

Anxiety and Fear

"The suspense: the fearful, acute suspense: of standing idly by while the life of one we dearly love, is trembling in the balance; the racking thoughts that crowd upon the mind, and make the heart beat violently, and the breath come thick, by the force of the images they conjure up before it; the desperate anxiety to be doing something to relieve the pain, or lessen the danger, which we have no power to alleviate; the sinking of soul and spirit, which the sad remembrance of our helplessness produces; what tortures can equal these; what reflections of endeavours can, in the full tide and fever of the time, allay them"

Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist*

Talking with friends from TCF, it has often struck me how many of us struggle with anxiety. The powerful words from Charles Dickens' struck a chord and made me wonder if the main reason for our anxiety might be because our core belief in the pattern of our lives has been shattered.

We are not meant to bury our children, it is the wrong order of things and not how we envisaged our lives would be. The knowledge that there was nothing we could have done to prevent the death of our child or children make us realise how vulnerable we are. No matter how we plan for the future, whatever hopes and dreams we have, nothing is guaranteed. My niece tragically lost her first husband and baby son in a dreadful car accident on Christmas Day in 1994. She told me afterwards that it was not dying she was afraid of any more, it was living... Although she has now remarried, with three beautiful children, she still lives with the intrinsic fear that something could go wrong. I have tried to reassure her but have no answer when she says that there are no guarantees. Lightning can and has struck twice.

C S Lewis, in his highly regarded book, *A Grief Observed*, written after the death of his beloved wife, said, *"No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear. I am not afraid, but the sensation is like being afraid. The same fluttering in the stomach, the same restlessness, the yawning. I keep on swallowing."*

He goes on to say, *"I dread the moments when the house is empty. (But) I wish they would talk to one another and not to me"*

I loved walking our Border collie, Luke. I have always enjoyed long walks with our dogs, whatever the weather. It was even more pleasurable when Will was home and we walked together, fortunate to live in an area where we have a great choice of riverside or woodland walks.

Will died of a mystery illness after almost 7 weeks on life support in intensive care. He had been transferred to a hospital in Leicester for specialist lung treatment. When we returned home after being by Will's side throughout his illness, we stayed with friends - our home was in the throes of being extended when Will became ill and I could not face the muddle at home. Our friends kindly agreed for Luke to stay with us too -my sister had been looking after him whilst we were in Leicester.

I was pleased to have Luke back but I did not expect to find what I had previously found a relaxing experience, now became a source of anxiety and fear. I could not bear to walk Luke on my own. I had to walk in the same place at the same time every morning, if not something might go wrong. If the friend who was walking with me was as much a five minutes late, I would be filled with panic. We now have another rescue collie, Cagney, but unlike our previous dogs we can rarely let him off the lead and I cannot walk him on my own. But even when I walk with Edwin and Cagney, I still feel apprehensive.

A TCF friend of mine, whose younger son died 12 years ago, admits she is forever filled with anxiety and imagines all sorts of possible scenarios. The posts on the TCF forum often reflect such anxiety and parents talk about their panic attacks. One recently bereaved mother has developed the highly distressing condition OCD. I began to have palpitations and panic attacks and now have to take Beta blockers and blood pressure medication, something I had never needed before Will died.

Speaking with a friend recently, who has lost both of her adult children; now lives alone and has no grandchildren. she said she hates the way she feels now. In the past she was very adventurous, travelling the world, often on her own. But she has now developed a form of agoraphobia and has not able to leave her house for the last few weeks.

I was a maternally minded child, my sister was very different and where I would wear out my dolls with too much love, my sister's remained un-played with and to this day are in pristine condition. I envisaged myself with children and an extended family one day, yet my sister is the one with a large extended family and beautiful grandchildren. To discover that our dreams can be crushed is devastating and we are left bruised and fragile. It is too easy to feel we have failed somehow in our duty to protect our child and although I have a Christian faith, it is hard to hold onto that at times. A TCF friend expressed her fear that she should not complain about her situation – she has lost her children and her husband – lest something else should happen - she will be punished for complaining when there is so much suffering in the world. I know there is nothing I can do to alleviate her fear, however irrational it is.

The fear of another catastrophe is very real - which may sound odd considering that the very worst that could happen already has. One would imagine that given all we have lost and somehow survived, we would have become immune to anxiety and learned that worry cannot and does not change anything. Although I tell myself I do not actively worry any more since Will died, there remains an underlying concern I do not have the reserve to cope with anything else that might happen. Edwin was forced out of his job last year, which meant unexpected early retirement. We tried to pursue a claim for unfair dismissal. But the stress overwhelmed us, we had underestimated how emotionally drained we are now and eventually withdrew from the proceedings. Although humiliating for us, it was our only option and now when I look at Edwin I am shocked by the effect this added pressure has had on him. And my health has suffered too.

Many parents say that that situations that they would previously have taken in their stride, now cause them irritation and impatience, they feel they have changed and have less tolerance than before their child died.

One mother expressed concern that by keeping so busy she is not thinking about her child enough and in danger of forgetting her. Impossible of course. But I can identify with her. Although forever aware of Will's absence, I often worry I do not think about him enough, which sounds contradictory. But it is yet another cause of anxiety, partly because there are so few people with whom I can share memories of Will. Sadly, I never see my birth family and we rarely hear from Will's friends, their lives have moved on and although I know they will never forget Will, his closest friends were those with whom he shared a house with at university and they did not really know us.

I wish I could rid myself of my anxiety I but suspect it is due to a form of PTSD, a condition which I believe many bereaved parents suffer from but unfortunately not easily recognised. And we are all only too aware that others cannot understand our pain and expect us to "get over it" and "reinvest" in our lives.

Many of us do. I admire greatly those who have set up successful charities or causes in their child's memory and/or travel the world – we have not yet found the courage to take a real holiday, even eight years on. I think many of us, especially in the early years of our loss, are filled with a kind of nervous energy, enabling us to want to do something to honour and remember our child. I certainly found this - I wrote my two books and gave talks on the loss of child or children. But, as time passes, the energy I had in those early days seems to be waning.

But perhaps I am being too hard on myself. All of us have suffered the worst of losses and are still on our feet, carrying on with lives, impossible as that may have seemed when we first lost our child or children. Maybe it is the fear that drives us to keep going, to want to honour our children.

In George R R Martin's book, A Game of Thrones, there is the following observation. Bran asks. '*Can a man still be brave if he's afraid?*' '*That is the only time a man can be brave,*' his father told him."

The following poem is from my second book, Aspects of Loss; I am including it as I think it fits the theme of this article.

Obsession

*I bankrupt myself feeding birds,
buying birdseed, mealworms and feeders,
furnish the garden with shrubs
create a wildlife reserve.
I watch from the window entranced
at the spectacle of spring,
the garden is full of burgeoning life,
baby birds on the wing.
There should be pleasure in this,
bringing comfort to a wounded heart,
the knowledge that life does go on
and I can play my small part.*

*But, as before, I am cheated by death,
that stalks unbidden, unseen:
creeping cats in the undergrowth,
or cruelly launched from the sky -
like cats, the sparrow hawk cannot lose,
takes innocence by surprise.
Distressed by the grief of the parent birds
and my failure to protect or forestall,
I am left angry, bereft and grieving,
for death makes fools of us all.*

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