

A matter of time... by Gill Hartley

'It has been said, 'time heals all wounds.' I do not agree. The wounds remain. In time, the mind, protecting its sanity, covers them with scar tissue and the pain lessens. But it is never gone.' Rose Kennedy

In January 2006, our dearly loved son, Will, died from a mystery illness at the age of twenty-two. We were extremely close, barely a day passed when Will and I did not talk, even when he was away at university. When Will died, all I wanted was to die and be with him. I could not imagine a future without him and truly believed I would die of a broken heart. But I didn't, much as I longed to.

Where am I now, eight and half years later? Has time, as we are led to believe, healed my wounds? The honest answer is no. But, as Rose Kennedy says, time has covered the scars and the pain has indeed softened. But the deep wound left by the shock of Will's sudden illness and his death remains. What has changed is I have learned to live with the pain, not expect Will to phone me or walk in at the door, learned to live without him saying, 'I love you, mum,' and survive without his physical presence, his wonderful sense of humour, his massive bear hugs. And I have learned to cope with the lack of understanding from those who have not endured the loss of a beloved child or children, and to accept that their lives move on and trying to make them understand is futile.

I believe in the first year following the loss of our child or children we are what is often referred to as in denial. Although I do not go along with the so called stages of grief I do recognise this as nature's way of cushioning us from the shock. In one of numerous books I read during the first year after Will died, Steve Griffiths' *God of the Valley*, Steve refers to this time as a blessing, a cushion which allows the human psyche to begin to accept that we are not caught up in some horrendous nightmare we will awaken from and that this has really happened. And he goes on to say that this can last for months or even years. My niece, who lost her first husband and baby son in a tragic car accident, said she found the reality drip feeds in over time.

Perhaps partly due to this reaction in the early years following our loss we can be filled with what I call a kind of nervous energy which makes us want to raise awareness, to help others - our reactions to our situation vary depending on our circumstances. In my case it was writing, beginning with writing poems for Will, not intending them to be for publication, although I'd had poetry published in the past. But a friend persuaded me to send the poems to a publisher and my first book, *My True Son*, was the result. This led to my second book, *Aspects of*

Loss, an anthology of writing and poetry from established writers and poets and other bereaved parents, in addition to my own writing. But as yet my intention to write a third book has not materialised; I seem to have lost some of the drive I felt earlier on.

When I talked about this energy with a friend from TCF, she said she recognises this and feels that in her case she is now at what she calls her 'peak' and is not expecting this to last indefinitely. At present she works incredibly hard on behalf of TCF and also runs support groups for bereaved parents and all this in addition to caring for two young sons and having a demanding professional career.

In his book, *The Examined Life*, Stephen Grosz, an American psychoanalyst, talks about 'the notion of closure - of having finished with grief', and goes on to conclude that this almost certainly has its roots in the work of Kubler-Ross, in which she set out the so called 'Stages of Grief'. He believes that those grieving, particularly after catastrophic loss, suffer more because they 'expect to make progress, to move through certain stages of grief. And when they don't, they feel that they are doing something wrong, or more precisely, that there is something wrong with them'. Therefore he concludes that the bereaved can suffer twice, firstly from grief and then what he calls the 'tyranny of shoulds'. In truth such losses can and do cause enduring sorrow and sadness.

We are expected to move through the 'stages of grief' until we reach 'closure' and then feel 'better'. The truth is that we can never reach closure - how can we when we are forever aware of our child's absence, when anniversaries and birthdays will always hurt and we will always wonder what our child would be doing now had they survived. I recognise the same indelible sadness in the eyes of all bereaved parents, however many years it is since their child died.

The notion of closure gives rise to what Grosz calls the 'counselling trade', which has given birth to such titles as *The Grief Recovery Handbook* and *The Grief Toolbox*. Recently Edwin and I had counselling with Relate to help us to adjust to Edwin's retirement and the inevitable change in our daily relationship. When she asked us how we envisage the future she seemed shocked by our reaction. We tried to explain that we could not allow ourselves to contemplate a future, it was too frightening. With no hopes of grandchildren and having very little support from our own families, the future was something we preferred not to think about. We can only live one day at a time.

Some bereaved parents say their grief has lessened with time, that they can look to the future, taking memories of their child with them. I think this is where being able to talk and share memories of their child with family and friends who knew and loved their child is so valuable. But sadly for some of us this is not possible and perhaps another reason why I struggle, as along with some other parents I know, we who do not have anyone with whom to share such precious memories.

We must not allow others to make us feel we are failing when we don't conform to their notion of the 'Stages of Grief'. Virginia Ironside, in her book, *You'll get over it: The Rage of Bereavement*, says, '*Stages of grief - shock, denial, numbness, guilt, rage, misery and resolution? Rubbish! This was one of the books I read in the first year and even then it made me smile.*

Recently I met a friend I had not seen for a while and when I commented that I struggle at times, her response was, 'Well, there is nothing you can do about it.' I could not help but reflect that is the very reason I do not see her - such comments are hurtful because there is nothing we can do to change what has happened, to bring our child back and this is the core of our pain. The following quote says it all - '*Time doesn't heal all wounds, handy lie though it may be. Time forces acceptance of what cannot be changed.*' E R Pierce, *Fractured Moon*

We each grieve in our own way, our relationship with our child was unique and no one can or should ever tell us how they think we should be.

The following poem is the first I wrote when I began to write for Will.

Moving On

My friend, I know you don't mean to hurt,
when you tell me I will 'move on'.
That 'Time will heal, you will feel better'.
My friend, we've just buried my son.
My friend, I watched my only child die,
the precious child I had borne.
The child I'd adored for twenty-two years,
the child who'd become a young man.
My soul mate and my closest friend,
quite simply the joy of my life.
When he died, my future died too.
He had shared his dreams with me,
the wife he prayed he would meet,
the children he prayed they would share.

He talked of his Lord, in whose church he would serve,
a future we will never see,
So my friend, please don't tell me,
how you think I should be.
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