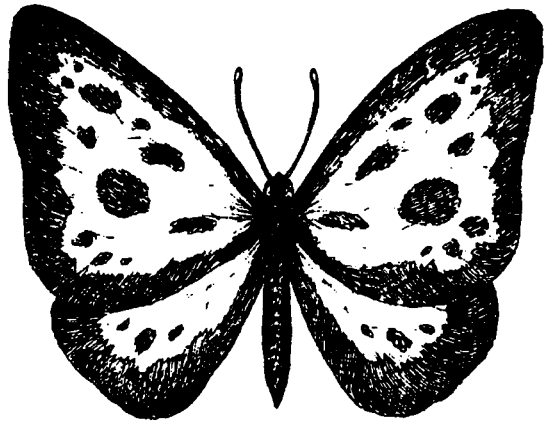
ing our friends, our animals and plants. They may reflect us and our involvement and impact on them but they also have lives of their own and speak of themselves. Knowing what is to do with us and what is to do with them is part of what relating is all about. Psychotherapy might help you to 'understand' a broken clutch cable but it would take a mechanic to fix it.

I would suggest that relatedness takes place in every aspect of our environment but that if we want to learn to 'converse' it is easiest to do it with what we know best. Intimate and complex machinery like cars and computers may in a sense be regarded as extensions of our bodies and minds. We need a certain amount of personal identification with them to operate them effectively. In a modern urban environment this is perhaps for many people the point of greatest engagement and overlap with the mineral world and as such maybe holds some real potential for learning and discovery.

My Father's Death at Home

Pamela Openshaw

Part of this article is a journal entry I made during the time I spent with my father on his 'last journey', as we came to call his transition from life into death. I want first to explain my own attitude to death.



SURBALA MORGAN

Near-Death Experience at Birth

Firstly, I have no fear of it; this happened because of a near-death experience I had in May 1967, after the birth of my first child: a truly wondrous experience whereby I simply left my body on the labour-bed and travelled towards a high-spot on the wall near the ceiling. I was aware that I was looking down on my body; I was also sitting or floating on the labour-ward clock. Then suddenly there was a shaft or tunnel of brilliant indescribable light. I went towards this light, this love. It was blissful — no pain, no fear, just light. A whoosh-

Pamela Openshaw trained at London's Regents College School of Psychotherapy and Counselling.

ing sound in my ears and all about, and I'm back again on the labour-bed.

This happened just before my twenty-first birthday, in the days when you were given 'the key to the door'. At this tender naive age, with a newborn baby, and this overwhelmingly wonderful experience, I felt I had been given the 'key' to life, death and love — the whole thing — and yet I had absolutely nobody to share this life- and death-changing experience with. It remained 'my secret' for a huge number of years; and life continued. I attended to things domestic, pushing aside my blissful experience.

Two decades later this experience was to stand me in good stead, when my entire first family died all within a very short space of time. First my mother, then my younger brother, then my father.

Facing Death Each Day

I found, after the death of my mother and brother, and with my father's death imminent, that I thought about death each and every day — also with my work at the Bristol Cancer Help Centre. Now it must be said that some people would find this somewhat morbid. I find that paradoxically this daily remembrance, awareness of death, gives me great personal power. It allows me the ability to distinguish between that which is important and that which is trivial, thus freeing me from many of the problems which seem to dog other lives.

Also this awareness of death teaches me to honour and love life. I celebrate life, I hug it. I'm also aware of its painfully precious fragility. So each day of my life I face death, and this act reminds me that life should be treasured every single moment. When faced with death, either one's own or the death of a loved one, courage is needed. I do not mean courage in the accepted 'bravery' sense. To me courage means the courage to move forward even in the face of despair and adversity. Finally, before sharing my journal entry from May '91 about my father's last journey, I will mention two things which have been of help during my own grief process.

A Personal Mythology

Firstly, cultivating an empowering personal mythology to live by, and to die by. These deep beliefs exert an invisible but decisive influence on the choice you make every day of your life. Your own personal mythology shapes what you think, how you feel and what you do.

Transmuting Grief into Creativity

Secondly, transmuting grief into creativity — alchemy in other words. First, one needs a philosopher's stone. Mine was called Hope.

For me it was just a case of finding my own path; there is also an element of magic — rather like the ancient Chinese philosophy or religion of Taoism. I stumbled along the path — what a Taoist would call 'the Way'. Then almost by magic I discovered 'the enchanted land' as it is known by its inhabitants, otherwise known as Taos, of New Mexico. So magic, good fortune, hope — all help, though each individual must discover his or her own path. It was here in Taos during my three months of solitude that I really entered the fire, the fire of my sorrow and anguish. I didn't hide or run

away from my pain, I entered into it. Grief is the base material to be transmuted, anguish is the flame. Their combustion causes unspeakable pain, it tests endurance, challenges assumptions and refines. It was upon my path in Taos I discovered Stephen Levine's works — he helped greatly. He also lives a life of solitude in the mountains of Taos.

