

COMMUNICATING WITH THE DEAD: TIMELESS INSIGHTS AND INTERVENTIONS FROM THE ARTS

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ABSTRACT

T. S. Eliot's profound poetic insight says it all: "We shall not cease from exploration/And the end of all exploring/Will be to arrive where we started/And know the place for the first time." Nothing is static. Nothing is "new," and yet "knowing it for the first time" as Eliot suggests, is the precious paradox that refutes the idea that we must break our bonds with the dead in order to heal. Long before the "continuing bonds" term was coined, the arts—literary, visual, musical—have been grappling with the ongoing relationships between the living and the dead. This article illuminates provocative examples of this communication from the expressive side of human nature and offers commentary intended to stimulate further observation and reflection.

"Whatcha mean *our* course, kimosabe?" Trying to connect with Bob Kastenbaum to plan "Death, Dying and Other Lethal Behaviors," the fall course we were to teach in the psychology department UMass Boston, was a series of rescheduling mishaps. When we met finally a few days before the beginning of the term, Bob informed me that he was heading up a heart study at Cushing Hospital in Framingham, MA. He then added with that twinkle in his eye, "By the way, what made you ever think I had any intention of co-teaching?" And so began my long tenure at the University of Massachusetts, initially at the college campus in Boston, and for the next 30+ years at the Medical and Nursing Schools in Worcester.

Bob might have been the most accomplished Renaissance man of our generation. He was a brilliant, warm, funny multitalented man who appreciated outside-the-box and other ways of thinking. Although my “non-linear” ways of knowing frustrated me, they intrigued him. Bob was editing a book, *Between Life and Death*, and the next thing I knew, I was summoned to contribute—to create a chapter. In response to the invitation I penned, “Communicating with the Dead: An Ongoing Experience as Expressed in Art, Literature, and Song” (1979, chapter 18, pp. 124-155). Thus, long before the “continuing bonds” term was coined (Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996), the concept was the basis of the chapter. In this contribution honoring Bob, I am revisiting the dialogue Bob and I started what seems like yesterday. T. S. Eliot’s profound poetic insight says it all: “We shall not cease from exploration/And the end of all exploring/Will be to arrive where we started/And know the place for the first time” (1944/1952, p. 145).

The dead, as most people studying grief and caring for the bereaved acknowledge, do not disappear from the lives of the living. They stay connected. Lively communications continue between the two worlds. In this article I focus on the communication as expressed through a work of art—a painting, an aria, a poem, a comic strip. Sometimes these contacts are expressed in the symbolic or ritualized form characteristic of a particular culture. Other contacts take a more intimate and personal form, such as a straightforward conversation. Often the contact is signaled by a memory, a dream, or by an object such as a piece of Royal Copenhagen china, any of which can conjure up phantoms which demand attention. Sometimes the living seek out the dead. At other times the dead seek out the living. In this article, I have selected some examples that provide the data for exploring the connectedness between the living and the dead. As I write it, there is a fullness because I feel so connected with Bob Kastenbaum.

“SO MUCH OWED BY SO MANY TO SO FEW”¹

The scene is serene and lively in John McCrae’s popular and widely reprinted poem “In Flanders Field” (McCrae, 1933). Delicate red poppies blow gently in the breezes, “and in the sky/The larks, still bravely singing, fly.” Evenly spaced crosses mark the graves of the military dead. But don’t be fooled. The dead are at rest, but it is not an eternal peace, permanent or nonreversible. In the poem the dead can only rest if the living continue the fight in which they died.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch: be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die,
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.

¹ W. S. Churchill, Speech, House of Commons, August 20, 1940.

The faith we keep with the battlefield dead and national heroes is expressed in designated holidays such as Memorial Day, Remembrance Day, Veterans' Day, Pearl Harbor. We build statues, erect monuments, dedicate buildings, and name streets to honor those who have died in the service of our country's ideals. Those honored dead are not consigned to obscurity. Their presence is annually memorialized to remind us of their relevance.

Of course, there are those like Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn, always the outsider, who was totally unimpressed by such heroisms. "But by and by she let out that Moses had been dead a very long time; so then I didn't care no more about him, because I don't take no stock in dead people" (Twain, 1967, p. 12).

