

B E R E A V E



M
E
N
T

*PERSONAL EXPERIENCES
IN TIMES OF PAIN*



CHRISTADELPHIAN
SUPPORT NETWORK

HELPING THE HURTING
ENCOURAGING AWARENESS

BEREAVEMENT

*PERSONAL EXPERIENCES
IN TIMES OF PAIN*



Helping the Hurting. Encouraging Awareness

TELEPHONE: 0800 9545 099

For Helpline choose option 1, for Prayerline choose option 2

Email support: help@chsn.org.uk

Website: www.chsn.org.uk

CONTENTS

Introduction

Loss of a spouse	03
- Loss of a spouse when young	04
- Realistic thoughts after bereavement	08
- Sustaining the brokenhearted	09
- Reflections on a book	14
- Farewell	19
Loss of a child	23
- Age shall not weary them	24
- Loss of an adult daughter	28
- Lessons in sorrow & kindness	34
- The goldsmith at work	42
- The biggest unseen thing	52
Loss of parent(s)	59
- Grief	60
- Who can explain the pain?	64
- Looking back	68
- Thoughts on losing a non-Christadelphian parent	69
Loss in early life	71
- Mourning the children I'd always wanted	72
- Un-conceived mourning	77
- Miscarriage	79
- Stillbirth	82
Loss following long/terminal illness	85
- Grieving before death: a personal journey	86
- Life after death	90

Loss of a close family member or friend	<i>93</i>
- Loss of a close friend	<i>94</i>
- Loss of a sister	<i>97</i>
- Being there at the end	<i>101</i>
Sudden loss	<i>103</i>
- Loss following addiction	<i>104</i>
- Personal thoughts on bereavement of a spouse	<i>110</i>
- Finding peace in grief	<i>112</i>
Conclusions	<i>116</i>
Where to find help	<i>121</i>
Legal information	<i>124</i>
Helpful resources	<i>129</i>
Index	<i>132</i>

**“THERE ARE NO GOODBYES
FOR US. WHEREVER YOU
ARE, YOU WILL ALWAYS
BE IN MY HEART.**

MAHATMA GANDHI

INTRODUCTION

Sadly, bereavement is something that happens to all of us eventually. Some of us have been dealing with close bereavement of various types for over thirty years, yet it is something that does not appear to get easier with practice. We may not get better at coping with it, but we hope that through developing empathy we can try to get better at helping and supporting others when they go through it.

While there are common patterns of dealing with bereavement and grief, not everyone progresses through them at the same speed. Sometimes we can get stuck in one phase or another while we try to cope with what has happened to us. Consequently, we can't expect everyone to experience even similar losses in the same way that we do or in the same time frame. We need to be understanding of the wide range of reactions that people may have and be there to comfort them for as long as they need.

This booklet is not intended to be an in-depth manual about bereavement and how to manage it. Rather this booklet is a series of short articles that we pray will raise awareness of the feelings of those around us when in such circumstances. The personal testimonies in this booklet present the experiences of Christians, mainly Christadelphians, who have suffered a range of bereavements and losses at different times in their lives. It does not cover every single bereavement situation or context as this is something people find difficult to write about, therefore many prefer not to. However, we hope that you will find that these insights help you on the way towards being a good comfort, support, and friend to those in our community and outside of it by increasing understanding of the different impact bereavement can have on our life, faith, and relationships with others. If you are suffering bereavement yourself, we hope that the testimonies in this booklet help you feel less alone and more able to reach out to those who might be able to support you.

At the end of the booklet there are a series of references and resources that you may also find helpful, as well as contact details for the ChSN.





CHAPTER ONE

LOSS OF A SPOUSE

LOSS OF A SPOUSE WHEN YOUNG

I tragically lost my young husband to an accident when we were under thirty. If I had to conclude what helped me through my own experience of grief, it could be summed up as the 3 Fs, plus work!

FAMILY

Certainly, the family of my husband I felt helped no end. We had always got on well but became so much closer through our shared loss. I felt like I could talk about my husband at any time and in the early days talking about him certainly helped; it seemed like he was alive again, back with us in our lives when we recalled anything about him. Also, expressing to one another how we were at a complete loss without his motivating and energetic presence made us feel closer to the one whose life had been taken. We were brought nearer together by our shared experiences and the journey of grief we embarked on and to this day my former in-laws have a very special place in my heart. Their example of faith in adversity has been truly amazing to all those who know them.

Of course, my own natural family were grieving their son-in-law also and were at pains to help as much as they could both practically and emotionally, without which I cannot imagine how I would have endured such emotionally agonising times.

FRIENDS

My friends were an essential part of my journey too. Being a young sister when I was bereaved meant that I didn't have anyone to turn to in my immediate friendship group who could truly empathise. Soon I was put

into contact with those who had been bereaved relatively young. They were marvellous at listening and showed great empathy too. I was also placed in touch with a lovely, young sister from Canada who was the only one at the time of a similar age who did not have children. I had a LOT of questions and many friends were willing to explore my spiritual wrestling and provided much needed support in these matters. During my bereavement I discovered that those who had found themselves on their own through various other circumstances were readily able to understand what I was experiencing.

Friends were more than willing to help in any way possible - largely in practical ways: inviting me to spend a weekend with them, sharing lifts, early morning swims, playing badminton, telephone calls, teaching me how to text (back in the day!) or just being company for me. They acted as a light relief because despite needing to talk about my thoughts and feelings I also needed to experience real life again so these people helped me back into the flow of day-to-day life once more and allowed me to realise there was life after death.

FAITH

My husband was a faithful brother in Christ and fell asleep awaiting the awesome resurrection. This was of enormous comfort to myself and the family. However, with this faith comes the dichotomy of longing for the Kingdom, when there will be no more death but also the existing in the NOW - occupying and living a faithful life as a disciple of Jesus. It was difficult to hold these ideas side by side at times.

