

CHAPTER 1

ORIENTATION

1.1 INSPIRATION FOR THIS RESEARCH

In choosing pastoral care with bereaved parents as my research topic, I was inspired by several things. First of all there was my own experience with a number of parents who had lost a child. This personal experience had made me realise what a tremendous blow the death of a child is to parents. As Mabe and Dawes (1991:334) put it: "The death of a child is one of the most stressful events that parents can experience during the course of a lifetime." Among other things the death of a child can be a shattering of dreams. And, how do parents live with shattered dreams regarding their child? Can they dream again, or is life now an eternal nightmare? How do they even manage to carry on with their lives? I was really curious to know more about how parents survive and keep on living while they have to deal with shattered dreams.

Next I would like to mention that, as a minister of religion, my experience in a situation where a child has died, is an experience of powerlessness in, what I would like to call, an "extreme" pastoral situation. This experience of powerlessness manifests itself to me in questions like: What do I as a minister, say in this situation? How can I help to bring comfort? What does the Bible have to say to these parents? How helpful is the advice one gets in books on bereavement in this situation? I wanted my research to help better equip me for conversations with parents after the death of a child.

When I was introduced to the concept of "re-membering" in my study of the practices of narrative therapy, I became interested in the possibilities of this concept for bereaved parents. Michael White (1997:22,23), following Barbara Myerhoff, uses the term "re-membering" in the sense of "re-engaging" with a deceased person as a "member" of one's "club of life." I also started wondering how parents are perhaps practising "re-

membering" without being familiar with the concept itself. How do they keep their deceased child with them, as a "member" of their "club of life"? How do they hold on to her or him when they have been forced to let go of the child's physical presence? I wanted to know what I could learn from parents in this regard.

Lastly I would like to mention the question of theodicy as part of my motivation and inspiration to undertake this research. My guess was that the very difficult question of theodicy would almost always be a part of parents' struggle to make meaning when their child dies. How do parents think about a God of love and their own personal world of suffering? Are they able to reconcile the two? Are they able to live with questions without clear answers? Where does the "will of God" come into this? Are parents able to maintain the relationship with God that they had before the death of their child? Through the research I wanted to find out more about how parents think about and get answers to these questions.

Starting out on my research project, I looked forward to the prospect of having informative conversations with bereaved parents and I hoped to learn a lot from them regarding their life with shattered dreams. I especially wanted to learn from them about what they had found helpful or not helpful after the death of their child(ren).

1.2 COMMITMENT TO AND PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

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). Reinharz (1992:186) refers to the work of certain feminist researchers in which there is the insistence that the primary recipients and users of research work should be the people who are its subjects rather than the researchers themselves. It should not be as Schwandt (quoted in Kotzé 2002:27) says about traditional positivist research in education: "None of this research is in any significant way *for* the people we study, it is only *about* them." Kotzé (2002:27) adds: "We cannot know *for* people what is good *for* them. We also have to know *with* them."

But who else, apart from the participating parents and me as the researcher, could benefit from this study? People with an academic interest in the subject of the research could benefit by reading the final research report. In a more "popular" publication, based on the research report, I could also help many other people benefit, for example other bereaved parents not participating in this research, or people who are in one way or another connected to bereaved parents. And with regard to the latter group, one can think of people such as family members, friends, clergy, doctors, psychologists and any other people who feel the need to sympathise with parents or support them.

The purpose of this study was to discuss my research curiosity (see next section) with participating parents and to learn from them about living with the death of a child. It was important to discuss and negotiate my purpose, curiosity and even the topic of my research with the parents (Grobbelaar, Kotzé & Kotzé 2001:164). The research had to be a co-construction between the parents and me as researcher, and the agenda for our conversations had to be drawn up together.

I planned to have conversations with bereaved parents some time after the death of their child(ren). That meant that the conversations would be a re-visiting of the process the parents had gone through. My assumption (and fear) in this regard was that research conversations too soon after the death of a child might retraumatise parents. To try to avoid retraumatisation I decided to follow the advice of Michael White and ask parents questions about not only their story of trauma but also about that of survival. White (2003) says that conversations about trauma have to be double-storied. Two parallel stories should be listened to at the same time: the story of trauma and the story of survival. If one focuses only on the story of trauma, the conversations could be a retraumatising experience for the participants. I therefore discussed the possibility and risk of retraumatisation with the participants before engaging them in the research.

I was aware of the fact that in qualitative research the exact purpose of the researcher could change as the research process developed. Clandinin and Connelly (1994:416) refer to "the almost inevitable redefinition of purpose that occurs in experiential studies as new, unexpected, and interesting events and stories are revealed." As researcher I therefore wanted to remain open to the possibility of having to redefine the purpose of

this study. At the start of the research my purpose and aims could only be seen as "preliminary" (Grobbelaar et al 2001:171).

An exciting prospect, on starting with the research, was that it would have a definite effect on me as researcher. Reinharz (1992:194) says:

Although changing the researcher is not a common intention in feminist research, it is a common consequence. In *On Becoming a Social Scientist* I suggested that learning should occur on three levels in any research project: the levels of person, problem, and method. By this I meant that the researcher would learn about herself, about the subject matter under study, and about how to conduct research.

I looked forward to the learning experience this research promised to be and I hoped that the other participants would also experience it as such.

When it comes to the people who would eventually read this research, I wanted to be instrumental in "opening up" for them an understanding of the experiences of the participating parents (Grobbelaar et al 2001:173). According to Clandinin and Connelly (1991:277) narrative researchers "attempt to have the reader understand enough of the participants' experience so that the reader can share something of what the experience might have been for the participants."

Finally, I wanted my research to be a contribution in the field of practical theology, and more specifically a contribution in the area of pastoral care and therapy.

1.3 RESEARCH CURIOSITY

At the start of the research my curiosity could be summarised by 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?

I wanted to negotiate with the parents about how they would prefer to tell the story of living with the death of a child. I also wanted to ask parents, before the start of our

conversations, what they would expect me to do when the telling of their stories became too difficult or painful.

Without asking direct questions about it, I also wanted to find out, during the conversations, how discourses about death and mourning helped or hindered parents in living with the death of a child, for example the discourses of "normal grieving," and of "acceptance of" and "working through" the death of a child. In line with what I said in explaining my inspiration regarding this research (see 1.1), I also wanted to listen carefully for hints on how parents "re-member"-ed their children and how they spoke about God, theodicy and their own spirituality, if it did happen that they brought up these themes in the conversations.

1.4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research methodology chosen for shaping this project can be described as follows:

1.4.1 A qualitative approach

Denzin and Lincoln (quoted in Grobbelaar et al 2001:172) say that qualitative research implies

an emphasis on processes and meaning that are not rigorously examined, or measured (if measured at all), in terms of quantity, amount, intensity, or frequency. Qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry.

Such a qualitative approach is in contrast with a positivist approach in which there is the belief that the research can "describe and accurately measure any dimension of human behaviour" (Kincheloe & McLaren 1994:139). In my research I focussed on processes and meaning, and not on measurement in terms of quantity.

1.4.2 Using postmodern ideas

According to Kincheloe and McLaren (1994:143)

[p]ostmodern theoretical trajectories take as their entry point a rejection of the deeply ingrained assumptions of Enlightenment rationality, traditional Western epistemology, or any supposedly "secure" representation of reality that exists outside of discourse itself.

Guba (quoted in Denzin & Lincoln 1994:5) points out an important postmodern idea when he says that "reality can never be fully apprehended, only approximated." In my research I wanted therefore not to be over-confident about my ability to know and understand the realities of the lives of the participating parents. I wanted to adopt the more tentative stance of the postmodern researcher. That means I wanted to shy away from making generalisable conclusions and rather search for qualitative and rich descriptions of the experiences of the participating parents.

1.4.3 Utilising ideas of social constructionism

In a positivist scientific paradigm the conviction is that "objective" knowledge of reality is possible, knowledge of the world as it "really" exists (Kincheloe & McLaren 1994:143). According to Lather (1991:51) we are, however, now living in a "postpositivist era" in which the prevalent view is that so-called facts "are as much social constructions as are theories and values." Scientific knowledge can never stand apart or be free from social construction, in which one has to "accept the existence of many alternative constructions of events" (Burr 1995:162) and in which one cannot work with the idea of one objective "reality."

1.4.4 An interpretive approach

I used an interpretive approach in this research. Therefore the information or data that was produced by the study consists of interpretations. Kincheloe and McLaren (1994:144) say:

The knowledge that the world yields has to be interpreted by men and women who are a part of that world. What we call information always involves an act of human judgement. From a critical perspective this act of judgement is an interpretive act.

In follow-up conversations my interpretation of and themes from the first conversation were discussed with the participants, with a view to further interpretation and discussion (Reinharz 1992:21). All my interpretations in the research were dependent on the modifications suggested by the other participants. Throughout the different phases of the study the importance of interpretation was kept in mind. I reminded myself constantly of the words of Clandinin and Connelly (1991:275) when they say:

Initially a narrative researcher is concerned with description, that is, a recording of events in field notes, a recording of participants' talk in interviews, and a recording of their stories. But even in these descriptive records, there is an interpretive quality, for when we tell stories of ourselves to others ... we are engaged in offering interpretation of the stories we are living.

1.4.5 Dealing with human experience

Human experience is a complex phenomenon, and positivism, with its view that "reality is knowable through correct measurement methods" (Lather 1991:172), has great difficulty in dealing with it. My research, however, started with human experience and attempted to deal with it in an appropriate way. Clandinin and Connelly (1994:414) state that "the social sciences are founded on the study of experience. Experience is, therefore, the starting point and key term for all social science inquiry."

1.4.6 A participatory research approach

I used a participatory research approach, an approach that creates participatory knowledge. In my research participants were not seen as "objects" or "targets" of the research, but as "active subjects empowered to understand and change their situations" (Lather 1991:59). Heshusius (1994:15, 16) criticises what she calls "an alienated mode of consciousness" in which a distance is perceived between the knower and the known, or between the researcher and the researched. She prefers a "participatory mode of consciousness" in which there is "the awareness of a deeper level of kinship between the knower and the known." She also says that "[b]efore the scientific revolution the act of knowing had always been understood as a form of participation and enchantment." Because of the participatory nature of this research it could also be called "co-search." Kotzé (2002:25) says: "*Co-search* refers to a participatory search in which the

'researcher' and the 'subjects' of research become participants in co-searching for new knowledges about which all participants have a say." I wanted participants to really co-search and co-operate with me (as the researcher), and in the process experience ownership of the research (McTaggart 1997:29).

Tandon (in McTaggart 1997:29) has identified the following as "determinants of authentic participation in research: people's role in setting the agenda of the inquiry; people's participation in the data collection and analysis; and people's control over the use of outcomes and the whole process." I hoped that authentic participation by the bereaved parents in this research would help to produce knowledge that clearly shows their participation in the research project. Cancian (in Reinharz 1992:182) defines participatory research as "an approach producing knowledge through democratic, interactive relationships" and says that one of the core features of this kind of research is that "the everyday life experience and feelings of participants are a major source of knowledge."

The participants in the research were asked to read summaries of previous conversations, as well as the research results, and to suggest modifications with regard to the interpretation of the research, if they thought it necessary (Reinharz 1992:22). In the words of Lather (1991:53) I submitted "a preliminary description of data to the scrutiny of the researched."

1.4.7 Power-sharing between participating parents and researcher

Power-sharing between the participating parents and me as the researcher was very important in this research. The bereaved parents therefore had to be co-researchers or "co-searchers" in this project instead of "objects" of the research. The emphasis was not to be on my own observations and interpretations as researcher but on the meaning that the bereaved parents gave to their lived experience. Botha (quoted in Grobbelaar et al 2001:173) says that the researcher is not "an independent observer but rather an inter-dependant participant within the meaning-generating system."

In the production of knowledge, the knowledge of so-called "experts" is usually privileged above other knowledge. The voices of the "experts" "count the most" (Kincheloe & McLaren 1994:147), but in my research the knowledge of the participants is not seen as less legitimate or important than that of the researcher or that of so-called "experts" in the field of bereavement. I made use of what Anderson and Goolishian (1992:25) call a "not knowing" position. That means I did not go into the conversations with the bereaved parents as some kind of "expert." On the contrary, the parents were acknowledged as the "experts" of their own lives and experiences. A "not knowing" position on my part as researcher could contribute towards "breaking down power differences between 'researched' and 'researcher'" (Reinharz 1992:185). According to Burr (1995:161) "[t]here no longer appears to be a good reason to privilege the account or 'reading' of the researcher above that of anyone else, and this puts the researcher and the researched in a new relation to each other."

1.4.8 Storytelling

Stringer (1991:179) points out that stories are well suited for "action-oriented participatory research." My research was done as participatory research in which storytelling featured prominently. According to Clandinin and Connelly (1994:415, following D Carr):

when persons note something of their experience, either to themselves or to others, they do so not by the mere recording of experience over time, but in storied form. Story is, therefore, neither raw sensation nor cultural form; it is both and neither. In effect, stories are the closest we can come to experience as we and others tell of our experience. A story has a sense of being full, a sense of coming out of a personal and social history... Experience, in this view, is the stories people live. People live stories, and in the telling of them reaffirm them, modify them, and create new ones.

I facilitated the telling of stories by the participating parents and at the same time became a witness to these stories. My task was also to describe and document the storied lives of the participants. In terms of narrative research, however, I did not remain at a distance from the stories but became a partaker of them and entered into them (Clandinin & Connelly 1991:260).

1.4.9 Highlighting the uniqueness of the stories of the participants

In my research the uniqueness of the stories of the participants was highlighted. That implies that "grand generalisation" was not an aim of this study, but rather the representing of the "case" of the participants. Stake (1994:245) says:

Whereas single or a few cases are poor representation of a population of cases and poor grounds for advancing grand generalisation, a single case as negative example can establish limits to grand generalisation... The purpose of the case study is not to represent the world, but to represent the case.

The interest of my research was not generalisation, but to discern and document the uniqueness of the story of the bereaved parents with whom I had the conversations.

1.4.10 Creating field texts and research texts

The concept of "field texts" is used by Clandinin and Connelly (1994:419) for what is usually called "data" in traditional research. Field texts can be created in various ways, for example by taking notes of the stories of participants, by making transcriptions of conversations, or by encouraging participants to write about their experiences in a personal journal. Clandinin and Connelly (1994:419) see "field texts" as "texts created by participants and researchers to represent aspects of field experience."

Research texts, on the other hand, are constructed when the researcher and the other participants reflect upon the field texts. The difference between field texts and research texts is evident when Clandinin and Connelly (1994:423) say:

Field texts are not, in general, constructed with a reflective intent; rather, they are close to experience, tend to be descriptive, and are shaped around particular events. They have a recording quality to them, whether auditory or visual. Research texts are at a distance from field texts and grow out of the repeated asking of questions concerning meaning and significance.

Through reflection the "reflective voice" of the researcher is added to the research text (Clandinin & Connelly 1991:268). When it came to writing my research text I imagined myself as researcher in conversation with a larger audience than just the participating parents (Clandinin & Connelly 1991:276).

1.4.11 Reflection

Reflection, which includes self-reflection, both by the participating parents and by me as the researcher, was a vital part of the research. 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." Reflection entails taking a critical stance towards one's own presuppositions and views, and therefore even questioning one's own questions (Grobelaar et al 2001:183).

It was important in my research to involve the bereaved parents in reflection so that it would not only be my own reflections as researcher that were mirrored in the research, but those of all participants. McTaggart (1997:41) refers to "collective and critical self-reflection as a source of legitimate understanding."

1.4.12 Respect for the participants

Stake (1994:244) says: "Qualitative researchers are guests in the private spaces of the world. Their manners should be good and their code of ethics strict." I hope that I succeeded in acting in a respectful way towards the participating parents while conducting the research. Clandinin and Connelly (1994:422) say that because we as researchers enter the relationship with participants "with certain intentions and purposes and, as the ones most often initiating the research relationship, our care and responsibility is first directed toward participants." Part of the respect I owe the participants was to take responsibility for how the research might influence their lives during and also after the research.

1.4.13 Emphasis on ethics

According to Kotzé (2002:26) the proper participation of everyone involved in research is a key issue as far as the ethics of research are concerned. He says that participants

need to participate in decisions about what to research; why we want to do the specific research; by what means; according to what paradigm, theory or research approach; what the design and process of the research journey are to be; the reflections and interpretations as the research is co-constructed; how

research reports are written as well as how the research is evaluated when presented for publication or as fulfilment for the requirements of a degree. These are all issues we have to consider and negotiate *with* participants in research.

(Kotzé 2002:27)

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." Heshusius (1994:20) emphasises that research involves values and is a thoroughly ethical act when she says:

The questions, How do I know? and How should I live? - separated since the rise of Western science - become the same question again when value and fact, and, therefore, when ethics and epistemology, are acknowledged as inseparable.

