

"BEREAVEMENT"

by Martin Hattersley

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One of the strange results of a bereavement is the effect it has on relationships.

What once was accepted, familiar, even taken for granted, has suddenly been put in question. Familiar places are suspect: they may contain dangers we had never before thought about. Familiar people are perhaps not the same as before. We feel guilty that we may have hurt them through the sorrow of our own tragedy. Our everyday bearings in a world which used to move so smoothly have been disturbed. Familiar worries and ambitions are out of place - they have become so ridiculously unimportant in the face of graver matters. Our compass no longer points to the magnetic pole we knew, and we have to reset it.

So part of the process of recovering from a bereavement is precisely this one of recapturing lost territory. To go downtown has never before been anything very difficult. To go downtown to the location where a murder has been committed is something else. To go to a public washroom to relieve oneself is nothing spectacular. To go to the particular washroom in the Churchill L.R.T. station where one's daughter was killed is an act of courage, even of defiance.

So with people. In our minds, the crime of one person puts the fidelity of the whole human race in doubt. How easy to become a recluse, to trust nobody, to hide behind a cloak of mourning and self pity. How easy to hate, to give way to stress, to fail to allow for the stress that others are under as well. Person by person, like an electrical system after a power failure, our relationships have to be checked out and rendered operative once again. Until then, an invisible barrier exists between us and our fellows, which can so easily over time harden into stone.

The good news of bereavement is, however, of the incredible compassion and sympathy of ordinary people, impotent, often enough, to do anything more than express their grief in a letter or card, and add their prayers to the thousands already being offered. Sympathy expressed in cards, in letters, in flowers, in food, in kind deeds beyond the call of duty, in a visit, a handshake, a prayer, a tear or a hug - how much these mean! The shock and horror that others share with us is a step back for us to normalcy. Our grief at something so horrific and unexpected is shown to us to be normal, when we witness the same reaction in others.

The most remarkable experience is to find oneself quietly made a member of an invisible club - a club with many more members than one would ever realize - the fellowship of those who have suffered. The owner of a pizza store, whose brother was shot ten years ago by a sniper in Lebanon. The elderly lady whose sister was the victim of a yet unsolved break-in and murder. The widow whose husband never came back from the war. Parents whose children have disappeared or who have died. For a moment the scars and the suffering, normally borne in silence, are displayed as a kind of secret badge of membership. Then they are put away again, so that the world as a whole will be spared the anguish of another's private grief. But the bond has been established, and will always be there.

There is no way of joining this club except by a path that no member would wish even on his worst enemy. Yet, the entrance fee once paid, few indeed are those who would go back to the days before their sorrow struck them. Members of this community have been forced by events to dig very deeply

within themselves. Strangely enough, it is from these depths that they have recovered a hidden treasure of peace and joy in the midst of sorrow, of more value to them than anything else the world can offer.

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