The journey of grief, someone told me quite early on, was one where you never experience going backwards but one where you always move forwards. Yes, you can fall into some large, dark cavernous holes along the way but when you have managed to climb out of them you are further along in your travels of acceptance than you were before you descended. My spiritual life ran in parallel with this it seemed.

At the start of it all I didn't know where I was on the journey at all. As the death of my husband had been sudden there was a long period of 'shock' which followed immediately, during which I was aware of a deep sadness.

I would wake up crying, I wailed at times but when that wave of tears had swept over me, I almost felt a high (from the adrenalin I suppose that was being supplied to my body to get me to a certain point at which my body let go). I thought it quite strange that I wasn't depressed and later heard this was termed "negative euphoria". Unfortunately, adrenalin in these amounts does not last.

The crash came almost overnight and I felt physically incapacitated by the lack of sleep, emotionally wrung out by the events I had been through and my mind was now processing the full scale of this enormous life event. I felt I couldn't get out of bed. I did manage each day to surface but it was an effort and required a lot of prayer. There was a lot of dialogue with God. I was feeling incredibly depressed, desperate and alone, I was really searching for answers at this point. I turned further to God as I realised our Heavenly Father was the only one now that could rescue me from the depths I was in.



Reading of particular characters in the Bible, for example Job, was a great comfort as I realised others had truly experienced this “wrestling” or questioning with God – the “whys?” that often people go through at this stage of their grief. I felt less alone. There were times I questioned “where was God?” and hearing a talk about Esther, which someone gave me helped me realise that even when God isn’t directly there, His presence is, it’s just hidden and it wasn’t until time had passed, I could look back and see this.

I discovered the helpfulness of the Psalms and didn’t feel so alone with my feelings knowing that the writers had shared their emotions for our edification. The words: rock, strength, fortress etc. kept jumping out at me. I gradually came to trust that this is what our God was for me. I heard also that the most quoted command in the Bible was to “take courage” and this is what I realised I was having to do. Slowly and surely, it became easier to climb out of my holes both emotionally and spiritually. All the while I was continuing to feel helped by family, friends – most of whom were my brothers and sisters. I remember a brother saying to me they were continuing to remember me in their prayers. I was so touched that months on from the tragic event the power of prayer was truly working.

WORK

Soon after I went back to work, I had a realisation. At the end of the day, it dawned on me that I hadn’t had any of the constant oppressive thoughts I had outside of my working hours. The feeling was akin to being on a relaxed holiday. Work I realised was a great distraction. I wasn’t always motivated to go to work but when I did manage to struggle in, the day usually then became better. A purpose and motivation in life is essential to give your grieving mind an alternative focus which then feels like your mind is being allowed some moments of peace.

The journey of grief isn’t something that ends. It is always there to some degree but as a sister once told me, time is like a sticking plaster over our wounds and every now and again that plaster is removed for one reason or another and the original injury is uncovered but each time this happens we observe more healing to the wound. Time heals and faith gives purpose.

REALISTIC THOUGHTS AFTER BEREAVEMENT

Following a bereavement automatic pilot steps in to deal with the practical issues of the funeral, burial, and financial and legal documentation. I found that what followed was a period of trying to find answers. If the death is sudden - 'why has this happened to me?' There is guilt and regret at things not said or things said that should not have been said. Many times I have wished that I could turn back the clock and say a simple "Thank you" or "I love you" or "I'm sorry."

Sometimes God is blamed and many times we struggle to know the reasons the death has happened. My advice is to be honest and admit that you don't know why and really it doesn't matter if you don't have the answers or reasons.

Dealing with others can be difficult, as so often people don't know what to say to the bereaved. Some may ignore you completely as they are embarrassed to talk about death. It's a shock when brethren and sisters expect you to be perfectly alright as 'you have a Faith' but that lack of empathy really doesn't help you to deal with loneliness, emptiness, hurt or emotional turmoil the bereavement has given you.

"Some may ignore you completely as they are embarrassed to talk about death."

Sometimes it's better to find a close friend who can listen and empathise with you, someone who won't judge you if you cry or are upset or feel lost and alone. Of course, we know that God is always with us in life, but it doesn't help when that is repeated again and again by well-meaning brethren and sisters who seem to have not experienced the trauma of death in their lives. The death of a life partner is particularly traumatic.

"We know that God is always with us in life, but it doesn't help when that is repeated again and again."

Time does heal. Personally, I find it better to be honest about things rather than pretend to be ok. It is better to avoid putting yourself into situations where you know you will get easily upset if the bereavement is raw. Be aware that simple things will trigger tears. It might be a piece of music, a scene on a TV programme or it may be a hymn, Bible reading or a prayer on a Sunday. Don't be afraid to feel vulnerable, it's normal and part of the grieving process that may take years to fade. Try and fill your time with positive things like a new hobby or sport, even if it's for a short time it will help you. Never be too proud to ask for help - good friends are only a text or phone call away.

The Kingdom will come, and you will, by God's grace, meet again. Let that hope comfort you and try and move on in your life with renewed strength and hope.

SUSTAINING THE BROKENHEARTED

“I don't know why I am alive”

I doubt there is a counterpart to the helplessness one experiences with the decline of health and death of a loved one. Those who lose a spouse, lose the person who has known them as no other. They shared trust and love through all the ups and downs of life. Their spouse knew them intimately and loved them, despite their weaknesses. Their most consistent support is no longer available to them for the rest of their life. Their companion is gone.

A PERSONAL BEREAVEMENT

My father endured the progression of losing my Mom over a three-year battle with cancer. It took an incalculable physical and emotional toll on him. When Mom slowly slipped away in January 2013, part of him died that rainy morning. His identity changed. The one he shared almost all his adult life with was now gone. Facing the world without her was a new and

frightening experience. As a couple, they had done almost everything together for nearly 60 years. She was the social one, the one who engaged others.

