a hole in the soul that nothing can fill. The loss is inexorable and the pain unyielding. The key to dealing with losing a child lies not merely in confronting the loss itself; it resides primarily in *understanding* the loss in the larger scheme of one's life. In other words, what does this death *mean* to me and what did my child represent in my life? William James distinguished between an event itself and its interpretive meaning. It is the *meaning* of the death that must be addressed for reintegration to occur. It is the hermeneutic, interpretive unravelling of the story of the life and death of the child as intermingled with that of the parent, that must be processed. And this necessitates more than a passing acquaintance with the nature of nature.

Nature uses many masks and frequently speaks in riddles. The problem with riddles is that we often miss the metaphor; our familiar patterns of knowing the world blind us to the riddle's true meaning. One such pattern is that children "should not" die before their parents. But, when the clown comes in, as mythology tells us, anything is possible, because the clown alone possesses the license to turn life upside down. When the clown dons nature's mask of death, children *do* die before their parents. The clown's advantage is in the surprise, and we are simply not prepared. The "shoulds" and "should nots" are in our heads—as conceptual frames—and they may not correspond to the clown's agenda.

Elaine Pagels says that we begin self-discovery when we experience "the anguish and terror of the human condition, as if lost in a fog." A child's death is just such a terror; it is, literally, "ecstatic," meaning to stand naked without defense. One of the most poignant examples of this ecstasy occurred the night Chris died. Coming home after the ordeal of the ambulances, nurses, hospitals, attempted resuscitation, organ donation, and physicians, we fell into bed, exhausted and in shock. Soon, I was awakened by noises in the family room and quickly went to investigate. My wife, weeping and moaning inconsolably, hands folded on her body where she had carried Chris for nine months within her, was frantically moving the furniture, searching for Chris behind it. I knew then that we were in hell.

In parental bereavement, one feels frozen in time and space. Nothing but the dead child matters. Bereaved parents respond to losing a child in somewhat different ways, but I have come to understand that most experience what I experienced, in one way or another.

I was very fragile, my body was cold, and I oscillated between numbness and feeling. The “fog” descended and moved me at whim. Dissociated, I wandered aimlessly for weeks, slept too much or not at all, lost 30 pounds, wept uncontrollably, cared about nothing, and felt absolutely dead. “Future” no longer existed. Life was over.

I experienced massive confusion about the “why” and “how” of Chris’s death and felt deeply guilty because I could not prevent it (I was his father, after all—it was my responsibility to protect him). I ruminated chaotically about “fairness,” “karmic balance,” and “justice” for the perpetrators of his death, those who had killed him. At times, I thought I was going mad. My body told the story: with drawn face and empty eyes, I bent with the crushing heaviness and pushed my way through the thickness of space. This lasted for many, many months.

Then, I saw a flicker of light: knowing “why” and “how” would not bring Chris back and all the rest was merely words we use to create the illusion of a sensible, rational world. Life just is; we provide the meaning. I knew this before, but now I understood it viscerally. I needed to discover what Christopher’s life and death *meant* to me. If I could get at that, perhaps something might make sense. And, I needed to integrate Chris’s death into my life. But, I did not *want* to do that—I did not *want* him to be dead. How does one say “goodbye” to one’s only child? How does one integrate desolation and futility, agony and wrenching loneliness? I needed to look inside.

I saw that Chris was the sole projection of my physical self into the material world and, as Plato said, my designated replacement in the law of succession and immortality. His potentiation and happiness reflected, in part, my completion and hopes for him. The intensity of my sadness was (and still is) related to the power of my attachment to him. No wonder I felt empty, devastated, enraged, and disintegrated. Chris had not died alone; I had died with him. I had discovered part of the meaning: Chris was both himself and a partial representation of me. He would be my future, my extension into life after my life. He would be the uniqueness of him in addition to what he carried of my wife and me within him. Our love for him would inform how he would love. Now, he was gone. I needed to reclaim myself or remain dead.

In my longing to join him, wherever he was, I was also longing to become whole again. I needed to recall my projections and decide who I was if not a father, what my marriage meant without children. Could I live just for my wife and myself? What purpose in that? What future?

I discovered no overriding sense of mission, but synchronicity showed its face. I began to feel as if the healer and father archetypes would not stand down. Young male students and clients, whose fathers had not fathered them, and bereaved parents began to seek me out, knowing nothing of my situation. I related to them differently now—with a deeper understanding of the anguish, fragility, and vicissitudes of life. And now I knew the clown; I had looked it in the face and survived. Only slowly did I realize the freedom I was gaining from the fear of life and death; after all, what more could life do to me? If I could survive this, I could survive anything, and so could my bereaved clients.

A child’s death knows no equal, say the bereaved parents I know. Victimization, intractable depression, deep rage, spiritual disconnection, dissociated “existing,” purposelessness, identity confusion, and survivor guilt are all common—and normal—responses to this heinous loss. Time alone does not make things “better,” particularly in the death-denying culture in which we live. Until some sense of reconstituted meaning and identity are achieved, nothing means anything at all.

Pathologizing bereaved parents' reactions is not helpful. In my view, if they can start rebuilding their identity as parents of deceased children (they are still parents), begin to find something to laugh about again, find the strength to keep on keeping on, somehow hold their marriages together, if married, and care for their surviving children, if any, they are performing what, to them, are nothing short of Herculean tasks.

A child's death is a de-stabilizing, horrible event, which words can only begin to describe. It just is. But, children die. Maybe this happens for a reason, maybe not. Regardless, I resist unrealistically happy endings. I want my son back. I still sometimes feel like shattered glass and I expect depression about Chris's death to be a periodic companion for the rest of my life. I do not want anything most people do not have. I just want to hug my son and see him smile. I want to watch him become a man and fall in love for the first time. And, I want grandchildren. But, I cannot have these experiences and, for me, this is not a happy ending. But, I *can* learn to live without his physical presence because I must. And so can other bereaved parents. In some ways, my story is a common story.

This is not the place to elucidate an epistemology of parental grief or a methodology for treatment. Suffice it to say that the true grief therapist has a heavy job: anchoring the crisis times, witnessing the wrenching sadness, validating the horror, and working toward clarification of the meaning of the child's life and death for the parents since, only by understanding meanings, can reclamation and reintegration occur. But, perhaps above all, the therapist and human scientist must understand the nature of nature, especially the clown. The clown plays tricks; that's what clowns do. And, only as bereaved parents *become the clown themselves* can they begin to turn life upside down again. Then, and only then, will life be on its way to "right side up."