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Shattered dreams - pastoral care with parents following the death of a child

ABSTRACT

This article is based on a qualitative study focusing on the stories of a bereaved couple who have to live with the death of two of their children. The effect of the children's death on the parents is explored, as well as the parents' effect on the problem of having to live without the physical presence of their two sons. The stories of the bereaved couple show their courage and resilience in continuing with their lives, maintaining their bond with their deceased sons and trying to make meaning of their death.

1. INTRODUCTION

A number of things inspired me to undertake a research project about bereaved parents. Firstly, my own experience as a minister of religion played an important role in this regard. On a number of occasions in the past I could see that the loss of a child is a tremendous blow to the parents. And I always wondered how parents could continue with their lives after such a loss. Then there was the theodicy question that interested me: How do bereaved parents think about a God of love and their own personal world of suffering? And lastly I wanted to learn more from bereaved parents about what they find helpful and what not, after the death of their child.

My understanding of the research I was to embark on, was that the research should primarily be of value to the participating parents (Kotzé & Kotzé 2001:9). I also hoped that other bereaved parents would benefit from the

results, as well as people who are in one way or another connected to bereaved parents.

My research curiosity could be summarised in the following two questions: a) What was the effect of the death of a child on her or his parents?, and b) What did the parents find helpful in living with this effect and in creating their own effect on the problem?

2. METHODOLOGY

The following key words could help to explain the methodology I chose for this project:

- **Qualitative.** I followed a qualitative approach, focusing on processes and meaning rather than on measurement in terms of quantity. This is in contrast with a positivistic approach in which there is the belief that research can "describe and accurately measure any dimension of human behaviour" (Kincheloe & McLaren 1994:139). It also explains why I had conversations with one bereaved couple only and not with many couples. The six conversations with these parents were documented thoroughly and summarised.
- **Participating.** I wanted the participating parents to co-operate with me (as the researcher), and in the process experience ownership of the research (McTaggart 1997:29). An example of how the parents were involved in the research is that they were asked to read summaries of previous conversations, as well as the research results, and to suggest modifications if they thought it necessary (Reinharz 1992:22).
- **Storytelling.** Stringer (1991:179) points out that stories are well suited for "action-oriented participatory research." I tried to facilitate a process in which the participating parents could tell their stories and, as a result, I became a witness of the uniqueness of their stories.
- **Reflection.** An important part of the research was reflection, my own reflection, as well as that of the participating parents. According to Clandinin

and Connelly (1991:275) "one of the main functions of research from a narrativist point of view is to foster reflection and restorying on the part of participants."

- **Ethics.** In a positivist scientific paradigm the ethical dimension of research can easily be neglected, because the researcher can mistakenly think that he or she is only dealing with "objective" and value-free "facts." Research, however, always involves values and is a thoroughly ethical act. Ethics and epistemology are inseparable (Heshusius 1994:20).

3. PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

My understanding of practical theology is that it should be ...

- **Hermeneutical and contextual.** These aspects of theology have to do with the fact that theology involves the act of interpreting and that theological interpretation is always being done by a particular person in a particular context and history. Bosch (1991:420) says: "Our entire context comes into play when we interpret a biblical text. One therefore has to concede that all theology ... is, by its very nature, contextual."
- **Dialogical.** According to Deist (1994:258) we should see the Bible as "a contextual conversational partner, rather than a decontextualised collection of norms and truths." In keeping with this view I understand practical theology as dialogue with Scripture, but also as dialogue with the lived experience of the participating parents.
- **Transformative and instrumental in the mending of creation.** Practical theology should, according to Ackermann (1996:47), play a role in the mending of creation. I would therefore like my own theology to be transformative and instrumental in the mending of creation.

4. THE EFFECT OF THE DEATH OF ALBERT AND J.W. ON THEIR PARENTS, VOSSIE AND CHRISTA

The bereaved couple that I had conversations with, Vossie and Christa, had lost two children. Albert died on the 5th of May 1998 as a result of a rare congenital heart defect. He was only one week old. J.W. died in a car accident on the 4th of April 2001 at the age of 15 years. He was a passenger in a bus that was transporting his school's under 16A hockey team.

What was the effect of the death of their two sons on Vossie and Christa?