I've grown even closer to my Dad since Mom fell asleep in the Lord. We have talked about things we never discussed before. He is newly transparent about his feelings in ways I would not have predicted. So, when one day he groaned, 'I don't know why I am alive' I felt a terrible sadness for him. What he didn't need from me were platitudes about how thankful I am he is still here, or that he still has a lot to live for. Those empty reassurances were unwanted at that moment. Rather, I just tried to listen to him express how hollow he felt and how life had lost much of its meaning to him. When life is irrevocably changed, our goals and expectations are dashed. We're left with a deep sense of loneliness. It manifests as a silence we may have never known before.

“I just tried to listen to him express how hollow he felt and how life had lost much of its meaning to him.”

As time has gone on, the answer to my Dad's question has become clearer. Our merciful God had a plan and purpose for him he could not have known previously. As his son, I treasure the time with my Dad, who turned 92 last month (in 2020). He is a connection to my past and a constant reminder of the husband and brother in Christ I aspire to be. I love him, his companionship, and his humour.

A COMMON PLIGHT

My Dad's story is far from unique. Across our community, there are so many who have lost spouses. The person God gave them, the one Divinely matched for their unique needs, is now gone. James wrote,

“Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.” - James 1:27

What is it about the needs of the fatherless and widows that is so important to God? How does this, along with keeping ourselves unspotted from the

world, provoke us to a pure religion? There are so many other things we might have listed well before the needs of the fatherless and widows to describe our religion.

But it is **how** we care for those most in need, those deeply bruised, that allows us to really know our love is sincere. If our love is not ‘pure’ the awkwardness and emotion of caring for those who have lost a spouse will overcome us.

When one loses their spouse, it is probably the most destitute time in life. Each story is different, and the pain and shock vary. There is an intense need for our loving and accepting people to share time with and care about them. This is where a devoted community of believers comes in. While others may treat you differently and some may even forsake you, your brothers and sisters will not. We are the ones, of all those in the world, who will love you throughout your entire life, in your best times, and in your darkest.

A DO AND DON'T LIST

Widows and widowers are generally not looking for anyone to solve their problems or perform the impossible. In fact, sometimes attempts to do so can be unhelpful. What is most appreciated is when someone gives them undivided attention and allows them to express just how sad they are feeling. I thank the brothers and sisters who sat with my father and permitted him to have a heart-to-heart chat from the bottom of my heart. While there is only one who can change lives, and that is our Lord, our role is to support one another, to love, and to listen.

A dear sister shared a few thoughts with me about how to support those who have lost a spouse, she having being widowed at a young age. Soon after the loss occurs, instead of saying ‘Call me if you need something’ she recommended you plan to call the person yourself. The conversation might just be for a few minutes, once a week or so. Focus on practical issues, such as shopping for food or supplies. If the issues being faced are too significant for you to deal with individually, reach out to others or your ecclesia. Do not quote platitudes like “We don’t sorrow as others sorrow.” They know these passages well and it leaves them feeling guilty

for being sad—an emotion they do not need. If you don't know what to say or feel self-conscious, just say so. They will understand. Remember, listening is much more important than what you say. American poet Maya Angelou once wrote “People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.” Help them to feel loved. Help them to not feel alone. Pray for them and with them.

As time passes, how can we meet the needs of widows and widowers within the ecclesia? There are some simple actions. Notice them when they come into the room. Greet them with a kind smile and warm embrace. Arrange to bring them along with you if they are willing, whether sitting in the ecclesial hall, during a potluck, or other social events. If you are a married couple, both should express how welcome they are.

A MUTUAL BENEFIT

This is an ‘equal opportunity’ service for each of us, old and young. We need to close any divisive age gaps in our ecclesias. Young people who genuinely care for their seniors and take the time to visit and speak with them will seldom be disappointed.

When I was 18 years old I often visited a sister in a convalescent home near our ecclesial hall. At first, I hated it. I disliked the strong smells of rubbing alcohol (or worse), and I did not know what I would talk about with this widowed sister, in her 90s. But good mentors I had in the Truth encouraged me to go. Once I started doing the readings with her, I could hear her quoting the verses from memory right along with me. It struck me about the value of a life-long habit of regularly reading and memorising the Scriptures.

This she had done for decades with her late husband. She talked about what I just read to her, and she asked me insightful questions. Eventually, I learned how she had come to America and some of the details of her life. I suppose it must have been helpful for her to have company from a young person, but I know the benefit was all mine.

A TIME OF NEED

Life does not follow the script we would always like. We are all such fragile creatures, and we need to appreciate every day we have with our God-given spouses. Those who have lost spouses will remind us of that. When we engage in care for those in need, it invokes an important perspective we always need set before our eyes. We are reminded that everything we have (and often take for granted), is only temporary. Our marriage, our health, and eventually our life, are all like the grass that withers and blows away. It also can remind us how the expectations we have in this life can be shattered in a moment. The only sure thing is our God. While we may be the servant today to our brother or sister, there is a time coming when we will be the one bruised, and we too will be able to lean on the love of our brothers and sisters.

Upon reflection, I think my Dad's question is probably pertinent many times throughout our lives. What now? What does the Lord want me to do? The wonder of our God is that He makes all things plain in His time. None of us have empty or pointless lives. Each of us has been specially redeemed and earmarked for work to be done (Eph 2:10). God always has a purpose for us.

A LOVING GOD

Our God is such a loving God. His eyes never turn away from those in need. He is the defender of the widows (Psalm 68:5 NIV). He relieves the widow (Psalm 146:9). He commands us to plead the cause of the widows (Isaiah 1:17). We have been given a noble and glorious opportunity to care for those who are sad and lonely, those who most need our reassurance. It also applies to any of our brothers and sisters who have suffered the loss of a family member. When nothing else may make sense, it is the love of the brethren that will serve as a warm blanket on a chilly day. Our religion and our community are inextricably tied to how we treat each other, especially those in greatest need. Ultimately, it is our opportunity to serve alongside our Lord, who we know will never leave us or forsake us.

