

Hoarding...

“At the end, all that's left of you are your possessions. Perhaps that's why I've never been able to throw anything away. Perhaps that's why I hoarded the world: with the hope that when I died, the sum total of my things would suggest a life larger than the one I lived.”

*Nicole Krauss, **The History of Love***

Some of you will have watched those programmes on television about hoarders, people whose homes are so full of things they have collected or cannot part with, that they have barely any space in which to live a normal life. These programmes usually involve someone trying to help these people clear their homes of the clutter to enable them to regain control of their lives and a degree of normality. Some are success stories but not all. When the helper attempts to find the cause for their hoarding, we invariably discover that the most common link amongst such hoarders is grief. Grief the counselling profession would most probably describe as “complicated” or “unresolved” grief.

Although I may not appear to live with the kind of chaos we see on these programmes, believe me I do. The difference is that mine is hidden, trodden down by years of grief and denial. Like the proverbial ducks serenely sailing on the surface of the water, whilst paddling madly underneath, I daily tread on hidden chaos: possessions I cannot part with, cupboards I cannot clear, thoughts and memories too painful to deal with. And I am sure I am not alone in this respect – how many of us in TCF live like me? The cupboards I cannot clear because they contain my son's belongings, along with various possessions that either belonged to him, or I associate with him. And the thoughts, especially the painful ones, remain at the back of my mind, always there but rarely if ever released.

I have never been an especially tidy person- I like to think of our home as comfortable, clean and relatively tidy. But it was never like it is now. Now I keep one room - the living room - tidy most of the time, to ensure that should someone call unexpectedly to see us, I am happy to invite them in. Most of the other doors I keep closed. And this reflects my life since Will, our only child, died in January 2006. On the surface I try to give the impression we are “OK” – after all, it will be nine years in January since we last saw our beloved 22 year old son. Nine years, more than enough time to be “over it” and “getting on” with our lives. Except that it isn't. And it never will be...

Always awake early in the morning – I do not sleep well – I lie there thinking of all the tidying up and sorting out I should be doing. And this thinking fills me with a quiet desperation, a feeling close to panic. There are some things I want to do but can't. I have old videos of Will dating back to his school days – videos of him in school plays: the time he played one of the girls in *Pirates of Penzance*, a nun in a French play, a gangster in *Bugsy Malone*. We also have videos of our last holiday in Canada as a family. I want to have these videos transferred to a DVD so what stops me? Partly because of the fear that the videos will have deteriorated and no longer be any good. Yet the longer I delay doing something with them, the more likely this is. And the anomaly is that I do not know if I do have the videos

transferred to DVD's I will ever have the courage to watch them. But maybe just knowing they are there and are still OK will be enough? I don't know.

Will was our only child and because relations with my birth family have broken down – this happened the second year after Will died – I do not see them. I had hoped to pass on some of Will's childhood toys and books to my sister's grandchildren. But this hope has long since faded... And I am also finding that the longer we hold onto Will's belongings, the harder it is to contemplate parting with them. Perhaps I need to hold on to them because – like the hoarders on those TV programmes – I simply do not know how to begin to move anything, it is too much to deal with. And perhaps another reason is that I need the proof that Will was here. This is such a lonely journey and holding onto his belongings gives us a feeling of his presence. He was after all the centre of our lives for nearly 23 years.

As for the buried emotional baggage, that is another matter entirely. I want to, and do, try to support others along this rugged and never ending road of grief. My life now is how it is going to be until I am with my son again. There is nothing I can do to bring him back, to make everything all right again. Sharing our grief and precious memories with other parents in TCF is a lifeline. But the weight of my personal grief is mine and mine alone to carry. A burden I will carry until I am with Will again. Only then can I put the weight to rest. Until then I have, along with many others in our situation, learned to cope on a day to day basis. To go on living a life that no longer involves a family, the two of us are no longer a family and no longer part of a wider family.

Unfortunately this chaos affects not only Will's belongings or my emotional baggage; it is also reflected in my seeming ability to keep a tidy house any more. Always hopeless with paperwork, it now builds up to unmanageable heaps that add to my feelings of panic and quiet desperation I described earlier. I am no longer in control and the worst part is that in some ways I no longer care. I do not envy those who will have to attempt to clear the chaos when I am no longer here. And therein lies another concern – I cannot bear the thought of someone else throwing Will's belongings, school and university papers (yes, I still have them!) onto a skip.

So yes, I am a hoarder and I have every sympathy with those hoarders we see on our screens.

So forgive me when at times I seem slow to respond or preoccupied. I am exhausted from treading down the daily chaos I live on top of for yet another year.

This poem I wrote the year after Will died. I am including it here because it reflects my muddled state of mind at the time, although unfortunately health problems prevent me from escaping into the garden as often as I used to. And our lovely Luke, Will's dog, died the year after I wrote this. We now have another rescued collie called Cagney.

Keeping busy.

In the mornings I walk Luke.
He chases squirrels,
sniffs, and socialises
He is such a busybody:
his busyness keeps me occupied.
just for an hour, or two.

Back home, I turn the computer on,
busy myself, writing,
answering emails,
trying to sort the muddle I'm in.
This keeps me busy,
for an hour - or two.

In the afternoons:
it's hard to keep busy,
that's when fatigue creeps in,
I try to ignore it,
must keep busy,
not give myself time to think.
So I busy myself in the garden,
there's always something to do.
I tire myself out, fidget,
make tea and try to sit still
and watch the busy bumblebees,
bumbling around...
like me.

Evening time:
while your father cooks supper,
I might be busy writing to you,
or writing a poem, checking emails,
and now that summer is here;
after supper I can work in the garden,
there's lots to do out there,
I water and prune,
keep very busy,
until darkness drives me indoors.

And now it's night time
and all I can do
is lie on my bed...

and weep.

Gill Hartley

From *My True Son*. For details about this and my second book, *Aspects of Loss*, please visit my website: www.gillhartley.com