

Gill Hartley,
hartley9ar@btinternet.com www.gillhartley.com

Setting a goal

When our son, Will, our only child, died from a mystery illness in January 2006, I did not know how to go on living. Will was my life, my soul mate; the person who gave my life meaning. He was my past, my present and my future. Without him, life would be meaningless.

Although I was incapable of even making myself a cup of tea, in the numbing weeks and months after Will's death, I did write. Poem after poem about Will and our life together. It was as if I had to make a record of everything he was and meant to me. I wrote poems about him as a baby, as a child, as a young adult, the things we did together – anything and everything I associated with Will and our life together.

About three months after Will died, I received a phone call from Jan, a friend who is a creative writing teacher. I had been a member of her class for several years when Will was younger. She kindly invited me to send her the poems, offering to help me with them if necessary. She also invited me to re-join her class as a guest for one term. I was very unsure as to whether I would cope but in fact it proved to be a very positive step.

And so it began. Every poem I wrote I sent to Jan. Sometimes I found her suggestions challenging but she was brave to do this for me at such a time - it can't have been easy for her, particularly as she herself has an only child.

Without Jan's encouragement, I doubt it would ever have occurred to me to bring the poems together in one book. But, with her support, I managed to sort the poems into some kind of order. When a member of the group suggested I try sending my collection to a small publisher who had published some of her work, I tentatively emailed him. A day or so later, he replied, saying his company rarely published poetry, but he was happy for me to send him some to see, as he put it, if mine were "any different". I put 12 poems into an envelope and posted them off. The following week I received another e-mail asking if I had any more poems to send. I certainly had! I bundled all my poems together – about 80 of them – and put them into the post.

It was some time before I heard from him again; to me it seemed like an eternity. Then one evening, quite late, the phone rang and an unfamiliar voice introduced himself as John, the publisher to whom I had sent my poems. He asked if I could come up with an alternative title, as he thought the one I had suggested was too limiting. I remember being rooted to the spot and asking did this mean he was prepared to publish my book? I mumbled that I would like time to think about another title and, agreeing to contact him in a couple of days' time, put the phone down and burst into tears. When I phoned Jan, I could barely get the words out but she caught on and shrieked with delight. I went to see her and together we mulled over various possibilities. "My True Son" a play on words from a hymn Will and I loved, was the result.

I'm making all this sound very easy, but in fact it is far from the truth. Every poem, every word was written from the depths of my being and overriding grief for Will. I was uncertain whether or not I really wanted to expose my pain to others. But once the publisher had made his offer, there was no going back. And there was a sense in which working on the book and

seeing it through to publication gave me a reason to go on living. I could not die before my book was published.

My True Son was published in November 2008 and at a time when I was still quite numb following Will's death. The driving force was a deep desire to "tell" others about Will, to try to ensure he was not forgotten. It was my tribute to him and I also hoped my words would resonate with others. I also wanted to help to raise funds for TCF, who had given us the support we so badly needed and decided to donate any royalties and profits from the book to them.

After the publication of My True Son, I wanted to write another book. The kind of book I needed when Will died— one that I could pick up and dip into at any time and always find something to comfort me. I began to collect poems and articles from TCF journals or books I had read and thread them together with my own story about Will. This new venture took me almost 3 years to complete. I encountered problems I had not expected – the main one being the difficulties obtaining copyright permission. This was a task I had not expected to be so difficult and it took up much of my time. It proved much easier to approach someone I knew, rather than the big publishing houses, although the majority of them – when they eventually replied - were prepared to let me use the writer's work free of charge.

"Aspects of Loss" was published in October this year. The publisher had phoned to ask if I would be in on a particular day to receive delivery of my share of the books. I was on tenterhooks until the books finally arrived about 5pm in the evening. I watched the delivery man stagger up the path with one box after another— the books were surprisingly heavy - and when he left, opened one of the boxes.

What I did not expect was the overwhelming feeling of anti-climax, sadness and loss. I was happy with the book, it looked inviting, had a lovely feel to it and I loved the cover. But I could not cope with the emotions it evoked. In a way it was a bit like giving birth, but with a very different outcome. I realised it was because I no longer had a goal to keep me going. The book was the culmination of nearly three years work and now it was finished. This thought, coupled with the underlying reason why I had written the book, felled me. It was three days before I found the courage to leave the house or show the book to anyone. It would be like baring my soul and I wanted to protect myself and the book from scrutiny.

This experience has taught me how necessary it is for me to have a goal – to have something to keep me on my feet. As with my first book, I felt I had to hold on to my life until the book was published and I did not want disappoint anyone who had contributed to the book or helped me with it.

I have been fortunate in finding a publisher but had I not been then I would have self-published my book. There is often a misunderstanding of the term "self- publishing". In this instance, I do have a publisher but I contribute towards the cost of the print run. In these difficult times, many publishers are struggling and I would urge anyone who has written a book or would like to do so, not to write off the possibility of publishing the book themselves or doing as I have done: finding a publisher with whom the financial outlay can be shared.

If you decide to travel down the self- publishing route there are many printers who will do it for you at a reasonable price and be very helpful in advising you as to the design and layout of the book. And it need not be as expensive as you might imagine. A word of warning here,

do not be seduced by advertisements by so called publishers offering to publish your book for you – you could end up with a very large bill at the end of the day.

Your goal may not be writing a book, your goal maybe setting up a charity or fundraising activity in your child's name. But whatever it is you decide to do, setting a goal can provide an invaluable incentive to keep on walking. It is also a wonderful way to honour our child or children. I never cease to be amazed at just how much some parents achieve in their child's memory. One couple I know, whose only child died, set up a charity in their son's name to raise funds to help disadvantaged children in sport – their son was a keen sportsman. To date they have raised a staggering £250,000 and helped many, many children and care organisations.

I now have to find another goal to keep me going – I have a project in mind and am leaving it to germinate before putting pen to paper. They say everyone has a book in them and what greater incentive can we have than writing about our precious children? So all you writers out there - have a go. Even if you do not want to publish your book, writing about your child is very therapeutic. I have not kept a journal and often wish I had. But there is a sense in which my books are my journal and as time passes, I can see how much I have changed. This does not mean I am no longer grieving for Will. I will miss him and grieve for him until the day I die. But until that day comes, I will continue to express my love in words – I just hope he is reading them too.

My son, I cannot think of you
As being a part of my past,
For you are every breath I take
You are the rhythm of my heart.

Gill Hartley