

Our dearly loved son, Will, died on Wednesday, 18<sup>th</sup> January 2006. He was twenty-two and he was our only child.

Will's death came as a shock to all who knew and loved him. Until he first became unwell in September the previous year, he had been fit and healthy. He was just over six feet in height, and with his amazing silvery blond hair, hazel eyes and golden skin, he was a beautiful young man. His quiet unassuming manner belied a wacky, but dry sense of humour and he had the ability to relate to everyone he met, whatever their age.

Will was bright at school. He was popular with his teachers, who loved him for his enthusiasm and friendliness, as well as his aptitude for learning. I will always treasure the comment made by the teacher in his reception class who, when I collected Will after his first day at school, commented, "I am very pleased with him" and later added, "There's the rest of the class, and there's William."

All parents think their children are special, and of course they are. We are all unique. But Will always had that quality that made people single him out. When I took him in his pushchair to the weekly market, the stallholders would always stop me to talk to him, or have some treat for him. I used to worry that he was too friendly, too outgoing, but, as he grew older, he became shyer.

I never wanted Will to be an only child. I grew up next door to a couple that had lost their only child, Jack, in a cycling accident when he was sixteen. His death destroyed their happiness. They doted on my brother, sister and me, but seeing the havoc Jack's death wreaked in their lives, I vowed even then that I would never have an only child. But, life doesn't always deal its cards the way we want and after Will was born, by emergency caesarean, I was never able to conceive again. I tried to compensate by inviting his friends to play, as there were no children of his age within my own family. Fortunately, he always had the ability to enjoy his own company and would chatter non-stop to himself, as he created imaginary scenarios with his adored Lego. My poem, "Castles in the Air", describes him doing just that.

I loved every minute of his childhood. He was a delight to be with and was always so interested in everything. He would happily accompany me to garden nurseries, to Kew Gardens, the kind of places many children of his age found boring. I worked at a local residential centre for adults with cerebral palsy, where I taught art. Will often came with us on our annual day out, usually to an art gallery or museum. He was never daunted by physical disability and was very popular with the residents. Will and I were always close and that closeness grew as the years passed.

When Will was seventeen and at Grammar School, I attended an Alpha course at our local church and became a Christian. Although from childhood I had attended church and been confirmed, I did not really understand the Gospel message until I took the Alpha course. When I attempted to tell Will about my belief, he resisted initially, saying that he did not know what he believed. However, at the invitation of a friend, he eventually attended a youth meeting at the church. Not long after this he went with the group to a Christian youth meeting with some friends from church. I was in bed

reading when I heard him arrive home, he came running upstairs and knelt beside the bed and, with tears streaming down his face, told me of his encounter with Christ. Others had been praying for him, he said, when his knees began to tremble, his eyelids to flicker, and he felt a hand grasp one of his outstretched hands. Then he described how he was running, impossibly fast, along side a figure dressed in white, whom he could not see but knew to be Jesus. Together they raced up over beautiful hills and mountains, amongst the most incredible scenery. When it stopped, Will said he wept tears of remorse, saying over and over again, "I am so sorry I never noticed You before, I am so sorry."

This description, coming from my sensible, levelheaded teenager, convinced me that his experience was real, not imagined. From that moment on, he became a committed Christian. He was confirmed when he was eighteen.

In a sense, I was not totally surprised by Will's conversion experience. When he was a small child and I took him to church, his eyes would always fill with tears when a Taize refrain was sung. I think I was always aware of the spiritual side of Will.

Will gained a place at Birmingham University, to read History. Birmingham was his first choice and he was very happy there. Knowing he was a Christian gave me much peace of mind, knowing what students can get up to in their first year at university! I needn't have worried. I always felt God looked after Will during his time at Birmingham. The first year, when he was in one of the halls of residence, there were other Christians on his corridor and some Christian girls in the adjoining corridor. Obviously Will made the most of his first year at university, doing the usual rounds of clubs and pubs, enjoying the freedom that all students relish in their first year. But the friends he made were all, like Will, honest, genuine young people. When he subsequently moved on to share a house with four of those lads from his corridor, they never embarrassed Will by bringing girls home for the night. And one of the four was also a Christian, like Will.

The subject Will chose for his dissertation was Byzantium Iconoclasm. I can't tell you how many times I have tried, as a layman, to explain to people what that entailed. He worked hard and to our delight, gained a first degree honours.

It was difficult for Will to come back home to live, having spent three years away. Obviously, until he found employment, he would not be able to afford to rent his own place, or even to share with others. However, finding employment proved harder than he expected. Especially so, because Will found that much as he searched the vacancy advertisements, he could not decide what career he wanted to pursue. To pass the time he took temporary employment and the following summer accompanied me to New Wine, an annual Christian camp, in Somerset. By the end of the week, Will knew where his future lay. He wanted to enter the Anglican Church. He wanted to train as a vicar. He was so excited. I remember him saying that once he felt God's call, there was not anything else he would rather do.

We were thrilled at Will's decision. He knew that by becoming a vicar, he would never earn a lot of money but that was unimportant to him. He had begun to re-evaluate his life and it's purpose. He knew he had not chosen an easy career but was sure it was right for him. I think he was a little surprised by the initial response to his

application. We all thought that the church would be delighted to have someone his age enter the ministry. We had often heard the Anglican Church called the “greying Church, due to the number of people undertaking ministry work, who were close to retirement age. His first interview was not encouraging. He was told he was too young and to go away and gain more life experience. But he persisted and his second interview was successful. Will worked hard, with the support of our vicar, to gain as much experience as possible, in order to give him the best chance of being accepted for training as a minister. He joined the PCC, a Deanery Synod representative for our church and, at the age of twenty-two, became leader of a newly formed cell group. One of the comments made at Will’s service was that it said a lot about Will that, at the age of twenty-two, he was in charge of a group whose ages spanned fifty years.

In October 2005, Will travelled to Edinburgh for a friend’s birthday. He arrived home full of enthusiasm for the city of Edinburgh and its yearly festival and eager to show us the photographs and slides he had taken. It was shortly after this trip, that Will first began to feel unwell.

Will died in January 2006 from fulminant pneumonia, following a misdiagnosis of MS. He was in intensive care for six weeks; the first three days at our local hospital before being transferred to a hospital in Leicester, where he was put on to an ECMO, a kind of modern lung by-pass, for five days. Initially he seemed to improve after coming off the ECMO. We so hoped and prayed (along with literally hundreds of people) that he would recover but the doctors never knew what they were treating and, after numerous operations and procedures, we lost him suddenly one night. We were with him when he died. A cause was never established. It was a cruel six weeks, with a tracheotomy Will could not speak but only write on a pad, held by the nurse or by us. Throughout it all, he remained gracious and kind, concerned for the nurses and those who had travelled from our village to visit him. Everyone was devastated when he died and the doctors and nurses wept. His funeral was incredible, our church was absolutely packed, with people in the entrance and the hall as well and we raised the roof for an hour and a half with beautiful worship songs and tributes.

Will is buried at Little Marlow cemetery. A member of “Memorial by Artists”, who lives High Wycombe, created a stunningly simple headstone for Will out of Welsh slate. It is very beautiful and a fitting tribute to our beautiful son.