1.5 TRUSTWORTHINESS OF THE RESEARCH

As far as the trustworthiness of my research is concerned, I wanted, with Heshusius (1994:15), to leave the ideal of "objectivity" behind me and rather focus on a "participatory mode of consciousness." In this mode of consciousness there is "the awareness of a deeper level of kinship between the knower and the known" (Heshusius 1994:16) and not the alienation between the knower and the known that tends to set in when one strives for objectivity. Stephanie Riger (quoted in Reinharz 1992:24) says: "Traditional research methods ... emphasise objectivity, separateness and distance ... Let us consider as well connection and empathy as modes of knowing, and embrace them in our criteria and in our work."

As criteria for the trustworthiness of my research, I chose some of those suggested by Kincheloe and McLaren (1994:151, 152). Their first criterion involves the "credibility of constructed realities." That means that the realities constructed in the research had to be "plausible to those who constructed them." I therefore wanted the participating parents to join me in assessing the plausibility of the realities that were, in the research, constructed about their lives. Another criterion suggested by Kincheloe and McLaren is "catalytic validity." This kind of validity has to do with the fact that research should be

a catalyst for participants to better understand their world and also to transform it. Lather (1991:68) says that catalytic validity "represents the degree to which the research process re-orient, focuses and energises participants toward knowing reality in order to transform it ...". If the participating parents, according to their own judgement, experienced positive change and transformation through the research process, the catalytic validity of the research would be confirmed.

Unlike in positivist research, in which "objectivity," "certainty" and "rational proof" play a major part, critical research "involves a less certain approach characterised by participant reaction and emotional involvement" (Kincheloe & McLaren 1994:151). Validity in my research would take into account the participants' responses to and confirmation of the research results, and would also make use of reflexivity (McTaggart 1997:37; Guba & Lincoln, as quoted in Lather 1991:66). Burr (1995:161) says about reflexivity: "In the development of alternative practices, the validity of the participants' accounts must be incorporated. This is part of what is referred to as 'reflexivity' ...". According to Burr (1995:181)

[r]eflexivity also refers to the equal status, within discourse analysis, of researchers and their respondents, as well as of the accounts offered by each. This means that discourse analysts must find a way of building into their research opportunities for participants to comment upon their own accounts and those of the researcher.

The validity of stories in research may perhaps be questioned by some people, but in qualitative research stories are seen as "valid" material for constructing a field text. Ballard (quoted in Grobbelaar et al 2001:172) says: "[S]tories are as important, relevant, valid, reliable, meaningful and generalisable as any other writing that is referred to as research."

Whereas traditional positivist research works with concepts like internal validity ("the extent to which a researcher's observations and measurements are true descriptions of a particular reality") and external validity ("the degree to which such descriptions can be accurately compared with other groups"), Kincheloe and McLaren (1994:151) find "trustworthiness" a more appropriate word to use in the context of qualitative and

critical research. Following them, I also prefer to make use of the concept of "trustworthiness."

1.6 PRACTICAL THEOLOGY AND PASTORAL CARE

My research was done within the larger field of practical theology, but I wanted it to not only be an academic contribution in general, but also a specific form of pastoral care as far as the participating parents were concerned. Thus, I wanted the bereaved parents to experience the research as a form of Christian ministry in which Christian love was shared with them and in which their well-being was advanced.

Gerkin (1991:64) defines practical theology as

the critical and constructive reflection on the life and work of Christians in all the varied contexts in which that life takes place, with the intention of facilitating transformation of life in all its dimensions in accordance with the Christian gospel.

According to Dingemans (1996:87) an important shift has taken place in practical theology in recent years, a shift "from the application of biblical data and statements of faith to the primary task of investigation of Christian practice itself. All over the world, practical theology is understood now as a science of action (*Handlungswissenschaft*) or as a social science."

Of importance for my research was what Dingemans (1996:92) has to say about methodology in practical theology. According to him practical theologians agree that "research begins with an interdisciplinary *description* of the practice or *analysis* of the situation." In my research I tried to listen very carefully to the bereaved parents in order to be able to describe their experiences and stories concerning the death of their children. I also wanted their participation in the research to be a transforming experience for them. As Dingemans (1996:92) puts it: "... all practical theological work aims toward making suggestions and recommendations in order to *improve* and *transform* the existing practice." And to this I would like to add that all practical

theological work should also aim at transforming *people* and not only at transforming existing practices.

Practical theology and pastoral care were, in my research, to be seen as:

- hermeneutical and contextual
- a dialogue with the lived experience of people
- a mutual and ethical enterprise
- transformative and instrumental in the mending of creation

1.6.1 Hermeneutical and contextual

The hermeneutical and contextual 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. Theology cannot be seen as a timeless and closed system in which the context of and interpretation by the theologian play no part. 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." In the conversations and research with the bereaved parents it was necessary for me to take into account the different contexts that were involved simultaneously, namely the context of the participating parents, my own context as researcher, and also the context of the biblical text.

1.6.2 A dialogue with the lived experience of people

An important part of the context for theological interpretation in my study was the lived experience of people. Neuger (2001:56) says: "Theology that is sensitive to and in dialogue with the lived experience of all people must hold a central place in the work of pastoral counselling." The lived experience of the bereaved parents participating in this research was taken seriously.

1.6.3 A mutual and ethical enterprise

In what Mead (1991:32) calls the Christendom paradigm, pastoral care was basically a one way affair. In this paradigm, Mead says, "[c]lergy were *the ministry*." That means pastoral care was "flowing" from the clergy to the so-called "laity," from the pastor to the flock. What Kotzé and Kotzé (2001:7) say reflects quite a different mindset: "A commitment to do pastoral care as participatory ethical care immediately challenges us not to care *for* but to care *with* people who are in need of care." The proper ethical stance for me as a researcher (even with many years of theological training to my credit) was not to decide for participants what was best for them and not to force my opinions on them, but to be with them in their struggle to give meaning to their own lives. In my research pastoral care was seen as a mutual and ethical enterprise in which both the researcher and the other participants could give and receive care.

1.6.4 Transformative and instrumental in the mending of creation

Practical theology and pastoral care should play their part in what Ackermann calls the "mending of creation." According to her (Ackermann 1996:47) the "hope for a redeemed creation runs through the Jewish and Christian scriptures ..."; and "Jesus' words and deeds embody and clarify what is meant by the mending of creation." For Ackermann (1996:47) the mending of creation "speaks of justice, love, freedom, equality and the flourishing of righteousness, all of which foster good relations between and among people." I wanted my own theology and my research to be transformative and instrumental in the mending of creation. I therefore started the research with a commitment to transformation, that is a commitment to help change the lives of the participating parents for the better.

1.7 VOICES FROM LITERATURE ON BEREAVEMENT AND THE DEATH OF CHILDREN

As part of the research project I looked at some of the ideas, themes and discourses that help constitute literature on bereavement and the death of children. Burr (quoted in

Kotzé 2000:12) describes a discourse as "a set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, statements and so on that in some way together produce a particular version of events." The question I wanted to ask when reflecting on literature on bereavement and the death of children was: What are the dominant discourses on grief, bereavement and the death of children? What are the dominant voices making themselves heard through this literature?

I previously got the impression that bereaved parents are often handed books or pamphlets to read, literature that is supposed to help them live with the death of their child(ren). Through this literature they are brought into contact with the ideas and views of so-called "experts" in the field of bereavement. However, the question is: How helpful do parents find the information and advice in this literature? What do they find helpful and what not?

I requested the library at UNISA to do a search on the themes of "bereavement," "death - children," and "theodicy." This search produced the titles of a whole number of useful articles and books. The references in these articles and books further directed me to other useful literature.

In chapter 2 of this study I will discuss in more detail some ideas, themes and discourses from the literature on bereavement and the death of children that I consulted. I will in the other chapters of the study also be referring to some of the material found in this literature.

1.8 "CHAPTERS" OF THE RESEARCH STORY

Clandinin and Connelly (1994:418) compare their own research with the writing of a story when they say: "As we begin work on a research project, we often talk about beginning a new story, a story of inquiry." The following actions or phases could be seen as "chapters" of the research story I have written in this dissertation:

1.8.1 Finding the necessary participants

Finding the necessary participants involved approaching the bereaved parents, Vossie and Christa, and having a conversation in which I informed them about the research that I was undertaking. An information letter (see Appendix A) was handed to them and served as the basis for the discussion. At the end of the discussion I suggested to them that they take some time to consider whether they would like to participate in the research or not. Initially I thought of trying to get three bereaved couples to participate in my research, but after the first two conversations with Vossie and Christa I changed my mind. The richness of the experiences Vossie and Christa had shared with me, prompted me to ask permission to explore more deeply their story of living with the death of Albert and J.W. I thus ended up only having conversations with one bereaved couple and not three.

After Vossie and Christa had indicated that they were willing to participate in the research, I had a further discussion with them in which the following were negotiated: the method of work for the research, the research agenda and the title of the study. We also discussed the question: What would we do if a conversation became too painful? I wanted to hear what they would be expecting of me in case a conversation became too painful for them. They indicated that it would be appropriate to stop a conversation at such a point and continue at a later stage. Vossie and Christa were asked to sign a consent form about their participation (see Appendix B). Towards the end of the project they were also asked to sign a consent form about the release of information (see Appendix C). In this last form they indicated that they wanted their real names to be used in the research rather than pseudonyms.

1.8.2 The first conversation with Vossie and Christa about the death of their children

The first conversation with Vossie and Christa gave them the opportunity to tell their stories of living with the death of their children. With their permission, I took notes in order to document the conversation thoroughly. I also made a summary of the conversation. The summary enabled us to reflect on the conversation we had had and to

go into further discussions. In this first summary, as well as in all subsequent ones, I made frequent use of the participants' own words. I also asked their feedback on every summary in order to make sure that I had understood them correctly. The summaries were made available to them "to review and to edit according to their understanding" (Grobbelaar et al 2001:182). Every summary was sent to my supervisor before using it in the following conversation with the parents.

1.8.3 Further conversations

In the second conversation Vossie and Christa had the opportunity to reflect on the first conversation and its summary. The same procedure was used with further conversations. In total we had six conversations about their living with the death of their children. At a certain point during the sixth conversation Vossie said that he wanted to meet with me for a further conversation in which he would explain to me how he tried to understand the death of Albert and J.W. We met a few days later for this final conversation.

1.8.4 Reporting the research in collaboration with the participants

Vossie and Christa had access to everything I wrote in reporting the research and were given the opportunity to review the report in draft form. Their voices are the most important voices in my research. According to Denzin (quoted in Grobbelaar et al 2001:184) postmodern researchers attempt "to produce reader-friendly, multivoiced texts that speak to the worlds of lived experience."

1.8.5 Reflecting on my own story concerning the research project

This final "chapter" of the research story describes how I reflected on what had transpired in the whole research project. I reflected, amongst other things, about myself, about the topic of the research, and about doing this kind of research. Important for me was to reflect on what I had learned, both in terms of enriching knowledges I came across and in terms of how I could have done the research differently.

In constructing and writing the story of my research I tried to utilise all aspects of the research methodology as described in section 1.4 above.

1.9 OUTLINE OF RESEARCH REPORT

In chapter 2 I give an overview of some of the literature on bereavement and the death of children. The most important ideas, themes and discourses in this field have been selected and discussed.

The effect of the death of their children on the participating parents, Vossie and Christa, is described in chapter 3. Their stories and experiences are reported.

In chapter 4 the way Vossie and Christa live without the physical presence of their sons, is looked at. That which helped them in living with the death of their children is highlighted.

In the final chapter, chapter 5, I reflect on the whole research project. I discuss the questions: What did I learn about myself, about the subject matter under study, and about doing research in general? I also, in chapter 5, bring different voices into dialogue with each other, namely the voices of the bereaved parents, my own voice as researcher and the voices of a number of authors in the field of bereavement and other relevant fields. Through this dialogue and the reflection of the last chapter the research is situated within a "broader context" (Stringer 1999:182). And finally, the participating parents, Vossie and Christa, get the last word when they reflect on their involvement in the research project.

CHAPTER 2

VOICES FROM LITERATURE ON BEREAVEMENT AND THE DEATH OF CHILDREN

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The literature read in connection with the subject of my research, brought me into contact with a vast number of ideas, themes and discourses. In this chapter I discuss a selection of these ideas, themes and discourses. By doing so I hope to provide a general overview of what is presented to readers in literature on bereavement and the death of children.

2.2 DOMINANT DISCOURSES

Through the literature I consulted, I came across a number of discourses about death, bereavement, grief and mourning that seem to have a significant influence on the lives of bereaved people and others alike.

2.2.1 Death

Different writers agree that there is a denial of death in Western culture (Foote & Frank 1999:184; Walsh & McGoldrick 1991:xv). This is evident for example in the way dying people are often removed from their homes and communities (Walsh & McGoldrick 1991:xv). They are removed to die "tidily behind drawn screens in a hospital ..." (Foster & Smith 1987:12). This was not always the case, as the words of Colin Parker (in Foster & Smith 1987:11) suggest: "Death in childhood was common. It took place at home more often than in hospital and tradition demanded that family and friends gathered at the bedside to ensure the child's safe passage to a better world."

One of the results of the denial of death in Western culture is that bereaved parents have to live in a world that does not recognise the reality of their children's deaths and desperately wants them "to get over" it (Klass 1999:191).

2.2.2 Bereavement, grief and mourning

Closely linked to the discourse about death in Western culture are the discourses about bereavement, grief and mourning. In a culture in which death is denied, grief is also denied and mourning is "stifled" (Moody & Archangel 2002:78). In what Foote and Frank (1999:170) call "policing" the grief, Western culture sets norms or boundaries to how bereaved people are allowed to feel and behave, as well as to what the duration of the mourning should be. That means that the local culture in a sense "decides" for people what "normal" grieving is. And when these norms or boundaries are exceeded, the grief and mourning are labelled with terms such as "abnormal," "pathological" and "complicated" (Walsh & McGoldrick 1991:xvi). In Western culture this labelling happens when bereaved people, for example, mourn "too expressively" instead of containing or suppressing their emotions, or when they mourn for "too long."

In terms of the discourses about bereavement, grief and mourning I have just referred to, what is expected of bereaved people is to move in the direction of "recovery" (Foote & Frank 1999:165) or towards the "resolution" of grief (Waldegrave 1999:176). Klass (1999:51) refers to this way of thinking about mourning as the "grieve-and-move-on model." The spirit of this model, which can also be linked to the work of Sigmund Freud, is captured in the words of Finkbeiner (1996:17) when she says: "I suspect Freud's model still affects the usual social expectations for a bereaved parent: cry, then put away the pictures and get a cat or have another child; detach and reinvest." The bereaved parent is in other words expected to mourn for a limited period of time and then detach from and let go of the deceased child. A metaphor that aptly describes this is that the parent has to say goodbye to her or his child.

A discourse made popular by Elizabeth Kübler-Ross is that mourning moves through certain stages (namely denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance) until the point is reached where the death is accepted and the grief is resolved (Moody &

Archangel 2002:121). Along with other authors such as Waldegrave (1999:179) and Alexander (1993:37), Klass (1999:56) is very critical of this discourse and says that

at this time there is no stage theory of grief that can be demonstrated as true using any scholarly tools available. It would seem then, that as we trace the resolution of parental grief, we have to accept a more messy world than if we had well-defined stages into which we could pour our data.

Another popular discourse about grief is that it comprises a task or work that should be completed. In this discourse it is all about "working through" the grief. An example of this view of grief is the four tasks William Worden would present to bereaved people, namely: 1. accepting the reality of the loss; 2. working through emotional pain; 3. adjusting to the environment; and 4. moving ahead (Moody & Archangel 2002:123). The problem with this model is that the bereaved person can fail in accomplishing one or more of these tasks and that her or his mourning would then be labelled as "abnormal" or "pathological."

A final discourse that is important to mention here is the discourse about how Western culture expects men and women to grieve differently. McGoldrick (1991:65) explains:

While women are generally free to weep openly, men ... often deny, withdraw, and avoid their grief, fearing a loss of control. The prescribed gender reactions of the culture exaggerate the distress of both men and women. Men generally take refuge in their work and distance from their wives' open mourning, seeing it as a threat to their desperate need to remain in control. Women experience their husbands' pulling away as a double loss. One woman, the mother of three sons, said when we met two years after the death of the oldest son, "Through my eyes flow the tears for our whole family." ... This kind of skewed pattern of grieving is the norm in our culture and breeds isolation.

2.3 VOICES PROTESTING AGAINST THE DOMINANT DISCOURSES

While I was reading the literature, it became clear to me that the dominant discourses, discussed in 2.2.1 and 2.2.2, are challenged strongly by voices protesting against many of the assumptions of these discourses. The voices also protest against the fact that the culturally prescribed grieving process often marginalises and trivialises the unique experiences of grieving people (Klass 1999:188). Some of the protesting voices are the following:

2.3.1 Connection rather than detachment

There are voices calling for an emphasis on connection with the deceased rather than detachment from the person. According to Waldegrave (1999:179) bereaved people are often "encouraged to say 'goodbye' to the one who has died; to break the connection; to reach closure; to sever the bond; and to disengage from the dead person." With the death of her own son, Waldegrave found this detachment advice extremely painful and even impossible, and she says: "We do not have to detach from our special people who have died" (1999:190). She finds the idea of "connection" more helpful and explains that "connection" is about finding ways to connect with one's own and other people's responses about what has happened, as well as ways to connect with or about the person who has died (1999:179).

