

Archaeology and modern reflections on death

Professionals working with patients at end of life need to feel comfortable and confident discussing death, dying and bereavement (DDB), however this is not always the case.^{1,2}

The Continuing Bonds Project sought to explore the impact of archaeology on the confidence and comfort for health and social care professionals and students in talking about DDB.^{3,4} Case studies from the distant and recent past, across cultures and geographical space, were used in themed workshops facilitating participants to reflect on and discuss memorialisation, legacy, age and circumstance of death, images of the dead, ancestors, place, treatment of the dead and objects. The impact of the workshops has been evaluated using a number of methods including discussion with participants as to what they did as a consequence of attending a workshop. As an illustration of the impact that is emerging we share here one specific outcome: a poem that one participant wrote as a consequence of attending a workshop and the continued impact on his thinking.

In an Ancestors-themed workshop, there was group discussion about what people wanted for themselves after death—to be buried or cremated. In a later interview, the participant explained that the deaths of loved ones had prompted him to train in counselling and psychotherapy, his client load including bereaved individuals. The workshop came as he was practising psychotherapy and shortly after another bereavement. The participant explained that the Ancestors workshop discussion inspired him to write a poem *Funeral Plan* which is showcased below.

Writing poetry can be an act of reflection and has therapeutic benefits.⁵ Through poetry, we think about a particular subject and mull over what it means to us. When we commit it to paper we might do so to record

our musings and, in some cases, to communicate them to others. In his postworkshop interview, the participant described musing about and reflecting on his funeral, ‘Every now and then I get mildly interested in planning how it’ll [his funeral will] be and then I think, actually it’s not for me, it’s not for me at all. This is for the people who are left behind.’ This sentiment is explored in *Funeral Plan*.

This poem, its author and the Continuing Bonds evaluation^{3,4} more broadly evidence that interacting with archaeology can spark communication, reflection and interactive activities about DDB. The impact of such workshops can be profound for the individual in both their personal consideration of mortality and loss and in their professional interactions with patients and clients.

Funeral Plan is published by kind permission of the author, Peter Wakefield. Permission to publish this article and poem, along with the name of the poet, was sought before submission.

Funeral Plan

As for me, I do not plan to attend —
 You may do as you please, do as you need.
 I had many thoughts about the music,
 Too many notes it turned out in the end —
 Could not prune it to a desert-island eight
 Let alone a quartet to celebrate
 The life I led, the man I used to be.
 Wesley or Dylan? Up to you, not me.
 Food is usual but I’ll not cook today —
 A massive spread or just the tea and scones

With which we said farewell to Lesley?
 I shall have no appetite either way.
 Free to drink like the proverbial fish
 Untrammelled by my poorly-hidden wish
 That you might take it easy with the gin;
 “Pissed at a wake” hardly counts as sin.

Is God invited or is She out of luck?
 My mixed feelings will be settled now
 But I’m glad it’s not my call to make;
 Everyone else is in the address book.
 Have what fun you can, the room will be full
 With stories, laughter, tears, someone on the pull
 For life goes on at funerals too
 But now I must leave all of that to you.

—Peter Wakefield

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