

Continuing Bonds

At the First International Conference on Bereavement held in Israel in November 1985, Phyllis Silverman recalled a frustrating exchange she had with a colleague. In a small work group, Ms. Silverman was trying to open up a discussion about the need to recognize what she was hearing from the bereaved who talked about their continued bond with the dead. A colleague insisted that dealing with bereavement involved putting the past behind and this required letting go of the relationship with the deceased. The colleague developed tie-breaking rituals to accomplish this with his clients. He was pleased with his ability to overcome his clients' resistant to his advice to let go of the past. When this colleague could not convince Silverman that he was correct in spite of her data to the contrary, he said it was like having a baby; the baby is pushed out by the mother, gets slapped on the behind, cries, and "That's it."

At that moment Silverman understood the nature of their differences. Birth is not about letting go, but about change in the nature of the mother's connection to her infant. Silverman had recently witnessed her grandson's birth and had watched as the midwife gently facilitated the birth and placed the newborn on his mother's abdomen, his umbilical cord still attached. Loving parents, aunt and uncle, and grandparents surrounded the child. His father carefully cut the cord. This delivery did not break a relationship; rather it led to a new set of relationships, with new dimensions and possibilities. The child was no less attached to his mother, and now attachment within an extended network of bonds was possible.

The bereaved, like the new mother, have to change their relationship to the deceased. It does not mean that the relationship ends, though it changes in a decisive way.

- *From the Preface to Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief, edited by Dennis Klass, Phyllis R. Silverman, and Steven L. Nickman*