

Well it is a long time since I had contact with a Mother's Union group – my mother was a loyal member for many years when we lived in Greenford, where I was born, and two vivid memories of that time. One was the Church fete, when all the members were give a pound to buy and make things for the Mother's Union stall. I know it was a long time ago but it was amazing how far my mother could make that pound go, making beautiful pram sets for children, doll's clothes and so on. The target was to turn the one pound into ten! The second was of the vicar arriving just as a meeting had ended and when offered a cup of tea, declined, saying, "Don't make a cup especially for me. I'll have this one." No one had the courage to tell him that it was the cup all the slops had been put in!

But I am here today to talk about another side of motherhood, a side that many mothers do have to face but one which is rarely talked about – the loss of a beloved child.

On January 18th 2006, Will – our bright, funny, handsome twenty-two year old son, with a first class honours degree in history and about to embark on new career to train as an ordained minister in the Anglican Church – died from a mystery lung infection after six traumatic weeks in intensive care. He was our only child and he and I were extremely close.

When we grieve it is a lonely journey. There are so many factors governing each individual experience of grief, that it is, by its very nature, isolating. But the loss of one's child must be the hardest of all bereavements to bear. The Jewish people say that there is a word for widows, there is a word for widowers, there is a word for orphans but for the parent who has lost a child – there are no words.

When you lose a beloved child, you lose your past, your present and your future. We are not meant to bury our children, it is the wrong order of things. I have lost both my parents, close friends and relatives. But I do not grieve for them the way I grieve for my son. And I also grieve for what I feel Will is missing out on, the hopes and dreams he will never achieve. It can be hard to see his friends getting on with their lives, marrying and having children. Knowing we will never be grandparents is very painful for the two of us and it can be difficult when people talk about their grandchildren.

Will was transferred by emergency ambulance from High Wycombe to The Glenfield in Leicester, for specialist lung treatment. My husband, Edwin, and I stayed in a travel lodge about a mile down the road from the hospital. Throughout that traumatic time, we could not have coped without the love and support of our church family, many of whom travelled up to Leicester to see us. It was our life raft and we had every reason to believe the same support would be there when we returned home.

But, sadly, it was not the same - for the church or for us. With Will's death, Edwin and I had become part of a huge body of largely unrecognised sufferers, set apart from society by the very nature of our loss. Our families found it difficult to cope and we had little contact with them, old friends failed to keep in touch. Our circle of friends is now quite different.

For the first three months we stayed with a married couple from church, as when Will became ill, we were in the midst of extending our home, and it was in too much chaos to return to. Although we were staying in this kind couple's home, we were alone much of the time. The husband was working in another country and his wife worked in the day time. After Will's funeral and when Edwin had returned to work, I found I could not bear to be alone, but alone I was for seemingly endless periods of time. I did have the occasional visitor but it was not enough

I was unable to pick up a newspaper, watch television or listen to the radio but I did read, book after book on bereavement, the afterlife, anything I could find, desperately trying to find an answer to the burning question "why?" I could not sleep but would doze, and every time I woke, I would switch on the bedside light and reach for a book.

One of the numerous books I read was Viktor Frankl's book, "Man's Search for Meaning" in which he relates some of his experiences as a concentration camp prisoner and the psychological effects on the individual inmates. Frankl noted that former prisoners often said, *"We dislike talking about our experiences. No explanations are needed for those who have been inside, and the others will neither understand how we felt then or how we feel now."*

This is one of the main reasons why those grieving after such catastrophic loss feel so alone. The pain of losing a child can only be really understood by those who have suffered the same kind of bereavement. For me, it felt like childbirth in reverse. It is like being a prisoner in one of the camps to which Frankl refers. Only the other prisoners can understand the utter despair and hopelessness we feel. And there is a sense in which we are indeed serving a prison sentence, more than that, a life sentence.

Looking back it is a wonder I did survive those very early days. After a sleepless night, I would get up, dress, go downstairs and just sit, staring into space for hours, longing for the doorbell or the phone to ring. All I wanted was to die and be with Will – I would plead with God to end my life and prayed the same for Edwin too, although he wasn't so pleased when I told him about that! Unlike me, he never felt he wanted to die.

I was totally unable to do anything, I couldn't even make myself a cup of tea and if Edwin had not taken over all the cooking, I would happily have starved. For months we lived on convenience food.

I had an overwhelming need to talk about Will and what had happened and would talk to anyone who would listen.