Reproduced from the Tidings Magazine, 2020 with kind permission of Dave Jennings who acknowledges special thanks to Sis. Jane Tunnell (San Diego, CA) for her important insights into this topic.

REFLECTIONS ON THE BOOK: “GRIEVING THE LOSS OF SOMEONE YOU LOVE”

BY RAYMOND R MITCH & LYNN BROOKSIDE

Kubler-Ross’s suggestion is that there are five stages of grief: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Sorrow, and Acceptance. I was surprised that guilt is not in the list. Unless it is anger aimed at oneself? – I was riddled with it! But never anger with God or others.

You may experience anger with loved ones you have lost because they have left you; they are no longer there to answer the questions you never asked them; no longer there to hear or benefit from the things you now want to share and enjoy with them. The routines of life make you feel abandoned; the empty seat next to you; the sharing of routine living that can be no longer; the recurring memories brought about by belongings and the personal things they have left behind.

Denial that death has happened – you do not accept that death has taken place until it happens followed by a dawning of the fact that ‘normality’ will never be the same. God gives us denial to shield us from the full force of grief when we are least able to withstand it.

Guilt – clearing out cupboards – clothes, belongings – can be interpreted as ‘getting the loved one out of your life’ but rather it should be regarded as moving on as they would want us to.

It is important to get to the stage of being able to look forward to the day ahead where we have jobs and tasks planned that occupy our time and give us a sense of achievement and success to which we can refer later.

Freeing oneself from the expectations of others – being satisfied with achieving own goals that have not been influenced by anyone else.

'Beating oneself up' (realisation guilt) – dwelling too much on the 'if onlys' and 'I wishes'. The things that you wanted to do but never did and now never will be able to do.

Artefacts left behind that remind us vividly of our lost ones (photographs, paintings, jewellery, gardens etc.) change from a feeling of dread to a feeling of joy that gives a sense of still being with our loved ones. Their aura is still all around us.

A sense of not being abandoned by God, but rather being asked to adopt a new and more meaningful way of life; developing lifestyles that might never have come about without the loss.

Emotional and physical loss – the need to be close, to hug people and see in close family members the reflection of the one you've lost. This realisation the fact that their presence is still with you.

The realisation that we must live in the present – 'get on with life' – and make the most of what God has given us today – 'one day at a time' – think of the future

No fear of embarrassment by showing emotions – 'wear your heart on your sleeve' – not a mask to hide feelings especially with prayer.

The ability to forgive oneself the 'Why didn't I say or do..... I wish..... If only.....' syndrome cannot be answered and is to be regarded as a negative waste of time, to be replaced by the remembrance of positive times together.

Have no shame or disloyalty when a degree of happiness creeps in. This will allow your feelings to increase and so fall outside the realms of judgement.

Coming to the realisation that the loss is permanent (before the Kingdom) but at the same time is opening doors for other opportunities to take place. We have to let go and realise that we are not forgetting our loved one, rather God has allowed us to change the course of our lives.

Do not let any unresolved issues (if you have any) with your loved one nag relentlessly in your life, conversely do not allow yourself to put the one you've lost on a pedestal. Talk openly with friends.

If we dream about our loved ones, we should not put too much emphasis on their meaning.

Do not expect your intense feelings to dissipate over time. If they are ignored, their full force can still hit you years later even though you may have built strong support systems around you.

Serious decisions such as moving house or forming new relationships should be avoided in the early days of a loss. Remember you are vulnerable; some people will try to take advantage of this fact. The length of time vulnerability lasts varies with individuals.

God gave us the inherent ability to heal, a process that is made up of combining small units of healing to become one whole. This obviously varies with each individual and the order in which the units of healing occur.



This poem brought me to tears even after three years of losing Rachel:

*Thought I saw you today,
Standing there in the checkout line,
Just out of reach,
I started to call your name,
But I stopped.
My mind said it wasn't you,
Couldn't be you,
My heart said otherwise,
Vehemently,
I was embarrassed by the
Tears that sprang unbidden
To wash away my Disappointment,
I wrestled – like Jacob with the angel –
Until I had conquered once more,
My grief
The struggle left me feeling
Out of joint.
The world slipped away
As I left the store
There was only me
And my grief
No you
Never again a 'you'
Finally I grabbed my grief
By the neck, shouting,
I 'will not let you go until you bless me!'*

We need to find time to relax and contemplate. This can be done in silent prayer (Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane) or by completing set tasks with definite achievable outcomes (rewards to which you can return and see a finished product e.g., digging a border in the garden, washing a car,). A written list will allow these tasks to be a daily routine (a challenge to be ticked off when completed).

We must see to our own healing of grief without carrying the excess baggage of family, although this is nigh impossible when children of all ages are involved. But ‘stiff upper lip’ and ‘head in the sand’ is not recommended. I would say it is totally wrong and is a form of ‘inverted self pity’ – shared grief is preferred.

Being surrounded by friends and family on a regular basis (in the home, church, clubs etc.) is a way of surrounding yourself with life. There is an assurance that the person we have lost will always be with us because of the contribution he/she has made to our lives. There will come a time when life has increasingly pleasurable moments and the day ahead becomes something to look forward to. This should not produce feelings of guilt but be positive and include the loved one whom we have lost. There is no set time for this to happen and it will take as long as it takes.

We have to be true to ourselves: if a piece of music, a video or a painting left behind brings us to tears we mustn't worry about other people. Our grief is not a plea for support – it is a genuine expression of what is going on inside us. Quote ‘We can turn our continuing grief into a witness for the Lord. Not a witness to the foolish notion that God will magically whisk away our grief, but to the fact that He walks with us in our grief’. Gather around you people that understand where your grief is coming from; their support (fellowship) will be beyond measure. Give as much time to meeting with those of faith so that routines with them take over a major part of your life. It's not ‘a one-sided repair job’ – genuine friendship benefits both parties.

