

God gave us our relations...

“The family has been informed...” Thankfully, we do not hear those words quite so often on the radio now, due to the gradual withdrawal of our troops from Afghanistan. But every time I hear them, I shudder. What have the family been told? That their lives will be changed forever? That nothing will ever be the same again?

When we see families on our TV screens standing alongside those who have suffered, whether it is from loss or trauma, we invariably have the impression of a close and united family. And of course this is often the case. It is always good to hear stories of those, who in times of great need, have been surrounded by a loving and supportive family and how much strength it has given them.

But, having met or corresponded with many parents since becoming a member of TCF seven years ago, it has saddened me how often I listen to or read stories of families who have not been able to provide the support we all hope for. Of course there are many TCF members whose families have been wonderful and provided loving care and support. But, sadly, there are exceptions. One only has to look on the TCF forum to read endless stories from those of us whose families have not only failed to support them but in some cases, have actually turned against them.

A recent spate of correspondence on this subject on the forum has made me question why this problem seems to be so common. Talking this through with a dear friend from TCF, who after the loss of her only child, found out both of her sisters turned against her. She is also cut off from her elderly mother and her nephew. We thought that perhaps, under such circumstances, childhood sibling rivalry sometimes comes into play. It would take a psychiatrist to understand why this should result in this kind of hostility but I know that it is all too common. And we also talked about anger...

Grief involves a great deal of anger; it is one of the emotions we all experience when we lose someone precious to us. I remember my anger— anger at God, anger at the world, angry with people who did not understand, angry with the doctors, anger at the apparent randomness and unfairness of it all, angry with me at my inability to save Will. All very understandable. What is less understandable is why others, not as closely involved with the loss as we are, seem to direct their anger at us - the very ones who deserve it least. This has certainly been true of my own birth family.

I do not intend this to be a personal account of my family difficulties, but I will say that I witnessed this reversal of anger some years before Will died, when my niece was involved in a horrendous car accident in which she lost her husband and her baby son. What perplexed me at the time was that it was our mother my sister and her husband directed their anger at – thankfully not in person. It fell to me to try to protect my mother and think up excuses as to why she could not see my sister and

her family, especially of course, my niece. It would have broken my mother's heart had she heard the unkind and untruthful allegations made against her. I am thankful she never knew. Everything changed, when only a few months after my niece's tragic accident, my mother was diagnosed with terminal cancer. My sister of course, was devastated at the prospect of losing our mother, coming so soon after the dreadful loss our family had already endured. But to this day, I still feel some regret and sadness that I did not challenge my sister and her family regarding their treatment of our mother but at the time I was very aware of their shock and grief in the aftermath of my niece's accident. (Thankfully my niece was young enough to rebuild her life and now has a happy second marriage and three beautiful children.)

So I guess it was not too surprising that when Will died, and with my mother no longer alive, this anger was directed at me. And in this respect I am not alone, as I have read many sad accounts on the forum or talked with friends who are bereaved parents, only to discover that they too had endured the same kind of anger and abuse from their families...

I am not a psychologist, the only explanation I can suggest is that the anger may arise from the fact that – faced with such grief – people feel helpless. But, even so, I am at a loss to understand why some families choose to turn their back on those who so desperately need their support.

And maybe there is another factor at play here. Obviously, being estranged from my birth family, I have given much thought to this. One of the conclusions I have come to has to do with responsibility. Perhaps our families have an unspoken fear that having lost our children – and this may apply especially to those of us who have no surviving children – we might become too dependent on them. None of us have children as an insurance against old age but that said I am sure we all hope that, when the time comes, we will have a loving and extended family around us.

Viewed from that perspective, it then makes sense that given that our birth families have their own lives to lead and their own families to care for and enjoy, why not distance themselves now before the worst happens and they find themselves burdened with us? And to absolve themselves from guilt, they create a situation that gives them an excuse to argue with us, or somehow twist the truth, so that they can then tell themselves – and others – that it is our choice, not theirs, to have nothing to do with us.

I hope this does not make me sound bitter, I am not. As regards my own family, I believe I have now reached the stage where I realise that too much time has passed. My great nieces and nephews no longer know us and we are not, and are unlikely ever to be, a part of their lives. I still care very much about my family. I miss seeing them and always will. And I like to think I will be there for any one of them should they ever need me. But I cannot change what has happened and have to accept that there is nothing I can do to change the way they feel about me,

Looking at the overall picture, people do tend to avoid us. They feel uncomfortable in our presence; we represent their worst nightmare – the loss of a child. And when they realise they cannot make us “feel better” that we are not listening to their advice and their attempts to move us on, they back away from us.

And I am comforted by the fact that we now have a new family - the very dear friends we have made within TCF. These friends are our family now and I would hazard a guess that many of us in TCF would say the same. We are united in our grief.

Experiencing the deep grief we have all experienced is utterly life changing and we are fundamentally changed - in some weird way I would say it is almost a privilege to be admitted to this deep level of compassion and understanding, at a level many will never, ever achieve. We now view life in a completely different way and our values have totally changed.

I know here I may be treading on some shaky ground, but if we do believe in Eternity, then none of this will matter when we are reunited with our children. And we will have had more understanding of life than those who sail through it on a cruise liner.

It is admirable how many millions of people come into and go out of the world, ignorant of themselves and the world they live in.

William Penn