Waldegrave (1999:177) uses the metaphor of "settled stories" when voicing her protest against traditional grief models in which detachment from the deceased person is the aim. With the death of her own son as background, she says:

I also "knew" I had to connect with my boy - continue to have a relationship with him... I had to weave something for myself that fitted my "knowing" and my need for connection, that had meaning for me. When I did, something started to settle within myself. A particular "settled story" of my own had enabled me to stay way out of the gutter. It has to do with how I think about my soul being able to be with Jack's soul. I have many other "settled stories" that help me live with my boy's death.

Where bereaved people do not always find the metaphor of "saying goodbye" helpful in their grief, the metaphor of "saying hullo again" could be very helpful. Michael White (1988:18) says that, guided by the "saying hullo again" metaphor, he formulated and introduced questions that he hoped would open up the possibility for persons "to reclaim their relationship with the lost loved one." And surprised by the effect of these questions in the resolution of bereaved people's sense of emptiness and feelings of depression, he decided to explore the metaphor further.

2.3.2 No end point that can be called "resolution"

In terms of the dominant grief discourse bereaved people are expected to complete their mourning after a "reasonable" period of time, say after a year or two (McGoldrick et al 1991:177). That means that an end point to grief is envisaged in this discourse. According to Finkbeiner (1996:19) "researchers do try to find some end point to grief, and call it 'resolution' or 'adaptation' or 'adjustment' or 'completion.' They pretty well agree that the word 'recovery,' if it means returning unscathed to normal life, is meaningless. ... Maybe grief is limitless." The voices protesting against the dominant discourse seem to me to be saying that there is no end point to mourning that can be called "resolution." Observing bereaved parents in support groups leads Klass (1999:95) to say: "The first lesson bereaved parents share with each other is that 'you never get over it.' The pain changes, but it never goes away, they say, because 'you never stop loving your child.'"

A term that protests against the view that complete "resolution" of grief is possible, is the term "adaptation." Walsh and McGoldrick (1991:8) choose for "adaptation" and explain that "adaptation does not mean resolution, in the sense of some complete 'once and for all' coming to terms with the loss. Rather, it involves finding ways to put the loss in perspective and to move on with life."

2.3.3 Criticism of the pathologising of grief

I referred in 2.2.2 to the fact that the local culture wants to decide for people on what is "normal" or "abnormal" when it comes to mourning. This discourse does, however, not take into account sufficiently the enormous diversity in people's grieving and response to loss. Alexander (1993:17) quotes a certain Malcolm who said that grief "comes in all shapes and sizes." It is not a matter of one size fits all. The voices in literature that emphasise this diversity in grieving, are at the same time criticising the tendency of the local culture to pathologise grief when it exceeds the boundaries that this culture tries to set for the grieving process. "Normal" or "healthy" mourning is no more than a myth because of the diverse ways in which different people grieve (Rolland 1991:146).

Important role players in the grief discourse in Western culture are the medical and psychological "experts." On the grounds of their expertise they can evaluate the "progress" of bereaved people in their grieving and can pathologise them when their grieving exceeds the boundaries of "normal" grieving. Protesting against this kind of pathologising, Moody and Archangel (2002:2) say: "We believe that each person is the lone expert for his or her grief."

2.3.4 Traditional African mourning practices

In the South African context traditional African mourning practices could also be viewed as a voice protesting against many of the dominant discourses in Western culture. Where a "denial" of death in Western culture often leads to a "denial" of grief or a "stifling" of mourning (see 2.2.1 and 2.2.2), traditional African mourning practices aim at bringing "into the open the personal and natural grief of the bereaved" (Bopape 1995:263). Bopape refers to a whole number of practices that help bring the grief of the bereaved in traditional Bapedi culture into the open, for example the moving of the corpse from the mortuary into the house of the deceased for an overnight vigil, the mandatory cutting of one's hair, the dressing in dark clothes, and the abstaining from the enjoyable things in life. These practices, and more, are engaged in by the bereaved "to demonstrate openly the intensity of their deep sorrow and remorse" (Bopape 1995:263).

Where in Western culture many people do not believe in life after death and the bereaved are often encouraged to "forget" and "move on" (Hedtke 2004:5), African traditional mourning practices maintain a strong connection between the living and the dead. This implies that bereaved people in the African tradition hold on to and "remember" their deceased loved ones. It is not like the situation in Western culture where holding on to the dead can easily be frowned upon. Ngubane (2004:173, 174), writing about traditional Zulu practices, says:

There is a chain between the living and the dead that creates continuity in terms of carrying forward family traditions. The perception of life as a unity enhances and strengthens the view that it cannot be terminated even by death. Those who have died are seen as having moved into another world, which is part of the whole reality... The dead continue to be members of their families, communities and societies and to interact with their living relatives.

In Western culture, with its individualism, the bereaved often feel isolated and lonely. Traditional African mourning practices help take care of this isolation and loneliness by creating a web of social support for the bereaved. Bopape (1995:266) says:

The Bapedi traditional religion does not permit the mourner to be alone with his sorrow. It behooves society to grant aid, to restore the equilibrium and to facilitate the role changes of the mourner. These are all things he cannot do on his own. Right at the cemetery a member of the bereaved family openly addresses the community and requests its participation in social support for the bereaved in consideration of his great burden.

Over time traditional African mourning practices have been influenced by Western culture. According to Ngubane (2004:171) "Western culture continues to play a significant role in alienating Africans from their culture." The result of this process of alienation is that one at present often gets, in the words of Bopape (1995:262), an "admixture of African traditional religion, Christianity and a Western background."

2.4 EFFECT OF DEATH ON PARENTS

The effect of the death of children on parents is well documented and described in the literature on bereavement and the death of children. I selected the following recurring themes in this regard:

2.4.1 Parental bereavement as a permanent condition

The experience of bereaved parents usually is that they never "get over" the death of their child(ren). In his work with parents in support groups for bereaved parents, Dennis Klass has found that many parents find the metaphor of "amputation" useful. Klass (1999:30) therefore remarks: "Like amputation, parental bereavement is a permanent condition." Even though the medical symptoms of grief may cease to exist, the bereavement remains (Finkbeiner 1996:20). Hilton-Barber (2004:61), herself a bereaved parent, says that bereaved parents "learn to live alongside the continual ache, emptiness and bewilderment."

2.4.2 Pain and grief

Everybody experiencing a significant loss is bound to experience pain and grief. Even when one tries to protect oneself or hide from the grief, the grief will be there (Alexander 1993:136). According to Klass (1999:46) "the parents are in incredible pain" after the death of a child. He is of the opinion that "the defining feature of parental grief is pain" (1999:186). And even though the pain may change over time, the pain never goes away (Klass 1999:95). The pain and grief usually tend to persist "and may even intensify with the passage of time" (McGoldrick & Walsh 1991:37).

2.4.3 Emotional reactions

In the literature I consulted, much is written about the emotional reactions of bereaved parents. Emotional reactions that are mentioned, are, amongst others, sadness, anger, shame, fear, loneliness, emptiness, bewilderment (Anderson 1997a:222), guilt, feeling incompetent, loss of interest in life (Finkbeiner 1996:23, 134, 189, 234), depression, resentment, envy, humiliation, self-doubt, and feeling crazy (Klass 1999:13, 37). Without enough space to expand on all the emotional reactions mentioned in this paragraph, one example will have to suffice. Finkbeiner (1996:114) writes extensively about the anger of bereaved parents and says the following about her own anger as bereaved parent:

Normally I rarely bother to nurse grudges, but I am still furious, eight years later, at small, thoughtless things my relatives said and did. I'm uneasy about this anger. Maybe they did betray me, but surely out of innocence or personal necessity. The most obvious explanation of an eight-year grudge is that T.C.'s death left me with a generalised, free-floating, unattributable anger, and the smallest, most forgivable betrayal is a convenient target.

2.4.4 "Defence mechanisms"

For lack of a better word, one can say that bereaved parents may use "defence mechanisms" to protect themselves from the impact and pain of their loss. They may have the need to cushion the immediate impact of the death of their child (Byng-Hall 1991:132). Walsh and McGoldrick (1991:22) say: "An individual's dissociation, denial,

and repression may be important coping skills in surviving and mastering catastrophic trauma and loss, as occurred in the attempted genocide of the Nazi holocaust."

2.4.5 Searching behaviour

According to Finkbeiner (1996:6) "searching behaviour" takes place when "people continue to search for someone who's died." This means that bereaved parents could dream about the deceased child, could "see" her or him in the street when coming across someone resembling the dead child, or could expect the child to walk in the door any moment now. Cook and Wimberley (1983:229) refer to earlier research that indicated "that mourning involves a strong impulse to search for and recover the individual who has died."

2.4.6 Difficult dates and seasons

Bereaved parents usually experience a number of difficult dates and seasons following the death of their children. These dates and seasons mostly include the birthday of the child, the death day of the child, Christmas, and when other people are celebrating a holiday. Walsh and McGoldrick (1991:12) say: "Each new season, holiday, and anniversary is likely to re-evoke the loss." When other people are enjoying a holiday, their celebrations seem to sharpen the bereaved parents' "sense of loss and differentness" (Imber-Black 1991:212).

2.4.7 Reminders

Apart from the difficult dates and seasons that remind bereaved parents of their loss (see 2.4.6), many other reminders, and even small ones, can suddenly bring back their pain. Klass (1999:46) says: "At first, everything reminds them that the child is gone: room, clothes, television programs, vacations photographs, meal time, shortened shopping lists, and especially holidays." And then, later on, it can happen that out of the blue "something 'brings it all back' and it is as if the death were yesterday" (Klass 1999:47).

2.4.8 Relationships

The marital relationship of bereaved parents is one of the relationships that can become strained after the death of their child. This could happen when a husband and wife grieve in different ways (Foster & Smith 1987:16). It could also happen when both husband and wife are so overwhelmed by grief that they are unable to support each other. Alexander (1993:101) says: " At the very time that you most need the other, you are so absorbed in your own grieving that it is easy for the non-communication, the alienation and the isolation to grow." The "popular" knowledge about marital strain after the death of a child is that a very large percentage of marriages break up after the death of a child (Finkbeiner 1996:44). Klass, however, says that according to his research marriages do not necessarily die with the death of a child, but often receive an "overdue burial," because "[a]fter accepting the reality of the loss of the child, accepting the reality of the prior death of the marriage is a small step" (quoted in Finkbeiner 1996:47).

The death of a child does not only affect the parents' relationship with each other, but also affects the parents' relationships with other family members, like with surviving siblings (Neimeyer, Prigerson & Davies 2002:246). Referring to the effect of the death of a child on the whole family system, Bowen (1991:85) says that such a death "can shake the family equilibrium for years." After the death of a child the family is never again as it was, but is forever changed (Waldegrave 1999:176).

In the literature it is also reported that parents' relationships with people outside the family are often affected by and changed by the death of a child (Finkbeiner 1996:23). According to Moody and Archangel (2002:89) insensitive statements by sympathisers can cause such anger in bereaved parents that as a result "relationships are often damaged or shattered beyond repair."

2.4.9 New knowledges

The death of a child has the effect that parents no longer only know about death in an abstract or theoretical way, but now know death in a deep and personal way. Klass

(1999:47) says: "Bereaved parents are no longer protected by the illusion that death only happens to other people." Some parents report that they have lost their fear of death through the experience of losing their child and now live less fearfully of death. Finkbeiner (1996:181) put the following question to Diana: "Do you think you feel differently about your own death?" Her answer was:

Oh yes. Definitely. I used to have a great fear of death. But I think, "Mindy's been through it, she's done it, she's there. And she was little when she did it." So I have no fear. I can think, maybe I'll get hit by a bus and that'll be great. I want to go where she went. I have no fear of death. I would welcome it ...

The knowledge of "having faced the worst" in the death of their child can apparently help bereaved parents not to be overcome by the prospect of their own death (Klass 1999:49).

Another knowledge parents have after the death of a child is the knowledge of how it feels not to be in control. Finkbeiner (1996:188) explains this knowledge by saying: "I think ... the parents now know more about lack of control than most people, the way a heart patient now knows more about the body's fragility than someone who's never been sick."

The death of a child usually leads parents to "recompute" their priorities (Finkbeiner 1996:208). They often live with a new sense and knowledge of what is really important for them in life.

2.4.10 Identity

The effect of the death of a child can be that it leaves parents without a "meaningful narrative of self and world" (Neimeyer 2001:4). That means that it can have a significant impact on their identity and sense of who they are. For many parents their identities are largely based on the parental functions they perform and on the relationships they enjoy with their children. Losing a child, therefore, means that the parent also loses the roles of provider, protector and adviser for the child (Mabe & Dawes 1991:336). In the words of Carlos Sluzki (quoted in Walsh & McGoldrick 1991:vi), losing a child means that the parent loses a "repository" of her or his identity

and history, as well as "a resource for his emotional nourishment, feedback, and concern." Conversely, the parent also loses the opportunity to be such a "repository" and "resource" to the child.

2.4.11 Shattered dreams

The death of a child is, amongst many other things, a shattering of parental dreams for the child's future. McGoldrick and Walsh (1991:38) say: "It is often said, 'When your parent dies, you have lost your past. When your child dies, you have lost your future.' The death of a child involves the loss of parents' hopes and dreams." When a child dies, much unfulfilled potential and many hopes for the future die with her or him (Alexander 1993:95).

2.4.12 Shattered worldview

Added to shattered dreams, the death of a child can leave parents with a shattered worldview. Their worldview can be shattered by what Neimeyer, Prigerson and Davies (2002:241) call "the decimation of frameworks of meaning that previously sustained the bereaved individual." It can, for the bereaved parent, be extremely difficult to make sense of the world. Often the death of a child can lead to "the most profound questioning of the meaning of life" (McGoldrick & Walsh 1991:38).

2.4.13 Shattering or strengthening faith

In the literature I consulted, reference is made to both the shattering and strengthening of faith in bereaved parents after the death of their children. Some parents can feel deserted by God, while others tell of experiencing his close presence (Alexander 1993:7). A bereaved father (quoted by Kübler-Ross 1983:175) says: "... I want to believe. I feel I should, but after the death of Christian and all the prayers, thoughts, and energies that preceded, I find it increasingly difficult."

2.5 HOW PARENTS LIVE WITH THE DEATH OF A CHILD

In acting on the problem of living with the death of a child, bereaved parents create, in narrative terms, their own "effect" or "influence" on the problem (McKenzie & Monk 1997:106). The following are some of the actions reported in the literature, actions parents may take in trying to counter the devastating effect of the death of their child on them:

2.5.1 Continuing the bond with the child

After losing a child herself, and after conversations with many bereaved parents, Finkbeiner (1996: xiii) says: "Our children are in our blood; the bond with them doesn't seem to break, and the parents found subtle and apparently unconscious ways of preserving that bond." Parents usually do not allow the death of their children to break their bond or relationship with their children. With regard to these parents one can say that death ends a life but does not end a relationship (Robert Anderson in McGoldrick 1991:50). According to Klass (1999:39) bereaved parents continue the bond with their child as "an inner representation that they can call on in difficult times, which comforts them in their sorrow and provides a means by which they can access their better self in their new and poorer world." The relationship between the parent and the dead child is no longer external and physical, but internal. Klass (1999:110) quotes a mother who said about her relationship with her dead child: "I have a new relationship with Allison. It is internal, redefined, relevant, valued. Our relationship and memory are captured within me always to draw upon."

Preserving or maintaining the bond with the child can mean

- that parents have conversations with the child (Klass 1999:39)
- that parents include the child in their lives by, for instance, placing a picture of the deceased child on family portraits made after the child's death (Klass 1999:41)
- that parents remember the child's birthdays and the anniversaries of the death and keep track of the child's age (Finkbeiner 1996:247)

- that parents ritually symbolise the death of the child like the couple who put a concrete angel in their front garden (Klass 1999:50)
- that parents "re-member" the dead child in the sense of re-engaging with and retaining the child as a "member" of their "club of life." White (1997:22, 23) uses this metaphor in helping people "to experience, in their day-to-day lives, the fuller presence" of the person they are missing.
- that parents make the experience of the child's death count for something by, for example, leading a committee planning a candlelight ceremony, or supporting a charity to help relieve the pain of others (Klass 1999:84)
- that parents use linking objects like an item of clothing containing the child's odour. People in the child's world, such as class mates or friends, can also serve as linking objects for the parents (Klass 1999:101, 102).

2.5.2 Trying to make meaning of the child's death

In discussing the effect of the death of a child on parents in 2.4.12, I referred to the fact that the worldview of bereaved parents could be shattered and that they could be seriously questioning the meaning of life. To make sense of the world they are living in again, presents an enormous challenge to these parents. The parents may take up this challenge by "constructing durable biographies of their children and of themselves after the deaths of their children" (Klass 1999:122). By doing this the parents try to make meaning of the child's life and death, as well as of their own lives after the death of the child. Neimeyer, Prigerson and Davies (2002:239) refer to the "ubiquitous human tendency to organise experience in narrative form, to construct accounts that make sense of the troubling transitions in our lives by fitting them into a meaningful plot structure."