As a society, however, we do not forget our heroic dead. Our culture and history direct us to be guided and inspired by the deeds and examples of dead heroes. At times we find a symbiotic need to keep the dead hero alive, or at least to continue to relate to the worshipped one. Fainting, throwing oneself on the tombstone, digging up the grave of a rock singer or movie star, dressing like and adopting the mannerisms of a particular personality suggest such a desperation for attachment.

One way of maintaining the connection between the living and the beloved dead is through song. The daring, young, misunderstood rebel James Dean, the teen-aged idol of the 1950s, inspired many songs. Some are characterized by active denial. Far from describing him at rest like the dead soldiers in Flanders Fields, the imagery of three songs, "His Name was Dean" (Russe, 1955), "James Dean, The Greatest of All" (Dalton, 1974a), and "The Ballad of James Dean" (Dalton, 1974b) portray the actor's death as merely a scene change. Nothing is really different; the theater is simply relocated, the substitute director, God ("Great Director did call"), and we, the audience, are replaced by a house of celestial beings ("may the angels bid you welcome/as we bid you goodbye").

The adolescent worshippers console themselves with the promise of continued relationship and interaction. Dean will still be available, as he always was, acting in *their* dreams. Note the use of the present and future tense in their assurance to him that no one will ever fill his space:

James, *we'll always love you*
Now we collect everything we can about you—
 Stories, pictures we even bought a record of your life
You'll always win the academy award in our hearts. [emphasis added]

The intention is not just to memorialize by mementos, the promise is more than not to forget. Their promise is to never let go.

In an e.e. cummings poem, similar imagery softens the harsh reality of the death of a Wild West hero Buffalo Bill (1953, p. 85). The word "dead" is never used; the hero is "defunct," merely out of commission. Like James Dean, a legend in his day, this handsome young cowboy and marksman is portrayed as virile and extraordinary in death as he was in life. But unlike the Dean songs,

who to cling to when the rain set in” died in their mid-30s, their candles, that is, their lives, “burned out long before their legends ever did.”

“Candle in the Wind” was also dedicated to Ryan White, a 13-year-old living with HIV who became a celebrity when his mother courageously fought AIDS-related discrimination and helped educate the nation about his disease (John & Taupin, 2010). He died at age 18 in 1990. At an AIDS Benefit Concert, Elton John asked the audience to pray with him for Ryan who wasn’t doing well. Ryan died the next day, Palm Sunday with his family, Elton John, and Michael Jackson at his bedside. A few months after his death, Congress passed the Ryan White CARE (Comprehensive AIDS Resources Emergency) Act, legislation reauthorized four times since now called the Ryan White HIV/AIDS Program. John credits his sobriety for 20 years at the 20th year benefit concert celebrating the life and legacy of this Indiana teen whose death inspired him to turn his life around.

TESTING THE BONDS: AGENDAS NOBLE AND LESS SO

The relationship between the living and the dead often continues almost as it was. The living communicate with the dead for many reasons, among them to receive comfort, to blame for not being present, to make amends, or to seek permission to go on with life. In her grieving *Momma*, the protagonist of Mel Lazarus’s cartoon strip of the same name (Lazarus, 1977), seems to be permanently frozen in anger. She consistently berates her dead husband, Jerome, for having left her. She must now shoulder the family burdens and make all the decisions herself. “I’m worrying myself sick. . . . but I hope you’re enjoying your harp!” In another sequence, she accuses Jerome of taking an eternal rest while she, as usual, worries herself sick about the children (Francis has a new girlfriend of whom Momma does not approve; Marylou might lose her job; Thomas is taking a pay cut and working too hard; etc. etc.). Jerome listens to this recital of woes, interrupting once to say, “That’s terrible. That’s really terrible.” As Momma continues complaining, her deceased mate sighs audibly, “I thought eternal rest meant never having to say, That’s terrible.” Momma addresses him sharply: “What was that Jerome?” to which he replies meekly, “Nothing dear, go on. . . .”

