

---

# Comments on and Extracts from: The Death of a Twin: Mourning and Anniversary Reactions — Fragments of 10 years of Self-Analysis by George Engel

Elizabeth Bryan and Ronald Higgins

*Multiple Births Foundation, London, UK*

Only recently has the special bereavement associated with the loss of a twin been generally recognised. With the notable exception of Joan Woodward, few have written on the subject. We, therefore, offer a shortened version of a paper written nearly 30 years ago. George Engel was himself a lone twin as well as being an eminent psychiatrist and psychoanalyst in the United States. The length of the paper precludes reprinting the totality but we hope readers will be encouraged to seek out the original published in *The International Journal of Psycho-analysis* in 1975, Vol 56 part 1, 23–40.

---

George Engel looks at his life as a twin and presents a ‘self-analysis of anniversary dreams and parapraxes’ which occurred over the 10-year period following the sudden and unexpected death of his identical twin brother, Frank, then Professor of Medicine at Duke University, at the age of 49. The self-analysis continued as he approached and lived through his own 58th year, the age of his father at the time of his sudden death in 1928. Despite suffering a myocardial infarction eleven months after his twin, George Engel himself died in 1999 at the age of 85.

Engel also discusses ‘the psychoanalytic literature on twins in the light of the author’s personal experience as a twin, particularly the unique aspects of the object relationships and of the mourning processes following the death of a twin’.

Our summary is limited to aspects primarily related to his twinship rather than to his anniversary dreams or their Freudian analysis. The death of his twin brother was a profound shock and continued to preoccupy him. He was therefore all the more aware of the perils of subjectivity in what became a research project in self-analysis.

Of their early life as twins, Engel says:

Our relationship had been close, intense, but extremely rivalrous. We were virtually indistinguishable, so much so that even our parents often confused us. Except for a four-year older brother we were in childhood constant and exclusive companions, virtually disdainful of other friends until the age of 12 and even thereafter for years shared friends rather than each having personal friends of his own. During childhood we went to extraordinary lengths to regulate and control expression of physical aggression toward

each other, the net effect of which was equivalent aggression, not non-aggression. In social relations we enjoyed a high degree of complementarity, I in general being the more active. Only in dating did we maintain complete independence, agreeing from the outset never to date each other’s girl, a rule strictly adhered to. Actually this became the device enabling me to disengage, for I began to go steady by 21 and was married by 24, whereas he remained a bachelor for another five years. Educationally and professionally we pursued virtually identical careers, attending the same college, medical school and internship, only going our separate ways at the age of 27.

The intense rivalry which had marked our earlier lives was in adulthood expressed in terms of our respective professional careers, but by the time of his death we were both sufficiently successful in our own fields that the need for constant display of overt competition had largely disappeared. Indeed a few months before his death, at our last meeting, we had for the first time discussed the possibility of collaborating on a book.

His brother died suddenly in 1963 at the age of only 49:

The news of his fatal heart attack on 10 July 1963 came as a profound shock. On that day my family and I happened to be visiting my older brother in Boston. I had a reaction of stunned disbelief, followed by tears some 20 minutes later. Within a few hours we were on a plane to Durham. On the flight I experienced left chest pain. A number of vivid dreams occurred in relation to the funeral, the details of which are now forgotten, but all were marked by a profound confusion between myself and my brother.

Upon return to Rochester a week later, I at once submitted to a physical examination which demonstrated that I too had evidence of coronary disease as indicated by radiological signs of calcification of the coronary arteries, but there was no evidence that the chest pain on the plane had represented a myocardial infarction. I assume it was a conversion symptom. Nonetheless, the idea became firmly fixed in my mind that I would soon suffer a heart attack.

---

*Address for correspondence: Elizabeth Bryan, The Multiple Births Foundation, Queen Charlotte’s & Chelsea Hospital, Du Cane Road, London W12 0HS Email: ebryan@higgins7.co.uk*

Engel says: 'The prediction was fulfilled':

As time passed I found myself increasingly entertaining the magical notion that if the myocardial infarction did not occur by 10 July 1964, the first anniversary of his death, I would survive. I was fully aware of the irrational nature of this idea, but nonetheless found it impossible to dispel. On 9 June 1964 the long anticipated event occurred, just one day short of 11 months of my brother's death.