By day I often phoned helplines and at night I would ring the Samaritans. Looking back now I can see my need to keep talking about it all was an irrational attempt to rewrite everything. I think I thought if enough people agreed how wrong it was, then God would admit he had made a mistake and send Will back.

One morning, not long after Will's death and finding myself alone yet again, I phoned a member of our clergy, in tears, to be told, "We should not be grieving for Will. He is

lost in Glory and Wonder". Shaken by this I phoned yet another member of our clergy to be told much the same thing. I put the phone down and wept. I did not want Will lost in Glory and Wonder, I wanted him here with me. Were they saying I should not be grieving? Nothing made any sense and I wanted to shout at everyone, "Don't you know? How can you go on with your lives as if nothing has happened? My son has died, how can you act so normally?"

What I did not understand at the time was that people did not know what to say to me and many stayed away for that reason. And because they were lost for words they resorted to the platitudes we came to dread hearing, such as the one I have just related. As a culture, we do not talk about death and grief has to be bottled up, often with devastating effects.

That said, one of the biggest stumbling blocks for me has been my relationship with the church. In his book, "A Grief Observed", C S Lewis refers to the Christian hope and how difficult it is to apply to ourselves. He says, "*If a mother is mourning not for what she has lost but for what her dead child has lost, it is a comfort to believe that the child has not lost the end for which it was created. A comfort to the God-aimed, eternal spirit within her. But not to her motherhood. The specifically maternal happiness must be written off. Never, in any place or time, will she have her son on her knees, or bathe him or tell him a story, or plan for his future, or see her grandchild.*"

In his excellent book, "God of the Valley", the Reverend Steve Griffiths, talks about the isolation of grief and observes, "for many of us there is that unspoken expectation for us to worship God and play a full part in the life of the church throughout our time of grief". He also believes that, "It is extremely harmful for us to cover up anger and hurt beneath a façade of happiness."

Following on from the beatitude "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted" Steve also says, "This is the mandate of God for those who hurt. Sadly, however it is not always the experience of those who turn to the church for solace. Too often, those who are recently bereaved or divorced are the subjects of unspoken judgement".

He goes on to say, "Sometimes the deprivation of comfort is less harsh than that but just as damaging. This is particularly the case with the bereaved, who may be well supported in the initial stages of grief but, after six months or so, find themselves passed over for the next 'needy case' that has come along.

I felt I was somehow letting the side down by not being able to attend church and lacking in my faith.

Although we did try to attend church in the early days after Will died, I found myself in tears every time a song or hymn I associated with Will or one that had been played at his service. Although others did seek to comfort me, I became

uncomfortable at displaying my grief in front of others week after week. After all, it's not very British is it?

I felt I was falling apart, losing my mind. I have learned so much from our sad experience. Never again will I say to a grieving person, "You know where I am if you need anything". The very last thing a person grieving after such a catastrophic loss can do is pick up the phone and ask for help and risk rejection. On the other side of the coin, some people are afraid that they will be rejected if they take the risk of calling or visiting. They are not sure how they will cope if the person grieving becomes emotional. A risk some cannot face.

There was one occasion when feeling very alone and during the time when our dog was still with my sister, I sat and looked at all the various sleeping tablets and antidepressants my GP had prescribed but, for one reason or another, I had not found helpful. I had enough there, I thought, to end my life. No one would be home until early evening, no one would know until it was too late. I don't know what stopped me, regard for my friend I think – I didn't think it would be fair to take my life in her home when she had kindly given us a refuge. It was only later on when I realised I could not leave Edwin and our dog, Luke, although Edwin says it was the other way round!

That said, I still wanted to die. A future without Will seemed, and still does seem, impossible to contemplate. Now, I know I have to go on living, although it is fearfully difficult to look after myself, when deep down I long to be with Will. But taking my own life would only turn what is already a tragedy into another tragedy.

The reason I mention this is because one of the dangers of being left alone so much was that suicide would have provided a solution to my state of mind at that time. Sadly some parents have taken that course after the death of their child or children'

Given that time again, I would not want a steady stream of visitors, my mind was too confused and all I wanted to do was talk about what had happened. But what would have been welcome would have been a small number – say two or three people, prepared to spend the time to come alongside me and ensure that I was not left alone and if I needed to talk, there was someone available to listen. C S Lewis said, "I want others to be about me. I dread the moments when the house is empty."