The psychological value of such a communication—of being able to get it all out—is illustrated in the painting by George Catlin (1792-1872) “Village of the Dead” (see Figure 1). An Indian woman, albeit in a more traditional and respectful way than Momma, is depicted visiting the dried out skull of her husband who has clearly been dead a long time. As Catlin reports:

Seldom passes a day that she does not visit it with a dish of the best cooked food that her lodge affords which she sets before the skull at night and returns for the dish in the morning . . . and she lingers to hold converse and company with the dead . . . sitting or lying by the skull . . . talking to it in the most pleasant and endearing language that she can use . . . and seemingly

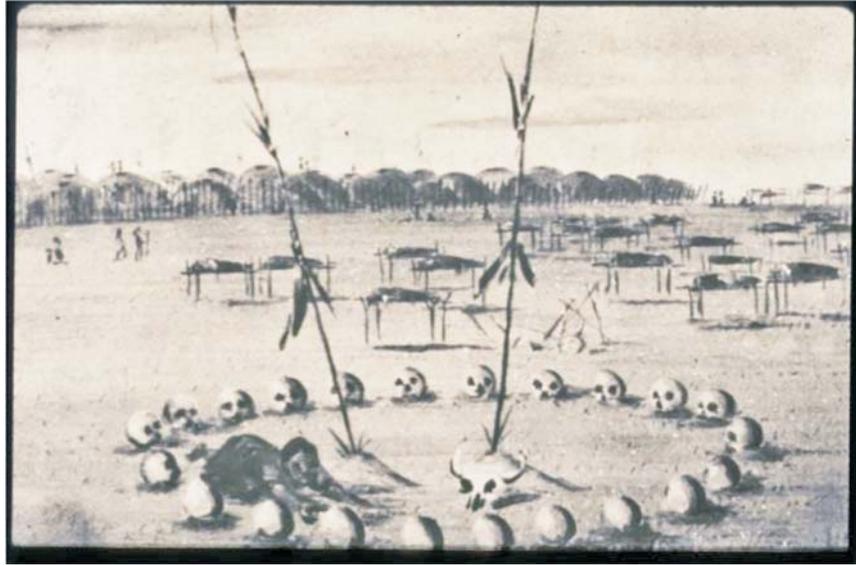


Figure 1. Catlin (circa 1850). Mandan Village of the Dead. b/w pencil. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian. Used with permission.

getting an answer back . . . frequently bringing her needlework with her . . . chatting incessantly with it, while she is garnishing a pair of moccasins. (<http://americanart.si.edu/exhibitions/online/catlinclassroom/searchdocs/catlinletter12.html>)

And what, we can ask, of the dead? Are they merely disembodied, disinterested entities who are personified only when their living counterparts need to obtain comfort and support? Do they ever take the initiative to make contact? Do they have the same need to find meaning, to explain themselves to themselves? Do they have a need to deliver a message to others? In literature and the arts we find a lot of different answers to those questions.

The dead may have their own “grief work” to do. For example, in the musical *Carousel* (Hammerstein & Rogers, 1940), tough and free-spirited Billy married tender Julie, lost his job, learned he was about to become a father, planned a robbery, and killed himself to prevent being captured. After 15 years of Purgatory, Billy is denied entrance to Heaven until he redeems his soul. He is permitted to return to earth for 24 hours during which time he must perform at least one good deed. Catching a glimpse of his unhappy teenage daughter he steals a star to give her as a gift. Awkwardly, when he cannot persuade her to accept the star he slaps her. But his slap transmits a kiss-like touch rather than a hurt and allows his daughter to feel the love she needs in order to acquire the self-assurance

and confidence she lacks. On some level, Julie, too, is aware of the happening and is reassured that she was right to have married Bill after all. In the song “You’ll Never Walk Alone,” Bill’s promises continued support and love and we know Julie hears when she repeats and re-sings his words.

A most common—and consuming—reason for the dead to initiate communication is to avenge a wrong. Hamlet’s father in Shakespeare’s tragedy (1948, pp. 885-934) and Jacob Marley in Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* (1915) return to set things right, with, as we know, different results. Both works begin with the spirit of the dead. Shakespeare’s play opens with the apparition of the Ghost; the novel opens with the lines “Marley was dead, to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that.”

Hamlet’s father speaks directly to Hamlet, explaining his penance and charging Hamlet with the task of revenging his father’s murder:

I am thy father’s spirit,
Doomed for a certain term to walk the night.
And for the day confined to fast in fire,
Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature
Are burnt and purged away. . . .

Hamlet doubted the ghost, saying, “The spirit that I have seen/May be the devil.” The father returns to remind him of the revenge he still must seek. “Do not forget. This visitation is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose.”