Scripture tells us that suffering paints a picture of a means of purification not punishment. It can be turned by us into something useful, a change of character, behaviour, heightening the understanding that it may be shaping our lives so that we come closer to God's purpose with us. Those

who have been touched by death have their sensitivity ‘sharpened’ to the brevity of life and the value and preciousness of relationships. With this ‘sharpening’ comes the serious realisation that the only true relationship we should be seeking is with God and the human relationships we form now are here to help us to that end.

“Sorrow and Joy are not mutually exclusive. The one merges into the other you cannot appreciate either without previously experiencing both.”

Written by Paul Dryhurst.

FAREWELL

Another respite was due nearly two months after Christmas, and John was booked into the local care home for a few days. Again, I was just as apprehensive, as usual, about it, but knew I needed it. I am not quite sure how much weight I had lost over this time, but it could have been nearly 2.5 stone. I was so tired and my muscles were wasting away. I couldn’t sit back in a chair properly because my vertebrae were sticking out and I was able to count my ribs when I took off my clothes. I knew John was worried about me. But I didn’t want to think about his worry. I just wanted to stick with him, follow him and lie beside him in his grave...

I took him to the care home, still desperately worried about leaving him. Then I went off to my sister’s and her husband’s house for a rest. We were to go to visit my mother in Bournemouth. On about the third day, when we were preparing to travel to Bournemouth, I telephoned the care home – as I always did – at the beginning of the day. He was alright, apart from a bit of a cough, they said. Chest infection, I thought, ‘I’m coming back’ I said. But the matron said he’d be alright. But I couldn’t go to Bournemouth. I had a strong instinct to be with him. So, I telephoned Mark and Rachel and voiced my concern.

Rachel's husband was in Blackpool with their only car. She contacted a kind friend who drove her over to the care home where Mark and I had been sitting with John. He had been well-cared for and was just tired. I was anxious to take him home with me, but if the matron had asked for an ambulance, he would have been taken to hospital. John would have definitely not wanted that, neither would any of us. By this time, he was even more sleepy. I held his hand. His breathing, although laboured, was not sounding painful and the GP who attended him got Mark to get an antibiotic from the chemist. I tried to give it to John. But his mouth stayed closed. It was evidence that pneumonia had set in and that it was to take him.

The children and I kept talking to him and, although I tried to organise some transport to bring him home, it was too late. A St John's Ambulance arrived at the door of the care home as John took his last breath. It was not to be that his passing be disturbed...

John was fully aware that those he loved and who were closest to him were surrounding him with their love as he silently slipped away. We kissed him goodbye. We all loved him so much. But I thank God his passing was so peaceful...

I was holding his hand.

Holding sand...

The doctor who confirmed his death happened to be the mother of one of my pupils. She was so kind. She very respectfully examined John, then turned round and hugged me.

“Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death...you are with me.” - Psalm 23

Subsequently, the funeral was organised by a close friend and the burial and memorial service taken by another close friend. A large congregation attended and their presence at the service and the wonderful things they said and wrote to me and the family have been a great comfort to us. John is resting in the village. But I know – as he did – that our Redeemer lives,

and that we shall see John again. John was a lovely man who was greatly loved. But life without him seems so unbearable.

GRIEF

Most people have been very kind. I can remember one of my music pupils handed me a card before her lesson. In her infant hand she had written: 'I'm sorry you're hurting'. How very perceptive! That is exactly how I feel. There is a rawness in my realisation about what has happened, like an exposed wound. My reactions are unpredictable. Yet, I try to think of setting advantages against disadvantages to my situation. For example, even though I feel alone and vulnerable, I do know I was able to care for John and we could say 'goodbye' as a family at his peaceful parting.

But I do marvel at some people's reactions. I certainly don't doubt their real concern and care. I sometimes sense they are uncomfortable with me as I am now. But I cannot be where I was before. My persona is different. I was John's wife. And now he has died – as I was to later find out – my identity is different. In some way. Wanting me to go back is wishing it hadn't happened, and a non-acceptance of my situation.

Six weeks after John's death, someone said to me: 'I should think you're over all this by now?!' How strange! You don't actually get over a loss like this but learn to live with it. It is one thing to say to someone 'Have you got over your operation to remove your appendix?' And quite another to say: "Have you got over having your leg amputated?' You don't 'get over' such a loss. You are reminded of it every day. Every time you try to walk. You do your best to learn to live with it. Crutches and sticks help, but you always remember you will never be a biped again.

Some try to 'bounce' me out of my sorrow 'Well, at least you have a faith', as if faith is 'like a muscle that can be enlarged by rehabilitation exercises!' (Where is God when it hurts? Philip Yancey). Yes, it is true that having a hope of God's plan for all of us gives perspective. It would help, though to benefit from people's empathy now! Just a hug, or to say 'I'm so sorry' would be absolutely adequate. Sometimes comments from believers I found confusing rather than consoling. While John was with us, some had said 'What's John done to deserve this?'

Perhaps it would help if we Christians recognised that pain and suffering seem to be the messiest problems for us to have to deal with. We keep chopping through arguments, and ‘foot-shuffle our way through their profound riddle’... It seems all our questions about pain and suffering are ‘nonsense’ questions, simply because they are un-answerable. And it does not necessarily show a lack of faith if we are unable to explain these phenomena. We can only accept them, but we can wonder why. I realised that grief was a process through which I needed to navigate. Stages would have to be worked through and – very likely – re-visited. And this will continue. I also learned that tears are a gift. Immediately after John’s death, my sighs, sobs and groans brought my two cats upstairs to sit with me. They said nothing but just sat, one either side of me! (Job’s friends would have been more use to him if they’d done just that!) But I must not expect too much of others. I know they mean well. It’s probably because they feel they need to say something and that I’d be offended if they didn’t. But I wouldn’t. I can quite happily live with silence!