Engel connected the heart attack with the previous week's events, in particular his speech about the twinship at an annual banquet. He reminds readers that:

We were so identical in appearance that under such circumstances it was common for the audience to laugh as soon as the unfamiliar Engel began to speak, so uncanny was the resemblance of voice and mannerisms as well as of physical appearance. I was emphasizing our identity yet calling on the audience to distinguish between us. I seemed determined to accentuate the humorous aspects of our relationship and avoid dealing with the sadness of the loss...then I thought my intended remarks were much too personal and quite inappropriate for the occasion. Suddenly I felt acutely anxious, the first anxiety attack I had had for many years.

Over the succeeding years I became less and less preoccupied with anticipation of the significant anniversaries, especially our joint birthdays (10 December) and his death (10 July). Yet a number of incidents occurred which served to keep alive the conflicts for myself, as well as for others, that I, not he, had survived... In 1965, invited to present a paper, I was introduced as 'Dr Frank Engel, brother of our late beloved colleague, Frank...' I was several times greeted as Frank in the hospital corridors by persons momentarily repressing his death.

He goes on to say:

...after his death such mistakes were painful to me... Hence all the more remarkable was such an occurrence at a meeting of the American College of Physicians in 1968 (Five years after Frank's death) where I responded to 'Hi, Frank' without a second thought. Only a few minutes later did I realize with amazement that I had been greeted as Frank and yet felt no surprise. But the setting was important. Frank was a prominent member of the College; I was not a member. The occasion for my attendance at that meeting was to receive an award, the perfect setting to play out our rivalry. Clearly my wish that he could share (and be put down) by my success was intense enough that for the moment at least I accepted the stranger's error as if Frank were indeed still alive.

Engel discusses at length his preoccupation with — and dreams about — time, twins, coincidences, fate (although he does not use the term) and family anniversaries. He records a recurring 'examination dream' and concludes that:

...the unpleasant fact I had to face was the guilt I felt that I had returned home alive, my brother had not! The dream characteristically condensed the pain of guilt and loss over his death and the triumph of my own survival.

On another dream he says:

...the fusion of our identities and the yearning for reunion are clear in two items in the dream... In the dream I will

overcome this painful reaction of unresolved grief by being reunited with Frank...at our final meeting, Frank and I had discussed collaborating on a book which would have in effect combined his endocrinological and my psychological insights. The thwarting of this hope was one of the more anguishing consequences of his death.

...my resentment that he had cheated me of my scientific priority...exactly paralleled my childhood resentment that he was the first, i.e. the oldest, whereas in fact I liked to fantasy that we had been mixed up at birth and I really was the first born.

I emerged triumphant, the first; my brother was second. Once again the theme of who comes first appears; to outdo my twin meant to achieve my own individuality, to be the favoured one, and in the dream to escape.

Engel is aware that:

The mourning and anniversary phenomena recounted here obviously are not unique to twins. Yet the distinctive features of twinning clearly introduce features which may illuminate certain aspects of these phenomena, especially the pronounced tendency toward persistent confusion of identities in the unconscious.

On separation, individuation and identity formation in twins, he writes:

My personal experience as a twin is consistent with what others have written. A central developmental issue for twins concerns the fact that separation and individuation must ultimately involve the twin as well as the mother. Indeed, there is indication that the intimacy and intensity of the interaction between the twins may actually accelerate the separation from the mother (Leonard, 1961), only to be replaced by a prolonged symbiosis between the twins, whose separation and individuation from each other may be consequently long delayed. Joseph & Tabor (1961) called this the 'twinning reaction' which 'consists of (1) mutual interidentification and (2) part fusion of the self representation and the object representation of the other member of the pair'.

Through much of my childhood, even well into adolescence, our parents referred to us collectively as 'the twins' while often misidentifying us as individuals. We were dressed alike, provided with identical possessions and from earliest infancy certainly spent far more time interacting with each other than with any other person, including mother. Obviously the primary separation and individuation from mother is beyond recall, but my earliest memory may be revealing. I see myself standing up holding on to the seat of a chair as my father attempts slowly to pull it away to encourage me to stand by myself. The rest of the family are encouraging me. Evidently my twin had already succeeded in standing alone. Many years later, during my analysis, my mother documented that the episode had indeed occurred at about the age of one year. I was becoming upset because my twin was toddling away from me and I could not follow, a phenomenon that Burlingham (1949) also observed among twins. I suggest now that to be able to keep physically close to my twin was important in mitigating the trauma of separations from parents. But at the same time this accentuated the wish and advantage to be as much like my twin as possible. Thus attachment needs and attachment behaviour, in Bowlby's (1969) sense, to an increasing degree became a positive force to intensify intertwin relations and

through this the duality of the twin unit became solidified. We became 'the twins', a unit separated from the others. I emphasize the positive aspects of the unity, rather than coexistence as a compromise to be worked out

I vividly recall our success in enticing our four-year older brother close enough to the bars of the playpen so that we could seize him by the hair, screaming helplessly like Gulliver in the hands of the Lilliputians. Patently the advantages of fusing our strengths and functioning as a unit long outweighed the opposite need to establish individual identities, important as that was.