As the play moves toward its tragic conclusion, former indecisive and rather ineffectual Hamlet breaks out of his bind of inaction. He avenges his father’s death and, so doing, rids Denmark of the “something rotten.” Hamlet dies in the process and is accorded a hero’s funeral. His ghost will not be restless as was his father’s.

Now cracks a noble heart. Good night, sweet prince;
And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest.

Marley had been Ebenezer Scrooge’s business partner. He is doing penance for not having “walked amongst his fellow-men” in life. His charge is to have Scrooge avoid the error of his ways: “I wear the chain I forged in life; I am here to warn you that you have a chance and hope of escaping my fate.” Marley’s ghost promises three spirits will visit Scrooge to help understand his own history, and to help him find ways to alter his life. In his last response to a spirit, Scrooge vows to honor Christmas in his heart and try to keep it all the year. Formerly ungenerous, unhappy, unkind, and unloved, Scrooge, who like Marley, had never walked amongst his fellow man, is totally transformed. The novel informs us Scrooge does, indeed, live up to his good intentions:

He had no further intercourse with Spirits, but lived upon the Total-Abstinence Principle ever afterwards; and it was always said of him that he knew how to keep Christmas well. If any man alive possessed the knowledge.

And, of course, the Cratchit family has a nice Christmas too.

Not everything rotten in the world left behind is made right. Within the framework of a spoken ballad, the dead young man in A. E. Housman's "Is My Team Ploughing" (1963) interrogates his living friend about the life he had loved: farming, football, his land, possessions, and prior relationships. As he talks, I wonder if this dead man has completed his "grief work"? Is he no longer feeling the pain of separation when he asks "Is my girl happy that I *thought* hard to leave/And has she tired of weeping?" [emphasis added]. His continued concern seems evident; feelings of possessiveness and of caring still exist. Earlier in this verbal exchange, prior to the mention of the dead man's sweetheart, the living friend exhibited comfort and directness in his replies. Now his answers smack of evasiveness, even an urgency to cut off the questions and end the conversation. Is the dead man's agenda to put this friend in touch with feelings of guilt and betrayal because the friend is his girl friend's lover? The concluding stanzas hint at this way of understanding the conversation with their puns on "bed" and "lie easy." We could, of course, ask what right has the dead man to expect his girl friend to remain faithful to him, but the possessiveness of young lovers seems to live on.

In the musical *Fiddler on the Roof* (Stein, 1964) we see a charming example of chicanery using communication with the dead. The central character, Tevya, blocks the arranged marriage of their daughter to the widower butcher by taking advantage of his wife's belief in the retributive powers of the dead. Tevya pretends to be awakened from a bad dream that his wife, Goldie, offers to interpret ("Tell me what you dreamt/And I'll tell you what it meant"). Recreating the dream in all its ghastly splendor, replete with bodies rising from their graves, he describes a celebration at which all their loved ones who have now died are present, especially Goldie's grandmother Tzeitel, who returns from the grave to bless the marriage of her namesake granddaughter, but not to the one she is marrying, but to another. Goldie's delighted interpretation: the dream is of their daughter's wedding to the widower butcher. The festivities are interrupted by the entry of FrumaSarah, the butcher's late wife. Furious at the thought of another woman getting her furs and jewels, FrumaSarah screams her vindictive wedding present—a union of 3 weeks followed by death to the bride. Goldie's conclusion is that the marriage with the butcher is not meant to be. Furthermore, concludes Goldie, "If my grandmother Tsitel (may she rest in peace) took the trouble to come all the way from the other world to tell me about the tailor, all I can say is that it must be for the best." Tevye chuckles to himself as he blows out the candle and they return to sleep.

And is it chicanery or *Carpe Diem?*—to quicken one's partner to consummation of the love act in the here and now. Robert Herrick's "To the Virgins, To Make Much of Time" ("Gather ye rosebuds while ye may"; Herrick, 1963a, p. 76); and "Corinna Going A-Maying" ("Then while time serves, and we are but decaying./Come, my Corinna, come, let's go a-Maying"; Herrick, 1963b, p. 76) voice the argument of Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" (Marvell, 1963, pp. 64-65): "The grave's a fine and private place,/But none, I think, do there

embrace.” Marvell uses the even less genteel imagery of maggots and worms trying his lady’s “long preserved virginity” to convince the young virgin of the negative consequences to postponing love-making.

