Alex James' perspective

I first met Robert Neimeyer (Bob) a few years ago at a conference. He spoke so clearly and descriptively about his experiences of working. He coloured his words and engaged everyone as he told stories and even acted out a simple vignette. He explored meaning making and how we human beings seek constantly (particularly when we are bereaved or experience trauma) to make some sense of what we are experiencing. We work hard at meaning making and often the bereaved do this by retelling the story and sometimes finding pieces that fit – you may remember my article on meaning making and synchronicity in a previous edition of this publication.

As Bob talked, I remember being fascinated, totally spellbound by his presentation. Those who know me will know that I have a wondering mind. Often at conferences I find it difficult to stay with the presenter, particularly if they use endless power points or repetitive presentation. Definitely not true of Bob!

I chatted to Bob afterwards. Another skill that Bob has is making you feel so important. He really listens to what you have to say, is never distracted and is always ready to explore ideas and thoughts with you. Bob is special, he has the most wonderful way of making time for everyone and of being really present in the moment.

When we heard that Bob was visiting the UK again we had hoped to attend one of his seminars but sadly could not arrange our diaries to suit. We were thrilled when Bob kindly offered to meet us over lunch and as my colleague, Tania Brocklehurst, couldn’t attend I was able to pass her interview to him.

We are sure you’ll enjoy it!

We look forward to meeting Bob again next time he crosses the pond.

Here’s Tania’s interview with Bob:

**BOB, WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO WORK WITHIN THIS SECTOR?**

As is true with most helping professionals, I suspect, the factors that contributed to my choosing to focus my professional work on the topic of grief and loss probably were a blend of conscious and unconscious considerations. On the one hand, the human confrontation with mortality was inherently fascinating for me as a philosophical college student, just as the all-too-real encounter with tragic loss of all kinds easily pushes its way onto the front pages of newspapers and the top stories of news hours throughout the world. Likewise, understanding the meaning of death and its implications for human life is an abiding concern in most religious and spiritual traditions. So abstractly but also concretely, death and loss have a strong hold on our psyches, and they certainly did on mine.

At another level, however, less conscious factors clearly played a role in shaping my career, though it took me many years to really grasp how profoundly they shaped my life choices. Chief among these was my father’s suicide, which took place one cold January morning 10 days before my 12th birthday. My father had suffered from untreatable glaucoma, and with dimming vision had coped by drinking increasingly heavily, as his life slid out of control in other respects, and he gradually lost his family pharmacy. Ultimately, I suspect, he decided not to awaken into another day of growing darkness, and as a pharmacist he had ready access to the barbiturates that would ensure that outcome. My mother’s scream that morning upon discovering his dead body tore through the three of us children like a bolt of lightening, and effectively, for me as the eldest, marked childhood’s end. Unsurprisingly, then, as our family moved into a decade marked by...
my mother's own alcoholic self-medication and repeated suicide threats and attempts, I naturally began to function as an untrained crisis interventionist, junior psychologist, and fumbling grief therapist. My draw toward existential theory, suicide prevention, and the psychology of death, dying and bereavement during my university years and beyond was really a predictable outcome of this adolescent trajectory. Of course, all of this makes more sense looking backward than it did moving forward, I can assure you!

**HOW DID YOUR WORK AND RESEARCH INTO GRIEF THEN BEGIN TO INFLUENCE YOUR LIFE CHOICES?**

I suppose I believe that, in the words of my friend and colleague Mark Savickas, our choice of career, if apt, is "the secret that makes our life whole." That is, in optimal circumstances what we do is deeply coherent with who we are, so that there is no real separation between our identity and activity: we are fully present in our work, and our work has deep meaning for our sense of self. At least this is how it has worked for me. I've clearly chosen to spend a good deal of time studying, teaching, training and writing about death and bereavement, and an equal amount of time working alongside bereaved people struggling with the loss of children, partners, parents and friends, sometimes gradually, as through life-vitiating illness, and often suddenly, through suicide, homicide, overdose, terrorism or fatal accident. Doing so with compassion, respect, and deep interest in the life stories that we are privileged to hear in such settings changes one, at levels ranging from our attitudes to our actions. Mostly, for me, it has made me more patient with life's small disappointments, more fascinated by the everyday nobility and resilience with which people confront adversity, and more attentive to strong emotion as a signal of what requires attention in our lives, and how.