An important aspect of the narrative meaning making parents may attempt, is whether they will be able to see themselves as survivors or victims in their story about the death of their child. If they see themselves as victims, it will be difficult for them to "rise above the experience," but they may also "come to see themselves as survivors, who can be struck down but never beaten" (Walsh & McGoldrick 1991:26). Being the

survivors in this story rather than the victims, may help the parents to experience a sense of resilience and to be witnesses of "post-traumatic growth" in their own lives (Neimeyer 2001:7). Referring to the possible personal growth bereaved parents may experience, Neimeyer, Prigerson and Davies (2002:248) state: "We have also documented the impressive extent to which human beings are capable of growing through grief, reaffirming or revising the very assumptive worlds that were challenged by their loss."

In trying to make meaning of the death of their child, different theodicies or explanations of the death may be employed by parents. In their theodicy they may blame themselves, blame God, see a special (even divine) purpose for the child's death, or see the death as God's punishment for their sins (Cook & Wimberley 1983:227, 228). Different parents may arrive at different answers to the question of why their child died. In the words of a *Bereaved Parents* group (Klass 1999:164):

We have learned that different people find different answers to the personal, family, and spiritual issues raised by the deaths of their children... We respect different answers members may find as we explore the dilemmas and discoveries our grief has brought to our religious beliefs.

Some parents may only arrive at "half-answers" (Alexander 1993:174) and others at no answer at all. Finkbeiner (1996:152) speaks for the latter group, and accentuates how extremely difficult it is to find meaning in the death of a child, when she says: "When you try to make sense of these deaths, you hit a wall. All the parents could do, is repeat: a child's death is unnatural, senseless, and wrong."

The role of spirituality and faith in the parents' attempts to make meaning of their child's death can be either helpful or unhelpful. It may for instance be helpful for some parents to hold on to their Christian beliefs in an afterlife as part of a "death-defying theology" (Mabe & Dawes 1991:338). Cook and Wimberley (1983:225), however, say that

for those with deep faith religion may act as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it provides an explanation for the suffering and loss. On the other hand, it may provoke religious guilt when parents find the proffered explanation does not provide the comfort they had expected.

2.5.3 Joining support groups

In the literature I consulted, I came across quite a number of references to small groups in which bereaved parents come together to support one another. McGoldrick and Walsh (1991:38) say: "Self-help groups are extremely valuable for bereaved parents, providing a supportive network to facilitate dealing with the pain of the experience." The community that parents experience in these groups can play a vital role in their healing. As Klass (1999:181) puts it: "Healing happens in community."

Two of the support groups that are specifically named in the literature are "The Compassionate Friends" (Finkbeiner 1996:51) and "Bereaved Parents" (Klass 1999:41). Many of the parents joining these support groups are of the opinion that "talking to others with a similar loss helped them come to terms with their grief" (Foster & Smith 1987:19). Hilton-Barber (2004:61), a bereaved mother herself, says:

If it weren't for the support I got from a support group I joined for women who had lost children under the age of six, and two friends I met there, Kate Chipman and Fiona Irvine, who had also recently lost children, my struggle might have proved too much to bear.

When bereaved parents take the step to join a support group, it appears as if the importance of such a group for them is not so much in the programs of the group but rather in "the connection to other people when they did not feel connected to others in their natural support system" (Klass 1999:60). This connection to other bereaved parents in a group can have the effect that the dominant discourses about bereavement, grief and mourning (see 2.2.2) are accepted, or it can help the parents to resist the demands of these discourses and choose their own unique way of mourning (Foote & Frank 1999:180).

Taking part in a support group could, amongst other things, be very meaningful to bereaved parents in that it could help them find a way "to make their grief experience of use to others who are just setting foot on the same path" (Willis 1981:139, 140).

2.5.4 Sharing the grief

Where bereaved parents choose open communication and not secrecy about the death of their child, the "recovery process" seems to be enhanced (Walsh & McGoldrick 1991:16). In the literature one can hear the voices of parents who benefited greatly from sharing their grief (Foster & Smith 1987:19; Hilton-Barber 2004:61). There are, however, also examples in the literature of bereaved parents deciding not to speak about the deceased and employing a "no talk" rule (Waldegrave 1999:186; McGoldrick 1991:66). This could lead to isolation for bereaved parents, while sharing the grief could break the isolation and foster connection with others (Waldegrave 1999:188).

McGoldrick and others (1991:188, 189) refer to traditional African-American mourning practices that "facilitate grief resolution" and mention as one of these practices "the public expression of grief." To share their grief in a culturally acceptable way and to be able to express their emotions openly, could, according to this view, be very helpful for grieving parents. In Western culture, however, especially men are frowned upon when they share their grief too openly or expressively, and as a result they "seldom form relationships that include emotional sharing" (Anderson 1997a:223).

2.5.5 Making use of rituals

In a culture denying death (see 2.2.1) many rituals that previously helped bereaved parents to confront the reality of death, are now abandoned (Winter 1999:370) or abbreviated (Paul & Grosser 1991:94). Rolland (1991:161) says: "Recent writings in the family therapy field have underscored the lack of rituals in many families dealing with loss." Where bereaved parents choose to make use of rituals, however, it can prove very helpful to them. Referring to funeral rituals and visits to the grave, Walsh and McGoldrick (1991:9) say that these rituals "serve a vital function in providing direct confrontation with the reality of death and the opportunity to pay last respects, to share grief, and to receive comfort in the supportive network of survivors."

Some parents experience a certain closeness to their dead child when they visit the graveside and they may therefore make frequent visits to the cemetery. For others the

experience is different and they may visit the graveside infrequently or not at all (Willis 1981:137). Those parents who do "find" their child there, may go there "to weep, to remember, to talk, and sometimes to listen" (Klass 1999:68, 69).

Dennis Klass has found, in his involvement with the support group *Bereaved Parents*, that the group often develops its own rituals. He says (1999:115): "Although the wider culture has few remaining rituals by which the living interact with the dead, a community of people finding solace in their memories develops rituals to fill the void." These rituals include, amongst other things, joint visits to the graves of the children, the sending off of balloons with messages and the lighting of memorial candles.

What could be a very important ritual for bereaved parents, is the farewell ritual in which, immediately after the child's death, they can take time to be with their deceased child. This ritual can include washing and dressing the child, holding and kissing the child, and saying a prayer or singing the child's favourite song (Kübler-Ross 1983:5; Foster & Smith 1987:38; Miles 1990:13).

2.6 HELPFUL AND UNHELPFUL THINGS OTHER PEOPLE DO OR SAY

In addition to the things that many bereaved parents do in trying to counter the effect of the death of their child on them (see 2.5), I now want to refer to a number of helpful and unhelpful things, mentioned in the literature, that other people do or say to bereaved parents. Because of the limited space available, I will refer here only to a selected number of helpful and unhelpful things.

2.6.1 The support of others

Many parents, quoted in the literature, express their gratitude about the support they receive from others. This support can be in the form of visits (Foster & Smith 1987:51), letters "containing special memories of family and friends" (Moody & Archangel 2002:87), or phone calls (Miles 1990:13). The support can also be in the form of small gestures, like touching an arm, giving a hug (Foster & Smith 1987:20, 67-69), or

helping with practical things like cleaning the house (Hilton-Barber 2004:64). What parents find unhelpful, is when people hide from them, avoid them or distance themselves from them, because of their own discomfort, confusion and fear (Finkbeiner 1996:108).

Bereaved parents feel supported when their pain and grief are acknowledged and the deceased child is valued by others (Foster & Smith 1987:67, 68). When it is their experience that the community they live in is not sharing in their pain, they do not feel supported and their own pain is aggravated. Klass (1999:59) says: "Unfortunately, for a significant number of parents, the pain they experience is not felt within their community in a way that allows the parent to know that the community is sharing their pain."

It seems to me that what parents especially need from others, is just to be there for them, to be available. And, according to Klass (1999:68), this means "being with the parent in a way that the reality of the child's death and the reality of the pain are not the parent's alone." Moody and Archangel (2002:88) explain it like this: "Simplicity and quiet presence can bring tremendous comfort. Survivors long remember friends who sat beside them, allowing them to mourn."

2.6.2 Conversations

Receiving a negative reaction from friends and relatives when they have a need to talk to them, can be very painful for bereaved parents. A bereaved mother, Ann Robinson (quoted in Foster & Smith 1987:44), says:

People, family and friends, they avoid talking about Andrew, because they think it's going to upset me, or it's going to remind me. That's ridiculous, I don't need reminding. He's in my thoughts all the time. And I've got very, very distressed on many occasions when I try to introduce him into the conversation and the subject was changed, or there'd be an embarrassed silence. I can remember screaming, literally screaming, "I had Andrew, he was alive, he was here for nearly fourteen years. Talk about him!"

Bereaved parents need others to be witnesses to their stories of pain and grief. Klass (1999:14) says: "We are the witnesses of survivors taking their bearings after the storm,

assessing the damage to their stores, repairing their boats, putting down new moorings, charting the shoreline, and making forays inland to survey the resources available in this strange land." By being listeners and witnesses to bereaved parents, we "validate their courage, their struggle, and their strength" (Walsh & McGoldrick 1991:26).

The literature reveals a lot of "advice" from bereaved parents that people who want to support them can use in their conversations with these parents. Parents, for example, may advise others not to try explaining their own theory on why the death of the child happened, not to give them advice on how to grieve (Hilton-Barber 2004:64), not to change the subject when they begin to cry, and not to judge them (Foster & Smith 1987:68, 69; Moody & Archangel 2002:86). Parents may prefer others to say that they do not know what to say rather than to be ready with advice and answers (Finkbeiner 1996:101).

What often makes conversations with others extremely difficult for bereaved parents, are the platitudes they have to listen to, the insensitive comments that are supposed to comfort them, but instead often "discount or minimise" their loss (Miles 1990:12). I include here a number of horrifying examples from the literature:

- You now have a little angel in heaven (Miles 1990:12)
- You two are young, so you can have other children (Miles 1990:12)
- Your child is better off now (Miles 1990:12)
- Thank God you have other children (Miles 1990:12)
- Think how lucky you are, you will never see your son grow old. He will always be young in your eyes (Finkbeiner 1996:115)
- It is the will of God. Gilbert (1992: 27, 28) quotes a parent who said:
I got "It's God's will" ... and I finally laid into one person and I said, "What possible good could come from making my wife so sick and killing my child?" And they said, "Well, you don't always understand the plan." And I said, "I'm sorry, but there is no ultimate plan to justify this," and [I said,] "Hitler had a plan." I just remember feeling that frustration Some people, meaning well but doing the typical thing of coming up and telling me that it was God's will and all that stuff and I didn't want to hear it at the time.
- Enough crying already. It's time to pick up and move on with your life instead of indulging in self-pity (Hilton-Barber 2004:64)

- I know how you feel. I lost my grandmother last year, and we were very close (Hilton-Barber 2004:64)
- Time will heal (Hilton-Barber 2004:64)
- Just as well it happened now before you got too attached to the baby (Hilton-Barber 2004:64)
- What doesn't kill you, will make you stronger (Hilton-Barber 2004:64)

It seems to me that people who want to engage in conversation with bereaved parents will be well advised to remember the words of Hilton-Barber (2004:64): "Hold our hands while we make the journey back to life, because nothing you say will comfort us."

2.7 CONCLUSION

Working through the literature that enabled me to write this chapter, presented me with a tremendous learning experience. What I found especially informative was where parents' stories or words were reported directly or indirectly. Sharing in the parents' experience brought me into touch with what Klass (1999:199) calls every parent's "own worst dreams," but it also showed me the courage and resilience of parents living with the death of a child.

The aim of this chapter was to present a selection of the most important ideas, themes and discourses from the literature on bereavement and the death of children. Voices from this literature will also be heard in subsequent chapters.

In chapter 3 I will be looking at the effect of the death of Albert and J.W. on their parents, Vossie and Christa.

CHAPTER 3

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

3.1 INTRODUCTION

There are many different ways in which the death of their sons affected Vossie and Christa. This became clear to me when I had the privilege of being in conversation with them and of listening to some of their stories concerning the death of Albert and J.W. I think one could say that the impact of the death of their sons was both very deep, being extremely painful, and very wide, cutting across many aspects of their lives. Before describing some of the effects of the death of their sons on Vossie and Christa, it would, in my opinion, be important to first recount the circumstances surrounding the deaths of Albert and J.W.

3.2 THE DEATH OF ALBERT

Albert, born on the 28th of April 1998, only lived to be one week old and died on the 5th of May 1998. The night before his death Albert was weepy, and Vossie and Christa decided to take him to the paediatrician the following day. Before they could do this, however, Christa had to hurry him to the local private hospital when his condition worsened the following morning. After a long wait outside the emergency unit of the hospital, the paediatrician came out with the terrible news that Albert had died. A rare congenital heart defect was responsible for his death.

Vossie described the birth of Albert as "a life-long dream come true." His death, therefore, meant that this dream was very quickly shattered and that Vossie and Christa had to live with the effects of a shattered dream.

3.3 THE DEATH OF J.W.

Not fully three years after the death of Albert, J.W. (born on the 5th of July 1985) died at the age of 15 years. J.W. was chosen to represent the under 16A hockey team of his school, Paarl Boys' High School, on a tour to Queenstown. The school bus with the hockey team departed on the morning of the 4th of April 2001. At approximately 16:40 that afternoon Vossie received a phone call from the headmaster of the school, informing him that the school bus transporting the hockey team had been involved in an accident. According to the headmaster, J.W. had only injured his arm. But when Vossie, a little later, spoke to the teacher who had been the driver of the school bus, he was told that J.W. had died in the accident.

J.W.'s death was sudden and unexpected, and Walsh and McGoldrick (1991:13) have the following to say about this kind of death: "When a person dies unexpectedly, family members lack time to anticipate and prepare for the loss, to deal with unfinished business, or in many cases even to say their goodbyes." The death of such a young child is experienced as an "untimely loss" (Walsh & McGoldrick 1991:18) and amounts to a "reversal" of "the natural order" (McGoldrick & Walsh 1991:31), with "the natural order" being for parents to die before their children do.

3.4 THE DEATHS INVOLVING A LARGE NUMBER OF PEOPLE IN THE LIVES OF VOSSIE AND CHRISTA

A major effect of the death of their sons was that it involved a large number of people in Vossie and Christa's lives. And, there were ways in which the conduct of these people either helped or distressed them. These people either contributed to the creation of stories of help or to stories of hurt in the lives of Vossie and Christa.

3.4.1 Staff of the local private hospital

While they were attending to Albert during the last minutes of his short life, the medical staff of the emergency unit asked Vossie and Christa to wait outside the unit. They had

to wait there for approximately two hours. At one stage Vossie asked a nursing sister about Albert's condition, but did not get a clear answer from her. To Vossie and Christa it was as if the staff tried to avoid them. Instead of this kind of conduct by the medical staff, Vossie and Christa would rather have wanted them to keep them informed about Albert's condition. Even news that things were not going well with Albert, they told me, would have helped them. Christa said that she would have preferred the staff to allow them to be with Albert, so that he would not have been without them while he was dying. She would have wanted him to experience their "love" and "warmth" which he had become accustomed to during his short life.

After the paediatrician came with the terrible news that Albert had died, Vossie and Christa went into the emergency unit and took turns to hold Albert. What they would have liked at this stage, was to be left alone with Albert. The staff, however, did not give them much of an opportunity to be alone and, after some time, also asked them to end off their saying goodbye to Albert so that they could start with the post-mortem. This conduct by the staff did not prove helpful to Vossie and Christa and was certainly not in line with what Kübler-Ross (1983:5) would advise in such a situation. She says: "When a child dies, it is important that the family be allowed to be alone with the child who is making the transition."

According to Vossie an administrative member of the staff at the emergency unit did not act in the same detached way that the medical staff acted. She was "involved" and patient with them. She did not increase their "anxiety" but was "empathic" and was "there for them." She also tried to comfort them and allowed them to make telephone calls. Vossie and Christa could see clearly that the crisis in the emergency unit had an "impact" on this woman. Vossie said that her conduct, along with the conduct of one of the local ministers and the undertaker, reminded him of the words of a song which says that where love and compassion are present, God is present too. He also linked the "loving conduct" of these three people to the fact that love is mentioned in Galatians 5 as part of the fruit of the Holy Spirit. In the conduct of these people, Vossie could see "the Lord at work." To this Christa added that the conduct of such people helped make the situation more "bearable" for her.