Kastenbaum (Kastenbaum & Kastenbaum, 1989) sums up the term continuing bonds that was first used in the title of the book, *Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief* (Klass, 1996) as referring to an aspect of the bereavement process which challenged the popular model of grief requiring the bereaved to “let go” of or detach from the deceased. The data presented affirms that maintaining links with the deceased leads to the construction of new relationships with them that continue and change over time, typically providing the bereaved with comfort and solace. Most mourners struggling with their need to find a place for the deceased in their lives are afraid of being seen as having something wrong with them, and are often embarrassed to talk about it.

TOMMY vs. FREUD: DEATH ENDS A LIFE BUT NOT A RELATIONSHIP

Sigmund Freud, recognizing the debilitating pervasiveness of grief, postulated the importance of expressing grief and detaching emotionally from the deceased in order to recover full function. He stated that the task of mourning is psychical and goal oriented: specifically, to detach the survivor’s memories and hopes from the dead.

A series of drawings by Tommy, a youngster whose mother died of AIDS, innocently and intuitively challenges Freud’s theory and speaks volumes about continuing bonds. His first sketch (Figure 2A), all in black, is desolate, his own figure alone in the foreground, observable tears dripping from his eyes, his mother visible only by a gravestone marker in the background. The second sketch (Figure 2B), still in black, adds his family, two siblings, and his father grieving with him in the foreground. Tommy writes over a crossed out “dying,” “I will be crying.” These early drawings of Tommy’s so perfectly capture the amorphousness, the intensity, the emptiness of grief. Juxtapose the American W. S. Merwin’s tiny poem *Separation* (1993) with any of these sketches: “Your absence has gone through me like / Thread through a needle. / Everything I do is stitched with its color.” Or, in this case, its lack of color.

In his final drawing (Figure 2C), a perfect metaphor for the power and solace offered by the continuing bonds, Tommy still in the foreground but now smiling and surrounded by colorful flowers, is visualizing and talking to his mom in heaven (“the one with red lipstick”) who is smiling and singing with God, his wife (“the fat dumpy one”), and all the friends and angels. He explains “She doesn’t hurt anymore either and I can talk to her anytime I want.” Having relocated his mother in his heart and memory, she is tenderly present whenever he wants or needs to connect with her. Not to be misinterpreted, their connection is further emphasized by the purple color of both their bodies. Tommy’s drawings

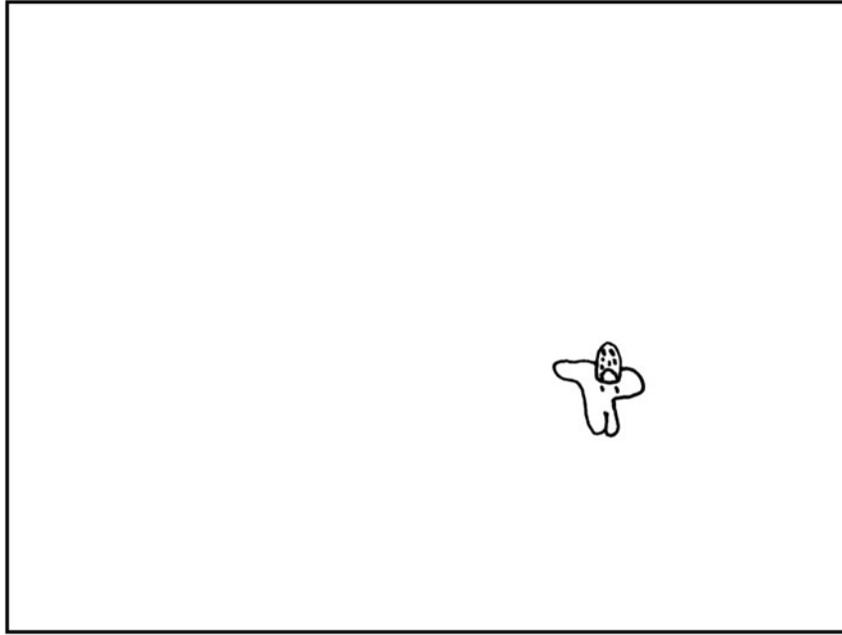


Figure 2A. Tommy: Helping Children Cope (AIDS Project).
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are an exquisite literal and symbolic illustration of how death ends a life but not a relationship.

