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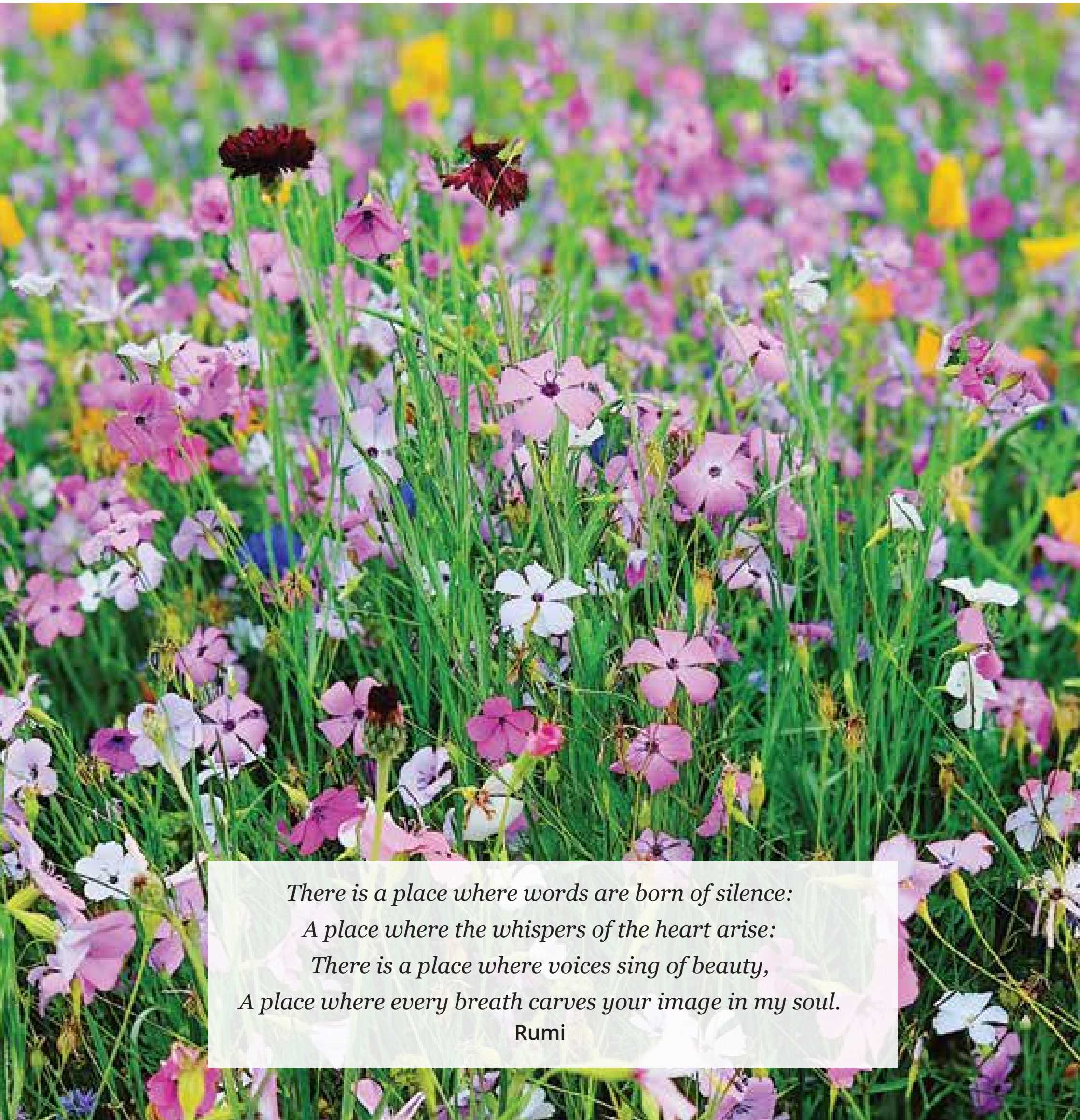
COMPASSION

The Quarterly Magazine of The Compassionate Friends.



There is a place where words are born of silence:
A place where the whispers of the heart arise:
There is a place where voices sing of beauty,
A place where every breath carves your image in my soul.
Rumi

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Board of Trustees

Chair - Andrew Miller
E: andrewmillertcf@gmail.com

Vice Chair - Susan Hughes
E: shughes@webmd.net

Additional Trustees

Maria Ahern
E: mariaahern.tcf@gmail.com

Margaret Brearley
E: zachor9@gmail.com

George Burn
E: georgermburn@gmail.com

Gina Claye
E: compassioneditor@tcf.org.uk

Gill Hardy
E: gill.hardy@gkpharmacomm.co.uk

Jen Hughes
E: jen_hughes88@hotmail.com

Melian Mansfield
E: melian.mansfield@btinternet.com

Sheila Phillips
E: sheila.phillips@zen.co.uk

Nigel Taylor
E: nigel.taylor77@btinternet.com

Warren Weiss
E: warren@defriesweiss.co.uk

Other Officers

Public Relations
E: media@tcf.org.uk

Web Administration
E: webadmin@tcf.org.uk

International Liaison - Margaret Brearley
E: zachor9@gmail.com

Other Contacts

Chief Executive Officer - Carolyn Brice
E: carolyn@tcf.org.uk

Finance and Administration
Buz de Villiers - E: buz@tcf.org.uk
Charité Nkusi - E: charite@tcf.org.uk

Helpline Manager - Ruth Mercier
E: helpline@tcf.org.uk
Helpline: 0345 123 2304

Head of Fundraising - Stephen Armstrong
E: stephen@tcf.org.uk

Events Coordinator - Sharon Rose
E: events@tcf.org.uk

National Office:
E: info@tcf.org.uk
Office: 0345 120 3785

www.tcf.org.uk
@tcf.org.uk
@TCFcharityUK

Contents

Correspondence is welcome and should be sent to the Editor. Contributions can also be sent via TCF National Office. Addresses are on the back page of this issue.
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Editorial Team:

Gina Claye and Carolyn Brice. Designed by Sam at Forbes Creative

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Reflections from the Editor


Gina Claye

Dear Friends

Christmas and New Year are behind us. Thank goodness, many of you will be thinking. We've managed one way or another to get through them. I remember after Nikki died in the March of 1987, making plans for getting through that first Christmas, but I hadn't thought about New Year. It hit me with great force. I felt as though I were leaving her behind and I couldn't bear it. I didn't want her to belong to the past, I didn't want to go on into another year without her.

One phrase I said over and over to myself in those traumatic early days was: 'One foot in front of the other, and don't forget to breathe.' It was that basic. I didn't have a choice; I had to go on into the New Year without her. And saying the phrase over and over, helped, it reminded me there was no point in beating myself up about not getting things done. I was trying to survive the absolute worst thing that could happen. It was as much as I could do just to get out of bed in the morning and to keep going. But keep going I did.

Slowly, as each year went by, I began to have a strong feeling that I was carrying her with me into the new year and when Robin died, I carried them both.