4.1 It involved a large number of people in Vossie and Christa's lives

The first group of people that became involved in Vossie and Christa's lives was members of the staff of the local private hospital. Vossie and Christa felt excluded by the staff during the last part of Albert's short life. They were also not given much time alone with Albert after he had died. Only one person at the hospital acted in, what they experienced as, an empathic way towards them. She was a woman working in the administrative department.

Vossie and Christa received a lot of support from teachers and pupils of J.W.'s school. J.W.'s best friends played a major role at his funeral, especially Edwin who was responsible for the tribute.

One of the local ministers reacted with "denial" to the initial news of J.W.'s death. Vossie and Christa did not find this reaction helpful. The other local minister and his wife ended their vacation a day early in order to support Vossie and Christa, and this minister's empathic presence, as well as his availability, meant a lot to them.

Their good friends were a great source of support for Vossie and Christa. They helped in many ways, such as doing practical things for them, helping them laugh, but also allowing them to cry when they wanted to.

4.2 Personal effect

Christa initially found it very difficult to see boys in the blazer of J.W.'s school. Vossie became emotional when he passed the place where he used to drop

J.W. off for school. And after Albert's death Vossie initially did not want to see babies or prams and skipped the birth columns in the newspaper because he "did not want to know" about new babies that were born.

It was a big anticlimax for Vossie and Christa to return home after an exciting overseas trip they had undertaken. To be back home after the trip was for them some kind of a "low." It was also bad for them to enter their home after a nice weekend away. Their home was now a place from which two children were painfully missing.

"Fear" was mentioned on a number of occasions during our conversations. Vossie told me how, in the first year after each child's death, he feared the commemoration of the boys' death- and birthdays. Christa said that she had lost her fear of death through the death of the boys. Her "biggest fear" is that people will "forget" J.W. after some time.

4.3 Spiritual effect

After Albert's death Vossie was "angry" for a long time, angry because he "bargained" with the Lord and hoped for a miracle to take place. But the miracle did not happen and, although Albert's death did not make Vossie less of a believer, he did not want "to hear" about the love of God for a fairly long time afterwards. And for a year after Albert's death Vossie did not go to church or teach Sunday school. This, he said, was in order for him to first "sort things out."

The fact that Christa had lost her first husband, Gawie, and her two sons within a matter of 6 years made her ask what the Lord had "against her." In our conversations both she and Vossie used the word "disillusionment" when they spoke about their experience of the death of Albert and J.W. The "disillusionment" changed Christa's focus in life. She therefore finds it difficult at present to understand why certain (especially material) things could have so much value for people.

4.4 Health

Within two months after Albert's death Christa had lost thirteen kilogram in weight and experienced headaches and shakiness. She told me that she had

to stop teaching at her school for a year because depression made it too difficult for her to continue. After Christa had found it difficult initially to accept that she was in need of an antidepressant, her present understanding is that she will be using antidepressants for "the rest" of her life.

Vossie told me that he was troubled by "panic attacks" and "convulsions" after the death of both Albert and J.W. After six months on antidepressants these problems fortunately did not return.

4.5 Receiving unhelpful and/or hurtful advice and treatment

Some of the stories Vossie and Christa told me, relate incidents where unhelpful and/or hurtful advice were given by others or where others acted towards them in ways that were unhelpful or hurtful.

Vossie told me that the advice he got from one of the local ministers was to become involved in church activities again. This man asked him if he did not think the Lord would bless him if he worked for Him again.

A colleague of Christa's also tried to give her advice after Albert's death. He told her: "You must pull yourself together, because you have two other children to care for." Christa also said to me that there were people who had told them to be thankful that they still had their daughter, Anna-Mart.

Vossie and Christa did not find it helpful when people changed the subject of talking about Albert or J.W. too soon. They told me that their need was precisely to talk about their deceased children.

4.6 Some extraordinary experiences

Part of what Vossie and Christa experienced in connection with the death of Albert and J.W. could in a way be described as "extraordinary experiences." While Vossie was watching Christa feeding Albert the night before his death, he suddenly experienced some kind of a "vision" in which he could see a small white coffin in front of him. He calls this a "special revelation" from God and told me that this revelation helped him when, on the following morning, he heard that Albert had to be taken to the hospital. In difficult times later it helped Vossie to think of what had happened that night and to realise that God is "in control."

