

How do I feel? How do I really feel? No one wants to know how I really feel. What would they say if I told them the truth? That part of me has died, shrivelled up inside me and I have a dried up sponge where my heart used to be. I have a constant dull ache in my stomach, I often feel on the verge of tears but the tears do not fall easily. I have become so used to holding them back so as not to embarrass others, that I find, even when I am on my own, I hold the tears in check. I am my own worst critic now, so fearful that people will think me weak that I judge myself too. I have to be strong, or at least be seen to be strong. Then are the feelings of isolation, that I am not good company and people seek to avoid me. It is easier to avoid me than to take the risk that I might mention Will's name, that I might want to talk about him. After all it is now three years since Will died. I should be getting on with my life, finding new interests.

I feel especially isolated from the church. I haven't attended church services since Will died, except for the very early days when I did attempt to go with my husband. But I found it so difficult. I inevitably wept when any worship songs that I especially associated with Will were played, found it unbearable and had to leave, conscious of the curious looks from members of the church who did not know about Will. I could not go on like this week after week, what would people think? I felt uncomfortable displaying my grief in front of everyone. And there was the added trauma of the memory of Will's coffin on the altar steps and the fact that the two seats where Will and I used to sit often seemed to be unoccupied.

I still feel I want to go into the church when a service is in progress. Go to the front of the church and shout at everyone, *"Why don't you understand? How can you possibly think that I can ever get over losing my son? How would you feel if you had your entire family taken away from you? For those of you with more than one child, it would be like losing all your children and grandchildren. It would be like losing your extended family and your future with them. Can you really imagine what that would be like? How would you feel if you had to stand by your child's bed and watch him suffer and die? The child you had cherished and loved more than life itself? Can you imagine how it feels to wake every morning and know that you are never going to see your child again? Never hold him in your arms, hear his voice, tell him you love him? You can't imagine because you don't want to. It doesn't bear thinking about and it is dangerous to get too close to me in case the same thing happens to you. It might be catching. It is much easier to stand in your pulpits and judge me. Judge me for my lack of faith. As a Christian I should not be feeling like this, after all my son is in a "better place" and lost in "Glory and Wonder". I pray that is true but what about me, his mother? How am I expected to find that a comfort when my son is no longer part of my life here? Can't you understand that it is not about faith? It is about grief. Raw, unspeakable, unendurable, agonising grief. In a nutshell, I miss him. I long for him. I don't want to go on living without him. But I am. I am still here after three years without him. Isn't that an achievement in itself? Isn't it enough*

*that I get up and dress in the morning? Isn't it enough that I am trying to live a normal a life as possible with the constant knowledge that life will never be normal again? I don't want to be told that I will find joy again. And happiness. Is it really so hard to understand that I can never, ever again be truly happy? I will only experience joy when I am reunited with my son, wherever and whenever that might be."*

I do try to take an interest in the lives of others. But it is not easy. I am so aware that their lives have moved on and I understand that. I only wish I could explain that it is not always easy for me to listen when they talk about their children and grandchildren. I berate myself for feeling envious at times but is it really so surprising? How can I not feel a little envious when I listen to women talk about such occasions as Mothering Sunday and how wonderful their sons or daughters were to them. I long sometimes to join in the conversation, if only to say how thoughtful Will was and how he always bought me beautiful white flowers on Mothering Sunday and made me special cards, how he used to write on the backs of the cards, "That Special Moment. Hartley Cards. Est. 1983" (Will's birth date). I would love to tell them but I know if I do it will only cause an awkward silence and a change of subject. I cannot pretend Will never existed and have heard so many parents say the same of their children. Our children were, and still are, a precious part of our lives and we should have the right to talk freely about them, not feel that we must keep quiet in order to make others feel more comfortable.