Gradually we begin to do more than just survive and try to find ways to make our children's lives count through what we do. That's why so many of us are TCF volunteers, running groups, being contacts, on the Helpline, helping at weekend retreats to name but a few. One of our Welsh members, Pauline Bevan, does small acts of kindness in her daughter, Katies's name; she is determined to let her daughter's life count through her actions: helping someone carry a bag to their car, picking up rubbish and putting it in a bin, letting people out of junctions whilst driving and saying each time, 'This is for you Katie'. All these things make a difference to other people's lives.

I once read of the world-renowned violinist, Itzhak Perlman, able to walk only with the aid of two crutches..... At the start of one concert, after only a few bars, one of the strings on his violin snapped. Instead of ordering another string, or another violin, he motioned to the conductor to carry on. You could see him modulating, changing and recomposing. It sounded as though he were retuning the three strings to get new sounds from them that they had never made before. At the end, after the silence and the cheers, he said, "You know, it is the artist's task to find out how much music you can still make with what you have left."

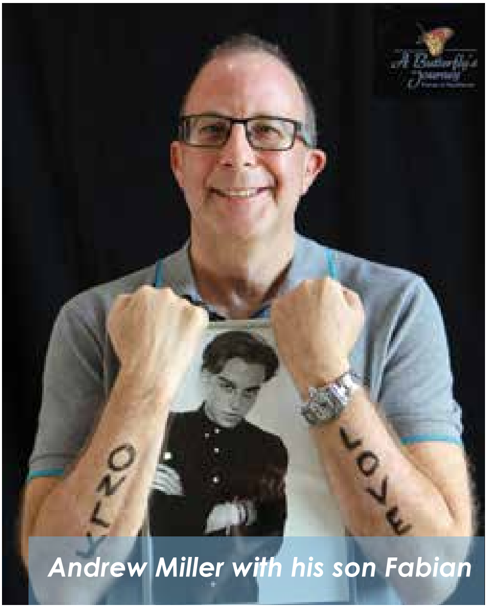
Now, after many years have gone by, the phrase that runs through my mind has modulated from 'One foot in front of the other, and don't forget to breathe,' to 'I can still make a difference with what I have left'.

Dear Friends, if you are newly bereaved and still trying to put one foot in front of the other in this new year, believe that one day you will begin to feel that rather than leaving your loved ones behind, you will be carrying them with you in your heart into the years that come. To those of you further along the road, thank you for all you do to make a difference to the lives of others on their grief journey.

And please, keep sending me your thoughts, your articles, poems and letters. You never know what a difference you might make to someone who reads them.

With my love to you all,
Gina (Nikki and Robin's Mum)

Thoughts from the Chair



Andrew Miller with his son Fabian

Let me start by introducing myself as the new Chair of trustees of The Compassionate Friends. Many of you know me from one of the many retreats where I have volunteered over the last 3+ years and most recently at our amazing 50th Anniversary Commemoration held over the first weekend of November 2019 at Horwood House where I took on the role of compere.

I want to use my first "Thoughts from the Chair" to tell you a little bit about myself, what brought me to Compassionate Friends and what I have been doing over the last few years as a volunteer and trustee of TCF.

But first, I want to take this opportunity to say a huge vote of thanks to the person whose shoes I am stepping into, our wonderful Maria Ahern. Under Maria's watch our Charity has grown from strength to strength. We now have over 90 support groups nationwide, run at least seven weekend support retreats every year for parents and siblings and last year saw us celebrating the 50th anniversary of The Compassionate Friends.

The feedback from that event has been incredible and the fact that it happened under Maria's watch is a credit to her. Those of you who were there will know that Maria made her mark on that weekend from the very start when she fell off the stage hitting her head in the process. But even as she lay there waiting for the ambulance, Maria was giving out instructions that 'the show must go on'. And so it did and thankfully with Maria being a part of it. I will always remember Maria's speech on the Saturday morning, talking about her accident, how there was nothing she could do about what had happened and how strangers came to help her. Her use of metaphors was wonderful and set the scene for the remainder of a truly memorable commemoration of The Compassionate Friends and a celebration of what TCF has done over the last 50 years.

So Maria, from me and from our fellow trustees a huge thank you for your leadership over the last few years. I have no doubt that I will turn to you for your valuable input over the next three years.

If, five years ago, you had asked me who I was, I would have told you that I am from London, where I still live and work as a lawyer and barrister, as I have been for over 30 years. I might have told you about other places in the world I had lived, what else I had done, my likes, dislikes and hobbies. In short I would have given you my world view of me as it then was.

But that changed on 5th January 2015, when I lost my youngest son Fabian. I am still many of the same things I was, but first and foremost I am a bereaved dad, and it is something I very much wear on my sleeve and never hesitate, given the right situation, to tell others. Sometimes people (especially the non-bereaved) are surprised at my description of myself, but it is how I feel and view myself and for me it is much more significant than where I live or what I do.

Fabian was only 19 years old when we lost him to the curse of drugs, or as one kind bereaved parent described it as 'an accident of youth'. That was very early on and I found that comforting at the time and still do. Fabian was the youngest of my two sons. Nothing can prepare you for the type of death that is so very sudden and so very unexpected. From that fateful day in January 2015, I found myself on a journey, my individual grief journey, just as you and all bereaved parents, siblings and grandparents have experienced and continue to experience. That grief journey starts the moment your child, sibling or grandchild dies. But it is a journey without any destination, just many, many stops along the way.

I did not find TCF until five months after Fabian's death. No one from the emergency services, the undertaker, the medical profession or my family or friends told me about TCF. I felt that I was the 'only bereaved parent in the world'. No one else was in my shoes. No one else was going through what I was going through. How could they be?

It was my partner, Esther, who found TCF, and that led me to my first TCF support group in Finchley, North London, run by Pat Bradshaw, who has been running the group for the best part of 30 years. I have heard lots of people describing their first encounter with TCF, the fear they had of going to their first meeting, the anticipation and the simply not knowing what it would be like. I was not scared but I do remember feeling numb and detached, finding it difficult to get my head round the fact that I was going to a meeting for bereaved parents... me?... how could that be? How could I be a bereaved parent? Surely they would tell me I was in the wrong place and there was no need to stay? But of course I was very much in the right place. I was not turned away, I was welcomed with open arms, with a smile and many hugs and with a warmth I had not expected.

> *"The more my TCF world enlarged, the more bereaved parents I met, the more difficult it became for me to retain a victim mentality."*

One significant thing in my first TCF meeting that helped me very much at the time, and has to a large part shaped my grief journey, was listening to a mother, Christina, telling her story about losing her beautiful ten year old daughter, Sophia, to brain cancer. It was like so many other stories, a tragic story, told with sadness, pain, with tears but also with such dignity. When she finished I had what I can only describe as an awakening. It would have been impossible for me, having heard Christina and Sophia's story to have said... "Well you think that is bad... just wait till you hear my story."

On the contrary, what Christina's and other parents' stories showed me, was that I was not the "only bereaved parent in the world" and most significantly I was not alone. It is so very easy as a bereaved parent to feel like a victim... and of course I did. But what that first meeting showed me was, I was not a victim, I was with so many others who, like me, were going through the same thing. I also realised that feeling like a victim did not help me and I knew that it was not the path I wanted to continue on and I am sure it is not the path that Fabian would have wanted me to take.