DEATH ENDS A LIFE BUT NOT A RELATIONSHIP

Nothing is static. Relationships with the dead are revisited throughout one's lifetime. The first half of the opening and closing lines of Robert Anderson's film and play *I Never Sang for My Father* are, "Death ends a life but not a relationship" (1974, p. 82). The completed statement, articulated at the end of the play, reads "but it does not end a relationship, *which struggles on in the survivor's mind for some resolution, which it never finds.*" Remarried 3 years after his wife's death, author Robert Anderson, in the conclusion to his moving retrospective essay *Notes of a Survivor*, expresses a most realistic and sober account of the continued communication between two bonded beings:

I have been married now for eleven years. It took enormous understanding and generosity on the part of my wife, Teresa, to take me along with your ghosts. We use the Royal Copenhagen porcelain [china brought with his

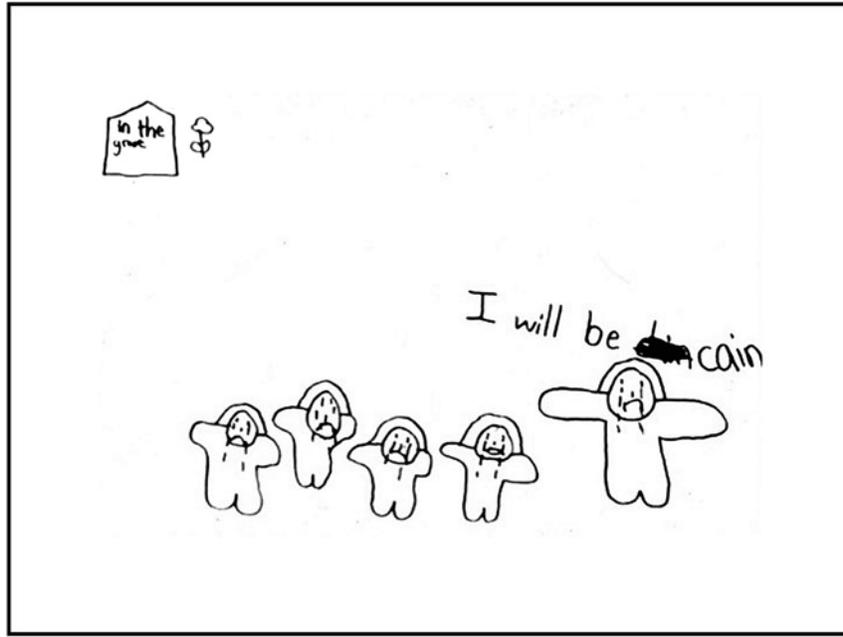


Figure 2B. Tommy: Helping Children Cope (AIDS Project).
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wife Phyllis for a future both knew they'd never have]—by her choice we live in the village next to the town where Phyllis and I had our cottage which now I use as my studio. I have a new life; but though I have a new life, I have an old relationship still struggling in my mind toward some resolution I know it will never find. It has been fifteen years—the struggle still goes on, and I imagine it will go on as long as I live.

Nothing is static. Nothing is “new,” and yet “knowing it for the first time” as Eliot suggests, is the precious paradox that refutes the idea that we must break our bonds with the dead in order to heal. Be it in mind or memory, *we* the living stay connected to *them* the dead, and sound our connectedness in language and in heart. The dead do not leave us. They are too powerful, too influential, too meaningful to depart. They give us direction by institutionalizing our history and culture; they clarify our relationship to country and cause. They immortalize our sentiments and visions in poetry, music, and art. The dead come to inform us of tasks yet to be completed, of struggles to be continued, of purposes to be enjoined, of lessons they have learned. We need the dead to release us from our obligations, to open new potential, to give us belongingness and strength to continue with our lives.



Figure 2C. Tommy: Helping Children Cope (AIDS Project).
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A richer grasp of such an eternal connectedness and of the solace in this relatedness might help create a more sympathetic attitude toward the pain of loneliness, toward active participation in the comforts of communication with the dead, and toward understanding the driving psychological forces that can dominate a person's behavior when under the influence of an overwhelming preoccupation. Such a grasp might also be of great help to those dying and to those losing another—for knowledge of connectedness can serve to ease the pain for both. As the lore of the arts and humanities constantly inform us, it really is to our disadvantage to insist that dead is dead is a logical imperative.

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