

## **The Compassionate Friends Sibling Retreat April 2018**

I spend a lot of time feeling like grief is an unwelcome visitor; someone who I wish I'd never met, don't want to get to know or spend any time with. I'm desperate to have them uninvited from my party and spend a great deal of time wishing hopelessly that grief would just find the nearest door and make a very quick exit. Failing that, I think I often search and long for ways that I can distance myself as far as possible away from this clingy, irritating and draining new relationship or avoid it all together. Like when you see someone you don't want to talk to, so you hide and hope they don't notice you and just pass on by. So when I saw a post on Facebook advertising a weekend away for bereaved siblings, I thought it sounded quite good, but no way was I going to sign myself up for it because I certainly wasn't prepared, or very keen, to get up close and personal with something I'd really rather pretend isn't real.

However, the problem with trying not to spend any time with grief is that it came to the party because of love. My love for my little sister is never going away, so neither is this grief. It's something I can resist all my life or try to work out slowly how to live alongside it and integrate it into who I am.

So when a last minute place became available for the TCF siblings retreat, I hesitantly decided that I'd give it a go. Of course I was very anxious about turning up to meet a group of strangers, as well as spending lots of time thinking about and exploring things that are so painful. I wasn't sure if I was really ready to face it so intensely, but somehow inside me I knew that it needed to happen at some point; the numbness and avoidance can't be constantly sustained and sometimes grief wants to be let out - given a chance to be felt, heard, acknowledged and witnessed. Not fixed or tidied away, but seen and shared. It felt like this weekend away, with people who really could relate and connect with my own reality, would provide a very useful and safe space to actually connect with my grief - something that is often so hard to manage in our day to day worlds.

So I went. And that is exactly what it gave me and more - a safe, relaxed and gentle place to finally breathe a sigh of relief and feel so much more myself than I have in a long time. An incredible opportunity to listen, to reflect, to drink tea, to laugh, to chat, to eat delicious brownies, to be inspired, to drink more tea and even to have a few little moments of tears that I think I needed to let myself cry. Along with the benefit of my own comfortable en suite room, three gorgeous fresh cooked meals a day and beautiful gardens to ramble around; there was plenty of informal free time to chat in small groups

or one-to-one while sitting around in comfy arm chairs or having a drink at the local pub - so nothing felt rushed, uncomfortable or too structured. However, there were also times for very helpful led activities if you wanted to take part; such as crafts, a writing workshop and small discussion groups with relevant topics to share our ideas and experiences. Personally I got so much from being part of the writing session and having some great prompts to get me started helped to unlock some stuff inside me that truly had felt so stuck. Making the space to write was amazing at enabling me to connect so much more with my pain and properly 'go there' - something that sounds horrible, but was actually hugely important and lifted a lot of weight. In the discussion group I attended about how dealing with all kinds of relationships can be so difficult while grieving, it was deeply humbling and inspiring to hear the honesty and rawness of others experiences. Being able to relate to so much of what people shared and having space to reflect on different perspectives, gave me a lot to take away. Particularly the reminder that we don't have to lose our previous relationships and friendships because they can't fulfil all our needs when we are carrying deep grief; instead we can focus on increasing our network by seeking out additional relationships, communities and sources of support. This can come in many forms - through online forums or groups, therapies, support groups, books or charity work. But when support can often feel so hard to access and services seem mainly unavailable, non-existent or with massive long waiting lists; a TCF siblings retreat or any opportunity to find community with others who may have a shared reality that is close to your own, are opportunities that I'd highly recommend finding and grabbing onto with both hands, (even if they're wobbling, shaking and unsure hands!).

What I think I realised over the weekend most of all, is that perhaps this new relationship I have with grief doesn't always need to be a strained battle or one I'm trying to shy away from and escape. It is possible, no matter how hard and complicated, to open my arms and heart sometimes and let grief be welcomed; to spend time with it and maybe even befriend it for a while. Something much more easily done alongside a community of friends who can help you open that door and invite grief in for a bit, because they too hear it's loud and endless knocking at their door and just want a place to be able to let it in and help it feel more home. After all, it's going to keep knocking and it's here to stay - so I better find ways to be more comfortable with having it in my world. There's no doubt that I think the TCF siblings retreat was a very special way to do just that - stop screaming at my grief to go away and just allow it to be whatever it needed to be. Thank you TCF and every person who managed to find the courage to be there.

*By Jessie Dutton*