I can only describe at the moment what it is like for me, and this may or may not be true of others. It is as though I am in a sort of bubble, surrounded by a very thin protective membrane that hides and protects my confused emotions, which I know will remain sore and hurting. Yet it is porous enough to allow the kindness of others to enter and calm the general confusion. But a chance remark, a picture, a tune, a view, or something I can’t pin-point will itself puncture this delicate layer, allowing it to haemorrhage and I have suddenly lost my equilibrium.

I remember going with a friend to another friend’s funeral not long after. We went back to the Birmingham area where John and I had lived during our early married life. I recognised a number of people, but they didn’t know me. I realised that I had shed pounds but put on years! So, I introduced myself as ‘John’s widow’. Then they knew me.

So, I have a new identity.

Part of ‘February’ published with kind permission from Ruth Fryer.

References:

Yancey, P. (2010). *Where is God when it hurts? Anniversary edition.* Nashville, TN: Zondervan.



CHAPTER TWO

LOSS OF A CHILD

AGE SHALL NOT WEARY THEM

“...what still hurts me looking back is that generally our community had a conspiracy of silence because it found handling a child’s death painfully uncomfortable.”

In 1987, our son Matthew died. He was eight years old. Like many children who are going to die, he was tough and uncomplaining and looking back I believe that in his own way he was trying to protect Joyce and me. It was only a couple of days before he died that he said ‘I’ve had enough, Dad’ and that was the only complaint I heard him make.

In the three years he was ill, and even when the end seemed inevitable, I don’t think we ever gave up hope that God might spare him and answer our prayers. And it seems a strange thing to say but our home was seldom an unhappy place during his illness.

There was the comfort, support and love of so many people – doctors, nurses, friends, neighbours, brothers & sisters and people we didn’t even know, so we felt surrounded by love and support. Recently I reread ‘Mary Barton’ By Mrs Gaskell – a novel of Manchester life in the 1840s and it compelled me to remember how well-blessed we were, compared to the deprivation and suffering of poor people especially when they had to stand by helplessly and see their children die from hunger and want.

But I’m finding that 30 years later my thoughts, and from them my emotions, have taken a different turn. I don’t say ‘new’ because perhaps they were always there, unformulated and unvoiced, covered by layers of culture, conditioning and even doctrinal hold.

I think it scarcely needs saying that the death of a child, no matter how good the support has been, is a terrible thing. To see a child suffer and die before he or she has set out on life is perhaps one of the hardest things to endure. Inevitably there are times of black fear and haunting inadequacy and it's not difficult to fall prey to the 'what if' bondage, even though you'd done all humanly possible and in truth would have gladly given your own life in exchange had that been a choice.

I realise how easy it is to repeat the well-worn tenet that came out of Job's mouth at the start of his ordeal.

“The Lord gave and The Lord taketh away. Blessed be the name of The Lord.” - Job 1:21

Intellectually I could voice these words, but with Job something penetrated his religious veneer and led him to an outpouring of almost indescribable bitterness – to the point he wished he'd never been born. Instead of what was expected of him by the religious conventions of his day, came an outpouring of his real feelings.

And this leads me to ask again what has in recent months (and so long after Matthew's death that I'm scared I can no longer see his face or hear his voice) caused this root of disquiet to spring up? I think I've realised that what still hurts me looking back is that generally our community had a conspiracy of silence because it found handling a child's death painfully uncomfortable.

This was nothing to do with the grief that is universally experienced in the death of any child but because of the doctrinal implications of the death of a child who has not reached an age of responsibility to be baptised. There were mercifully, from far and near, communications from largely unknown voices who had endured similar grief. Some of these had lost children many years before and had been given no comfort from the doctrinal straitjacket that somehow they were being backed into. These were the ones who encouraged us to trust in God's love and have confidence we would see our child again.

So now I'm sorting out in my own mind what is really at the root of my

concern. I remember the well-meant anxiety of some. Had Matthew asked to be baptised? And beneath it all the fear that without baptism there could be no salvation. Others spoke of little children playing in the streets of Jerusalem and this offered no comfort. Was our son always to be a child if he had a future? How would he relate to his childhood friends - those who had lived adult lives? And I begin to wonder how much we actually know with certainty of that future state?

It may be that things have changed in the last three decades. Certainly, there seems to be more conviction regarding the status of children and their place in our worship. Psalm 8:2 confidently asserts that God ordains for Himself praise from the mouths of children and the very young. Children sang 'Hosanna to the Son of David' as Jesus entered Jerusalem (Matthew 21:9). God chose children to communicate His intentions, as with Samuel and the young David. In the childhood of Jesus are clearly set out the fact of his obedience and his growth in favour with God and man. And more to the point in terms of our discipleship, it's not surprising that Jesus says little children are the true symbols of genuine disciples.

“For the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” - Matthew 19:14

We are commanded to accept the kingdom 'as a little child' and receive it in simplicity as a gift from the Father, rather than our due for our understanding and acceptance. Jesus shows us what true greatness is when he puts a small child in the midst of his disciples and says:

“Therefore, whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” - Matthew 18:3

Without this humility it is impossible to be a son of God. And if we are in any doubt about the status of our children before God, Paul sets our minds at rest:

“For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband, otherwise your children would be unclean, now they are holy.” - 1 Corinthians 7:14

I think that my concerns now are essentially to do with inflexible dogmatism which can back us into a corner. I wonder what people standing at our son's graveside grasped about our faith and conviction. I wonder whether the veiled uncertainty of the spiritual standing of Matthew registered with them? What would they think about the confidence we have in our own salvation? We believe the Gospel is The Good News of the Kingdom, that God's purpose with us is salvation and not judgement. The danger of over-dogmatism is that at times we seem to be telling God what He will do, which is a frightening thing. If we are not careful, we can fashion a God limited by our own understanding and inevitably this will fail us. Are we demonstrating the humility which Jesus says is the real evidence of being children of the kingdom?

The last verse Matthew wrote in his Sunday School book before he became too ill to leave the house came from Joshua 1v9.

“Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid, nor be dismayed; for the Lord your God is with you, wherever you go.” – Joshua 1:9

So I find myself, 30 years after our son's death, looking at things differently. The first thing is the importance of experience. It is largely by this that we know to be true what God says about himself and His relationship with us. And we need to trust the fruit of experience. This can empower and give us confidence in God's promises. I know too that religion and faith are not the same and religion can prove a broken reed. How many people do you know who at the end-of-life feared judgment and the outcome of their salvation?

By the grace of God, we will see our son again and this is no ethereal, insubstantial hope. Although I feel I know less and less about the detail of God's plan for his creation, I am strengthened by the reality of his working in my life and that the work begun in me will be completed. And that my son will be part of the work.

Written by David Coulton

References

Gaskell, E. (1848) *Mary Barton – A tale of Manchester life*. London: Chapman and Hall.

LOSS OF AN ADULT DAUGHTER

INITIAL DIAGNOSIS

In April 2012 my younger daughter, M, at the age of nineteen, was diagnosed with a brain tumour in her left frontal lobe. Initial scans showed that it was the size of an orange, but likely to be non-malignant and very slow growing. The consultant suspected it had probably been growing for most of her life.

She went into two weeks of real depression, as we all struggled to come to terms with the diagnosis. I didn't have answers. How can there be answers? What should I say? What could I say?

The only thing I could do was talk to God about it. Over time I had become very careful what I said to her about God – she had previously said to me regarding Christadelphians ‘I love the people, Dad, but hate the way they do religion.’

“I love the people, Dad, but hate the way they do religion.”

Within a couple of weeks, M had been introduced to the neurosurgeon, Dr G, who took more detailed scans and confirmed the diagnosis and the likelihood of the tumour being benign. Here, I'm convinced, was an angel sent from God. An extremely engaging man, he put M at ease through his communication style and the rapport he immediately developed with her. A few scans later he confirmed the tumour was low grade, she could enjoy her summer, and he'd operate in the autumn of 2012. He gave her a good prognosis.

SURGERY

As surgery approached, I was relieved to see that M had put her trust totally in Dr G. She went into the 12-hour craniotomy (partly performed while she was awake) anxious but trusting. She wanted as much of the tumour removed as possible. All I could do was put my trust in God and ask him

to guide the hands of the surgeon and his team. The operation was a success with 90% of the tumour being removed. Subsequent tests showed it to be 100% benign – the very best news, and what an answer to prayer!

The morning after the operation Dr G rang to give me an update and said M was doing well. I thanked him for what he'd done. He said, 'It's an awesome responsibility, and an awesome gift. It keeps me just as much on the edge as it is keeping you on the edge. His use of the word 'gift' led me later to discover that here was a deeply religious man.

RECOVERY & GETTING ON WITH LIFE

M's recovery from the operation was fairly rapid and by April 2013 she was back at work. Life settled into the normal routine again. Every few months she would have a scan to check all was well. These were anxious moments, but I always asked God to be with her. After the scan in early 2015, the interval between scans was increased from every six months to once a year.

TUMOUR RETURNS

During June 2015, M started to have problems with her vision and became increasingly tired. Initially this was put down to her new job which was quite pressured and involved a lot of work on the computer. But her condition quickly deteriorated so we made an urgent appointment for another MRI scan.

The results from this scan were as bad as they could be. Within six months, the remaining tumour had transformed itself into a Glioblastoma Multiforme Grade Four which had spread round her head and into the brain stem. The outlook was two months to live without treatment and twelve months at most with treatment.

This was the worst day of our lives. And again, I didn't have answers. How can there be answers? What should I say? What could I say? I didn't even know what to think. All I could do was to ask God to be with us as we stared into the abyss.

The morning after the diagnosis M told me what she wanted to happen at her funeral: ‘Dad - I want it to be family only round the grave with a religious element, followed by a celebration event at a venue, with bright clothes, laughter etc. I don’t want any morbid religious stuff in a meeting room’. She never spoke about it again.

“Dad - I want it to be family only round the grave with a religious element, followed by a celebration event at a venue, with bright clothes, laughter etc. I don’t want any morbid religious stuff in a meeting room.”

M then went into a deep anger for two weeks. By the end of that time, she had made her decision to have treatment and slowly picked herself up. The treatment was difficult (radiotherapy and chemotherapy) and involved travelling to hospital twenty miles away every weekday for six weeks. On day 9 of 30 she nearly didn’t get out of bed. I knew that on day 10, unless a miracle happened, she wouldn’t get up at all to go for treatment. The theme for the scripture passages on the ‘Bible in One Year’ app that morning had been ‘Help, Lord’. I went outside, lifted my hands in the air, and told God I didn’t have an answer and needed his help. Within twenty minutes my phone rang. It was M’s ex-boyfriend who she had finished with a couple of months previously, wanting an update on her progress. I told him the problem, and he came round with her best friend and they sorted it. They used every trick in the book to make sure she got up each morning, they came with us to hospital, and made sure the treatment was completed. Praise God. He was working in our lives.

RECOVERY FROM TREATMENT

With the treatment completed, M decided I was going to be her manager (administer her tablets, deal with monthly oncology appointments, make sure she was doing what the doctors said, take her places she needed to go, etc.) and she was going to get on with life.

In ways which I cannot put into words, the subsequent months were both the best in my life and at times the worst. Here now, staring me in the face, was the reality of how a father feels for his children. For the first time in my life, I really started to understand the love of God towards me. God tells

us he loves us more than we could ever love our own children. I'd been baptised 35 years previously, but this was the start of my conversion.

M didn't want to talk about the future at all to me. She was clearly thinking lots of things but kept her cards close to her chest. Our relationship, always good, now morphed into a team. She had total trust in me. She also demonstrated a love for other people during those last months of her life which inspired us all. Her concern in the Oncology Department on the monthly visits was not for herself but for the others who had a similar fate. Her attitude was not 'why me?' but 'why not me?'. To others, close to her, M spoke candidly about her condition and the prognosis. I know they were profoundly affected by the things she said to them.

