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Peeling the Onion

It will blind you with tears/like a lover/It will make your reflection/a wobbling photo of grief.
From Carol Ann Duffy's poem, *Valentine*, in which she describes presenting her lover with an onion, instead of a heart.

The outer skin of an onion can be tricky to remove. It is shiny and gives the appearance of solidity and perfection and yet at the same time it is very thin and papery. It is not easy to peel it off. Once you have removed this skin, you have the onion; less shiny and the layers more obvious. When you cut into these layers, the onion can make you shed tears.

A couple of days ago, preparing an onion for a stir-fry supper, I looked at the beautiful shiny skin and remembered the time I went to see a homeopath. On my first consultation with her, she said how she thought approaching health problems homoeopathically was a bit like peeling back layers of an onion. There are many factors that cause certain conditions and it was not a simple matter of treating the symptoms but of peeling back the layers until the root cause of the illness is uncovered.

Since our son, Will, died in January 2006, I have met many bereaved parents and often think the homeopath's analogy of the onion can be applied our grief. No two stories are the same, even if the cause of our child's death is from the same recognised condition. We all have to face the trauma and pain of losing a child with a deep core of pain, like the core of an onion. But, depending on our personal circumstances; the way our child died; our own personal history and our relationship with family and friends, we cope, or don't cope, in vastly different ways. This is why the words we so often hear - "I know how you feel" are wrong - no one knows how another person feels. How can we? Yes, we can begin to understand their pain and identify with them but we cannot honestly say we know how they feel.

Will died from a sudden and relatively short illness. For six weeks we had to stand by his bedside in the Intensive Care Unit and watch him struggle to hold on to his life. Unable to help him, we could only watch helplessly as his condition deteriorated. It was a double shock - the suddenness of his illness, and the rapid decline in his health - took us by storm. People tend to assume that if our child died from a terminal illness we were "at least were able to say goodbye". Sadly this is not always how it is. We did not expect him to die and hung onto the hope that he would recover. He was not suffering from a diagnosed terminal illness - in fact Will was struggling with an illness that was never diagnosed, even after a post mortem. When the worst happened - in the middle of the night when we were not at his bedside - by the time we reached his room he had lost consciousness. We never got to say goodbye to our adored son.

Some parents who have lost their child in accident have said to me that they are thankful that they did not have to watch their child suffer. Yes, it was utterly heart breaking. But equally I cannot imagine now awful it must be to have your child leave the house one day and never return. Or when shocking news is delivered by a policeman standing on your doorstep. There is no room for comparison here and whenever and however our child dies, the experience is for each of us intensely personal and incomparable. Although we could not allow ourselves to think that Will might not survive, we feared for him throughout those six tortuous weeks. And I will never, ever forget the casual way in which the nurse turned round on the first night

Will was admitted to intensive care in our local hospital, and uttered the words, “Well, it is borderline.” This was before we were informed that there was nothing more they could do to save Will and the only hope was to transfer him to a hospital in Leicester for possible life-saving treatment. So I can understand how devastating it must be to be told your child is going to die, and - even worse - to have to break that news to your child. Or when your child takes his or her own life. Will was our only child – yet another layer of pain. Each and every story involves every parent’s worst nightmare – the death of a beloved child.

Then there is the matter of your child’s age. Yes, it is hard to lose a young adult son or daughter. We had come to know him on so many different levels and Will and I were extremely close – he was my soul mate. I feel I have lost my closest friend as well as my dearest son. But when I think of Will as a baby and as a delightful toddler, I also think how unimaginable it would have been had I lost him at any stage in his life. Will was twenty-two when he died and next year he would have been thirty. It saddens me deeply that I will never see my son as a mature man and I will never be a grandmother to his children. Perhaps your child was still at school or older with children of his own. With the latter, much as you love your grandchildren, you have the sadness of knowing that their mother or father is missing out on so much of their lives. If your child was still at school, then it is hard seeing their friends growing into young adults. It is too easy to think another parent’s pain is somehow lessened by the age their child was at the time they died, when the truth is, it makes little difference to our pain.