Isn't it time that as a nation we learned to cope with grief? Death is part of living. One thing we can be certain of in life is that each of us will die sooner or later. It is often said that we begin to die from the moment we are born and that is true. We are all destined to live here on earth for our allotted span and then die. So why is death such a taboo subject? Why are we embarrassed by grief and feel we must be strong and wear the very British "stiff upper lip?" I have lost count of the number of times people have said to me that I am "looking better" and "doing very well". Firstly, I have not been ill, bereavement is a fact of life, and not an illness and I will never "be better". I will continue to grieve for my son until the day I die. I still lie awake longing for him and often weep myself to sleep. And, secondly, I am not "doing very well". I am simply surviving and, sadly, having to learn to live with the absence of my dearest son. I will never recover from his death but I am finding ways to cope and to ward off the insensitivity of others. I often say, "Pass" if someone thinks to ask how I am. I don't want to be dishonest. At the same time I don't want to embarrass them or make them wish they hadn't asked by telling them the truth. We British have a bad habit of asking how someone is without really wanting to know or hear the answer. And we have all learned to answer, "I'm fine thank you. How are you?"

I hope all this does not make me sound bitter. I try hard not to be but there are times when the unfairness of it all overwhelms me and yet I know that life is unfair and none of us can expect to be singled out to live a charmed existence.

My son was a wonderful young man. He looked like an angel with his beautiful silver blond hair and hazel eyes. He was kind, caring, compassionate, funny, clever and exceptionally thoughtful. He even kept the dates of his friends' birthdays in his diary and kept record of the birthday dates of the children in my family. He had a genuine concern for others and wisdom beyond his years. He was the light of my life. I adored him and he, in turn, adored me. We were unusually close; he was my soul mate, my closest friend. Not only have I lost my baby, the baby I carried for nine months. I have also lost the child I suckled, nurtured, educated, and encouraged, the beautiful child who accompanied me everywhere before he started school. I have lost the bright happy schoolboy I ferried to and from school every day. I have lost the boy who became a teenager and went on to study at university. The handsome young man who wanted to give his life to God and become an Anglican minister. The friend who phoned me every day, with whom I talked for hours and listened as he shared his hopes and dreams. The young man who could always make me laugh with his dry and quirky sense of humour.

I have lost all this and much, much more. I cannot simply put a stop to all this and "move on" with my life. It is too easy for others to say, "Well, at least you had him for twenty-two years." Would they like to put a limit on the number of years that their children will live for? How can the fact that our children lived for one, five, ten, twenty or forty years and died before us be of any consolation? It is the wrong order of things; we are not supposed to bury our children.

Our children are our future, we want to see them marry, hold our grandchildren in our arms and smile at the family likeness. A little bit of ourselves carrying on into the future. Will was unmarried and our only child and like many parents in our position, we will never be grandparents. And so we are told, "Well, he might not have got married." Or "He might not have had children." Oh well, that's all right then. But all I know is that Will dearly wanted to marry and have children and I have every reason to believe he would. If it had turned out that he and his wife could not have children, then we would have faced that disappointment with him. It is quite a different matter to know that it will never, ever happen. Not now. Not ever.

All I do know is that Will doesn't phone me every day the way he used to. I can't hear his voice or hear him laugh. I can't hold him or touch him. I can't tell him how much I love him and hear him voice say, "I love you, Mum."

There are times when I feel suicidal. I know that I have to be here but I don't want to be. I know that I should be thankful that I am alive and count the blessings I have. I know that I have to be here for Edwin, that I cannot leave him alone. But I am frightened. I am frightened of the future. I am frightened of being alone. Sadly, like many other bereaved parents, we are not surrounded by supportive family and friends. Our respective families could not cope with Will's death and we seldom hear from them. Old friends simply disappeared. Outside of TCF, I do have a few good friends who are there for me. But there are times when even they confess that they do not really understand the depth of my pain and, to be fair, how can they?

I do not know what to do to change the way I feel. I feel put down, misunderstood, and terribly, terribly, lonely. I feel so insecure. I feel that the more time passes, the harder and more of a battle it becomes just to survive. It is as if Will never existed, except in my imagination. But he did exist and that is why I have to hold on tightly to all that proves his existence. He lived for nearly 23 years and was a gift to everyone he met. But the fact that there is hardly anyone with whom I can share memories of him is literally sapping all the life force out of me. It is slowly strangling me. Draining me of all the interests I once held dear and which kept me on my feet. Even tending to the garden seems pointless now.

Like all of us, I do try. I have written a book as a tribute to Will, which was published last year. I am giving talks on the subject of losing a child, in the hopes of raising awareness and suggesting ways others can help bereaved parents and come alongside them. I am surviving. And that is all I can do.

*Gill Hartley*  
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