The more my TCF world enlarged, the more bereaved parents I met, the more difficult it became for me to retain a victim mentality. A terrible, tragic and painfully sad life changing event had happened to me, but it had also happened to many other people, good, caring and loving people. And sadly it will continue to happen to many others here in the UK and around the world.

I had found a new family of friends who were always going to be there to give me support along this bumpy road of grief. These friends spoke my 'grief language', understood what I said, empathised with me, because they understood their own grief and knew how they had felt in the early stages of bereavement. I started going to as many TCF meetings and social events as I could.

Along the way, I met Margaret Brearley, who needs no introduction, the then Chair of trustees. I found myself at Margaret's request, sitting at a table of the TCF Board of Trustees. I had not even reached the first anniversary of losing Fabian. I do not know how she got me there, but Margaret's persuasion was tenacious and impossible to ignore. I was co-opted onto the trustee board and a year later elected as a trustee and have been a trustee ever since.

I have been going to TCF retreats since 2015 and started volunteering for them at the beginning of 2017. There was no Central or North West London support group and I was determined to set one up. The key to being able to run a support group is when you know that you do not have to keep telling your own story (although you might still want to), but realising that your role as a volunteer is to listen and allow others to tell their story. For me that time came after three and a half years. With the assistance of TCF's brilliant CEO, Carolyn Brice, our events' coordinator, Sharon Rose, and one of our sibling trustees, Jen Hughes, we set up our monthly support group at Kilburn, London at the location of the TCF Office. It was clearly needed as many months we have over 20 parents and siblings. I am especially pleased that we have been able to attract so many siblings to our support group and thank Jen for her efforts in this regard.

> *It is hard to think of a comparable charity. TCF is there to help those who find themselves in a situation that was beyond their imagination and understanding.*

It felt like a logical step to move from being a trustee to being the Chair of trustees. I thank all my fellow trustees for their unanimous vote of confidence in electing me as their Chair and I promise I will do my uttermost to ensure the continued success and proper governance of our wonderful charity.

Andrew Miller with his son Fabian

And so that is me… that is my story. Over the next three years I hope to share with you my views, hopes and aspirations for the charity from my position both as Chair and as a volunteer and, of course, as a bereaved dad.

It is hard to think of a comparable charity. TCF is there to help those who find themselves in a situation that was beyond their imagination and understanding. Very few have ever heard of it before the death of their child, sibling or grandchild. It is a charity that many non-bereaved do not understand and why should they; we were in the same position before our loss. Yet despite all this it is a charity that when found by those who need it, provides a support and lifeline that is impossible to explain but so very possible to feel. Over the last few years many parents have told me that 'they do not know where they would be but for TCF' and that 'TCF provided them with a lifeline'. I am so very proud to be the Chair of the trustees of a charity, your charity, that does so much and helps so many.

I was recently asked, 'What does TCF do?' I could have described the support groups, the on-line facilities, the publications, the retreats and many more things. But I did not. Instead I took inspiration from Gina Claye's wonderful book – 'Don't Let Them Tell You How to Grieve'. I told them that TCF helps bereaved parents and families on their grief journey. It remains for every one of us our own grief journey. TCF cannot and does not tell you how to grieve, but is there to help you on your journey. Do we help people grieve better? I am in no doubt that TCF helped me grieve better and helped with my on-going relationship with Fabian. I know that is the same for many of you and that it will be the case for many more who will join our TCF family. It is the very reason why we need to keep doing what we do so well.

I look forward to working hard on your behalf over the next three years and to meeting as many of you as possible. Until the next time, I send you all my warmest wishes.

Andrew x
(Bereaved Dad and Chair of TCF Trustees)

My New Normal?

I wrote the following after a discussion we had in our local Compassionate Friends support group in Colchester Area in January 2020.

We react to the idea of a new normal after the loss of our child because to do so would acknowledge that it has happened – and we don't want it to. So the realisation of the new normal is part of accepting that the worst has happened and that we are forever changed by that event.

My new normal is personal (I wrote this for myself) – yours will be different but may have similarities. So what follows is offered as an encouragement to stop and think about yourself (!) and maybe discover something encouraging and hopeful:

1. Normal is the integration rather than avoidance of the pain of loss into the whole of my life.
2. Normal is the expectation that I will be ambushed (that pain will be touched without warning) from time to time.
3. Normal is to have painful flashbacks but also to be able to remember fondly the joyful times.
4. Normal is making the choice to be grateful - ultimately grateful for the life of my child.
5. Normal is the choice to let go of my child, alive or dead, in the end letting go matters.
6. Normal is, while rightly remaining angry, letting go of all negative feelings of bitterness, resentment and regret around my child's death.
7. Normal is for my feelings to be nearer the surface and hopefully being able to empathise more with others in their pain.
8. Normal is making no comparison or judgement of another's pain.
9. Normal is being on a journey to being more real and whole as an integrated human being to the benefit of myself and others around me.
10. Normal is for my identity not to be that of a bereaved parent but of an increasingly whole human being.

In no way do we find this new normal easily or quickly. It is part of the continuing journey of grief which, in turn, is inevitably part of the journey of life.

Paul Bowtell
Paul and Chris' son, Stuart, died of cancer in January 2002 aged 23 years.

News from the Catharine Pointer Memorial Library

I'm writing this during the cold, dark days of January which I find can be difficult to get through. Somehow I find the warmer weather and the lighter evenings of Spring lift my spirits a bit and being able to get out of the house, or even have all the windows open and see the sun streaming through them, makes me feel that little bit better. There is one consolation for me in winter though and that is the extra time I find for reading.

Nowadays I read all sorts of books, with crime thrillers and historical fact being my favourite genres, but for four or five years the only books I could concentrate on were those written by other bereaved parents and supplied to me by our library. At that time the library was my lifeline and I know it still is for many members of TCF. In fact, if I'm honest, I'd be lost without it too because I love finding new books, looking through them, reading them and then choosing which ones will suit which reader.

When I first asked for library books, back in 2004, I didn't have a clue what there was or what would help me but Catharine Pointer, our then librarian, did know and sent me four books which were absolutely perfect for me. Since then I've spent a lot of time and effort getting to know the library and I try to use that knowledge to emulate Catharine. I don't always get it right of course but I do pretty well, so please, if you think you'd like some books but are just not sure what it is you need, do let me know. You can send me an email, write me a letter or leave a message on my answerphone and, if you've spoken to the helpline, any request for library books will be passed on to me.

At the moment there's one book in particular that everyone wants to read and that is, the rather idiosyncratically named, 'Upright With Knickers On: surviving the death of a child' (UKO) by Gina Claye. I'm getting requests for this book on at least a weekly basis, and I know the office are also getting requests from people wanting to buy it, and I can only say I'm not at all surprised. For a start Gina is a bereaved parent and all the people who have contributed to the book are bereaved parents, siblings or grandparents and that's so important. Other people can be very kind and supportive and even wise but it's the ones who have already been there, have already trodden the terrible path we've found ourselves on, that can really help us and there's a lot of help to be found in UKO.

