Grown-Up TEARS: Adults Grieving the Death of a Parent

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experience. This commonality of experience is the most emotionally effective aspect of The Pitch of Grief. Close-up shots draw the audience to these people; we share the intimacy of their homes as they share the intimacy of their grief. In these interviews we do not hear analyses, but only the labor of these four people to understand the death of their loved one and their struggle to reestablish their own day-to-day lives.

The topics they cover form the mainstream of grief and bereavement theory. For academic use, with only one older adult represented in these interviews, this video is less directly appropriate for a course in gerontology and would fit better into course work on death, dying, and bereavement. For newly bereaved family members this video may provide some insight into the affect of those closest to the loved one who died. The video is unlikely to foster academic discussion, but gives viewers personal emotional accounts of four people currently struggling with grief. These interviews may act to normalize the uncomfortable and unusual feelings experienced by many newly bereaved persons.

Reference

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Grown-Up TEARS: Adults Grieving the Death of a Parent, 1997, 28 min. Directed and Produced by Leslie Kissman. Distributed by Aquarius Productions, 5 Powderhouse Lane, P.O. Box 1159, Sherborn, MA 01770, 508-651-2963, E-mail: [aqvideosix.net.com]. Preview $50, Purchase, $225.

How do adults view, feel about, and cope with the death of a parent? Surely this is a topic that is considered of minimal significance if we view the literature on gerontology or thanatology: grief for an elderly parent is often disenchanted, not considered socially or culturally acceptable. Grown-Up TEARS: Adults Grieving the Death of a Parent, is a film that may be the first to legitimize the deep feelings of bereaved adult children. The very first words of the film are, “Probably my greatest fear in life, if I had a greatest fear in life, was that some time I’d have to live without my mother.” Essentially this is both a film about death and about the strong and deeply meaningful tie between adult child and parent. Through the words of five women and two men, all highly articulate, the viewer is drawn into the world of children who have lost a parent as long as ten years ago, and as recently as a few months ago. Although three clergy who also carried roles as bereavement counselor or nurse did not speak at all, their silent presence in the group heightens the viewer’s attention to the words of the bereaved. With minimal narration throughout, the surviving children clearly articulated their experiences in their own words. Although each person spoke of his or her individual loss and although there was no verbal interaction between the bereaved, much of what was said would likely be shared in a support group.

For the first half of the film we hear highly emotional varied stories of the deaths of the parents. The settings of their endings (their own home, hospital, nursing home, and the death of both parents in a plane crash) were diverse, but the quality of their relationships was always very positive. One died from heart disease, five from cancer. It is not clear how much of a role hospice played for most of these families, although in two there were specific references to hospice, one mother calling her nurses, “Ladies of the last hurrah!” In any event the palliative care orientation was pervasive. Two common topics characterized the deaths: the need to have the parent “let go” as well as the value of having been present at the moment of the parent’s death. Although both were described as desirable, they are not typical of most deaths of older parents, who often die alone without family permission.

Three major themes emerged: the differential impact of the death on the families and on the meaning of family, the ways that the parent’s death became interwoven into the lives of the surviving children, and the ways that the child maintained a viable tie with the deceased parent.

The film is given further breadth by the interweaving of subthemes including the intergenerational impact of the death, the shift in the surviving child’s worldview, and the (lack of) guilt. Throughout the film the viewer is led to recognize the wide range of a child’s responses to the parent’s death: from painting the fingernails of a comatose mother; to writing a continuing journal for her best friend. The normalcy of the dreams and the daily thoughts and associations, months and years after the death, is emphasized.

The ending of the film is particularly poignant, as it highlights the essence of child-parent ties in adulthood. The impact of the loss was intensified when seeing photographs of the parent on the screen as each child spoke to the parent and reaffirmed love, expressed how the presence of the parent is incorporated into the child’s life, and said simply what was missed from the parent: their role as a mentor, guide, protector, best friend, link to the past, and symbol of family unity.

This film could be a valuable addition to the resources of hospices, nursing homes, and hospitals, as well for college courses in death and dying and training of health care and mental health professionals working with individuals and families. It can also provide a basis for discussion in support groups. It affirms the depth of parent-child ties in adulthood and evokes the multi-varied ways that parent death is experienced. It is a valuable beginning in a hitherto unexplored area for this medium.

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Facing Death, 1994, film, 56 minutes. Distributed by Filmmakers Library, 124 East 40th St., New York, NY 10016, 212-808-4980, E-mail: [info@filmmakers.com] web: [http://www.filmmakers.com]. Rental (video) $75, Purchase (video) $275.

For both Scandinavian film producer Lars Westman and his mother, Karin, exploring the meanings of the present moment comes as naturally as picking berries in the summer or dying in old age. The son interviewed his mother on camera for many years; then he made this film of her last five years and of her death. The version distributed in North America has subtitles.

The scenes can be very intimate in both senses of that word. The camera stays still for what seems a long time as an attendant wipes and washes Karin’s bottom and crotch