3.4.2 Pupils and teachers of Paarl Boys' High School

Christa spoke about the many pupils from J.W.'s school, Paarl Boys' High School, who came to visit them after J.W.'s death and who talked a lot about J.W. Edwin, J.W.'s best friend, still visits regularly. Some time after J.W.'s death Edwin had a dream that he told Christa about. In this dream Edwin meets J.W. at school and hugs him. They then try to phone Christa to say that J.W. is at the school and that everything is all right. But then Edwin suddenly realises that it is only he who can see J.W. and nobody else. When they eventually get through to Christa on the phone, and Edwin wants to give the phone to J.W., J.W. has disappeared again.

Pupils from J.W.'s school also played an important role at his funeral service. The whole hockey team and many other pupils attended the funeral in school uniform. Edwin, J.W.'s best friend, was responsible for the tribute at the funeral, in which he told how he and J.W. became friends in their grade 8 year. Edwin pointed out the "highlights" of J.W.'s life, but added that J.W. always remained "humble" in spite of his achievements. He also referred to J.W.'s "dry and sharp sense of humour" and the "enthusiasm" with which he did everything that he attempted in life, even the "touch rugby" on Friday afternoons. Five pupils of the school, J.W.'s best friends, who also helped with the coffin, supported Edwin during the tribute by standing beside him in the front of the church. At one stage the six boys all saluted J.W. with the Tinus Delpont salute, Tinus being a rugby player in J.W.'s favourite rugby team, "The Cats."

After the accident the wife of the school's headmaster brought J.W.'s hockey kit to Vossie and Christa's house. She sat on the bed with Christa and helped her unpack the clothes. She visited Christa again and Christa said that this woman sat with her "for hours." She also organised for Christa and the teacher who had driven the bus in which J.W. died, to meet at her home over a cup of tea and talk about the accident, something that they had trouble organising before that time.

The school brought out a special issue of their monthly magazine, "Retina," an issue that was dedicated to J.W. The school also introduced an award for journalism, called

the "J.W. Minnaar Award For Journalism," to be awarded at the annual prize-giving of the school.

Christa said that it was difficult for her when J.W.'s friends were confirmed as members of their congregation. She did not feel like attending the confirmation ceremony, but some of J.W.'s friends invited her and afterwards some of them gave her the rose that they had received at the confirmation. This meant a lot to Christa because she says that her "biggest fear" is that the friends will forget J.W. Christa also told me about the last school day of the year in which J.W. would have finished school. On that day J.W.'s class-mates brought Christa a bunch of flowers, a gesture that moved and touched her deeply.

3.4.3 Local ministers

One of the local ministers accompanied Vossie when he had to tell Christa about J.W.'s death. According to Vossie this minister was in "a state of denial" and initially persisted in saying that perhaps J.W. was not dead after all. Christa said that she had found this conduct very disturbing. And when, shortly after she had received the news of J.W.'s death, the minister told her to calm down and not to ask what the Lord "had against her," she just wanted the minister to be taken out of their house. Vossie felt that this minister "had not made peace with his own mortality."

Some time later the same minister advised Vossie to become more involved in congregational activities again. This made Vossie very angry and he told the minister that he was "angry" and that he "needed time." The minister then asked Vossie if he did not think that the Lord would bless him if he started to work for him again.

Another local minister and his wife ended their vacation a day early in order to get to Vossie and Christa. They were sad with Vossie and Christa. What this minister and his wife did, was to just be "present" and "available." This minister did not say much and did not try to use messages from Scripture to comfort Vossie and Christa. He did say a prayer before they left. Vossie and Christa describe him as a person with an "empathic" personality, somebody who can "sympathise." In contrast to the first minister, this one

was not "uncomfortable" with death. Vossie mentioned him as one of three people (see 3.4.1) who reminded him, through their conduct, of the words of a certain song about love and God's presence.

3.4.4 The family doctor

Christa said that the conduct of their family doctor meant a lot to her. Shortly after Albert's death, when Christa came back from the hospital, the family doctor arrived at their house. She gave Christa an injection and cried with her. She was "dumbfounded," "very sad" and "shocked" and said that she "could not believe it" that Albert was dead.

According to Christa, this doctor also "assisted" her very well during the time that followed Albert's death. She phoned from time to time to hear how Christa was doing. And on a certain day, when things threatened to become "too much" for Christa, the doctor sent her receptionist to fetch her and then organised everything for her hospitalisation. Christa remembers that the doctor told her not to be so "hard" on herself by trying to cope without help, such as the help of good medication.

3.4.5 Good friends

Shortly after Christa had received the news of J.W.'s death, a large number of people came to their house. Among these people were Vossie and Christa's "good friends" who never allowed them to be alone. They did not necessarily do or say anything, although they sometimes helped with practical things like making a cup of tea. After Albert's death there was almost no meal that Vossie and Christa had to eat without good friends present. According to Vossie and Christa their good friends gave them "a lot of support." They went to the Karoo and to the sea with friends. These friends "helped them laugh," but also let them cry when they wanted to. The humour they could enjoy with their friends, Vossie and Christa said, helped a lot, though it was never "frivolous" or "forced" but "spontaneous." And when it was difficult for them to pray, their good friends prayed "on their behalf." All of this helped to make things "softer" for Vossie and Christa and they could experience that when they were with their friends life was still "half good."

Some female friends of Christa's made a collection of the articles that appeared in the newspaper about the accident in which J.W. had died and brought Christa the collection. For some of Christa's female friends it was initially very difficult to talk about Albert and J.W., but in course of time they could talk about them with more ease.

Then there were the friends who brought Vossie and Christa a tree after the death of each of their sons: a camellia to plant in memory of Albert and an olive tree to plant in memory of J.W.

Christa singled out the support she had received from one of her neighbours, a woman who sent an SMS on J.W.'s birthday while she was on tour in Paris, France. This neighbour keeps the commemoration of the death and birthdays of Albert and J.W. going by bringing flowers or a beautiful card. Christa also mentioned two couples who visit them regularly on J.W.'s birthday.

When I asked Vossie and Christa if their good friends could be thought of as a "support team," they replied that they would rather describe them as part of their "extended family."

3.4.6 Therapists

In our conversations Vossie referred to two therapists he had consulted after Albert's death. He told me that it was important for him to talk to the therapists about his feelings. One of the therapists, Vossie said, helped him to get "perspective" regarding living with Albert's death. This therapist shared from her own life experience how the death of her husband became an opportunity to grow as a person. Vossie identified strongly with this personal story and wanted his own life story also to be a story of personal growth.

When Vossie was in consultation with the other therapist, this man told him about the passage he had read from Scripture that morning. It was the passage about Abraham and Sarah who conceived their own child after they had waited for a very long time. Vossie told me that this passage had made him wonder: "Why did it work then and not

today?" "One wants to keep hoping," Vossie said, "but when does hope stop?" Vossie said that this therapist tried to open the door of hope a little more for him, but that his need at that stage was rather to be accompanied towards "acceptance."

Christa consulted a psychiatrist at some stage but chose not to have a series of conversations with a psychologist or other therapist. On one occasion she did have a conversation with a pastoral therapist to unload emotional tension.

3.5 PERSONAL EFFECT

In our conversations Vossie and Christa made mention of quite a number of different emotions and personal changes they had experienced after the death of Albert and J.W. They often talked about situations in which the effect of the death of their sons on them was quite evident.

Christa told me that initially it was difficult to see boys in the Paarl Boys' High School blazer. It was also very difficult when J.W.'s friends were to be confirmed in their congregation. Vossie said that he became emotional when he passed the place where he had always dropped J.W. off for school. For the first week after Albert's death he was very emotional and found it very difficult when his brother came to fetch some of Albert's baby things. Initially Vossie also 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 had been born.

Vossie and Christa told me how, a few months after J.W.'s death, it was a big anticlimax for them to return home after an exciting overseas trip they had undertaken. To be back home after the trip was some kind of a "low" to them. They also had the experience that it was bad for them to enter their home after a nice weekend away. Their home had become a place from which two children were painfully missing.

"Fear" was mentioned in a number of contexts 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. As time went on, this fear lost its initial "sharp edges" for him. The death of their two sons, Christa said, made her fear of death "disappear," but she more than once referred to her "biggest fear." And this "biggest fear," she said, is that people will "forget" J.W. after some time. A certain Anna, quoted by Klass (1999:158) expresses a similar fear when she says about her deceased son:

I miss him so when I tell the stories, but it feels wonderful to tell them. There are few places I can do that now. People just don't take it well when I say "let me tell you about my funny, adorable dead son." But as I talk to you it seems real and good. It feels bad, and it feels good. One thing I am afraid of is that, as the years go by, no one will remember his story, fewer people will know the reality of him.

The fear that others will forget her deceased sons could perhaps be aggravated for Christa by the fact that in Western culture the "dominant discourse of grieving encourages forgetting, getting over grief, moving on" (Hedtke 2004:5). This discourse provides fuel for the fear with which Christa and other bereaved parents have to struggle. In working with bereaved people, who painfully experience the effect of the dominant grieving discourse in their lives, Michael White (1988:17-28) uses the metaphor of "saying hullo again" (see also 2.3.1). By means of this metaphor White helps people to understand that they do not only have to say goodbye to their deceased loved ones but that they can, in certain respects, also continue to "say hullo" to them after their death. White (1988:28) says: "...I believe that the process of grief is a 'saying goodbye and then saying hullo' phenomenon." And if one could regularly say "hullo" to one's deceased loved one it could perhaps help contain the fear that he or she would be forgotten.

Christa said that she found some "comfort" in the fact that J.W. was ready to die and that he knew about his death in advance. But this comfort, she said, is outweighed by the "need" to have J.W. with her. She would have preferred having him with her. At one point in a conversation Christa said: "I don't struggle with the why-question any more; I only long for them [Albert and J.W]."

According to Christa it still happens that she experiences some kind of a build up of emotions and that something trivial will then "trigger" it. After crying and expressing her emotions, she then "feels better" afterwards.

Christa told me that her whole "looking forward to things" had changed. Whereas she earlier would not have wanted to die young, she at present would not mind if the Lord came "now." To this Vossie added that he did not want to "cling to life at all costs" any more.

3.6 SPIRITUAL EFFECT

Vossie and Christa were also affected spiritually by the death of Albert and J.W. Christa, for example, mentioned how, shortly after receiving the news of J.W.'s death, she was very upset with what the local minister said and also wanted to know from the Lord what it was that He had "against her." When J.W. died, it meant that Christa had lost her first husband, Gawie, as well as Albert and J.W. within the space of approximately six years. Three people very close to her were taken away by death in relatively quick succession. And this was the backdrop against which her question of what the Lord had "against her" had been asked.

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 him less of a believer, Vossie, for a fairly long time afterwards, did not want "to hear" about the love of God. 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 "anger" Vossie talked about could perhaps have had something to do with the fact that Vossie and Christa experienced the death of their two sons as an "injustice" life had inflicted on them. It was not something they "deserved," they said. When I asked them about it, they made it clear to me that they did not see this injustice as being inflicted by God, but by life.

In our conversations Vossie used the word "disillusionment" to describe the effect of Albert's death on him. In shattering his dream, the death of Albert also left him behind to contend with "disillusionment." To this Christa added that the "disillusionment"

changed her focus in life. She nowadays finds it difficult to understand why certain (especially material) things could have so much value for people.

3.7 QUESTIONS

The death of Albert and J.W. raised certain very difficult questions for Vossie and Christa. Vossie told me about how he had "bargained" with the Lord while Albert was in the emergency unit and how he wanted a "miracle" to happen. When the miracle did not happen and Albert died, Vossie asked the question: "Why only seven days?" And accompanying this question was his "anger." He said that he was angry for a long time, although he knew that Albert's death "had to be."

According to Vossie, he "makes theology" out of the death of their two sons and he told me that this brings him to the "theodicy question," "theodicy" being "any attempt to solve the problem of justifying the concept of divine providence in the face of suffering and death - specifically, the problem of reconciling the existence of evil with the notion of God's love and sovereignty" (Deist 1992:258). How Vossie answers the theodicy question for himself, is explained in chapter 4 (see 4.8).

One of the difficult questions for Christa was the one about what the Lord had "against her" when three of her close loved ones died in such a short time (see 3.6). Another question that presented itself to Christa initially, was why J.W. was the one person out of the fifteen occupants of the school bus to die in the accident. The answer for her was: "because J.W. was ready."

Vossie told me about a certain Bible study they attended where it was said that Christians are on this earth only because they have the task of being witnesses to the Lord. This statement made Vossie ask: "Why then was there no further task for J.W. on earth?"

3.8 REMINDERS

From time to time Vossie and Christa are reminded of Albert and J.W. through people they see or through something that happens. Even small things can suddenly serve as a reminder of their deceased sons. The morning after J.W.'s death his alarm clock went off at 05:00, waking and reminding Christa of him. After J.W.'s death Christa was also reminded of him when she was driving her car. Because she picked him up at school every afternoon, it initially felt as if he was near her when she was driving the car and as if she could even hear his voice.

A powerful reminder of J.W. for Vossie and Christa is his friends or other young people of more or less the same age. Christa explained how difficult it was for her when the confirmation service of J.W.'s friends drew near and that she did not want to attend it. Vossie again, told me about the time he saw young students at Stellenbosch and thought that J.W. would probably have been one of them at that stage. Finkbeiner (1996:105) quotes a certain Anne who said about her deceased son Robert's friends: "I like them and they like me. But it's not something I seek out. There is some pain attached to them. Robert has stopped in time; they've moved on through time." According to Finkbeiner (1996:107) the "common thread" that bereaved parents have with people with living children becomes "painful," especially when they tell of things like a child's wedding or job promotion.

3.9 HEALTH

Within two months after Albert's death Christa had lost thirteen kilograms 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.

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

3.10 RECEIVING UNHELPFUL AND/OR HURTFUL ADVICE AND TREATMENT

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

Vossie related how one of the local ministers advised him to become involved in church activities again and asked him if he did not think the Lord would bless him if he worked for him again. It could perhaps be with this incident in mind that Vossie and Christa stated that if a minister were to visit them now, they would not want this person to tell them how to handle their losses.

A colleague of Christa's 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 confirmed that there were people who told them to be thankful that they still had their daughter, Anna-Mart. It also happened that people who did not have the "guts" to contact them shortly after the death of their sons and who let some time go by, offered a weak excuse such as: "Unfortunately we were just too busy to get round to visiting you."

Vossie and Christa have not found it helpful when people change the subject of talking about Albert or J.W. too soon. They confirmed that their need was precisely to talk about their deceased children.

3.11 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." When Albert was born, Vossie was very glad but immediately had the sense that something was going to happen. This sense was confirmed by what happened on the night before Albert died. While Vossie was watching Christa feeding Albert that night, he suddenly experienced some kind of a "vision" in which he could see a small white coffin in front of him. He also calls this a "special revelation" from God. This revelation or vision helped him when, on the following morning, he heard that Albert had to be taken to hospital and that all was not well. According to Vossie this vision was not fabricated but came "from somewhere" and that this "somewhere" was from the Lord. In "bad times" later it helped Vossie to think about what had happened that night and to realise that God is "in charge."

On the morning of J.W.'s hockey tour J.W. was up and ready at 05:00, while he normally had difficulty getting up early. He also behaved in a much more quiet way than usual and did not greet Christa in his usual way when it was time to leave. Vossie and Christa also remember that J.W. avoided eye contact with both of them. Because of this unusual behaviour by J.W., Vossie and Christa labelled that morning a "strange" morning. Their understanding of his behaviour then is that he must have had some sense of his imminent death, perhaps not unlike Vossie's experience the night before Albert's death.

On the afternoon of the day J.W. departed on the hockey tour, Christa was asleep. At about 15:00 she was woken by something like a thud, and she later learned that this incident had happened more or less at the same time the accident took place.

In one of our conversations Christa told me about the day when she was lying on her bed and heard a repeated tick against the window. When she tried to determine the cause of the noise, she saw a little sunbird - 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 and at the door it flapped its wings for some time. For Christa this was some kind

of a "message" that J.W. was "fine." To her it was an answer to her prayers that the Lord would give her a "sign" that J.W. was "fine."

3.12 CONCLUSION

In my opinion what has been related in this chapter shows very clearly that the effect of the death of Albert and J.W. on Vossie and Christa was immensely far-reaching and that it touched and changed many aspects of their lives. The death of their sons involved many people in their lives and affected them personally, spiritually and health-wise in a profound way. It also made them ask and struggle with difficult questions and share in some extraordinary experiences.

In chapter 4 I will explain how Vossie and Christa did not just capitulate in the face of their enormous losses and the effect that it had on them, but how they kept going without the physical presence of Albert and J.W.

CHAPTER 4

HOW VOSSIE AND CHRISTA LIVE WITH THE DEATH OF ALBERT AND J.W.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The enormous challenge Vossie and Christa have to face daily is to live with the death of Albert and J.W. They could of course capitulate before this challenge, especially when the death of their two sons is perceived only as part of an overwhelming problem story in which they are the powerless victims. What I want to report in this chapter, however, shows that Vossie and Christa bravely carried on with their lives and, in narrative terms, had their own effect or influence on the problem. White (in White & Epston 1990:100) refers to a conversation in which he first questioned people about the influence of a certain problem in their lives and relationships, and then questioned them about their influence in the "life" of the problem. The latter mode of questioning is what this chapter is about. It asks about Vossie and Christa's effect or influence on the problem of having to live with the death of Albert and J.W.