I've just had a quick count and there are 48 different topics covered, such as anger and guilt, exhaustion, PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder), anniversaries, positive thinking, eating, craft, TCF support via residential weekends or the internet, just to name a few. There's also a chapter on reading and another on chocolate, two of my favourite things. None of the chapters are over-long and they are all composed of easily digestible pieces of text, making it a great book for dipping into as well as reading from start to finish.

As well as Gina's own writing there are contributions from many other members of TCF and that makes it the first book written by, and for, TCF in a very long time. In fact I think the only other was 'Our Children' by Ena Mirren which was written over 25 years ago and is still a valued part of our library. I've acquired plenty of copies of UKO although they're not spending much time on the library shelves; they no sooner arrive back than they're off again into the post. It really is a book for all of us no matter what our circumstances.

Finally I'd like to mention some of the audio books we've acquired. I know that Cathy Rentzenbrink's 'The Last Act of Love', which was written after the author's brother was terribly injured in a road accident, an injury which eventually led to his death, has been a popular book with many readers and now we have an audio recording of it. It was generously given to us by a grandmother and a mum in memory of their very handsome grandson and son, Guy Hewitt-Jones. We also have 'See You Soon', a book to help parents whose children have died from drug and substance abuse, which has been kindly recorded for us by the author; it really is very special to hear Philippa reading her own words and it makes a wonderful addition to our library.

Lastly we have 'It's ok that you're not ok' by Meghan Divine which addresses the way society doesn't understand or even really tolerate grief, an attitude which contributes to the sense of isolation so many of us feel. We already have this book but now have an audiobook dedicated to another handsome young man, Jake Burkin, by his mum, Chris, and this is another very welcome addition to our library.

So that's it from the library for now. I'd just like to end with a little quote from UKO which captures the exhaustion of grief so well. It's by Lorraine Lynn and says quite simply:

'I'm not an early bird or a night owl.
I am some form of permanently exhausted pigeon'. (p68)

Amen to that,
With love from Mary

In Grief and Love

Your death has changed me.
And the part of me
that died with you
is never coming back

I am different now,
learning a new way of being,
a person transformed.

Grief has become
a force in my life
and that's how it must be.
For how else should I live
without you,
if not in grief and love.

Katja Faber

My son died suddenly almost six months ago from an as yet unexplained cardiac arrest. Marley was ten months, so happy, joyful and full of life. He and our daughter lit up our life.

I wrote this poem because people's well meaning words keep hurting me. After sitting in tears from yet another message from a friend this weekend, I wrote down how I felt.

Please ....

Please don't tell me how to feel unless you've walked in my shoes
Please don't tell me what to do unless you've actually done this too
Please don't tell me to move on, it doesn't work like that
Please don't tell me to be grateful for what I have, part of me is missing
Please don't tell me you understand I can no longer hold his little hand
Please don't tell me you 'get it', I now wear my heart on the outside
Please don't say 'you are doing amazing', I have no choice in this
Please don't say you are so strong, I hide a lot inside
Please don't say you are lucky to have another child or a loving partner,
our family is no longer whole

Just, Please, listen
Please hold me
Please give me a tissue
Please mention his name
Please tell me your memories
Please embrace me in tears
Please just sit with me when it hurts too much to talk
Please hold me up when I'm falling down
Please be patient, I've never done this before and I hope you will never have to
Please help me, support me, don't hurt me with your words

Bex Oakes

I'm Caroline, Mum of Lance, who died two years ago at almost ten months old. We put to bed a happy and healthy baby boy but in the morning he was almost gone. He died from sepsis after a very short spell on life support.

Lance has a brother called Austin who is five and we are expecting another baby in May. It was a very difficult decision and I'm full of worry but we feel we still have a lot of love to give.

I didn't know what to do with myself on Lance's anniversary this year and found myself writing this poem.

Empty Chair

I sit here in silence; there's an empty high chair.
I'm so full of love but there's nobody there.
Silence is amplified; there are no squeals of joy
No screaming for lunch, no bashing your toys.
There is no mucky face to lovingly clean,
No sticky fingers,
No baby to wean.

Much as you're gone, I still feel you here
Amongst all the silence, amongst all the tears.
Sometimes the silence is broken a bit...
A bird in a tree or the heating might click.
It's an odd situation when life must go on.
The world keeps on turning, there's stuff to be done.

As hard as it is, we are so glad you came.
We don't go a day without saying your name.
Your brother still loves you, as we do too.
How lucky we are to love both of you.

The silence has lessened, it's windy outside...
Reminding me of you watching the washing dry!
I would park you under the washing line
And you'd laugh as the sheets blew high in the sky.

Our hearts are still broken as they always will be
But sometimes I feel your strength in me.
It seems to be reserved for the most difficult days
When I look for you in so many ways.

The love that we shared can't be taken away;
The chair might look empty but the memories remain.
We promised you we'd do our best to stay strong,
To look after your brother and to just get along.
Know that you're with us in all that we do....
There is NO forgetting the wonderful YOU!!

Caroline Bignell

Rosie's Melody

Today I went to a non-religious service at the tiny chapel in the cemetery where my Rosie's ashes are. I go every year as it is always on the first Sunday in December and the anniversary of Rosie's death is 4th December. I lit a candle for Rosie and all our children and as they know me there, they asked me to choose one of the poems/pieces of writing to read out. I chose the one called 'A Young Life Cut Short' as I could relate to it... after 15 years Rosie's 'melody' lingers on in my heart and is endless, and I hope it will be so for you too in time.

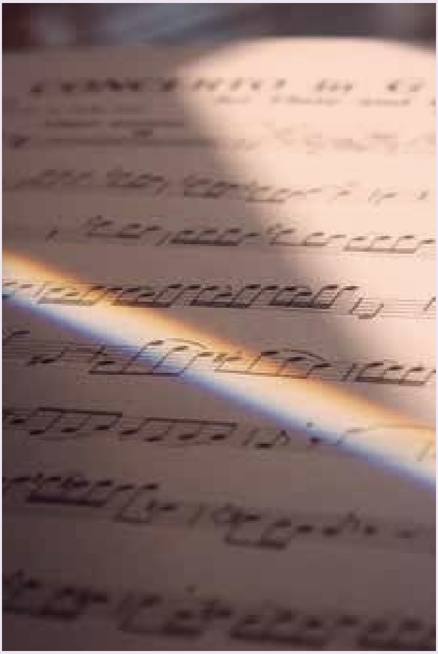
Carolyn Brice

A Young Life Cut Short

Do not judge a song by its duration
Nor by the number of its notes
Judge it by the richness of its contents
Sometimes those unfinished are among the most poignant...

Do not judge a song by is duration
Nor the number of its notes
Judge it by the way it touches and lifts the soul
Sometimes those unfinished are among the most beautiful...

And when something has enriched your life
And when its melody lingers on in your heart
Is it unfinished?
Or is it endless.....



