

29/7/2015

Hedged in...

If you think in terms of a year, plant a seed; if in terms of ten years, plant a tree...
Confucius

Will, our only child, died in January 2006 from a mystery illness after almost 7 weeks in intensive care. He was twenty two. Will lies in a beautiful little cemetery, nestling in a small valley surrounded by trees and farmland. We can walk to where Will is over the farmland we back onto.

Often, after visiting Will, we walk up a footpath near the cemetery, which provides panoramic views over the surrounding countryside. But we are a bit late today and do not want to risk encountering two very large dogs which are usually walked up this footpath around this time. They intimidate our collie, Cagney. Edwin suggests another footpath, adding that is one I have walked with Will. He turns into a winding lane and pulls up by a kissing gate. But when I see the footpath, I tell Edwin he is mistaken, I have never walked here before.

I am confronted by a maze like footpath, which climbs steeply uphill, edged in on both sides by large hedgerow. It is totally unfamiliar to me. But Edwin continues to insist that it is one of the paths Will and I used to walk along with our last border collie, Luke. It wasn't like this, I tell Edwin, the path Will and I took was very open, with views of the farmland. Yes, the farmer had begun to plant small hedgerow plants like Hawthorn but it was not along this path. This path is completely enclosed by the hedgerow and you can't see over it.

At the top of the slope the path runs downhill and on our right is a farmhouse with outbuildings which Edwin insists is proof because Will had described this house. I am still unconvinced. The house Will and I saw was newly constructed and on our right, not our left. Edwin tells me this was because Will and I had walked from the other direction. By the time we return to the car, I am tired and irritable. As we climb into the car, I say to Edwin that, on one occasion, Will and I did walk for longer and crossed over a lane, not unlike the one we are parked in today. But I remember out buildings close to the side of the lane and here there are none. He must have somewhere else in mind.

But, during the night, I wake in tears... Edwin is right. It is the same footpath. The hedgerow plants – little sticks protected by plastic tubes to protect them from the deer – have indeed grown into a tall bushy hedgerow, blocking out the views I remembered. It must be over 10 years since Will and I last walked along that path with Luke. Ten years. As I write this it will be 10 years next January since Will died.

We had only lived in our current house a year before Will became ill. We inherited a very large garden, backing onto open countryside and farmland, and overhung by large mature trees. Will and I wanted to create a wildlife friendly garden. To conceal the shed and compost heaps, Will and I began to create a hedgerow; planting hawthorn, beech, holly, wild roses and so on - three and in some places four layers deep.

We also began to plan the rest of the garden, which, because we live in a corner plot, surrounds our house on three sides. Sadly apart from planting the hedgerow, creating a vegetable garden for us and planting some new shrub and perennials, Will did not live to see our plans develop into the mature wildlife garden it is now. Creating the garden has provided a lifeline for Edwin and me, lovingly carrying out the plans Will and I had drawn up together. I hope (and believe) he can still see it and sometimes fantasise how he would react should he return. I hear him saying, "Oh wow, Mum! It is amazing!"

The morning after our walk, I look again at our hedgerow, now quite tall – about 6' - and very bushy, already providing perfect cover, food and protection for the numerous birds we encourage into our garden. It is about the same height as the footpath hedgerow. It has grown well but, as with the rest of the garden, the change has been gradual. The same can be said of our children, we do not actually see them grow, we only realise one day they have outgrown some of their clothes and they look a bit taller. I had not walked that path with Will for about the same number of years as our hedgerow has been growing and the fact I no longer recognised the path somehow reinforced the length of time we have been without Will. And the reality that life moves on. Nothing stays the same.

I don't know why this has affected me so much but it has. After all, we all experience this kind of feeling when we see our child's friends moving on with their lives. Will helped with the junior group at our local church, children around 12 – 15 years of age. Now these same children are adults, many of them through university. It can be hard seeing them around our village or seeing their photos on Facebook.

Yet, despite this, the walk along that footpath locked into the passing years in a deeper way than I could have imagined. I guess because it was so unexpected. Faced suddenly with a totally unfamiliar path, I could not accept it was the same one that Will and I had trodden together some 10 years or so before.

This experience that has unsettled me, causing a fresh surge of grief and sadness that has stayed with me.

I wrote this poem for Will for my first book, My True Son, describing the plans Will and I had for our new garden.

New beginnings...

You and I,
at our favourite nursery,
you are cramming the car with plants,
tucking them everywhere.
On the way home,
we'll stop to buy more...

The plants were your protégés
you knew all their Latin names.
I kneel and touch them,
you were green fingered,

they are thriving...

Such plans, you and I...
here, a pond
there, some steps,
here, a pergola,
for the roses to climb...

I remember you...
tenderly planting,
nurturing,
watering.

Last summer,
the garden burgeoned.

It will be as we planned.
I will tend your flowers,
learn their Latin names,
nourish them with my tears.

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