It would have been a huge comfort and help if there had been someone to co-ordinate things for me, since I was physically and emotionally incapable organising anything for myself. It is impossible at such a time to make decision of any kind. Someone to check, at the start of the week, whether there was someone to walk the dog with me; if there were days when I would be alone and needed company; if there was anywhere I needed to go or any shopping I needed. I found walking the dog therapeutic, yet at the time, I could not face walking him alone, I had an irrational fear something might go wrong, something might happen to him.

These may sound like trivial things, but when you are in such a state of grief and shock, even making a cup of tea is an impossible task. Making a meal for a person

a newly bereaved person or family is something one can do to help and I know that people would like to do something but feel helpless in the face of such a tragedy,

Our lifeline was, and still is, an organisation called “The Compassionate Friends”, which is a charity run by and for bereaved parents, grandparents and siblings and has been a true lifeline for thousands of bereaved parents and their families. Through Compassionate Friends (TCF) we have made some enduring friendships and drawn comfort and inspiration from many of the parents we have met.

Compassionate Friends also provided valuable insight into our grief, helping us to understand how differently couples grieve. Men, often with their work to consider, have to compartmentalise their grief and are often more able to do that. This can lead to the mother thinking the father does not care which of course is not the case. You are both hurting so much that it can be difficult to share your pain.

It is now more than five years since I last saw my beloved son and I am very aware that many people hope and assume that I am “feeling better”. The hard truth is that I will never feel better. Firstly, I haven’t been ill, grief is not an illness; it is a way of life. I read recently that someone said grief is something you learn to live around. It is always there, but as time passes, I am learning to live with the pain, learning new ways of coping.

But there are times when the loneliness is overwhelming and I feel very vulnerable and lost. Rightly or wrongly I have a fear that others will think me weak, lacking in faith and that I should be able to move on in my life. In truth, I am doing the very best I can to move on but at times the realisation and the reality of what has happened shatters me and I am back to the beginning of my journey without my son.

For a long time I could not look at photographs of Will, especially those I had not seen before. But last year I summoned the courage to create a collage of photos of him from the very first photograph of me holding him to the most recent. It took me three tearful emotionally exhausting weeks to do it but now I am thankful I managed it. And a bonus has been that when anyone comes to see us, they look at the photos and it gives us a precious opportunity to talk about Will. There are still days when I find it difficult to look at the pictures but they are very precious memory of happier times.

I often think how wonderful it would be if more people mentioned Will’s name and talked about him. I so treasure memories a couple of his friends shared with me in the early days after losing Will. Both were friends he shared a house with whilst at university in Birmingham. One of them, Rob, recounted how they had bought two new sofas for the house from Argos – a buy one, get one free offer! It fell to Rob and Will to put the old sofas out for the council to collect and the two of them sat down in them in the sun and chatted. I love the mental picture of the two of them sitting in sofas on the pavement as if it were the most normal thing in the world.

Don’t be afraid to mention the name of the deceased to the person grieving. It is a gift to them to hear their loved one’s name, to have a memory shared, to know that their dear ones have not been forgotten. And the latter is a very real fear indeed.

Although I use Will's room as an office, I cannot yet turn out his cupboards. All his icons are still displayed on the computer screen and all my work is still to be found under the heading "Mum's".

It is unhelpful to tell a bereaved person that they are turning their loved one's room into a shrine. Fiona Castle, who kindly wrote the foreword for my first book, told me that Eric Morcombe's widow (a close friend of hers) had not yet touched any of Eric's possessions. We do what we can and there are no rules.

I have a list of guidelines some of you might find helpful and you are welcome to take a copy.

My most precious lifeline, apart from joining the Compassionate Friends, has been my writing and in the year to eighteen months following Will's death, I wrote poem after poem for him. At times the words seemed to fall onto the page. When I finally stopped I had written over 100 poems. I never intended to publish them but a writer friend, Jan, whose creative writing classes I used to attend, encouraged me, inviting me to come back to her classes for a term. I accepted somewhat nervously and have been a regular member since. That is where I met Ruth, a fellow writer, who kindly invited me to talk with you today.

With Jan's help - she read every single poem I had written and made sensitive and helpful suggestions - I somehow managed to gather the poems together. Another member of the writing group suggested I contact a Christian publisher who had been very helpful to her. The rest, as they say, is history. My book of poems for Will, which I called, My True Son, was published in 2008 and I have just finished a second book, which this time is more of what I call a bedside book - a collection of prose and poetry including others work as well as my own.

Finally, I would like to read you some of the poems from my book of poems for Will, My True Son. All proceeds from the sale of this book are donated to The Compassionate Friends.