Memory Corner

We remember with love all our children

From Gina, Tim and Rachael Claye

Remembering our daughter and sister, Nikki, 1968 - 1987 and our son and brother, Robin, 1970 - 2003

Nikki, your pink rose, Compassion, still blooms after 33 years; it is a delight to see the first buds forming each spring.

Robin, it's Six Nations time again. Wales beat Italy 42 - 0 but lost to Ireland 24 - 12 yesterday. So no Grand Slam this year for the boys in red.

Your anniversaries have come around again this March and we shall spend time together as a family remembering you both and celebrating your lives.

With our dearest love,
Mum, Dad and your sister, Rachael

From Carolyn Brice

Remembering my beautiful, funny, smiley, kind and loving daughter, Rosie – always 9 and a half - but who should have been 25 years old on 21 May 2020.

We think of you now with so much love, remembering the day you were born and the boundless love, laughter and joy you brought to our little family.

With all our love from
mum, dad and your sister, Natalie.

From Jane Pentling

Remembering our wonderful daughter, sister and mother, Ann, who would have been 50 on 2nd March, 2020.

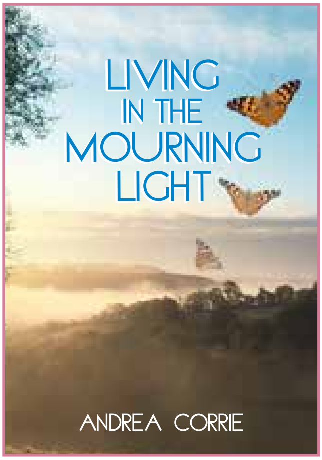
You are missed more and more each day – always in our thoughts. The pain of losing you will never cease.

Hoping we will all meet again one day.

Lots of love from Mum, Dad, Mark, Kay, Jo and your two lovely children, Emma and David.

Book Reviews

We are always looking for people who are willing to review books for us. Please contact Mary at the library (address on back page) if you would like to help in this way.



Living in the Mourning Light

by Andrea Corrie

What is it like, living in the mourning light? This is the question asked and answered by TCF member and (now Devon-based) author Andrea Corrie in her second book, Living in the Mourning Light. The book, part memoir, part grief resource, further describes her path after the loss of her 19-year-old son James to accidental drowning in the River Thames at Kingston, South West London, in 2005.

Every bereaved person knows the shock, despair and horror of early grief. What do you do with your emotions? How do you bear your loss? Andrea's outlet is to write out her anguish, to put into words the worst of her feelings in an attempt to better understand them and ultimately to move from the darkness into the light, which she terms the mourning light. Initially written for TCF and the Drowning Support Network support forums, Andrea's musings and articles led to the publication of Into the Mourning Light in 2014, which focused on the first eight years of loss. Her description of the safety measures implemented at Kingston riverside via the family's three-year campaign with the Council, brought the book to the notice of the RNLI. As a result, Andrea became involved with their Respect the Water campaign, an annual national campaign which focuses on the dangers inherent in water and which exists to ensure that people know what to do if they fall into water.

Andrea continues to support the campaign and she says, "I cannot emphasise enough that any body of water, innocuous looking though it may be, poses a risk to anyone who enters it, particularly if that entry is accidental. We are fortunate to live in a beautiful area of Devon that has large and varied waterside areas locally: for example, Wimbleball Lake, the Tiverton canal and the rivers Exe and Barle. They are no less dangerous than the tidal river Thames, or the open ocean off the Devon and Cornwall coast. I say this not to be a killjoy, but to raise to the forefront of people's minds that they should always take care of themselves and those around them, and Respect the Water."

Living in the Mourning Light continues the story of life after loss, written with a broader perspective on the grieving process. The book's positive narration focuses on the attributes of hope, light, love, faith, resilience and joy. Contributions from family and friends, representatives of the RNLI, the Fire and Rescue service, and bereavement organisations broaden the appeal of the book. Andrea also relates how she came to recognise that for her, faith is a powerful tool for processing grief.

Living in the Mourning Light's many suggested supportive tools for the grieving process are useful and inspiring. Andrea's gathering of this toolbox for grief inspires her workshops and presentations to the RNLI, Fire and Rescue services and bereavement organisations. In particular she endorses the Compassionate Friends, which she describes as an important lifeline to her, particularly in the early stages of grief. She says, "Nearly 15 years on, my connection with TCF continues largely through ongoing friendships and mutual support. I am delighted that Carolyn Brice and Mary Hartley felt able to endorse my new book."

Readership of Living in the Mourning Light need not be restricted to bereaved parents, as the book contains much to enlighten anyone who is grieving the loss of a loved one, or supporting them. The book challenges you to think about your own responses to grief and loss and reassures you that the mourning light offers a safe, optimistic and joyful place in which to live, despite the absence of those whom you miss.

About the author

Having lived and worked in Surrey for most of her life, Andrea and her husband Shaun heeded the call of the South West and moved to Mid Devon in 2017. They enjoy exploring the beautiful countryside, often walking with Shadow, their rescue greyhound. Andrea continues to work part of the week as a medical secretary. In her free time, she likes to record life with a camera and a pen and relishes being able to chase round after grandchildren, cook elaborate recipes and generally celebrate a stage of life not entirely governed by the clock.

Of her writing, she says,

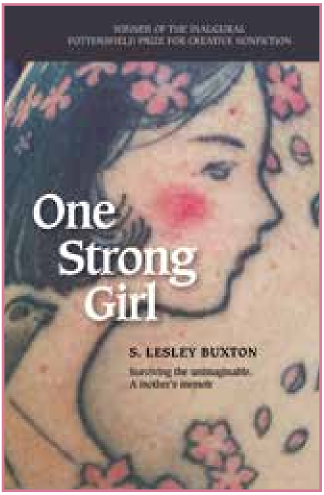
"I am proud to have produced two books that are not misery memoirs but aim to uplift, inform and inspire readers with a sense of hope for the future as well as providing a lasting legacy for my dearly loved son James."

Living in the Mourning Light and Into the Mourning Light by Andrew Corrie are both available to purchase at Amazon.

Andrea's positive blog on grief and living as a bereaved parent can be found at **andreacorriesblog.wordpress.com**

One Strong Girl - surviving the unimaginable; a mother's memoir

by S Lesley Buxton



This is a moving, intense story of remembering the illness and death of an only child. India, a healthy child for ten years, began to fall over and have epileptic fits. After five years of increasing disability she was diagnosed with a rare genetic disorder and died at the age of sixteen.

This mother conveys the impact of the shock of the illness, deterioration and delays in the diagnosis and the chronic exhaustion of constant care and distress at her daughter's impending death. She describes the struggle to maintain their lives and employment alongside caring for their daughter, searching for answers, hoping for treatment and then losing hope.

The story opens with the parents' journey to Japan, months after her death to visit places India was fascinated by. The book moves back and forth as the mother reflects on the illness and death of her daughter and her own grief. This is one mother's story of how she endured and survived. Many bereaved parents will recognise the all-consuming nature of the illness and death of their child, for which there is no preparation.