Many consequences ensued for us from this prolonged struggle between unification and individuation, the most important of which were on the one hand diffuseness of ego boundaries, on the other complementarity. The latter constituted a developmental process encouraging in each of us the emergence of ego capacities that would complement each other and enhance the effective operation of the twin unit in relation to outsiders.

As children we were retarded in language development and social communication. Like many twins, we enjoyed a private language, remnants of which persisted well into latency period (Leonard, 1961). We never addressed each other by our proper names. Rather, until I got married, we both addressed each other by the same name, 'Oth'. The derivation of 'Oth' is relevant to understanding the process of individuation. As early as the age of two we began to address each other as 'Other Man'. Over the years this became shortened to 'Othie' and finally to the more curt 'Oth'. This shared appellation constituted an elegant compromise, for it simultaneously differentiated self from the other while maintaining the dual twin identity distinct from the rest of the world.

Engel adds:

I cannot with confidence differentiate childhood photographs...An uncanny phenomenon, which only began to fade since my twin's death, occurred regularly when viewing myself from behind in a double mirror, as when trying on a suit in a clothing store. Invariably I saw Frank! When young, it was Frank; later I felt uneasy and usually laughed, so uncanny was the experience. But since I practically never saw myself, but commonly saw Frank from behind, this should not be surprising.

Confusion of childhood memories persists to date. We both told numerous twin stories but those who had heard such tales independently from both of us reported the stories to be identical, but roles sometimes were reversed. We were never able to resolve such discrepancies.

Our habits and tastes also remained remarkably similar, so that independently — and occasionally virtually simultaneously — we purchased similar if not identical items of clothing or makes of car.

The vicissitudes of aggression between twins is a complex issue. My twin and I elaborated a complex system of equivalent but tempered aggressive behaviour controlled by regulations which we also agreed to deviate from by a small degree. Pinching, poking, squeezing knuckles, damaging possessions, whether by accident, or intent, justified exactly equivalent retaliation but we could never agree on what was 'exactly equivalent'... From an early age I believe this contributed to the process of establishing boundaries, yet the

libidinalization must simultaneously have had the reverse effect of diffusing boundaries. At the same time there was intense rivalry for the attention of our parents and older brother. Though both parents attempted to be (and I now believe really were) even-handed, I nonetheless long nursed the notion that my mother gave priority to Frank because he was the older (by five minutes!).

The importance for me to be 'the first' has already been discussed... Since I never could succeed in reversing this sequence I ultimately...arrived at the compromise solution of exploiting the advantage of being 'the youngest'. Thus I could boast that I was the youngest in my high school, college and medical school... Thus the struggle for individual attention from others was used in the service of individuation. In this regard our older brother probably played the most significant role, for he made no pretence of being even-handed. On the contrary, when he realized that he could not cope with us as a unit, he inaugurated a quite successful policy of aligning himself first with one and then with the other. Under such circumstances our carefully monitored non-aggression pact broke down completely and the excluded twin either submitted passively (more often Frank) or engaged in violent attacks on the others (more often I). Though such exclusion was painful at the time I suspect it contributed importantly to the ultimate success in achieving individual identities.

The narcissistic advantage of being a twin is a major factor that is intuitively appreciated by the non-twin who envies twins their constant companionship — which he imagines to be totally without ambivalence — and for the advantage they enjoy in being able to deceive others. It includes ...the narcissistic gain derived from the twin unit itself. Such narcissism constitutes a powerful force working against achieving separateness: ...On the other hand, struggle against homosexual bonds may play a corresponding role in inducing the separation of like-sex twins.

...the narcissistic gain of being twins was reinforced early in childhood from the attention directed to us as twins by strangers as well as by family and, later on, by the extraordinary power we felt in our ability to deceive others.

When together we invariably attracted attention; when separate we could at will provoke mystification... one obvious consequence of my brother's death was the loss of this source of narcissistic supply.

Other writers have commented on the corruptibility of the superego in twins as one possible outgrowth of twins' ability to 'pass the buck' and hence escape punishment (Joseph & Tabor, 1961). Certainly the gratifications derived from the readiness with which twins can confuse, if not deliberately outwit, others is a powerful temptation, especially when taken in conjunction with the wish to outshine the other twin

Engel discusses the complexities of grief after death of a twin in mid-life:

Three factors must differentiate the grief experienced upon loss of a twin from that upon loss of a sibling...the enduring diffuseness of the ego boundaries between... the narcissistic gains of twinship, and the delicate balance of the defences against aggression.

