

Grenades and Guillotines: Navigating Grief and Finding Hope **A talk by Cathy Retzenbrink on Tuesday 13 October via Zoom**

Like many others, I was initially sceptical over how supportive events would translate online. Events and support groups run by The Compassionate Friends are so much about being together, sharing tears, laughter, tea and hugs...a lot of warm, healing, oxytocin-surgic hugs. Can joining an event via webcam from our separate living rooms ever hope to achieve anything near that sense of presence and connection that has become a lifeline to so many of the TCF community?

After a warm welcome and introduction from TCF chief executive Carolyn Brice, author Cathy Retzenbrink (*A Manual for Heartache, The Last Act of Love and Grenades and Guillotines: Navigating Grief and Finding Hope*) told us she approaches online talks as if she's in one room with her audience. And truly she did! As Cathy shared her story of finding hope following the loss of her brother Matty, her warmth, honesty and genuine desire to help her fellow bereaved transcended the screens that separated some 130 attendees.

Cathy reminded us that while the loss of our loved one is terrible, tragic and unbearable, the reality of navigating the world without them feels impossible. The titular "grenades" of her book describe how grief explodes like shrapnel, leaving the bereaved the "walking wounded". The "guillotines" hark back to the paper choppers of school days, blades sharply slicing her old life from her new reality - an analogy we can sadly all relate to.

She described how her family used to function as a vehicle, but with the loss of "vibrant, alive, clever" Matty, suddenly one wheel was gone and their car was scraping across the road - with Cathy now sitting alone in the back seat. Understanding and respecting that she, her mum and her dad each handled their grief differently was important to help them function in this new form.

So how did she function? Cathy shared that earlier on in grief, she turned to alcohol, but is now sober and has found healthier coping mechanisms: running, writing, even punching cushions to let out repressed anger. Supportive loving parents were a huge part of her recovery journey, along with therapy; not just none bout, but several chunks over the long game including EMDR for trauma healing.

Continuing her bond with Matty has also been important, talking to him, waving to his remembrance plaque and allowing herself to feel his presence. "I have a relationship with him that is very joyous," she shared.

Asked by a bereaved parent how to help their surviving children, Cathy suggested "turning up the volume on compassion on everyone, including yourself," she said. "Retreat, hibernate and do a bit of wound licking - you may sometimes need to go to bed for the day." Such an important reminder to honour our own process.

Cathy's renewed appreciation for both the bigger picture and the little things was striking. "I didn't survive *this* to get wound up about the petty crap of daily life," she said, relating the simple yet immense pleasure of her dad giving her a grapefruit when she runs to her parents' house.

She also shared how writing became a lifeline for her. You don't need to write for others, but it helps to get it all down; to "write it out of me" as she did. Journaling and morning

pages (three pages of stream of consciousness writing done first thing in the morning) are a couple of ways to do this.

We've all experienced how other people aren't always helpful during the grieving process. Cathy's book '*A Manual For Heartache*' even includes a list of things not to say to the bereaved, including platitudes like "time will heal" , "God only gives you what you can handle" or "you'll feel better in a year". As we all know, comments like this can put huge, destructive pressure on us when we don't feel better in that given time frame.

I liked Cathy's point that when people do make unhelpful comments, she doesn't get angry – she accepts that it's hard and everyone is generally trying their best. And like her father, she appreciates a clumsy comment over somebody crossing the road to avoid her.

Above all, Cathy's talk was a reminder that while we've endured the unimaginable and we do become the "walking wounded", there is hope. Don't beat yourself up wishing you'd appreciated what you had before – she told us - as time passes you can grow the other bits of your broken heart so that the damaged bit becomes less all encompassing.

Within her parting words, Cathy reminded us that even the most painful of times offer us pearls, and at the end of a difficult day we can decide to think: "I learnt a lot about being a human being today."

As the comments, questions and post-event feedback showed, participants on the evening learnt a great deal about being human with Cathy on this, the third in TCF's series of online talks.

Thirty years on from losing Matty, Cathy confirms that there is no recovering or getting back to normal from a loss like this. Yet Cathy would tell her younger broken self, still in the trenches of grief, that things *will* get better. "It won't be the life you imagined, but there is a life for you out there. I promise you that in the future you will be glad to be alive again."

You can view a recording of the event [here](#). [Cathy's book *A Manual for Heartache* is available to purchase at the TCF shop.](#)

The Last Act of Love and *Grenades and Guillotines: Navigating Grief and Finding Hope* are available on Amazon.