In one of our conversations Christa told me about the day when she had heard a repeated tick against the window of her bedroom. The noise was caused by a sunbird, and it was the first and only time ever that she saw one of these birds at their house. The bird moved from the window to the open door where it flapped its wings for some time. For Christa this was some kind of a "message" that J.W. was "fine," an answer to her prayers that the Lord would give her a "sign" that J.W. was "fine."

5. VOSSIE AND CHRISTA'S EFFECT ON THE PROBLEM

The enormous challenge Vossie and Christa have to face daily is to live with the death of Albert and J.W. How do they do it?

5.1 Continuing the bond with Albert and J.W.

The photographs Vossie and Christa have of their sons play an important role in their continued relationship with them. A framed photograph of Albert has a permanent place on a cupboard in Vossie and Christa's room. That means that they see this photograph every day and that Albert is "part of the family." The photographs they have of J.W. help Vossie and Christa "feel close" to him.

In honour of J.W., Vossie and Christa changed J.W.'s room into a study and workroom and they live in this room a lot. They see this new use for J.W.'s room as making what happened "part of their lives." They said to me: "We cannot put what happened behind us. It is too precious."

While not having their two sons with them physically, Vossie and Christa take them with them "in their thoughts." And they told me that when they think of J.W., they tell each other about it and that they talk about J.W. a lot.

Another way in which Christa continues her bond with J.W., is by reminding herself of some of his values and principles. J.W., for example, used to say: "When in doubt, opt out." And Christa still uses the principle contained in this expression when she has to make decisions. She also remembers him as a person who did not like "quarrels" or "discord," something that helps her to take the correct actions towards people that perhaps annoy her.

5.2 Making use of rituals and symbols

An ongoing ritual in Vossie and Christa's life is when Christa lights three candles every night, one each for Gawie, Albert and J.W. Christa told me that these deceased family members feel close to her during this ritual. Vossie does something similar to the lighting of the three candles when he uses groupings of three in their garden. He would, for example, make an arrangement of three pots in the garden. In this way the number "three" is for Vossie and Christa a symbol of the three deceased persons in their family.

A friend of Vossie and Christa's brought them a tree after the death of each of their sons. The first tree was a camellia that they planted in their garden in memory of Albert and the second one was an olive tree in memory of J.W. The trees serve as living and growing symbols of the life of their two sons.

Another important ritual for Vossie and Christa is to take flowers to the graveyard. They do this to commemorate important days, such as the birth- and deathdays of Albert and J.W., and to keep their memory alive.

5.3 Taking comfort from various things

Amongst other things Vossie and Christa find comfort in the following:

- some extraordinary experiences, like Vossie's vision and the dance of the sunbird (see 4.6)
- that they are convinced that J.W. was "ready" to die
- that J.W. acted in an uncommonly quiet way before leaving on the hockey tour, something that indicated to Vossie and Christa that he "knew" he was going to die
- the neighbours' son who came to tell them that he had found J.W.'s name and deathdate on the inside of the lid of a school desk - something that meant a lot to Christa because of her fear that people will "forget" J.W.
- even something as small as Albert's "baby grow" which initially comforted Christa, because it was something that belonged to him

5.4 Making their own experiences count

Christa told me that she would be thankful if all the things that she had shared with me during the course of our conversations, could "make it better" for somebody else. And because of their experience with the death of Albert and J.W., they could act as "consultants" for other bereaved parents and people who would like to support such parents. Others could, for example, learn from their advice that one should not change the subject too quickly when talking with them about the death of their sons (see 4.5).

Vossie and Christa's list of most important "do's" and "don'ts" for people who want to support bereaved parents looks like this:

- You don't have to be clever in such a situation; just be there for the parents
- Allow the parents to be sad or angry and to give expression to their feelings
- Limit words to a minimum and let the parents take the initiative in the conversation
- Don't say that the death of a child was the will of God
- Don't say that the child is in a better place now
- Don't say that the parents still have a lot to be thankful for

5.5 Accepting help

Vossie referred in our conversations to two therapists he had consulted. One of them helped him to get "perspective" in dealing with Albert's death.

Part of how Vossie and Christa resisted the depression that tried to make life miserable for them, was to accept medical help. Both Vossie and Christa told me how they had benefited from taking antidepressants. Christa also mentioned the help she had accepted from the family doctor.

