Obituary

Dr Phyllis Silverman, a pioneer in the field of death and bereavement, died in Lexington, Massachusetts, on 10 June 2016. A tiny, fit, silver-dark-haired woman, who swam almost every day of her adult life until she became ill, was a forceful, perceptive and outspoken proponent of valuing and listening to the expertise of the bereaved and of learning from them. In the course of her learning, she wrote or co-authored twelve books, fifty book chapters and thirty-five first and co-authored articles, and served as a Professor at the MGH Institute of Health Professions, a Scholar in Residence at the Women's Studies Research Center, Brandeis University and as a founder of The Children's Room in Arlington, MA, where she taught, supervised and applied the theories that she developed. She was a Co-Principal Investigator in the Child Bereavement Study at the Massachusetts General Hospital, the winner of multiple awards for her groundbreaking work on children's grief, books on widows and widowers, and on processes of grief, and she enjoyed an international reputation, teaching in Israel, Canada, Australia, Hong Kong, South America and many other places.

Phyllis came to her work with the dying not through the usual route. Most who work in this field have suffered significant loss and seek to understand our own experiences by trying to make meaning from them in order to mitigate some of their own suffering. Not so for Phyllis. Phyllis would readily say that she was shielded from death as a child, that she would close her eyes as she passed cemeteries as a child and adolescent, and that she was lucky enough to never even attend a funeral until her late twenties. What drew her to the work instead was a job working in the Widow to Widow Program where she had the opportunity to apply her insatiable intellectual curiosity as she formed self-help groups with widows, learning all that she could from their expertise. Her stance of seeing the bereaved as our teachers was one she carried with her throughout her career, never imposing theories upon those who were grieving, but listening for themes in their narratives that became guiding ways to illuminate what she shared with us: that grief was a process, not to be overcome, not to be worked through, but one which changed the self and, in that way, the other. Phyllis wrote about the process of grief not as one of severing ties to the deceased, but of one in which we maintain continuing bonds with those we have lost, transforming ourselves and them throughout the time we still live. This was a view that flew in the face of many significant loss theorists,

who suggested that we need to sever our bonds to the deceased in order to love again. Phyllis, in her research and writing, came to understand that children's relationships to their deceased parents also continue to change and grow, so that relationships with those who have died are never fixed or static. Phyllis helped us to understand that grief was a natural process and she fought valiantly against the pathologising, stigmatising and medicalising of grief. Phyllis cared deeply about gender differences and about women's ways of knowing and of grieving differently. She understood the importance of relationships and the ways in which groups formed the best context for sharing grief, especially for women who could offer self-help and mutual aid. She was sceptical about the professional's role in grief and, as a true qualitative researcher, saw that the role of the professional must be one of listening, not of prescribing or of constraining naturally supportive processes that emerged. Thus she understood the utmost importance of community in helping those who were grieving.

Phyllis challenged so many stereotypes. She could often be heard saying that 'who died' really mattered. It was not acceptable to refer to the dead as those 'loved ones', for example. In her funny, forthright voice, she would say 'Who says anyone loved them!' She was exquisitely attuned to listening to the kind and quality of the relationship with the person who had died and to understanding the developmental context of the griever.

I co-edited *Living with Dying: A Handbook for End of Life Care Practitioners* with Phyllis in 2005. I did so with a little trepidation. She was so smart, so knowledgeable and so opinionated that I feared we might struggle over both the ideas and the execution of the book. What I found instead was her tremendous heart, prodigious intellect, extraordinary generosity and warmth that permeated the entire collaboration. She was humble; she was funny; she was self-deprecating; and wonderfully, and thankfully, insecure. In short, she was completely human as she critiqued, thought out loud, wrote beautifully and with great depth about the history of dying and about developmental issues in grief, and invited so many friends who were scholars and practitioners to contribute to the book. Of all of my collaborations, this was the easiest, the most playful and the best shared. It bespoke her generosity, and authenticity.

She was that kind of mother and wife, too. With five children, and a husband who was her collaborator and greatest supporter, she always had time to prepare Sabbath dinners, to lovingly open her home, to prepare ritual feasts and to let her children know how valued and loved they were. Phyllis was a force of nature. Nothing could stop her. She would sit in any group, knitting, and, just when it was least expected, say the pithiest, most important comment or critique that would utterly change the quality of the discourse. She fully embraced her life, her

travels, her religion, her community, her family, both of creation and of scholars. She was resilient and she was strong and underscored the strengths and resilience of griever. We have lost a visionary, scholar, mother, wife and friend, but she has left us with wisdom that is both simple and profound.

Dr Joan Berzoff
Professor Emerita, Smith College School for Social Work