Anne McAreavey

Searching for Spenser

by Margaret Kramar

Near the end of this book Margaret Kramar describes how she was trying to help another writer. She saw that he needed to "bring the reader into the scene with vivid, descriptive details which conveyed emotion".

Margaret is exceptional in her ability to do this. She tells the story of the traumatic birth, life and death of her disabled son Spenser in a way that kept this reviewer wanting to know what happened next. Many readers will be caught up with what she went through, what she thought and how she reacted. Her story has some unexpected twists and turns.

The book is not just about Spenser but also about his family, his parents unhappy marriage, new relationships, reconciliation and spirituality. Margaret writes in some detail about Spenser's final days, his death and funeral, her precious store of memories of him and her sense of his ongoing presence with her. She is aware that the veil between this life and the next one is thin. Readers will no doubt have different responses to her meeting with a spiritualist several years after Spenser's death. This is described in the longest chapter of the book. The book is around 250 pages and it has 42 chapters which break it up in a helpful way.

Bereaved parents, especially those who have lost a disabled child, will surely find many helpful things in this book to strengthen them. As someone who commends the book says on the inside cover, "No matter who you are you will find yourself in these pages".

Henry Whyte

Finding Life Again

When Katherine my daughter and only child died I could not cope with it at all. I had lost my wife only a few years before so it came as a double blow. In short, I lost all reason and just slid into a dissolute self destructive life style. Gentle reader I will not assault your senses with the details of that time, let us draw a veil across that.

After about four years, purely by chance, I found TCF and finding that there were others like me, and who understood me without judgement, probably saved my life. I was no longer on the road to self destruction. Although it saved me, it was still hard to find anything to arouse an interest or find any joy in life. Fine while at the meetings or the office but the rest of the time just seemed to be aimless.

Then one day, purely by chance, I saw an advert for local people to audition for parts in a film being shot nearby. So I went along just for something to do, had my photo and measurements taken and told to go away, and if they wanted me they would call. So off I went, thinking that was the end of that, when to my surprise a few days later I had a call telling me to report for work.

So I duly reported, was put into a costume and led onto the set, and instantly stepped into a different world of magic and make-believe. I was transfixed by everything I saw. It was all that you imagine Hollywood to be but for real. Camera men and sound engineers pushing great pieces of machinery about. Lighting guys rigging up great big spotlights. Wardrobe ladies running around with needle and thread fixing costumes, hair and make up ladies making sure everyone looked right for the scene. All talking some strange technical language I could barely understand. All seemed total chaos but I was mesmerised by it all.

I was placed on the set, told what to do when I heard the magic word, ‘Action’. While I was waiting and looking around, I realised that I was standing just feet away from two Hollywood A listers; the day was becoming more surreal by the minute. The filming started and after a great number of takes the director was happy and suddenly the day was over.

As we were leaving, the casting agent asked me if I had liked doing it and if I wanted more work would I like to sign up with the agency. I think I almost screamed at him, “Yes I want more, give me more.” At last I had found something that gave me some joy and interest; for the first time in a long time I felt alive again.

Since then I have been very lucky to have been on a good number of film and TV productions but the magic never ever fades for me.

I miss Katherine every moment of every day but I have learnt that you can still find moments of joy and even happiness.

I hope my story helps someone.
Love to you all xxx

John Robertson - j.robertson585@btinternet.com

Week 272 by Maria Ahern

Hi beautiful.

"Hi mum. How's it going?"

Well James, it has to be said that 2020 has turned out to be quite horrendous.

"I know mum."

I can't say much more really.

"I know mum."

Do you have any words of wisdom?

"Not really. Sometimes you don't have to be wise, you know mum. Sometimes you just have to be... hmmmm... what's the word... silently there.'"

That's two words.

"I knew you were going to say that."

I know James.

"Ok, touché. Listen. Just listen."

To what?

"The silence. Listen to what it's saying and let yourself hear the wisdom in that."

Crikey Moses James! What have you turned into...?!

"Whatever you need mum."

Eh?

"Sometimes, you need a joker, sometimes a wise man and sometimes just someone who will sit beside you and say nothing. To just be still and silent."

But…

"Yes, I know. 'Still and silent' aren't the first words that come to mind when anyone thinks of you mum. But I'm watching you. I'm seeing that you are learning this truth and it is helping you with all sorts of things that are happening at the moment. You are finding the truth in the silence. I know you are."

Do you mean like meditation. 'Cos I can't do that stuff James.

"No mum. I don't mean that. I mean, just to find a way to absorb what life is giving you and not to let it send you off balance."

How…?!

"By doing nothing."

That's not easy.

"Easy is for wimps mum. We never did 'easy'."

Ha! Ain't that the truth. Sometimes James, it is honestly too much.

"I know mum."

There is too much tragedy in this world.

"And lots of beauty too."

Hmmm…

"I think someone needs to settle down with some knitting."

You're right there James. I think it's time to do nothing…

"There you go."

Thanks for the chat, son. See ya later.

"Anytime gorgeous. Catch ya later."

This is the beginning of a new day. You have been given this day to use as you will. You can waste it or use it for good. What you do today is important because you are exchanging a day of your life for it. When tomorrow comes this day will be gone forever. In its place is something you have left behind. Let it be something good.

My New Life I Didn’t Want Without You Deb!

by Joy Rooke

Since you left us, Debbie, after your tragic accident, my life has changed so much. It had to change the day you left us. I am sure you didn’t want to go as you were enjoying your life, being in the middle of a course on Catholic Theology and just about to start a Masters Degree too. However when God called you Home, I am guessing there was no way you would want to be anywhere but with Him.

All your possessions and secrets were now ours and not yours anymore; you had no more need of them where you were! So much to sort and plan, hard to believe it was true. We made you with God’s help and in His timing, and I gave birth to you and saw you through so much in life and you became a woman, a strong woman with ambition and drive and care for others. You were an excellent Science and Special Needs teacher caring more than most, plus voluntary work with the church and St John’s Ambulance. You went on Charity Cycle rides. In 2011 you did 800 miles, mostly alone from North to farthest South. We will never know until we die why God called you home so young when you were doing so much good in the world at 31yrs old. He gave you to us and took you back too early in our eyes, but not in His. His timing is perfect I know, but hard to accept at times.

I made sure your name was known far and wide in newspapers and other places. Your funeral was attended by over 400 people and every boyfriend was there including Kris who was only a friend at that time, but may have become more if you had lived. My sister Carol read the eulogy and everyone there knew what you had achieved in your short life, Deb.

I had to get on with this new life without you; you were a good friend, we went out together, especially during the school holidays. We chatted long on the phone at least once a week, often you were busy in the background doing jobs. You confided in me about good and bad things, you asked my advice and I asked your advice too. You were to help us in our old age. Not now though sadly.

I went back to work, running a pre-school, a job I had loved for over 20 years, which was hard in some ways and Deb, I had to put you away in a box while working. I very soon realised that I didn’t want to be there any longer, so gave a year’s notice and trained up a lady who has proved excellent for the position.

