

## A Story of Compassion

Grief is one of the loneliest journeys in life. There are so many factors governing each individual experience that grief 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 our twenty-two year old son, Will, our only child, died, my husband and I became 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 understand our feelings and we had little contact with them; old friends failed to keep in touch.

Our lifeline was 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.

People who have survived extreme and harrowing ordeals often say that they do not talk of their experience because others cannot understand. This is one of the reasons why bereaved parents feel so alone. The pain of losing a child can only be really understood by those who have suffered a similar bereavement.

A feeling of being misunderstood and expected to be able to "move on" and return to their previous life pattern makes parents' grief even harder to bear. It is as if they are walking alongside friends and family as before but now, as C S Lewis described it, "*There is an invisible blanket between me and the rest of the world.*"

One of the most valuable aspects of belonging to an organisation like TCF and other such support groups is that there is an understanding between its members that one

cannot find anywhere else. We speak the same language This particularly applies to the time of grief; it is an unbelievable 11 years now since Will died and yet we still miss him and long to see him as much as we did when he died. Sadly those not in our situation, seem to think that once the first anniversary has passed, we will begin to “feel better” and able to “move on” and get on with our lives. That will never happen.

At any gathering of bereaved parents, you will hear endless stories from them, relating the hurtful and thoughtless comments, the awful clichés which those not in our situation are prone to utter. There is always laughter at such gross misunderstanding and ineptitude. But beneath the laughter there is pain.

There is a need to recognise that this kind of loss is one from which bereaved parents will never fully recover, in many ways it is a life sentence. The loss of a child is the wrong order of things, we are not supposed to bury our children. Parents also need to talk about their dead child, a need that is not always recognised by others. We want to talk about our children, to keep the precious memories alive. We should be allowed to reminisce. We cannot and do not wish to pretend our children never existed.

I never cease to be amazed at the courage bereaved parents display and many go on to set up successful fund raising projects in their child’s memory. Others find comfort in helping those in a similar situation, or enter the caring profession. Some like me turn to writing. The list of achievements is endless.

I can honestly say that I am not sure I would have found the courage to go on with my life without the support and love of fellow bereaved parents and the new friends we have made through them. Our circle of friends is now quite different from that which existed before the death of our son.