Siblings typically begin social relations with peers early and hence move more easily into less interdependent and more

overtly rivalrous relationships than do twins. Their bonds are further loosened when they marry and raise their own families. Twin bonds are more lasting; some even make marriages based on twin object choice, even marrying twins. Though we saw each other only once or twice a year, the drive to sustain the old duality was ever present. For years we carried on a voluminous correspondence and... exploited our twinship at every opportunity. It seems likely that the uniqueness of the twin relationship is never fully overcome.

Vagueness of ego boundaries was a recurring and pronounced experience during the first days of grief and periodically thereafter... in dreams... characterized by an extraordinary sense of confusion as to who was who and which had died.

The diffuseness of ego boundaries of twins and the narcissistic gains of the dual unit suggest that mourning for a twin may involve... a narcissistic... loss. This is especially likely to be the case where the unique role of being a twin had been exploited throughout life... I could enjoy the double pleasure of being mistaken for the well-known Dr Frank Engel and then identifying myself as Dr George Engel. The childhood games were played out to the very end; I could even pass as an endocrinologist with an exceptional knowledge of behaviour. Death ended the steady input of twin-associated gratifications; indeed, for a period they turned to ashes... I lost all pleasure in any longer recounting twin stories. Thus, to no longer be a twin was in itself a loss, albeit a narcissistic loss. I am very aware that the preparation of this paper constitutes an effort to compensate for this loss.

...the psychic task of tempering self- and twin-directed aggression during the mourning period is formidable. Arlow (1961) reports a twin whose dead twin remained alive within him, and 'internalized Dybuk (that) caused him intense suffering. As long as he experienced such suffering, he was able to maintain denial of his brother's death.' To this I would add, and through fusion of self and object to feel himself still alive.

Engel stresses his view that in the unconscious is timeless:

The fact of being a twin, of sharing time through the extended and repeated contemporaneity and simultaneity of shared life experiences, multiplied the occasions suitable for anniversary responses to [my brother's] death. Once again the issue of separateness and unity was joined. But upon his death, to be separate was to live, to be joined was to die. The battleground was in the unconscious where boundaries between self and twin representations were fluid and where time and numbers were used in symbolic and magical, not in chronological and metric senses. In the unconscious time repeats itself rather than moving inexorably on. And to be a twin is also to be simultaneous in time. The reader will recall how important for my struggle to achieve a separate identity became the question of which of us was born first.

Engel says this about the duration of grieving:

[All] this raises the question as to whether certain key losses in life are ever actually completely resolved and to what extent the impact over time of such losses is cumulative. Freud (1908) opined that a loved object is never really relinquished. 'Actually we can never give anything up; we only exchange one thing for another. What appears to be renunciation is really the formation of a substitute or surrogate.' Certainly... Greene (1965) has pointed out that even at a superficial level one cannot make a judgement about the degree of resolution of grief until the end of the second year when the reactions to the important first anniversaries without the deceased, e.g. the first vacation, the first birthday, etc., can be assayed. At such times, and sometimes even over several years, it is not uncommon for at least brief feelings of sadness to recur:

Ten years have passed since my twin's death. The question impossible for me now to resolve is whether I was reacting in 1972 to my father's death, to my brother's death, or to a condensation of the two, the twin complex.

Engel adds this conclusion:

Caveat lector! Derivative as it is from fragments of self-analysis, everything in this paper must be regarded by the reader as data... as though it were the manifest content of a dream that had already undergone secondary revision in writing. In this sense everything is data, the form and sequence of the presentation, the formulations, the omissions and elisions that the reader will immediately detect, and indeed even the motivation to write the paper in the first place.

## References

- Arlow, J. A. (1961). In panel report by E. D. Joseph: The psychology of twins. *Journal of American Psycho-analytical Assessment*, 9, 158–166.
- Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment and loss (vol. 1): Attachment*. New York: Basic Books.
- Burlingham, D. T. (1949). The relationship of twins to each other. *The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, 3–4.
- Freud, S. (1908). *Creative writers and day-dreaming*. S.E.9.
- Greene, W. A. (1965). Disease response to life stress. *Journal of the American Medical Womens Association*, 20, 133–140.
- Joseph, E. D. & Tabor, J. H. (1961). The simultaneous analysis of a pair of identical twins and the twinning reaction. *The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, 16.
- Leonard, M. R. (1961). Problems in identification and ego development in twins. *The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, 16.