Two months after your death was your brother’s wedding, what a day that was of mixed emotions. We had to be happy for Simon, but felt sad that you were not there to share it with us. Soon along came Isabella Deborah, our precious grandchild. I retired at 62 yrs of age. I often wonder how much you actually know of all this, being in the Heavenly realm where life is so very different, we cannot begin to imagine!

I needed my friends and family, but more, somehow, I needed to speak to other bereaved parents and sought them out from various places. I found time, having retired, to help others and have coffee and lunch with people. I very soon realised that I needed to start a group for bereaved parents, which I did in March 2015 which was just under 2 yrs since you left us Deb. I felt to honour you I could do nothing less. We also go on Bereaved Parents’ weekends with The Compassionate Friends and Care for the Family, helping at both.

We are ageing too Deb. When you left I was a young 60 and now I am 67 with many more health issues. Dad is now 69, but his health is brilliant, and he has an allotment which he loves. I still remember the lovely party you arranged for my 60th birthday. I believe there was 59 people, just one short of the 60! We have since celebrated 40 years of marriage too, a small do for that and a larger one for Dad's 65th and retirement. So much you have missed Deb. You would love Isabella, your niece, she reminds me of you when you were younger. I thank God for sending her to us so quickly after you had to leave; maybe you also had a hand in this?

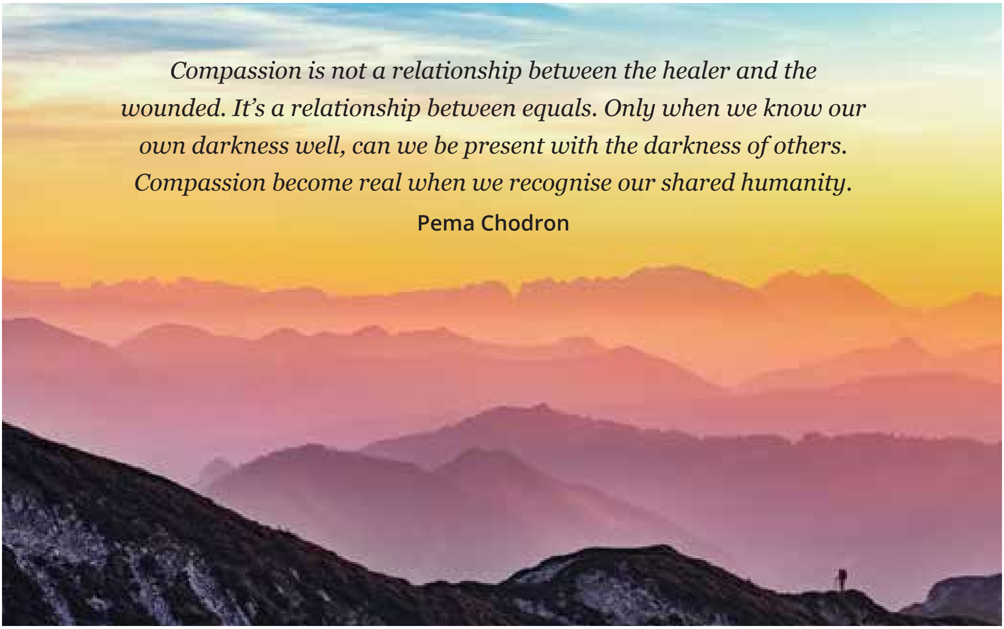
You were never one to show off, you didn't really want the ceremony for your graduation from University, but you did it for me, All the proud memories I have of you and tell others about too, you would have hated, all the photos and articles in newspapers. You might not be happy with me dedicating a bench in your memory at Walsingham, where you had your accident, and one at your church, St Helens. We also have an area in our garden for you and your final resting place is in the Cemetery which is near my Mum and Dad's plot, so they can look after you. Isabella sometimes comes with us to put flowers on the grave.

Like Mother's Day, your birthday, Christmas, and Father's Day, the anniversary of your death is hard and feels even harder because the day of your accident and the day your machine was turned off have Simon's birthday in the middle, so we try to focus on Simon's birthday rather than those other sad days. Sometimes the build up to these days is worse than the actual day. After nearly seven years we should be getting used to things; I am in some ways, but not in others...

Your ever loving mum, until we meet again. Mother Joy, as you loved to call me.

Compassion is not a relationship between the healer and the wounded. It's a relationship between equals. Only when we know our own darkness well, can we be present with the darkness of others. Compassion become real when we recognise our shared humanity.

Pema Chodron



Now I See:
Grieving and Raising My Grandchildren

'You're coming home with us,' I said. My husband and I and our twin grandchildren were standing by the hospital emergency entrance. Nine months ago, their mother (our daughter) died from the injuries she received in a car crash. Now their father was gone, killed in another car crash. The life I had known stopped and I was engulfed in darkness.

Like the words of the famous hymn, 'Amazing Grace,' I was blind and couldn't see.

The twins (one boy and one girl) were orphans and we were GRG, grandparents raising grandchildren. Would I have the energy to raise grandchildren? Could I grieve and stay upbeat for the twins? What would become of me? These questions haunted me and all I could do was put one foot in front of the other and keep going.

For me, 2007 was a year of death. My daughter died, my father-in-law died, my brother died, and the twins' father died. I felt like I was lost in a dark, dense and brambly forest. Years later, I could see the path, the steps I took, and the journey from darkness to light. You may be raising your grandkids and my tips may help you:

1. **Eat dinner together.** Mealtime isn't just about food, it's about family values, sharing news, and learning how to cope and solve problems. We expected our grandchildren to eat dinner with us. I'm a made-from-scratch cook and my grandchildren appreciated this, 'I love your salad dressing more than the salad', my granddaughter exclaimed.
2. **Support school activities.** We cheered our granddaughter at gymnastics and applauded our grandson's trumpet playing at concerts. Sometimes the twins asked me to help with their homework and I was glad to help. 'I'm only proofreading', I assured them, 'and won't change your style.' The twins appreciated my help and I was impressed with their writing.
3. **Set new goals.** Making it to the next hour was my first goal. Once I could do that, my next goal was to make it through the day, then a week, and then a month. Step-by-step, I inched my way along the recovery path. Though I took several detours, I kept moving forward. Setting goals gave new purpose to my life.
4. **Practice self-care.** Writing is self-care for me. Friends advised me to give up writing to care for my grandchildren. What a terrible idea. Giving up writing would feel like another death in the family. A week after my daughter and father-in-law died, I sat down at the computer and poured out my soul in words. I'm still writing. Put self-care on your To Do list.
5. **Embrace silence.** Like many who are grieving, I feared quiet times, the pain of these times and the disturbing thoughts I would have. But in silence - a few moments of meditation each day - I found a wellspring of strength I could tap again and again. Instead of avoiding silence, you may choose to make it part of your day.

6. **Believe in yourself.** 'I will survive this,' was my mantra and you can make it yours. Attitude has a lot to do with how we approach life and I gave myself frequent 'attitude adjustments'. When a negative thought came to mind, I balanced it with a positive one. This took practice, but the more I did it, the better I felt.
7. **Trust life again.** My grandchildren's trust in me enabled me to trust life again. A dozen years have passed since the twins moved in with us. Their energy and interests changed my life forever. Instead of me saving my grandchildren, they saved me.