Vossie and Christa could have decided to reject any help that was offered to them and could have withdrawn from other people. Their decision, however, was to accept help and to allow others to be part of their team or "extended family." They used the latter term to describe their good friends. And the things they could do in the company of their good friends made it "softer" for them. Vossie and Christa's experience in this regard could be linked to Dennis Klass's experience in his work with many bereaved parents in support

groups. Klass (1999:181) says: "As the parents have taught us, we grieve in our aloneness, however, the resolution of grief is an interpersonal process. Healing happens in community."

5.6 Mourning actively

According to Vossie, he reacted to the death of Albert with a "typical male" reaction, acting as if mourning was not necessary for him. But Vossie did not continue on this course of trying not to mourn. One of the things he found therapeutic later on, was something he only took up after the death of Albert and J.W., namely gardening. He also told me that his way of mourning actively was to struggle with the questions surrounding the death of the boys. This is evident in his "making theology" of the two children's death, an attempt to make meaning of their death.

Christa's way of mourning actively, on the other hand, was to "work" and to be active. She told me that it proved helpful to her to stay busy. By their own admission, Vossie and Christa mourned in different ways. They did, however, both talk a lot about Albert and J.W. when they had the need to and when they thought of them.

5.7 Trying to make meaning

One of the things both Vossie and Christa did while trying to make meaning of the death of Albert and J.W., was to read a lot. They told me that they had tried to sort things out for themselves by reading many different kinds of books. Amongst their reading matter were "alternative books," stories of parents who had also lost children, books on bereavement and books on the "why-question."

For Vossie and Christa making meaning of the death of their sons involved, amongst other things, thinking about God's role and involvement in what had happened. According to Christa Albert did not have any "sin" yet, and J.W. lived an "exemplary" life. Therefore she cannot see the death of Albert and J.W. as "punishment" or as a "lesson" to be learned. She is of the opinion that there exists, even before one's birth, a plan and purpose for your life. And as far as the lives of Albert and J.W. were concerned, she said: "They came to

do what the Lord had determined that they should, even though it was shorter than other people's lives."

Vossie explained his view of God's involvement in the death of Albert and J.W. to me by saying that it was God's "will" that the boys should "not grow old." He said that he holds on to the fact that God is "in charge." In his own words Vossie "makes theology" of the death of Albert and J.W. He also told me that he would like to see a reviewing of the basic Christian theology of death and that "alternative models" should be considered. According to Vossie such "alternative models" will give "more hope" to the bereaved than simply pointing to the future and saying: "One day!" An example of an "alternative model" is for him the woman in a television program who sees a deceased person "in a white light" when everything is "fine" with such a person. This woman says that she received this "gift" from God. And Vossie asks: "Why is the church so negative about these things?"

6. REFLECTIONS ON AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

6.1 Most important knowledges and discoveries

What did I learn from the conversations with Vossie and Christa? The following knowledges and discoveries are amongst those that I value most:

- The conversations showed me very clearly that it is indeed a shattering of dreams when a child dies. Vossie referred to Albert's birth as "a life long dream come true," a dream that was tragically shattered only one week later.
- I came under the impression of the very important role other people played in Vossie and Christa's lives as bereaved parents. Many of these people supported and helped Vossie and Christa along the way, but the words or conduct of some of them did not prove helpful.
- It is important for Vossie and Christa to hold on to Albert and J.W. as part of their family.

- Vossie and Christa found the mere presence and availability of people very valuable.
- It appears to me that Vossie and Christa are today witnesses of "post-traumatic growth" (Neimeyer 2001:7) in their lives. When I asked Christa about the effect of our conversations on her, she said that it had helped her to realise how they had "grown" and "learned" to handle the circumstances.

6.2 Research knowledges in relation to other knowledges, discourses and theories

The research knowledges of my study do not always confirm other knowledges, discourses and theories in the field of bereavement. In terms of the "grieve-and-move-on model" (Klass 1999:51), for example, bereaved parents are expected to grieve for some time, but then move on with their lives. My conversations with Vossie and Christa, however, did not suggest that it was possible for them to "grieve-and-move-on" in the sense that their grief could be "resolved" completely at a certain point and that they could then live on without having grief as part of their lives.