The stories Vossie and Christa told about their lives after the death of their two sons, convinced me that they should be looked upon as "survivors" of this tragedy rather than as mere "victims." While listening to their stories, I came to know them as "survivors" in the sense in which Walsh and McGoldrick (1991:26) use the term when they say: "Families that have experienced many traumatic, untimely deaths may develop either a feeling of being 'cursed' and unable to rise above the experience, or they may come to see themselves as survivors, who can be struck down but never beaten."

But how do Vossie and Christa live with the death of their two sons? I believe that the stories related in this chapter will help towards answering this question.

4.2 CONTINUING THE BOND WITH ALBERT AND J.W.

One way in which Vossie and Christa live with the death of their sons is by continuing their bond with them. Many of the stories they related, have to do with including Albert and J.W. in their lives. And by including them in their lives, they continue the bond with them.

The photographs Vossie and Christa have of their sons play an important role in their continued relationship with them. Because of the shortness of Albert's life, they do not have many photographs of him. Christa referred to a photograph of Vossie and Albert in which she enjoys seeing Vossie's features in Albert. Unfortunately, Christa said, there is no photograph featuring only Albert and herself. 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. A number of these photographs, together with other mementos, are to be seen on the wall of J.W.'s room, which is now being used as a study and workroom. In honour of J.W., Vossie and Christa decided to change and use J.W.'s room in this way. They spend much time in this room and see this new use for J.W.'s room as making what happened "part of their lives." They said: "We cannot put what happened behind us. It is too precious."

One of the things Vossie and Christa use in continuing their bond with their sons, is what Klass (1999:101, 102) calls "linking objects." An example of this is Albert's "baby grow" and the bath cupboard that remind Vossie and Christa of him. Other examples are J.W.'s friends, his room and his bed. Christa shared how, shortly after J.W.'s death, she used to climb into his bed. Making use of these "linking objects" helped Vossie and Christa continue their relationship with Albert and J.W. even after their death.

While not having their two sons with them physically, Vossie and Christa take them with them "in their thoughts." They share their thoughts of J.W. with each other. They

talk about J.W. a lot, and their daughter, Anna-Mart, joins them in this. Christa told me about a poem Anna-Mart had written in which she says that it sometimes feels as if J.W. is far away, but that he "lives in her heart."

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, liked to say: "When in doubt, opt out." 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," and when she thinks of him as somebody who always wanted peace, it helps her to take the correct actions towards people that perhaps annoy her.

For Christa her relationship with Albert and J.W. is an ongoing relationship. According to her she experiences it as ongoing because she "will see them again." For Vossie the relationship is ongoing too, although he sees it as "abstract" and "one-sided." The one-sidedness, he said, is because it is he who "longs for" and "misses" the boys - and they can of course not reciprocate.

A number of rituals and symbols were referred to in our conversations. Some of these rituals and symbols also play an important role in helping Vossie and Christa continue their bond with Albert and J.W. In the following section the rituals and symbols that Vossie and Christa talked about in our conversations are discussed.

4.3 MAKING USE OF RITUALS AND SYMBOLS

A very important ritual for Vossie and Christa was when, shortly after the deaths of Albert and J.W., they had to say goodbye to each of their two sons. In Albert's case they had a short time with him in the emergency unit of the hospital, where they took turns to hold him. Afterwards they had more time to say goodbye to him at the mortuary. At the mortuary, Christa said, she touched Albert again. At that moment she experienced that it was "no longer" Albert and that that which made him Albert, had actually gone.

When J.W. died, they had to wait until he was brought back from the Eastern Cape before they could visit and say goodbye to him at the mortuary. Vossie and Christa told me that they went to the mortuary about three or four times and took leave of J.W. "properly." It was good for them that they could take their time and did not have to hurry up at the mortuary.

An ongoing ritual in Vossie and Christa's lives is when Christa lights three candles every night, one each for Gawie (her first husband), Albert and J.W. Christa mentioned 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 often 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 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. Vossie and Christa said that the olive tree already bears fruit and that the camellia bears white flowers. The trees serve as living, growing and blooming symbols of the lives 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 death and birthdays of Albert and J.W., and to keep their memory alive.

Through their use of rituals, Vossie and Christa continue their bond with Albert and J.W. And all these rituals contribute to keeping their sons "integrated in the world of the living" (Klass 1999:136).

4.4 TAKING COMFORT FROM VARIOUS THINGS

During our conversations Vossie and Christa mentioned various things they derive comfort from. One of these comforting things is Vossie's "vision" the night before

Albert died. (In chapter 3 this vision was described in more detail - see 3.11.) According to Vossie, the Lord used this vision to "prepare" him for what was to follow the next day and he is convinced that the vision came from the Lord.

When it comes to J.W.'s death, it was of comfort to Vossie and Christa that J.W. "knew" beforehand that he was to die. The unusually quiet way in which he had acted the morning before he left on the hockey tour, was an indication to them that J.W. "knew." According to Vossie and Christa he probably had some sense of what was to happen. The other important comforting aspect for Vossie and Christa was that J.W. was "ready" to die (see also 3.7).

Even something as small as a "baby grow" was mentioned by Christa as a source of comfort. Initially Albert's "baby grow" comforted her, because it was something that belonged to him.

A story of comfort that Christa related was the one about their neighbours' son who came to tell her about what he had found written on a school desk. On the inside of the lid of this desk somebody had inscribed J.W.'s name and the date of his death. For Christa this meant that somebody had been thinking of J.W. while he was doing this. This meant a lot to her because her "biggest fear" was that people would "forget" J.W. after some time. The story about this school desk incident in some way corresponds with the words of a bereaved father in a work of fiction who said: "I have a hunger to talk about my son, but even more of a hunger to hear others talk about him" (Coetzee 1994:25).

The extraordinary incident (see 3.11) where a sugar-bird visited Christa was to her a "message" that J.W. was "fine." She also sees this incident as an answer to her prayers that the Lord should give her a "sign" in this regard. And, as a Christian she derives much comfort from this God-given "message" or "sign."

In one conversation Christa mentioned the importance of the "grace" of God to her. Referring to her experience over the last ten years, she said: "I know something that very few people know - something about the grace of God." For her this grace of God

meant not knowing how she had "handled" the situation and "not knowing how you came from there to here." This mirrored the well-known story about the two sets of footprints left in the sand by a human person and God walking together. In this story the narrator tells how he blamed God for the times that only one set of footprints could be seen in the sand, as if God's footprints were absent during difficult times. But, according to the story, those times were the times when the narrator of the story was actually carried by God.

4.5 MAKING THEIR OWN EXPERIENCES COUNT

Through my conversations with Vossie and Christa it became clear to me that they wanted their own experiences, in living with the death of their sons, to count. In other words they wanted their knowledges and experiences to be of help to others. Christa said that it would be good for her if all the things that she had shared during the course of the conversations, could "make it better" for somebody else. This is in keeping with the words of Klass (1999:83 & 84) where he says:

Part of the resolution of grief is making the pain count for something, or, put another way, of making the parent's life, especially the experience of the child's death, count for something ... One of the ways parents' lives can count ... is to help others ...

A thought that occurred to me when thinking about how much Vossie and Christa could offer in terms of their experience, was that they could act as "consultants" to other bereaved parents and people who want to be of help to such parents. Ministers, for example, could benefit much from some of the ideas Vossie and Christa shared. They expressed the view that if a minister were to visit them now, they would like to tell him or her about what they had learned from the death of their two sons. One of the things they had learned was that it was not helpful when a local minister, who tried to support them, was not comfortable with death. The way they see it is that ministers, who have to deal with bereaved parents as part of their ministry, should be at peace with their own mortality. This presents a real challenge for those who are involved in the training of ministers. They are challenged to listen to the voices of people like Vossie and Christa who are on the receiving end when ministers have difficulties handling their own

mortality. The question is how theological training can help ministers to be more comfortable with death and their own mortality.

On one matter Vossie and Christa were quite clear: they would not like a minister to tell them how to handle their losses. Ministers and others could further benefit from their advice that one should not change the subject too quickly when talking to them about the death of their sons. They say this because of their "need" to talk to others about Albert and J.W.

A word Vossie used to describe his own experience with the death of Albert and J.W., is "disillusionment" (see also 3.6). From what he said, it was clear to me that he had made "disillusionment" count in his life. He did this by viewing it as a preparation for other disillusionments that were to follow. When he lost his job in the year of J.W.'s death, he was "more empowered," he said, to handle the situation than before the death of their sons. "Disillusionment" made him more sensitive for "injustice," especially for injustice against the farm workers he is now working with. It made him sensitive, he said, to how "hard" people could be in society and in the world.

Vossie and Christa mentioned the following "dos" and "don'ts" when it comes to trying to help bereaved parents:

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

Vossie and Christa's experience was that their friends prayed "on their behalf" when they found it difficult to pray (see also 3.4.5). When a friend, who was dying of cancer, felt that she was unable to make contact with God, Christa could "comfort" her by

telling how others prayed for them in their crisis. In this way she made her own experience count in aid of her dying friend.

4.6 ACCEPTING HELP

During our conversations Vossie and Christa told some stories about accepting help in dealing with the effects of the death of Albert and J.W. Vossie, for example, referred to two therapists he had consulted (see also 3.4.6). Visiting one of them, he said, had 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. According to Christa, she initially found it difficult to accept that she was in need of antidepressants. But without them, "anxiety" and "depression" threatened to disrupt her life. Both Vossie and Christa told me how they had benefited from antidepressants and Christa's view was that she would be on antidepressants "for the rest of her life" (see also 3.9). She also mentioned the help she accepted from the family doctor.

Vossie and Christa could have decided to reject any help that was offered to them and to try to cope on their own. They could have withdrawn from other people and treated their losses as something so personal that nobody else would have been allowed to enter that part of their world. However, they decided to accept help and to allow others to be part of their team or "extended family," standing with them against their problem. "Extended family" was the term they used for describing their good friends. They allowed these friends to, amongst other things, eat with them, make them laugh and pray for them. And this made it "softer" for them (see also 3.4.5). Vossie and Christa's experience in this regard could be linked to Dennis Klass's experience in his work with many 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."

4.7 MOURNING ACTIVELY

According to Vossie, he reacted to the death of Albert as a "typical male." This means that he acted as if mourning was not necessary for him. This fits the picture presented by Anderson (1997a:205) when he says: "From childhood, men are encouraged to control their grief. 'Big boys don't cry,' they are told. The mark of being a man is to suffer in silence: showing pain is a sign of vulnerability or weakness." Vossie pretended to be strong and, for a long time, acted as if nothing had happened. He made certain "plans" with which he wanted to "cancel out" Albert's death. One of these plans was to consult different doctors about the possible reversal of Christa's sterilisation.

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. His way of mourning actively was to struggle with the questions surrounding the death of the boys. ("Wroeg" is the Afrikaans word he uses to describe this struggle.) This is evident in his "making theology" of the two children's death, an attempt to make meaning of their death (see 4.8). Christa's way of mourning actively, on the other hand, has been to "work" and to be active. Staying busy proved helpful to her. At times, after a build up of emotions, she cries and expresses her emotions, and then feels better afterwards. By their own admission, Vossie and Christa mourn in different ways. They do, however, both talk often about Albert and J.W. when they have the need to and when they think of them.

Some of the rituals mentioned in 4.3 also indicate to me that Vossie and Christa mourn actively for their two sons. They light candles for them, take flowers to the graveyard on important dates and watch the trees that they planted in memory of Albert and J.W. grow and flower.

4.8 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 extensively. They told me that they had tried to

sort things out for themselves by reading a variety of books. Amongst their reading matter were "alternative books," stories of parents who had also lost children through death, books on bereavement and books on the "why-question." Christa referred specifically to some books on bereavement that were written by Elizabeth Kübler-Ross. Vossie said that he gave a lot of attention to the book of Job in the Bible.

On the question of sorting things out for themselves, Vossie said that one can never sort out this matter completely. He said that "one aims for acceptance," which is the "ultimate." The questions, however, remain, although the manner in which one asks them, does change. When Vossie says that the death of his sons can never be sorted out "completely," it resonates with what Walsh and McGoldrick (1991:8) have to say about the seeming impossibility of reaching "some complete 'once and for all' coming to terms with the loss." According to Walsh and McGoldrick the "cherished psychoanalytic notion of working through loss to accomplish a complete resolution does not fit the experience of most individuals and their families."

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 determined that they should, even though it was shorter than other people's lives."

Vossie explained God's involvement in the death of Albert and J.W. 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. In the process he is critical of some of the existing answers and models in connection with a theological understanding of death. He said: "What we know at present about death needs more qualification than what we are being told by books and ministers." He also expressed the view 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!" In the current theology hope is, for Vossie, too far off, "only at the end." To him an example of an "alternative model" is the woman in a television programme 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?" He thinks that theology should be "broader" and include "alternative models." The Biblical material alone is "too abstract."

Some of the stories Vossie and Christa told indicated to me that they could "see the Lord at work" in certain "extraordinary" things that happened to them. Some of these experiences were related in 3.11. But Vossie also said that he could "see the Lord at work" in the conduct of ordinary people, for instance in the conduct of the undertaker, one of the local ministers (see 3.4.3) and the woman who did administrative work in the emergency unit of the hospital (see 3.4.1). Vossie and Christa experienced that God is "love" by "other people" caring for them. In both the "extraordinary" events at the time of their sons' death, as well as the loving and caring conduct of ordinary people, they detected the involvement of God.

At one stage during our last conversation, Vossie said that he would need more time to relate how he tried to "explain" the death of Albert and J.W. to himself. A meeting was arranged and in that meeting Vossie said that he had tested his "explanation" with friends, but that not all of them had accepted it. Vossie said that perhaps it had been difficult for them to accept because they had not had the same sort of experience with death that he and Christa had had. According to Vossie Albert's death did not make sense right away but only three years later, when he lost his work because of rationalisation at Nederburg. Albert's death was some kind of "preparation" and was "instrumental" in what was to come. By this, Vossie said, he meant that Albert's death had prepared them for J.W.'s death three years later, as well as for his move to the Amos project, where he would enjoy fewer financial benefits. An "explanation" for their sons' death, Vossie said, also had to do with the fact that all people have a "purpose" on earth. And Vossie discovered, after Albert's death, that what he was doing at Nederburg was

not in line with his own purpose in life. A "process of stripping" had to take place in Vossie's life and to him the death of their sons was part of this stripping process.

Without the one week of Albert's life, Vossie said, he would have experienced God only "one dimensionally." Before Albert's death, Vossie had thought of God as being in a "box" and he thought that his theological training contributed to his thinking of God in this limited way. But through Albert's death he experienced what he calls the "extensiveness" of God. To Vossie this means that God cannot be boxed in. He could see God's hand in everything that had happened and that God was not only busy with a stripping process in his life, but also with "restoration." Examples of this "restoration" are, amongst other things, the development work at Ruitersvlei and the Valcare model for farm ministry that are both making good progress and are leading to better financial benefits.

According to Vossie he received a "special revelation" from God. If other people differ from him with regard to his "explanation" of the death of Albert and J.W., it does not matter to him, because he feels that his own "experience of God" made it possible to explain their deaths in this way.

It was not at all difficult for me to see a connection between the enormous effort Vossie and Christa had put into trying to make meaning of the death of their sons and the following words by Klass (1999:129):

The consensus that seems to be emerging among scholars and clinicians is that the purpose or goal of grief is to construct a narrative story, a durable biography, that organizes and makes meaning of the survivor's life after the death, as well as the life of the person who died. The task bereaved parents face, is finding the meaning of their lives and the meaning of the lives of their dead children.

4.9 CONCLUSION

The challenge for Vossie and Christa to live with the death of Albert and J.W. could also be described as the challenge to be survivors in a completely new situation in their lives. What has been described in this chapter could therefore be seen as some of the

ways in which Vossie and Christa took up the challenge of living with the death of their sons. The "raw material" related here is Vossie and Christa's stories of survival. And their stories of survival relate how they continue their bond with Albert and J.W., and how powerfully they utilise rituals and symbols to "re-member" their sons. The stories also portray how they take comfort from various things, make their own experiences count, accept help, mourn actively and try to make meaning of the death of their sons. Numerous stories illustrate how Vossie and Christa live as survivors rather than victims of the death of Albert and J.W.

Chapter 5, the following chapter, is a reflection on my research story as a whole. Amongst other things I will be looking at the way in which I undertook the research and at the methods I used. I will also reflect on what I learned about the subject of my research, both from the conversations with Vossie and Christa and from the literature I consulted.

CHAPTER 5

REFLECTIONS ON AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE STORY OF MY RESEARCH

5.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I do a number of different things. First I return briefly to the purpose, questions and commitment mentioned in chapter 1, reflecting on how well I achieved my goals with the research. Then I report the most important knowledges and discoveries I have made during the research process. These knowledges are then brought into dialogue with other knowledges, discourses and theories. After that I reflect on how I was changed by the research and about the implications the study has for doing research and for transformation. And after reflecting on issues of accountability, the last word belongs to Vossie and Christa. The chapter is concluded with what they have to say about their participation in the research project, without my replying to that.

