

Milestones and Potholes...

I swerve. There are humps and potholes. If I try to drive straight over a hump, it scrapes the bottom of the car. So it's best to turn to the left or right so that I take the hump at an angle. Not face on. The potholes are harder. They hide, looking like ripples in the road surface, but as I get near they yawn. My wheel rolls straight in, hits the far side and the whole car jolts. What's hard, is that the holes are often on the downside of the humps. So even as I dodge the hump I land in the hole. Sometimes I spot the hole on the other side of the hump and at the very moment I've worked out how I'll avoid it, I find myself going straight over the hump, dead centre, and it's scraping the bottom of some vital out of sight part of my engine.

*From **Carrying the Elephant**, by Michael Rosen.*

I like this prose poem from Michael Rosen's book. He is describing the road on which we all have to travel following the loss of a beloved child. Michael's nineteen year old son, Eddie, died in 1999 from a sudden onset of meningitis.

I am writing this the day before what would have been Will's thirtieth birthday. Will died in January 2006, a couple of months short of his twenty-third birthday. His first birthday without him was difficult, as have been the subsequent ones, but I knew his thirtieth birthday would be especially hard. But I did not expect it to hit me quite as hard as it has. Being so close to Mothering Sunday has not helped but, even so, the harsh reality that Will is not here to celebrate the day with his friends, has felled me. I rarely weep these days but this week I have been awash with tears, the grief flooding over me like a tidal wave.

It seems that no matter how far we have travelled along this endless road, there will always be unexpected twists and turns and – as Michael Rosen describes so well – potholes, to trip us up and bring us to our knees. As those of us further along the road know, we do learn to cope better with our changed lives and the pain does soften with time. But, that said, we will never recover from the loss of our child and the yearning to see them will never go away.

I remember in the very early days after losing Will, my husband Edwin and I went to one of Rita Henshaw's Childless Parents' weekends. We were most newly bereaved there and we looked to those other parents – some of them only two or three years ahead of us – hoping for reassurance - reassurance that it would get better. But in fact we were told by some of these parents that the second year, and the third, would be harder still to bear and I can remember thinking that was not possible. Surely it could not be worse? When we reached our second year without Will, I was thankful that we had been warned because the pain did indeed feel worse, I guess in part because some of the shock has worn off and the finality of our loss is beginning to register. But we also came away from that weekend with hope; hope that if the other parents we had met had survived, then maybe we could, too. And it was so comforting to be with others who truly understood.

There do seem to be landmarks on this journey. I think the first is probably around six months. There was a mother at this first meeting had lost her teenage son six months earlier and she looked stunned. We felt very sad for her and wanted to comfort her. When we ourselves reached six months, we thought of her and understood. The sad thing is that the

majority of people assume that once we have passed the first anniversary, we will feel better. Little do they know...In his brilliant book, *God of the Valley*, the Rev Steve Griffiths says, *“By the time we have to face our first Christmas alone, our first birthday alone, the first re-run of that series our partner loved so much, our first summer day, our first snowfall alone, the (Christian) community seems to have moved on. We are left alone and comfortless – and it hurts.”* I know in this instance Steve is referring to the church but it applies the secular world as well.

On this journey we have to cope not only with our child's anniversaries and birthdays but other significant dates too. Of course there are the obvious ones: Christmas, Easter, Mothering Sunday, to name but a few. But for each of us there are other significant days too. Our own birthdays, the anniversary of some particular event we associated closely with our child. The list can be endless.

It doesn't have to be only dates of course. Some parents draw comfort from returning to places, such as holiday resort or perhaps a particular restaurant they visited with their child which hold happy memories for them. Unfortunately for me is something I cannot do. Not yet, anyway.

Hearing a particular piece of music, finding a forgotten photo, or an object, can bring us down. I recently came across Will's Swiss Army knife and remembered his delight when his aunt gave it to him. Sometimes the seemingly smallest things can lock into our pain.

Will and I used to enjoy watching the American series *ER* and *House*. But since Will died, there is no way I can bear to watch a medical drama. I admire those parents within TCF who worked in hospitals before their child died and have continued to do so – that takes a lot of courage. Will was admitted to the intensive care unit at our local hospital in High Wycombe for three days before being transferred to the Glenfield hospital in Leicester. Since then going to Wycombe hospital is very traumatising and I try to arrange any necessary appointments at another hospital. I have managed on a couple of occasions to visit friends who have been in-patients at Wycombe but it has proved harrowing and I have felt emotionally drained afterwards.

Last week we received a wedding invitation from the daughter of a second cousin of mine. It may sound selfish but weddings are one of those occasions I have not found the strength to attend since Will died. And this particular invitation hurts because Will was very fond of this cousin and I think both her mother and I rather hoped that she and Will would get together! They were far enough removed relationship-wise for this to be okay. I am happy for her of course but I know I would find this wedding far too painful for me. This will be difficult for those not in our situation to understand and we will probably be regarded as selfish and our non-attendance seen as yet another sign that we have not yet, “Moved on”.

Other potholes that catch us unexpectedly might be something said, a casual comment that unintentionally locks into our grief. A friend from church whose elder son died at the age of eighteen, twenty years ago, came to see me just after Christmas one year. She said she had felt unexpectedly low over Christmas and could not think why until she remembered a cousin

had asked her what she was doing at Christmas. When my friend said that her younger son would be joining them, her cousin had said, “Oh, just the three of you then?”. My friend realised later those words had locked in to her grief – just the three of them, when there used to be four... Then there was the time another friend told me that there was a centenary reunion at my son’s school. I really struggled with that, knowing how much Will would have enjoyed it, meeting with old school friends and how much we in turn would have enjoyed hearing all about it from him afterwards.

The main problem is of course those who have not experienced such devastating loss do expect us to get over it. We always hope that people will understand but to be really honest how can they? And so when these unexpected words or events cripple us, albeit temporarily, we do not know how to explain our pain and feel isolated.

I wrote this poem, now in my new book, Aspects of Loss, to describe this tortuous road we have to traverse. When I think of TCF I get a mental picture of people rock climbing. Of someone a little higher up the rock face leaning over to help someone else over a particularly craggy piece of rock whilst others in turn help those both above and below them. One of our GPs, when I mentioned TCF to her, said that surely maintaining contact with bereaved parents was holding me back? She went on to tell me about her ninety-one year old mother who works with teenagers and that is not too late for me – being so much younger than her mother! – to reinvest, as she put it, in life. I did not attempt to answer.

One Step Forward...

many steps back.

This is a mountainous road,
such steep hills to climb,
I think I’m nearing the summit,
then I’m faced with another ravine.

A sudden memory,
a thoughtless remark,
a young man who resembles you,
causes me to lose my grip,
and again I fall.

I get back on my feet,
determined to do it this time,
but the burden is too heavy
and I break down and cry.

I think I have made some progress
I have conquered some of the slopes,
But my feet are heavy
and this path is rough,

and I cannot hold onto my hopes.

I pray, in time I'll get stronger
learn how to carry this pain,
if I keep one foot
in front of the other,
my efforts might not be in vain.

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Love to all of you,

Gill