**MANY PEOPLE KNOW YOU FOR YOUR THEORIES ON MEANING MAKING. COULD YOU EXPLAIN A LITTLE MORE ABOUT WHAT THIS ENTAILS?**

That question strikes me as funny, as it is a bit like one fish asking another, "Can you explain to me what is this thing called water?" That is, meaning is the medium in which we are at all moments swimming; it surrounds us like an atmosphere. We never encounter the world as it is; we always encounter a world structured by our anticipations and interpretations, our hopes and our fears. And gradually, from childhood to adulthood, we find ways of organizing the flux of experience into somewhat predictable patterns and themes that give us a workable sense of security and control in a very big world. If we are fortunate, others support us in this: our parents and other attachment figures help us encounter life in ways that feel safe and sustainable, they help us acquire the tools to make sense of ourselves and our social worlds. And our broader community and culture provide a language, a set of roles, and rituals for negotiating life's growing complexity as we undergo the inevitable transitions that we encounter in the course of our development through the lifespan. All of this is a form of what I would term situated interpretive and communicative activity - essentially making sense of shifting life situations as we accommodate to them in word and deed, and play a part in their unfolding.

The problem is, however, that we are soft bodies in a hard world. That is, the events of life often don't comply with our hopeful anticipations, and indeed, they often challenge, invalidate or even shatter them and us, as my father's death did my own illusory assumptions about what adolescence might hold. Meaning making or meaning reconstruction is what happens, then, in the wake of such challenging events: How do I understand why he died as he did? What does
it mean for my family and me now? What story can I tell that makes sense of what we have suffered? And who, if anyone, is willing to hear that story, and help me find a way to carry it forward in hopeful directions? All of these questions and more are questions of meaning making, and I see these as central to the experience of profound loss and adaptation. Importantly, they are at least as emotional and practical as they are cognitive and intellectual, requiring human connection, reflection and action as we find ways to reaffirm or rebuild a world of meaning that has been challenged by loss.

BOB, YOU HAVE A NEW BOOK OUT IN SEPTEMBER ENTITLED TECHNIQUES OF GRIEF THERAPY: ASSESSMENT AND INTERVENTION. CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT THE INSPIRATION FOR THE BOOK AND ITS MESSAGE FOR THE FUTURE OF GRIEF THERAPY?

Certainly. The seeds of the book were really sown in the field of practice, as I routinely, in dozens of professional workshops, offered around the world each year to thousands of helping professionals, encounter people and practices that are creative, compassionate, and compelling in their ability to assist grieving people integrate loss in healthy ways. But far too often, these creative tools and techniques are the province of isolated practitioners without any means to share them with others beyond their own relatively small group of clients. I really organised this book and its predecessors to promote this sharing. In addition, as grief theory and research have grown in sophistication, they have begun to yield genuinely interesting ways of measuring the unique impacts of loss on our emotional lives, as well as the factors that inhibit or promote our adaptation, and therapeutic methods of fostering growth through grief. I therefore invited 66 practitioners and clinical scholars to share a novel model, measure or method of grief therapy in short, readable chapters that emphasized “news you could use” in working with bereaved people of all kinds. For example, techniques chapters describe briefly for whom the tool is appropriate, spell out exactly how to use it, illustrate it in a real case example, and offer some concluding thoughts on its adaptation to different people or circumstances - all in a pithy three to five pages. The result is a practical handbook that can enrich the practice of bereavement support and grief therapy immediately, and ultimately facilitate better research to document the effectiveness of what we do.

AS A RESPECTED AND EXPERIENCED PROFESSIONAL IN GRIEF, HAVE YOU SEEN MANY CHANGES IN THE WAY SOCIETY MANAGES LOSS, AND HOW WE DEAL WITH IT DURING THE YEARS YOU’VE BEEN WORKING IN THE FIELD?

Absolutely. Perhaps the one consistency in social systems is that they continue to evolve, and sometimes remarkably quickly. Certainly contemporary cultures and subcultures have continued to do so in how they accommodate loss and grief, and this is as true for the professional cultures of psychotherapy and counseling as it is for culture as a whole. One clear trend is that traditional rites and rituals for structuring major life transitions of all kinds have declined in authority in much of the world, though the need for helping people acknowledge, understand and negotiate such events remains as compelling as ever. As a result, we witness a great outpouring of spontaneous and personal forms of ritualisation of loss, ranging from the mountains of flowers, photos and teddy bears left by mourners after the death of Princess Diana or the London Underground bombings or their counterparts in other countries, to the creative ways that families now craft memorial services, often of a more secular sort, that honor their dead. Developments in grief therapy are really an extension of this, stepping in where society leaves off, to help people find deeper meaning in suffering, to affirm the value of continuing bonds to those we have loved and lost, and to rebuild lives of purpose and significance in their wake. I appreciate the opportunity you’ve given me to reflect on my modest contribution to this effort, as I also appreciate your contribution and that of this web site to the work we share.