In Western culture detachment from the deceased was traditionally encouraged for bereaved people and the emphasis was placed on the metaphor of "saying goodbye" to the deceased. As far as Vossie and Christa's relationship with Albert and J.W. is concerned, however, I used in my research report expressions like "continuing the bond" with their sons and "holding on" to them. This indicates that Vossie and Christa's preference is not to think in terms of detachment from their sons but rather in terms of connection with them. One example in this regard is where they told me about how they now use J.W.'s room as a study and work room in order to honour him.

A discourse made popular by Elizabeth Kübler-Ross states that mourning usually moves through certain "stages," namely the stages of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (Moody & Archangel 2002:121). But nothing in the conversations with Vossie and Christa suggested that they had mourned in "stages." They did speak about things like "anger," "bargaining" and "depression" as being part of their experience, but their stories

did not point to a "progression" through stages of mourning, ending with "acceptance."

When bereaved people do not grieve in ways that are acceptable in their culture, their grief is sometimes labelled "abnormal" or "pathological." When they, for example, mourn "too expressively" instead of containing or suppressing their emotions, or when they mourn for "too long," their mourning may be seen as "abnormal" or "pathological." This kind of labelling, however, does not take into account sufficiently that each and every individual is a unique person and that the relationships of the bereaved with their deceased loved ones are also unique in character. The stories Vossie and Christa told me about how they had grieved, underline the uniqueness of individual grief. Rather than using labels like "normal" and "abnormal" when it comes to mourning, I would therefore rather suggest only one label and call every individual's grief "unique" mourning. This could help us move away from the tendency in our local culture to pathologise grief when it does not conform to so-called "normal" grieving.

6.3 How the research has changed me

An indication of how the research has changed me is perhaps that recent encounters with bereaved parents did not make me feel as overwhelmed and helpless as before. I felt more confident about being of some help to them as a pastor. I also hope to never again think that bereaved parents are "overemphasising" anything in their mourning and in their "re-remembering" (White 1997:22,23) of their deceased children. And as far as my curiosity is concerned, I have learned so much through the research process that I feel that I do now have a much better understanding of the possible effect of the death of a child on the parents, as well as of the ways in which bereaved parents live with the death of a child. The conversations with Vossie and Christa made me a witness of their pain, struggle, courage and strength (Walsh & McGoldrick 1991:26).

6.4 Implications of the study for doing research

Through my conversations with Vossie and Christa I came under the impression of the value of qualitative research in the human sciences. Not only quantitative studies are valuable as research, providing valuable "results." When one is privileged to study in depth the richness of the experiences of two bereaved parents such as Vossie and Christa, you realise how invaluable qualitative research could be.

The research project convinced me of the importance of participatory research. In this research, Vossie and Christa were not the "objects" of an impersonal study, but could participate in the whole project. They could, for example, help determine the agenda for our conversations and the method of our work together. They could also read the summaries of the conversations and the research results and suggest modifications to it.

The importance of respect for the participants in a research project is emphasised by this research. Vossie and Christa's knowledge of their own lived experience was treated with the utmost respect. It was not subordinated to the knowledge of so-called "experts" in the field of bereavement, because Vossie and Christa were considered to be the experts on their own lives

6.5 Accountability

The concept of accountability refers in my research especially to the fact that I had to assume a certain responsibility towards Vossie and Christa while engaging in the research. My accountability had to do with trying my utmost to let Vossie and Christa benefit from the research. And in order to be able to achieve this, I asked them, from time to time, how the conversations were going for them. I also asked them to tell me when they perhaps felt that a conversation, or certain questions, or their participation in the research process in general, was doing them more harm than good.

My accountability towards Vossie and Christa, however, can not be limited to the research process only. It should also extend into the future. And because of this I told Vossie and Christa that I would be available for conversations even after the whole research project was completed.

6.6 The voices of Vossie and Christa

The last word in this research belonged to Vossie and Christa. I asked them to put in writing how the conversations with me and their participation in the research project had affected them. Their thoughts were added unedited as the very last section of the research report. And I end this article with a quote from their thoughts: "It was, however, very clear from Hugo's first visit that this research project was not only about the gathering of firsthand 'information' that would be taken down clinically, but that in essence we would be, under Hugo's guidance, taken back on our tracks to where our lives were impacted irrevocably."

7. BIBLIOGRAPHY

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