Both twins graduated from high school with honours. The ceremony was an emotional experience. A friend of our daughter was there and took a photo of the twins. He emailed the photo to me. Every time I looked at the photo I cried, yet I couldn't stop looking at it. What was going on? I studied the photo and realised I was crying because, for the first time, I saw hope in the twins' eyes.

When I began this journey, I was blinded by sorrow. Today, I am living a new, happy life and immensely proud of the twins. My grandson is a senior at the Mayo Clinic School of Medicine. My granddaughter is an independent photographer and the mother of a new adopted 'great-grandchild' - a darling boy.

Death made me appreciate life. I'm a stronger person than I used to be. Most important, I know every breath, every moment, and every day are miracles. Just as the hymn says, 'I was blind but now I see'.

Harriet Hodgson
Lifted with thanks from TCF Malta Journal.

A Letter to my Family - A memoir of grief by Vera Griffiths

There is nothing like the death of your child to bring you absolutely to your knees and scream "why me?". It is the loneliest of griefs because nobody understands how it feels for the grieving parents, except another grieving parent. We have both lost a child and there is comfort in the understanding we give each other.

I felt abandoned not long after Peter's funeral as people began to disappear. It was made worse because my 60th birthday was coming up and it would be the first event without Peter. Then my brother died; I was so very raw, I couldn't take it in: I was unable to make any rational decisions.

I've read many books now on grieving for your child whatever their age, and the devastation it brings to people's lives, the yearning, the suicidal thoughts, the pain in your chest, not wanting to face any day without your son or daughter, the seesaw of emotions, beginnings of acceptance one minute and anger the next, the wanting to blame people, blaming a God that I don't believe in, and lots of irrational thoughts. So on and so on, a never ending circle of grief that consumes you, takes over your mind, you can't function, can't think. What did I do before this grief?, I can't remember, I can't remember a damn thing, only that my son has died and I must live without him.

It is a lonely experience even within the family, because our relationships with Peter were different and each of us has our own grief and thoughts, and we deal with it in different ways, whilst at the same time trying to support each other, accept and understand each other's ways of dealing with it.

A friend said to me this weekend, that putting off doing things, not living my life to the full, would mean two lives were lost. It made me realise that amongst all this pain and grief I am still living. It may be a different life now, because nothing can or could ever be the same again, I will never feel the abandonment of joy, the carefree joy or the joy of having Peter around, but I guess I can get joy from the people still here and that we all loved Peter just the way he was, joy from the memories we all share in the life that was his.

Coming into contact with grieving parents now, I realise I am not the only person in the world to have lost a child, some people make a distinction of age when you say ‘child', because at 33, Peter was not a child, but he was my child. Yes he'd gone through all the hard work of growing up, done the studying, made it through the teenage years, got through his 20s, been through some difficult times, made some wrong choices, but eventually made some progress, made plans, was fit, healthy, working and looking ahead to his future. He lost his future, as did we; who knows what he might have done, now we'll never have those other people in our life who might have been in his life, a partner, a grandchild perhaps, there are many people who may have met him in the future who'll never know how wonderful he was, a joy to be around, laid back, funny and a bit quirky.

So, how do I get through this, I don't know, I want people to know how hard it is. When people say, "you look well”, “you're looking better”, "you look great, fine" or worse, “you're doing well”, actually telling you how you are, they don't see that it takes all my strength to stay upright, to breathe, to make the effort to be there for them. How ironic is that, that I should care how I am for them. The reality is I feel as though my body has caved in, I get that sinking feeling in my stomach everyday when I wake up, my very first thought being - my son is dead. From that waking moment everything is a chore, getting out of bed, having a shower, dressing, making myself presentable for the outside world, a world without my son. There are many days I don't make beyond waking and dressing; that's it, that’s my two achievements for the day.

So when you look at me, know I am never alone, Peter is always with me, a part of me, he's there when I'm with you at parties, weddings or any celebration that I will ever attend in the future, Peter will be there, he's with me; see him, say his name. Make my day. Ask me if Peter is with me and I'll say, "of course, he's always beside me, he comes with me everywhere". Let me know you remember him, let me know that you care.

Thank you for reading this, I'm hoping this will go some way to easing my way through this next phase in my life and hoping it helps us all in some way to know that our children are remembered, and that it's OK to let our feelings out.

Love to you all, Vera x

What we do for ourselves, dies with us;
what we do for others and the world,
remains and is immortal.
Albert Pine

The Compassionate Friends Creed

We need not walk alone.

We are The Compassionate Friends.

We reach out to each other with love, with understanding and with hope.

Our children have died at all ages and from many different causes, but our love for our children unites us.

Your pain becomes my pain, just as your hope becomes my hope.

We come together from all walks of life, from many different circumstances.

We are a unique family because we represent many races and creeds.

We are young and we are old.

Some of us are far along in our grief, but others still feel a grief so fresh and so intensely painful that we feel hopeless and see no hope.

Some of us have found our faith to be a source of strength; some of us are struggling to find answers.

Some of us are angry, filled with guilt or in deep depression; others radiate an inner peace.

But whatever pain we bring to this gathering of The Compassionate Friends, it is pain we will share, just as we share with each other our love for our children.

We are all seeking and struggling to build a future for ourselves, but we are committed to building that future together as we reach out to each other in love and share the pain as well as the joy, share the anger as well as the peace, share the faith as well as the doubts and help each other to grieve as well as to grow.

Compassion Magazine Contacts

Contributions to 'Compassion' are always welcome. Please use the contacts below to get in touch.

Articles, poems and letters to the Editor
E: compassioneditor@tcf.org.uk

Memory Corner
E: compassioneditor@tcf.org.uk

Support in Bereavement for Brothers and Sisters
The Compassionate Friends SIBBS,
Kilburn Grange, Priory Park Road, London
NW6 7UJ
E: info@tcf.org.uk

TCF Catharine Pointer Memorial Library
The Compassionate Friends Postal Library
Service, Kilburn Grange, Priory Park Road,
London NW6 7UJ
T: 01634 666353, E: library@tcf.org.uk

Donating membership enquiries
The Compassionate Friends
National Office, Kilburn Grange,
Priory Park Road, London NW6 7UJ
T: 0345 120 3785, E: info@tcf.org.uk

Talking Compassion

The audio edition of this publication is available as a CD on loan from TCF Library. Back Issues from Summer 2011 onwards.

Beautifully read -
always wonderful to listen to.

To find out more about TCF visit

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Leave a legacy to The Compassionate Friends

Help us to continue to support others after the loss of a child of any age from any cause.

Final Date for Contributions is 17th April 2020

for the next issue of Compassion (Summer 2020)

If you are sending a letter, poetry or story for publication in Compassion, please remember that to protect your privacy only your name will appear alongside your contribution, not your full contact details, unless you expressly ask for them to be included. Please try and make sure you get your contributions in by the final date for the best chance of being included in the next edition. All views are welcome, irrespective of your personal religious beliefs. Compassion allows freedom of expression in whatever way you wish in order to honour your children.

The
Compassionate
Friends