Dio de los Muertos

On my latest trip to New Mexico (I now travel with a much firmer footing along my path in Taos), I was lucky enough to take part in Dio de los Muertos — Day of the Dead. Of course this celebration and festival came from just across the border in Mexico. Calavera (skeletons) dance in the street, jauntily strumming guitars. Most Mexican art features calavera. Of course art represents life or, in Mexico, death. Such a poor country and society cannot hide its dead. Death is on every street corner, unlike a comparatively wealthy society such as ours, one that can afford to pretend that nobody dies.

Dying at Home

My father had borne a slow, insidious disease (emphysema) for a great number of years. He managed nevertheless to stay independent — living alone after the death of his wife and son. My father died as he had lived, with quietness and courage, simply and without reliance on any outside forces. Without any fuss one morning he rang me to say he simply could not get out of his bed. I moved in with him that night, called the doctor, not for help but to inform him of the condition of my father. Hospitalisation was recommended, father simply said 'No thank you, my daughter is looking after me.' He had never been admitted to hospital in his 74 years of living, he added, after the doctor had closed the front-door, 'Why break the habit of a lifetime — now, near death?'

He made no big declaration — he simply asked 'Do you want to do this journey with me?' I said 'yes'. One month later to that date he died without struggle, without pain, with only his inner resources and with somebody who loved him deeply and most dearly.

Journal 19th May 1991

'I walk out into my father's garden; as I step out into the night, darkness hits me, like an ocean. Dark and heavy, the ocean engulfs me. The ocean — ocean of consciousness. That which evolves and that which can be taken away. The ebb and flow of transience. I think back, I am thinking back to thoughts I have thought on other dark nights. Other deaths, other births; when either is imminent, the atmosphere is tangible, connected and numinous. I thought about my son, born 24 years ago this very date. Now he is on the other side of the world but I feel his presence here in my father's garden on this dark night. The world is conscious in the night, connected and knowing. All thoughts occurring synchronistically, ebbing, changing form and often a mighty wave brings forth an individual, transformed from the groundswell of consciousness surrounding us, pervading the whole world. We condense and are born, given one short span as separate individuals to do with what we will, to grow, to flower, to stretch our mighty wings like birds, before the ocean claims us again,

ebbing and flowing, the living ocean of consciousness. I stand silently in my father's garden, a faint hint of crimson along the distant horizon. Another cycle turns again.

'I walk into the quiet house, I climb the stairs to take my father his first cup of tea of the day. This is all that has passed his lips for four weeks now. I walk into his bedroom. He is sitting propped up in his bed like some proud warrior, his high prominent cheekbones slightly flushed.

'His old khaki-coloured hanky he uses as an eye-shield, pushing back his now long hair like an Indian brave's headband: he does not want the curtains opened. They have been closed against the world for several days now. He has shut out the world, but he hasn't shut out me. I am more in his life than ever before. Twenty-seven days we have been together night and day now. It has been a long and arduous journey, but it's coming to an end, we are both very very tired and just want to 'get home'. This, the last day of his life, was the most restful he's had. We spent this day as we've spent the others.'

Opening

'At 3pm he had a very bad attack, fighting to get oxygen into his lungs. His whole body was racked with the fight, no energy left to fight with; when he finally could speak, he quietly asked me to pull back the curtains, to open the window and door.

'I did as he asked. I sat back on the bed, he sank back onto his pillows exhausted. I noticed both of his large feet were still firmly planted on the floor, I didn't try to move him — I could see him fading. I said "Smell that lilac, Dad". Waves of lilac perfume came in through the open window, also birdsong. I said "Just listen to those birds, Dad — just listen!". He said "My lips . . . they are numb". Just for a minute he seemed fearful. I repeated what he had told me so that he knew I understood, I placed one hand firmly on his, and one hand palm flat upon his chest — fingers open, this always comforted and quietened his erratic breathing. He sank further into his pillows, I continued to talk gently, reassuringly to him, he could only communicate with his eyes. I saw his eyes suddenly left mine; they went to the corner of the room. I said "Do you see light, Dad, is the light bright?" He continued to look. I encouraged him to move towards the light — Go on Dad, keep on travelling, there is the light — go on towards it. Gradually, peacefully, his eyes became filmy; I knew he couldn't see any more. I continued to stroke his hand. I sent him love, told him of my love, of the love and light out there he must move toward. I continued to talk to him long after his last breath. The cord had been cut; he was gone.'

This experience, this sharing of a last journey, was even more profound than birth for me. My father left me with the greatest gift any parent can leave: a memory of a life well-lived, lived with great integrity, openness, honesty and courage.