5.2 PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

In chapter 1 (see 1.2) I stated that my purpose was "to discuss my research curiosity with participating parents and to learn from them about living with the death of a child." But what exactly was my research curiosity? I summarised it in two questions (see 1.3), namely: "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?" I had the privilege of discussing these two questions thoroughly with Vossie and Christa. During the course of seven conversations many aspects regarding these two questions were discussed. In chapters 3 and 4 the outcome of these discussions is presented under a number of headings, and the contents of chapter 3 could basically be related to the first question

mentioned above, namely the question about the effect of the children's death on their parents. The contents of chapter 4, again, could be related to the second question, the one about what the parents found helpful in living with the death of their children. The stories Vossie and Christa told me, as related in chapters 3 and 4, clearly tell about the different effects I was curious to learn more about. And in this regard, I learned a lot from Vossie and Christa.

5.3 MOST IMPORTANT KNOWLEDGES AND DISCOVERIES

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

5.3.1 The conversations showed 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 (see 3.2).

5.3.2 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 (see 3.4).

5.3.3 My own conduct or words could either help or hinder Vossie and Christa. This became clear to me when they told me about how negatively they experienced the conduct of the minister mentioned in 3.4.3 and about the "advice" of one of Christa's colleagues, after Albert's death. This man said that she should pull herself together for the sake of her other surviving children (see 3.10).

5.3.4 It may perhaps seem like stating the obvious, but Albert and J.W.'s death had a very far-reaching influence and effect on Vossie and Christa. In chapter 3 I discussed the different effects the deaths had on them (see especially 3.5, 3.6, 3.7, 3.8 and 3.9). Because I never got the impression during our conversations

that Vossie and Christa wanted to bring up their double loss as a central issue, I did not ask them about its significance for them.

5.3.5 Vossie and Christa do not want people to avoid them or avoid the subject of their two sons' death, precisely because they have a need to talk about Albert and J.W. (see 3.10 and 4.5).

5.3.6 In the light of Vossie and Christa's experience I came to believe that I should seriously consider "alternative models" when it comes to my own theology of death. Their experiences and thoughts (see 3.11, 4.4 and 4.8) made me realise that modernism, with its closed view of reality (König 2005:271, 272), had put a lot of doubt in my own mind about certain Christian beliefs, such as the belief in miracles and life after death. These experiences and thoughts also challenge me to widen my own outlook from one of being sceptical when hearing about other people's "extraordinary" experiences to one of more readily accepting the occurrence of such experiences. The dilemma one could be facing at this point is the dilemma of what to do when one's own dogmatic and other people's experiential truths do not correspond. In terms of my contextual approach to theology I would not like to impose my own dogmatic beliefs on others' experiences and "correct" their "misconceptions." For me the correct ethical stance would be to respect other people's experiential truths and be open to incorporating them into my own belief system.

5.3.7 It is important for Vossie and Christa to hold on to Albert and J.W. as part of their family. Early on in chapter 1 (see 1.1) I said that I was curious to find out whether the parents were perhaps practicing "re-membering" in the sense that Michael White uses this term. I think the section on "Continuing the bond with Albert and J.W.," namely section 4.2 in chapter 4, points in this direction. Amongst other things Vossie and Christa use photographs to "re-member" their two sons and they take them with them "in their thoughts." They are, in other words, still continuing their relationship with Albert and J.W. and are still keeping alive their two sons' membership of their own "club of life."

- 5.3.8 Rituals play an important part in Vossie and Christa's life. The three candles they light every night and the flowers they take to the graveyard on important dates are only two examples in this regard (see 4.3).
- 5.3.9 I realised that what might seem small and insignificant to me, could be very important to Vossie and Christa. I think an illustration of this is where Christa told me about how the neighbours' son discovered J.W.'s name and death date on the lid of a school desk (see 4.4). This seemingly small incident meant a lot to Christa.
- 5.3.10 Vossie and Christa want their own experience to count. Christa expressed the hope that her involvement in this research project would "make it better" for somebody else (see 4.5).
- 5.3.11 Vossie and Christa found the mere presence and availability of people very valuable. As Vossie put it: "You don't have to be clever in such a situation; just be there for the parents" (see 4.5).
- 5.3.12 Meaning making was a very important activity for Vossie and Christa as bereaved parents. They told me about the many books they had read to help them in this regard. Vossie also made an extra appointment with me to explain in more detail how he tried to make meaning of the death of Albert and J.W. Through the conversations I became acquainted with Vossie and Christa's respective theodicies (see 4.8). And this means that my initial desire to find out more, through the research, about how parents think about and get answers to the difficult question of theodicy (see 1.1), was met.
- 5.3.13 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 they helped her to realise how they had "grown" and had "learned" to handle the circumstances. This means that Vossie and Christa did not only experience the terrible after-effects of enormous trauma but also achieved "post-traumatic growth" in their lives as bereaved parents.

Although the emphasis in this research project was on learning from Vossie and Christa, I also learned much from some literature about bereavement and the death of children. In chapter 2 I wrote more extensively on what I discovered in this literature. Here I only want to point out what I consider the most important knowledges from the literature I consulted, which are the following:

- Parental bereavement could be described as a "permanent condition," somewhat like an amputation that one has to live with for the rest of one's life (see 2.4.1).
- Saying hullo again to the deceased could be very helpful in addition to being forced by death to say goodbye to the physical presence of the person (see 5.4.2 where I expand on this).
- Good memories could be the really painful ones. A woman named Diana (quoted in Finkbeiner 1996:175) said:

The horrible thoughts are truly horrible, ... (b)ut sometimes it's the thoughts that are beautiful, the memories, that are much harder. That's something people don't understand - they say, "Don't you have good thoughts and good memories?" Yes, I do. They *hurt*.

The knowledge that good memories of a deceased person could be especially painful made me wonder how often, as a pastor, I had tried to comfort bereaved people by referring to their "good memories" of their deceased loved ones without knowing how hurtful these memories could be.

5.4 RESEARCH KNOWLEDGES IN RELATION TO OTHER KNOWLEDGES, DISCOURSES AND THEORIES

In this section a number of discourses and theories already referred to in this research are restated and brought into dialogue with research knowledges mentioned in 5.3 and elsewhere in the research report:

5.4.1 The "grieve-and-move-on" model

In terms of this "model" (see 2.2.2 and Klass 1999:51) bereaved parents are expected to grieve for some time, but then move on with their lives. My conversations with Vossie and Christa, however, do not suggest that it was possible for them to "grieve-and-move-on" in the sense that their grief could be completely "resolved" at a certain point and that they could then live on without having grief as part of their lives. In section 3.5 I reported that Christa still experiences some kind of a build up of emotions and that something trivial will then "trigger" it. After crying and expressing her emotions, she then "feels better" afterwards. Vossie, again, said that one will never be able to sort things out completely when it comes to the death of a child (see 4.8). And in our conversations different rituals (see 4.3) were mentioned through which, in my opinion, the mourning process still continues. All of this indicates to me that parental grief, as Vossie and Christa are experiencing it, has no end point called "resolution" (see 2.3.2) and that it is indeed a "permanent condition" (see 2.4.1 and 5.3).

5.4.2 Detachment from the deceased

In Western culture detachment from the deceased is traditionally encouraged for bereaved people and the emphasis is placed on the metaphor of "saying goodbye" to the deceased (see 2.2.2). Clinebell (1966:170) supports this view when he says: "The grief wound cannot heal fully until one ... has *surrendered*, to some degree, one's *emotional tie to and investment in the lost person ...*" He also finds it important that the bereaved should "psychologically 'bury the dead'" (1966:169, quoting Gerald Caplan). As far as Vossie and Christa's relationship with Albert and J.W. is concerned, however, I used expressions like "continuing the bond" with their sons (see 4.2) and "holding on" to them (see 5.3.7) in this research report. This means that, according to what Vossie and Christa told me during the conversations, their preference is not to think in terms of detachment from their sons but rather in terms of connection with them (see 2.3.1). One example in this regard is where they told me about how they now used J.W.'s room as a study and work room. This new purpose for J.W.'s room helps them make what happened "part of their lives." And they explained the importance of making it part of

their lives by saying: "We cannot put what happened behind us. It is too precious." And this, of course, is not detachment language.

I have already referred to Michael White's use of the metaphor of "saying hullo again" in helping people to connect or re-connect with their deceased loved ones (see 2.3.1 and 3.5). Closely linked to this metaphor is White's use of "re-membering" (see 1.1), and my perception is that Vossie and Christa are continuing to hold on to Albert and J.W. as "members" of their "club of life." The rituals they use, like lighting candles and taking flowers to the graveyard, serve as ways in which they could, on a regular basis, say "hullo" to Albert and J.W. and continue their relationship with them. The conversations with Vossie and Christa helped me understand that we do not have to use metaphors like "detach," "let go" and "psychologically bury the dead" when it comes to mourning. We can instead "say hullo to," "hold on to" and "re-member" our deceased loved ones even though we have to say goodbye to the physical presence of the dead.

5.4.3 The "stages" of mourning

In section 2.2.2 I referred to the discourse made popular by Elizabeth Kübler-Ross that mourning moves through certain "stages," namely the stages of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Nothing in the conversations with Vossie and Christa suggested that they mourned in "stages." They did speak about things like "anger," "bargaining" and "depression" as being part of their experience, but their stories do not point to a "progression" through stages of mourning, ending with "acceptance." Vossie did refer to "acceptance," but said that it was "the ultimate" which "one aims for" (see 4.8). In my opinion this implies that Vossie feels that he has not yet reached complete "acceptance" and that he is using the term in the sense of an ultimate goal or ideal to aim for. To him it is not, like for Kübler-Ross, a last stage in the resolution of grief, but a goal to keep reaching for.

5.4.4 Men and women grieving differently

Western culture expects men and women to grieve differently (see 2.2.2). This probably has more to do with what this culture "allows" or "permits" people to do in

their respective "roles" as men and women than it has to do with some genetic gender difference. Whatever the case may be, Vossie and Christa also indicated in our conversations that they grieved differently (see 4.7). Vossie describes his initial reaction to the death of their sons as a "typical male" reaction in which he did not want to mourn openly. Later on Vossie especially grieved through "making theology" of the death of Albert and J.W., trying to make meaning of their death. Christa, on the other hand, expressed her emotions more openly and found it helpful to remain busy. This difference in the way they mourned, may be an indication of how powerfully the discourse prescribing different grief "roles" for men and women in Western culture had impacted Vossie and Christa. Criticising and protesting against this discourse could, in my opinion, be especially helpful for men who are often inhibited by it when it comes to freely expressing their feelings and sharing their pain and grief with others (see 2.5.4).

5.4.5 "Normal" grieving

When bereaved people do not grieve in ways that are acceptable in their culture, their grief is sometimes labelled "abnormal" or "pathological" (see 2.2.2). 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." Using these words implies that something like "normal" grieving exists. This kind of labelling, however, does not sufficiently take into account 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 (see 2.3.3). The stories Vossie and Christa shared about how they grieved, underline this 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 (see 2.3.3). It could also help us remember, in our contact with bereaved parents, that every parent's experience of grief is unique.

5.4.6 Theodicies

In 5.3.12 I referred to the importance of meaning making for Vossie and Christa as bereaved parents. Part of this meaning making had to do with the question of theodicy (see 3.7 for a definition of "theodicy"), in other words struggling with the problem of reconciling their belief in a God of love with their own personal world of suffering because of the death of Albert and J.W.

Christa's theodicy, I think, could be summarised in saying that she does not see the death of her sons as God's "punishment" or a "lesson" to be learned, and that Albert and J.W. fulfilled the plan and purpose God had had for their earthly lives. Christa said of Albert and J.W.: "They came to do what the Lord determined that they should, even though it was shorter than other people's lives" (see 4.8). In Christa's theodicy there is, in my opinion, an acceptance of Albert and J.W.'s death as part of God's bigger plan. She did not, in our conversations, question God's actions in this regard. As she put it: "I don't struggle with the why-question any more; I only long for them [Albert and J.W.]." (see 3.5).

In explaining his theodicy to me, Vossie said that it was God's "will" that Albert and J.W. should "not grow old." He said that he held on to the fact that God is "in charge." He also echoed Christa when he told me that all people have a "purpose" on earth. And Albert's death, he said, helped him discover that what he had been doing at Nederburg was not in line with his own purpose in life (see 4.8). During our conversations I could not detect any doubt in Vossie's mind about God's love. He and Christa told me that, through all the care they had received from "other people," they experienced that God is "love."

My perception is that Vossie and Christa, by struggling with the "why-question," had constructed their own theodicies. And in a way their theodicies are not dissimilar. Both of them accept the fact that God is "love," that He is "in charge" (Vossie) and that He ultimately "determines" (Christa) the plan and purpose of our lives. These positions Vossie and Christa take in their theodicies remind me of a book by Adrio König (2002:142-165) in which he identifies three possible positions one can hold when it

comes to God's involvement in our lives. In explaining these three positions I would like to bring Vossie and Christa's positions into dialogue with what König has to say about God's involvement in our lives.

König says in his book that the first possible position to hold is when we understand God's control of our lives in an "absolute" sense: God controls everything that happens to us, good and bad, in an "absolute" way. The second position is that God is in control in a "narrower" sense. This position entails that God directly controls and determines all that is good in our lives, but that He allows bad things to happen. The third possible position König describes, is to understand God's control of our lives in a "broader" sense. By this he means that God is not the only role player in history, but that there are other role players as well, such as human beings, powers of evil and the laws of nature (König 2002:169). And because of these other role players, God is involved in a struggle to eventually make his kingdom become a reality (König 2002:181).

It seems to me that Vossie and Christa's theodicies would best fit in with the first or second possibilities explained by König. König says that the expression "God is in control" provides comfort and security to believers (2002:155). Although the third possibility mentioned by König also holds on to God's being in control, this third one might perhaps not be comforting enough to Vossie and Christa because it takes a much freer and broader view of God's control in our lives and in history.

At this point I would like to mention that my own preference with regard to theodicy would be for König's third possibility. That means that it does not exactly match those of Vossie and Christa. In the case of therapeutic conversations with bereaved parents it could present a difficult theological dilemma if the therapist's meaning making differs a lot from the theodicy of the parents. In such a situation the best ethical way for me would be to respect the theological position of the parent rather than to "correct" it or be prescriptive about it. Should the therapist, however, get the impression that the theological view of the bereaved parent has a harmful or even destructive effect in her or his life, it would in my opinion be important for the therapist to challenge the theological view of the parent. This challenging need not be confrontational, but could

consist of presenting and discussing other options and views than the one the parent is holding.

5.5 HOW THE RESEARCH HAS CHANGED ME

When I think back on how the death of other people's children affected me before I started the research, I can recall feeling overwhelmed and helpless in the face of such tragedy. I also remember being somewhat judgemental towards people who were, in my opinion, "overemphasising" the anniversaries of their deceased children. I used to see it as "overemphasising" when bereaved parents, for example, annually put a photograph of their deceased child in the newspaper. Finally, I remember my curiosity about how bereaved parents manage to continue with their lives. Much of what I mentioned above was addressed and I myself was changed in the research process.

But how was I changed? An indication in this regard 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 never again to think that bereaved parents are "overemphasising" anything in their mourning and in their "re-remembering" 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 to their pain, struggle, courage and strength (Walsh & McGoldrick 1991:26). And being such a witness has helped me realise how deeply the death of Albert and J.W. affected Vossie and Christa's lives and what an enormous challenge it is for them to live with the death of their sons. Before Vossie and Christa had told me their stories I was, in the words of Weingarten (2000:397) "unaware" and "disempowered" with regard to their life stories. But by sharing their experiences, I have been changed into an "aware" and "empowered" witness of their lives as bereaved parents. This means, amongst other things, that I should now be able to point out to others that we as pastors can learn much more from the lived experiences of bereaved parents than from many theoretical books about grief

and bereavement. But learning from bereaved parents will of course only be possible if we as pastors are open to it and do not cling to our pre-conceived ideas, beliefs or truths!

The research was a significant learning experience for me. One example of how I benefited from what I was learning, was when I had to assist other bereaved parents when their son died not long ago. In conversations with them I realised that there were people trying to enforce their own "explanations" for the child's death on the parents - that other people wanted to impose their own attempts at meaning making on the parents. This made me speak out during the funeral service, asking everybody present not to assume that their own answers as to why the boy had died, would necessarily be the same as the parents' answers and warning that some of those answers were quite upsetting to the parents. The harmful effect of some of the things that others have to say to bereaved parents, should not be overlooked in pastoral conversations with the parents. It is not only the contents of what people have to say to them but the effect it has on the parents that should be discussed in such conversations. Bereaved parents should be helped to liberate themselves from the knowledges of others that have a harmful and restricting effect on them. This could happen when the parents are helped to recognise these knowledges for what they are: the personal views of individuals setting themselves up as experts while having little or no knowledge of the real life experiences of bereaved parents.