I was prompted to write this article after a meeting with my counsellor last week. I was feeling uncertain as to whether I wanted to go on seeing her. In two years of counselling I have not yet dealt with the trauma of Will’s illness and I have never wept – really wept – in her presence. Her response has made me think. She said that whoever I saw, a psychiatrist, a PTSD consultant, or another counsellor, I would still be in the situation I am now. I have not allowed myself to let go, let the pain out. I have tucked it away, deep inside, and somehow struggled on over the last six and half years, fearful to “go there” and deal with the consequences. I have asked myself many times since I saw my counsellor why I am like this and this is where our friend the onion comes into play again, my own perception of myself and lack of self-esteem have meant that I had to keep a tight control on my emotions. As a child I was mocked as a “cry baby” when I showed emotion. Indeed when we first lost Will, my sister, who had been looking after our dog, Luke, for us, told me not to weep in front of Luke as it would upset him! It sounds silly but her words had an impact on me, and when Luke died of cancer at a relatively young age, two years after Will, I felt guilty that somehow because he had seen me weeping, then maybe my distress had been a trigger for his cancer. In truth it was probably his own grief for Will that was the trigger.

It has surprised me how for much of the time I have spent with my counsellor over the past two years has involved talking about my birth family and my relationship with them. My husband found the same happened with his counsellor. The massive loss we have endured somehow locks into so much of our past and can revive past difficulties and sibling rivalry.

The shiny thin skin of the onion is not unlike the mask we learn to wear in public. It is protective and conceals the inner layers and vulnerability. My counsellor’s comments have made me think how I have learned to cling to this outer layer, to protect myself from allowing others to see the real me. In a way, we all have to learn to do that. We cannot burden others with permitting them to see our real pain – like the onion, if we allow that it will make us cry and might actually make them cry too.

I am now in a dilemma. I cannot decide whether I should take the risk and try to remove the protective layer or leave the core of pain untouched. There is so much I have not even begun

to deal with or talk about. Misgivings about some of the treatment Will was received in hospital, yet at the same time knowing all the medics caring for him wanted to do was to save his life. And the on-going torture of not knowing why he became so ill and the inevitable questions and concerns. A friend who is a bereavement counsellor and who works with bereaved families has warned me to be careful. Yet there is a part of me that is aware that by not dealing with my pain, I am stopping myself from living the life Will would have wanted me to live in his absence. It is as if I am wearing a straightjacket woven out of grief and pain. I cannot permit myself to do things that I cannot share with Will. We have not even taken a real holiday since Will died. It does not make sense as by now Will would of course be living his own life, away from us and perhaps married with children of his own. I have a form of PTSD which manifests itself in avoiding situations and blocking out thoughts that are painful to me. There are times when this avoidance frightens me. I fear I am forgetting Will although of course that is impossible. I am aware of his absence every minute of every day.

It would be interesting to hear from other TCF members if they found it helpful to delve into this pain and talk about it. I know some parents have had PTSD counselling. And of course, there is the problem many of us face, getting the medical profession to recognise that many bereaved parents do suffer from PTSD. Soon after Will died, I remember saying to a friend -who used to be a counsellor - that I thought maybe I was suffering from PTSD and her response was to say, "No, of course, you haven't." This surprised me – what could be more traumatic than standing by your child's bed for six weeks and then having to watch him die?

When I am preparing an onion, I often cut the onion in half before peeling off the top layer of skin, as it is can be easier to take it off that way. Years of living have created layers I have to work through if I am to release the pain I have at the core of my being. But of course cutting it open this way is a sure fire way to release the tears – maybe that is what I should do? But I am not at all sure that I can.

Unearthing...

In hibernation – memories
held safely in the dark
like the leaves I press in heavy books,
like the manual of gardening
you dropped in the mud
in the greenhouse in the nursery
the day we searched for plants to cram
into the overflowing borders of our garden.
Now spring is here again
I unearth the book,
open its pages to find the mud -
now long since dried –
unlike my tears, which fall like rain,
and wonder if I can allow the light
to penetrate the dark,
release the weighted pain
and bring me hope...

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