

## Judge not...

Some time ago I received a letter from a bereaved mother which made me feel uncomfortable. The writer said my articles make her despair, she felt both sad and angry at my lack of faith and understanding. I found the letter unsettling because it locked into my innate insecurity. She compared my situation with her own and implied that I considered my son to be superior to other children who have died. I found this especially upsetting as I have never set out to give this impression. Nor indeed I do not think this way - all our children are special. Of course to *me* Will *was* special - but to *me* and only *me* - simply because he was *my* son. I remember when Will was born a friend phoned to congratulate me and said, "I bet he is the most beautiful baby ever." I put the phone down feeling flattered. It was only afterwards I realised she was simply stating a fact! Every mother setting eyes on her new born child – especially her first born – thinks her baby must be the most beautiful baby in the world.

Will died in January 2006 and, four months later my husband, Edwin, and I went along to our first bereaved parents' meeting. We were the most newly bereaved parents there and I was taken back when another bereaved mother declared that no loss could be as bad as hers. Her son had died in an accident and she insisted nothing could be worse than opening the door to find a policeman on the doorstep. I wanted to say that it was equally horrendous to watch your child die, as we had. But instead I mumbled we should not compare because - no matter what the circumstances of our child's death or what age they were – at the end of the day we had all lost a very precious child. When we are so often hurt by the insensitive comments of those who have not lost a child, we ourselves need to be very careful when talking with other bereaved parents.

When we join an organisation like TCF, we hope that we will meet with nothing but real understanding and compassion and most of the time we do. But - maybe because we are all deeply wounded people - there are occasions when we can, albeit unintentionally, hurt one another. The mother who wrote to me obviously felt aggrieved by something I had written and for that I am deeply sorry.

Another reason why it is dangerous to compare is that we have no way of knowing other parents' circumstances or personal history. So much depends on our individual personalities, age, and beliefs, support systems, and so on. In my case, the loss of my son was utterly devastating because my relationship with him was deeper than any other relationship in my life. I did not have a happy childhood. I was a highly sensitive and emotional child - very different from my elder brother and sister and I struggled throughout my childhood to feel loved or valued. When my son was born I understood, for the first time, the meaning of unconditional love.

Edwin and I were separated for a few years and Will and I lived on our own during that time. We holidayed together and supported each other through some very difficult times. He was my soul mate and when he died I felt I had been chopped into two. My story is just one example of how personal circumstances can deeply affect the way we react when our child dies. If we judge someone or criticise the way we deem they are coping or not coping, we do so without any knowledge of their personal history. We have no right to judge.

It was not until I started to have counselling that I began to recognise just how angry I am at my son's death. Much as I loathe the way grief is described as a journey with set stages, I do recognise anger is a common factor. I read a wonderful book by a Christian author called Steve Griffiths, who was writing a book after his young wife died of a brain tumour. Steve visited a friend who asked him if he was writing a chapter about anger. Steve said he wasn't because he had not felt any anger. The friend wisely refrained from saying anything more, apart from querying if Steve had not felt anger even at the consultant who had upset his wife so much. Steve describes how that night he could not sleep. He recognised just how angry he really was and admitted to himself that when the consultant had deeply hurt his wife with a cruel insensitive comment, all he had really wanted to do was pin the consultant up against the wall! Steve went on to devote a chapter in his book to the subject of anger. This deeply submerged emotion can build up inside us and be very damaging to our health. There is also a danger it can cause us to lash out and end up saying or doing something we deeply regret afterwards.

The mother who wrote to me had no way of knowing just how deeply her letter would affect me, any more than I know what it was that made her react as she did to my writing. What she did not understand is that, for me, writing is a way of expressing my pain, and hopefully at the same time helping others with theirs. Michael Rosen, in his insightful foreword to my new book, said that writing about our loss is a way of taking our emotions and laying them out in front of us. Then we ask ourselves, "Am I really like that? Do I really think that way?"

Like many of us, I have formed some close and equally supportive relationships with other mothers within TCF. Yet there are times when one or other of us will send a text asking if we have said the wrong thing. The answer is always that we haven't but because we are so ultra-sensitive, we worry we have worded some comment tactlessly – too easy to do, especially when texting.

On the whole - although we would never have chosen this route - the majority of us end up much more compassionate and understanding than we were before our tragic loss. Yet, I for one – forever aware of the deep, troubling emotion bubbling

away inside me - try to be on my guard and, when provoked by an unthinking and hurtful comment, not lash out with some verbal retaliation, tempting as it is at times! I have quoted this before but I always remember the comment made by the then editor of Compassion when I first became a member of TCF. "It seems," she said, "that when we are most in need of tolerance and understanding, we have to find it in ourselves for others." How true that is.

I wrote the following poem after seeing a mother shouting at her children in a shopping mall. It was one of those times when I longed to intervene but knew how wrong that would be.

### **Triggers...**

She walks in front of me,  
    fraught, careworn, cross.  
Her brooding children  
    lag behind...  
She harangues them,  
words snapping like firecrackers.

We've all been there,  
I tell myself,  
She's exhausted -  
it's the end of the day.

But oh, I want to run after her,  
I want to tell her, "Stop!  
Life is too short,  
your children are precious,  
each one is a gift from God"

But I will not run after that woman.  
I have no right to intervene.  
And how can I possibly explain,  
why her anger is making me weep?

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