In chapter 1 (see 1.1) I expressed the hope that my research would help better equip me for conversations with parents after the death of a child. I think that I received this equipment in the form of the many new knowledges I acquired in the research process, as well as through the personal changes described in this section.

5.6 IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY FOR DOING RESEARCH

Doing qualitative research (see 1.4.1) for the first time in my life proved to be very different from all the other academic research I had done previously. It was a different experience because of its very personal nature and the personal involvement with

Vossie and Christa. This research was not "about" bereaved parents via books, but "with" them. Because I could learn so much from Vossie and Christa through our conversations, I had a firsthand experience of the value of qualitative research in the human sciences. Not only quantitative studies are valuable as research, providing valuable "results." When you are privileged to do an in-depth study in 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 (see 1.4.6). 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 them. Their interpretations were deemed more important than my own observations and interpretations. In terms of the ethics of this research, it could be said that the research was not only "about" Vossie and Christa but "with" them, that it was "co-search," in the words of Kotzé (2002:25).

The importance of respect for the participants (see 1.4.12) 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. This emphasis on respect for the participants made me wonder how respectful many of the large scale quantitative research projects really are, where many participants are involved but are perhaps treated as impersonal "numbers" to be used to get to generalisable results? How ethical could research be when it treats people as mere "objects" of study (see 1.4.13)?

The value of story-telling for doing research (see 1.4.8) was highlighted by this research project. What Vossie and Christa told me about the death of Albert and J.W. and how they live with it, provided much to document, discuss and reflect on. It also brought to the fore the uniqueness and richness of their experience (see 1.4.9). It could of course be argued that one cannot arrive at generalisable conclusions by studying the experience

of only two bereaved parents, but documenting the uniqueness and richness of Vossie and Christa's experience could perhaps be just as valuable to many people as introducing them to general conclusions from large quantitative studies. Kotzé (2002:20, 21) writes about "narrative ethicising" when he says:

I would like to suggest narrative as a meaningful way to present and procure ethical ways of being in a participatory manner. Stories can carry the ethical wisdom of people across generations and different cultures in a way quite different from purely logically and rationally organised normative systems. ... Stories are able to convey the complexities and diversities of possibilities and choices. Stories can serve as vehicles to carry people's dilemmas and ethical choices, including the effects of those dilemmas and choices on other people. The more of these stories we have, the richer the possibilities that could guide people's struggles to find ways in which to live at the margins of clarity about what is good and/or evil.

Before engaging them in the research I discussed with Vossie and Christa the possibility and risk for them of retraumatisation through the research conversations (see 1.2). We also discussed the question: What would we do if a conversation became too painful? They indicated that it would be appropriate for us to stop a conversation at such a point and continue at a later stage (see 1.8.1). This danger of retraumatisation during research brings to the fore the important question of the relationship between research and therapy. While the participants could well be experiencing the conversations with the researcher as therapeutic for them, it could also happen that the trauma they are talking about tries to resurface in a damaging way. This would then challenge the researcher to make an important suggestion: the suggestion to the participants to consider the possibility that the conversations be (temporarily) shifted from research conversations to therapeutic conversations. Another option could be for the researcher to suggest a postponement of the research conversations while referring the participants to another therapist for therapeutic conversations about the resurfacing of the trauma.

If I were to re-do this research, one thing I would revise is the initial contact with the participants. I had phoned another couple before I phoned Vossie and Christa. This first couple declined the invitation to participate in the research. However, this was all done over the telephone and I had no idea afterwards of what the effect of my invitation might have been on them. I now realise that even to ask parents to participate in such a study can be a very sensitive issue to them. It confronts them with the decision to take

part in this kind of research or not. And, it could be risky for them to say yes, risky in terms of revisiting extremely painful memories and not knowing what the effect of the research would be on them. In retrospect, I think that it would have been better for me to have organised a personal visit with the potential participants first. I could then, after informing them about the research project, have asked them personally whether they would be interested to participate or not. I now think that only the minimum should have been done by means of an impersonal telephone call. Perhaps a more ethical way of finding participants would be to make use of an open invitation to unidentified bereaved parents, for example putting an open invitation to a group of parents involved in a support group for bereaved parents. This would mean that parents would not be personally invited by the researcher to participate in the research project but could react to a general invitation if they wanted to.

5.7 IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY FOR TRANSFORMATION

In section 1.6.4 I expressed the view that I wanted my own theology and research to be "transformative and instrumental in the mending of creation." The research project provided me with new knowledges and a commitment to transform some of my own practices, as well as to help transform other people and society. This transformation should be with a view to helping bereaved parents benefit from the acquired knowledges. Kotzé (2002:11) states that, when it comes to "knowledges, paradigms, truths, doctrines and beliefs," we should ask: "How do they work? Who benefits? Who suffers?" Transformation should therefore be to the benefit of bereaved parents and towards more "ethical ways of being" with them (see title of book by Kotzé, Myburg, Roux & Associates 2002).

One way in which I would like to transform my own pastoral work with bereaved parents is to take a "longer" view of their mourning, in other words to see my involvement with them as a long-term commitment. The knowledge that parental bereavement is a "permanent condition" (see 2.4.1) urges me never to remove bereaved parents from my own "follow-up" list. I could also utilise ideas such as the ones expressed in the following quotation by Miles (1990:13):

Families greatly appreciate cards, letters, visits and phone calls from clergy and others after a child's death. I make it a point to write to families within two weeks after the death and, subsequently, on the following occasions: the child's birth date or due date (if a premature infant) and on the anniversary of the child's death, as well as whenever I receive a letter from the family.

When it comes to using the knowledges of this research to help transform other people and society, I want to consider different ways in which to take the results of the research into the public arena. This is of great importance because many people are uninformed about the possible effect of the death of children on their parents, and as a result may act and speak in insensitive ways to bereaved parents. Towards the end of 2004 I was invited to speak at a meeting of the local chapter of "The Compassionate Friends" and in May 2005 I was asked to deliver a message at the Drakenstein Hospice's annual commemoration service. In June 2005 I had the opportunity to participate in a talk show and discuss my research on Radio KC, the local radio station. I will be on the look-out for similar opportunities where I could share some of the results of this research with other people. I also consider presenting the research results in a less formal format to people in society who wish to support bereaved parents.

In chapter 1 I expressed the hope of opening up an understanding of the experience of the participating parents for people who would be reading this research report (see 1.2). But, I now hope that my research will eventually influence and help transform many more people than those who read this formal research report.

5.8 ACCOUNTABILITY

The concept of accountability describes an important aspect of my research. It refers 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. In order to be able to achieve this, I asked them, from time to time, how they were experiencing the conversations. 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. If they were not deriving benefit from the conversations, it would be for my account and I would be responsible for trying to set things right.

My accountability towards Vossie and Christa, however, cannot be limited to the research process only. It should also extend into the future. I thus told Vossie and Christa that I would be available for conversations even after the research project had been completed. This corresponds with the need I have to stay in touch with them in future. I could phone them or invite them over for a meal or a cup of tea or coffee. I could also visit them when it is convenient for them.

Finally, I will be accountable to Vossie and Christa for the future use of the research results. I needed their written consent for using the information obtained from the conversations, and Appendix C was completed for this purpose.

In chapter 1 I said that it was important to me that the research would primarily be of value to the participating parents (see 1.2) and that it would help change their lives for the better (see 1.6.4). The last word now belongs to Vossie and Christa. It is for them to say whether they feel that they benefited from or were exploited by participating in this research project.

5.9 THE VOICES OF VOSSIE AND CHRISTA

I asked Vossie and Christa to put in writing how the conversations with me and their participation in the research project had affected them (see Appendix D for the original Afrikaans version). This is what they had to say:

When we were approached about participating in this research project our first reaction naturally was one of: "What else can be said about the loss of two children? Whatever anybody wants to know additionally, he/she can read in books. More than enough has been said and written."

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 we would, under Hugo's guidance, in essence be taken back on our tracks to where our lives were impacted irrevocably. Because of Albert's age

(seven days) we could not talk much about him. It was mostly talking in sighs about "What if" Nevertheless, the shared thoughts about Albert were a recalling of the seven special days and we could again cherish him and smile, even though it was with the proverbial tear in the eye. We personally found the fact that we could share our experience of God's presence with somebody like Hugo very valuable. You do not often get the opportunity to share your personal experiences of faith. Hugo's conversations with us were the important breeding-ground for this sharing. Never before had anybody asked us directly about our emotions, our reactions and the ripple effects.

The conversations about J.W. were more intense. It was as if we could talk about something that had been relativised by the passage of time. Everything was still very clear - just what we wanted, but at the same time it confronted us with the irony of what had happened. Normally you try to forget about that which is painful. About these events we do not want to forget, because they became integrated with the most precious memories. We want to remember the pain, that pain that at the same time made us aware of what had happened beforehand - J.W.'s preparation by God himself. On the one hand you want to once again cry out to the heavens above about the pain, the loss, the longing and your own broken life that will never again be completely whole, your inability to look higher and to be thankful in everything. On the other hand you are thankful for the certain knowledge that God took J.W. in his arms on the morning of the 4th of April 2001. In retrospect, you can rejoice about God's faithfulness, which even today sustains you, and revel in the knowledge that God is alive.

All of this we could share with Hugo. We could take stock of our own faith and we could witness, with gratitude, that even though our lives had changed drastically/dramatically, we daily experience God's presence through our senses. But more than that, that He daily teaches us how to live. Deo Gloria!

Vossie & Christa.

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APPENDIX A

SHATTERED DREAMS: PASTORAL CARE WITH PARENTS FOLLOWING THE DEATH OF A CHILD

INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARTICIPATING PARENTS

This information sheet is to help you decide whether or not to participate in this research project with bereaved parents. I will be most thankful if you should decide to participate. I would like to add, however, that you must feel free to turn down the invitation to participate.

Aims of the project

This project is being undertaken as part of the requirements for a Master's degree in Pastoral Theology - with specialisation in Pastoral Therapy. The aims of the project are:

- a) to listen to bereaved parents telling their stories of living with the death of their child(ren).
- b) to learn from the parents about the effect of the death of their child(ren) on them.
- c) to learn from the parents about what they found helpful in living with this effect and in creating their own effect on the problem.
- d) to open up for others (like other bereaved parents or anybody who wants to support bereaved parents) an understanding of the experiences of the participating parents.

Participants needed for the study

Three couples or individual bereaved parents will be included in the study. They will be approached personally and will, after a discussion about the research, receive this information sheet.

What will be required of participants

All participants will be asked to give consent for the information obtained during conversations to be used in the research project. Participants will be expected to take

part in about two or three conversations of more or less one and a half hours each. After every conversation participants will receive a summary of the conversation. They will be asked to reflect on the summary and provide feedback about it.

Free participation

Participants will be free to withdraw from the research project at any time without any consequences to them.

Confidentiality

The information obtained during the conversations will be discussed with my supervisor and will be used in the project. In order to summarise the conversations I will take notes during the conversations. Participants' comments on, corrections of, and feedback about the summaries will be included in the final report. The information collected during the project will be safely stored in a locked filing cabinet and will be destroyed after conclusion of the project.

Results of the study

The results of this study may be published. If participants would prefer it, details (like names and places) will be distorted to ensure their anonymity. They will have the choice to use their own name or a pseudonym of their own choice. Participants are welcome to request a copy of the research results.

With a view to reaching a wider audience, the final report will be written in English.

Questions of Participants

Should you have any questions or concerns regarding the project, either now or in future, please feel free to contact me:

Hugo Biermann (Tel: 021 8725776).

You can also contact my supervisor, Prof Dirk Kotzé, at the Institute for Therapeutic Development (tel: 083 3248729).

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Department of Practical Theology at Unisa and the Institute for Therapeutic Development.

APPENDIX B

SHATTERED DREAMS: PASTORAL CARE WITH PARENTS FOLLOWING THE DEATH OF A CHILD

CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPATION BY PARENTS

I have read the Information Sheet concerning the project and I understand what the project is all about. All my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I am free to request further information at any stage.

I know that:

1. My participation in the project is entirely voluntary.
2. I am free to withdraw from the project at any time without any disadvantage.
3. I am aware of what will happen to my personal information at the conclusion of the project, that the data will be destroyed at the conclusion of the project but that any raw data the project depends on, will be retained for three years.
4. I will receive no payment or compensation for participating in the study.
5. All personal information supplied by me will remain confidential throughout the project.
6. I am aware that Hugo's supervisor will read the material.

I am willing to participate in this research project.

.....

(Signature of participant)

.....

(Name of participant in capital letters)

.....

(Signature of witness)

.....

(Date)

APPENDIX C

SHATTERED DREAMS: PASTORAL CARE WITH PARENTS FOLLOWING THE DEATH OF A CHILD

CONSENT FORM FOR RELEASE OF INFORMATION BY PARTICIPATING PARENTS

1. I have read the summary of the project.
2. I had the opportunity to make changes to that information, including suggestions, corrections or comments to summaries pertaining to my participation.
3. I agree for my suggestions, corrections or comments to be included in the research project.
4. I have read the final summary of the conversations and agree that this is an accurate and satisfactory account of the conversations, and I therefore give permission for this summary to be used in the research report.
5. I understand that the information obtained during the conversations may be included in article format for publication. I also understand that should I decide that I do not wish the information to be published, I am able to withdraw my permission at any stage of participation in the project.

I hereby give my permission for information concerning myself to be used in the written report of the project and in the publication. I understand that confidentiality will be maintained throughout the study, in the written report of the project and in the publication. I also understand that any information that may lead to my identification will not be used or included in the project report or publication.

I prefer that the following name (either own name or pseudonym) be used in the research report or any other publication resulting from the project. Name to be used:

.....

.....
(Signature of participant)

.....
(Name of participant in capital letters)

.....
(Signature of witness)

.....
(Date)

APPENDIX D

THE ORIGINAL AFRIKAANS VERSION OF WHAT VOSSIE AND CHRISTA HAD TO SAY ABOUT HOW THE CONVERSATIONS WITH ME AND THEIR PARTICIPATION IN THE RESEARCH PROJECT HAD AFFECTED THEM

Uiteraard was die heel eerste gewaarwording toe ons genader is, dié van: "Wat is daar nog wat `n mens kan sê oor die verlies van twee kinders? Dit wat iemand nog wil weet, kan hy/sy maar in die boeke gaan lees. Daar is oorgenoeg gesê én geskryf."

Dit was egter vanaf die heel eerste besoek van Hugo duidelik dat dit nie net gaan oor die eerstehandse "inligting" wat klinies neergeskryf word nie, maar dat dit in wese ons is wat met Hugo se leiding op die spoor teruggevat word tot daar waar ons lewens onherroeplik geïmpakkeer is. Ons kon as gevolg van Albert se ouderdom (sewe dae) nie baie oor hom praat nie. Dit was merendeels versugtinge oor "Wat as ...". Tog het die gedeelde gedagtes oor Albert die sewe spesiale dae weer in herinnering geroep en kon ons hom weer koester en glimlag, al was dit met die spreekwoordelike traan. Wat vir my persoonlik baie waardevol was, is die feit dat ek my ervaring van God se teenwoordigheid met iemand soos Hugo kon deel. `n Mens kry nie aldag die geleentheid om jou persoonlike geloofservarings te deel nie. Hugo se gesprekke met ons was die teelaarde wat so belangrik was. Nog nooit het iemand ons "prontuit" gevra oor ons emosies, ons reaksies en die rimpeleffekte nie.

Die gesprekke oor J.W. was meer intens. Dit was asof ons oor iets kon praat wat deur die tydsverloop gerelativeer is. Dit was alles nog so helder, juis dit wat ons wou hê, maar wat ons ook terselfdertyd gekonfronteer het met die ironie van die gebeure. Normaalweg probeer mens vergeet van dit wat pynlik is. Van hierdie gebeure wil ons nie vergeet nie, omdat dit geïntegreerd geraak het met die kosbaarste herinneringe. Ons wil die pyn onthou, dié pyn wat ons terselfdertyd opnuut bewus gemaak het van die voorafgaande gebeure, J.W. se voorbereiding deur God self. Aan die een kant wil jy van voor af ten hemele skreeu oor die pyn, die verlies, die verlange en jou stukkende lewe wat nooit weer só heel sal wees nie, jou onvermoë om hoër te kyk en in alles dankbaar te wees. Aan die ander kant is jy dankbaar oor die sekere wete dat God vir J.W. al die oggend van 4 April 2001 in Sy arms geneem het, kan jy in retrospeksie jubel oor God se trou, wat jou vandag nog onderhou, kan jy daarin roem dat God lewe.

Dit alles kon ons met Hugo deel. Ons kon ons eie geloof weer in oënskou neem en met dankbaarheid getuig dat, alhoewel ons lewens drasties/dramaties verander het, ons God se teenwoordigheid elke dag sintuiglik ervaar. Meer nog, dat Hy ons elke dag leer hoe om te lewe. Deo Gloria!

Vossie & Christa!