We had been warned that M's health would improve for a while and then deteriorate. My constant prayer to God was not for her to get better, but that she should have peace without pain, and above all that the tumour would not change her personality (which can often happen). On top of that, my prayer was that God would give me clear signs that I would see M again, and that deep inside her faith would move her.

In spite of her condition, M determined to raise money for Brain Tumour Research whilst she was able. In March 2016, she achieved her ambition to do a sky dive, and in so doing raised over £5000 for the charity.

Just one week later, M's condition deteriorated rapidly, and she was admitted to hospital, where she would stay for the rest of her days, apart from one day at home. She had her own room, which meant she had privacy and felt safe. Her big sister, in an act of selfless love, moved in with her and stayed throughout. Her mum and grandma and I were there most of the time also. The tumour went about its awful business over the next seven weeks. It caused seizures at first, followed by a couple of days of deep sleep. However, there were good times too with laughter and visitors.

For the first three weeks M was able to get out of bed and with help, move around the hospital ward. My prayer at this time was that M would not be scared of the future and that God would give her comfort.

One Sunday night M asked me if she could walk down the ward with me

and have a talk. We talked about many things and then she suddenly said ‘Dad – what is God telling me here?’ Shocked at the suddenness of the question, I did a Nehemiah, asked God for the right words, and said ‘He’s telling you to put your total trust in him’. Her response was ‘I am doing, Dad’. This was the last meaningful conversation I had with her and, without any shadow of doubt, it was the sign I’d been asking God for: that I would see her again. That night she had a big seizure and was put onto drugs which would keep her in the moment and make her drowsy. Over the next three weeks she was in and out of consciousness, gradually getting weaker until she passed away early on the morning of May 13th 2016.

“Dad – what is God telling me here?”

LEARNING AND REFLECTION

Everyone reacts or responds in different ways to crises, and all I can convey to you is how I responded to and coped with what happened after the initial diagnosis in 2012. There are several things which really helped and sustained us, for which I will be forever thankful and grateful. In no particular order they are:

- God working in our lives during that time in a real and practical way. I have detailed only one of the signs he gave me that I will see M again, but he has continued to give me these reassurances.
- My partner, family, close friends and the wider church family (although there were several Christadelphians who told me I wouldn’t see my daughter again as she hadn’t been baptised – this didn’t hurt me but felt like an adherence to rules rather than an acknowledgement of grace).
- The Bible in One Year App – which I’d been listening to for a couple of years each day, and still do now. Unknowingly it had prepared me for this time. It’s positive, upbeat and emphasises continually how much God loves us and wants us to have a relationship with him. This was and is a life-saver.
- My ability, through my career, to always see the big picture first, solve

problems, communicate well, and inspire people. I was always able to see and hold on to God's big picture and plan for those who trust him.

Looking back on those four years, I realise that this period had brought about my own conversion. I would have taken on my daughter's burdens if I could and swapped places with her. Then, and only then, did the love of God and the laying down of Jesus' life for us, make real sense. It had moved from knowledge in my head to something I could really understand and feel.

Having said all the above, the feeling I'm left with is one of joy: joy, that I had twenty-three fantastic years with an incredible daughter; joy that I will see her again; joy that I now understand the relationship between myself and God and Jesus; and joy that God loves me infinitely more than I could ever have loved my own daughters. This has enabled me to talk much more about my faith and the certainty of the future to anyone who cares to listen. Hallelujah.



LESSONS IN SORROW & KINDNESS

My family has gone through the darkest time of our lives after losing our beloved Rachel in December. Her passing was sudden and awful for all involved. The days and weeks since have been a time of mourning and deep introspection for all of us. I have spent a lot of time pondering the Book of Job because I now strongly identify with him. Unlike him, though, my dear friends **have** lifted me up—over and over again. I have told people many times in recent weeks that we stand only because of the loving hands and hearts that lift us up.

There is much about Rachel's death I do not understand. I doubt I ever will. But I am thankful for the lessons that shine through the fog. I share four of them now with the readers of the Beacon. Before I do, though, I want to make one point clear. Each of us encounters pain and trauma through the course of his life. There can be no comparing one person's pain with another's. I claim no corner on sorrow and grief. I am sharing this in the hope that in some small way the lessons I have begun to learn might supply encouragement to others.

“A MAN WITH SORROWS AND ACQUAINTED WITH GRIEF”

The great prophet Isaiah foretold the arc of our Lord's life more than seven hundred years before he was born. None of Isaiah's prophecies about our Lord is more poignant than Isaiah 53. One of the early phrases of this powerful prophecy has been much on my mind: "...a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" (v. 3). (You may recall that these powerful words form one of the most moving solos in Handel's Messiah.) Each of us can recall times in Jesus' life that left him with pangs of sorrow and grief. Here are a few I have pondered:

The death of John the Baptist.

He had baptised Jesus. John's sudden death must have been a huge blow to Jesus, especially coming in such a horrible way.

The low point in his ministry.

Arguably, this nadir came right after one of his great high points—the feeding of the 5,000. It was then that Jesus gave one of his most powerful exhortations on fellowship and eternal life (Joh. 6). The people rejected his message outright, “This is a hard saying!” (v. 60). And then they began to turn away in droves. Jesus must have had a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach, punctuated by his poignant question to the twelve, “Do you **also** wish to go away?” (v. 67).

The death of Lazarus.

Simon’s family was much beloved by Jesus. Indeed, Lazarus, Mary and Martha may have been his very dearest friends. When informed that Lazarus was sick, Jesus waited to go to Bethany—knowing that the delay meant Lazarus would die. Witnessing the grief of Mary and others made Jesus weep, the only time this is mentioned in the Gospel record.

The death of Joseph.

At some point in Jesus’ life his father must have died. We do not know how or when, but he likely passed away when Jesus was still in his formative years. How Jesus must have grieved for the man who let the boy in Nazareth play with his carpenter’s tools.

The sight of Mary from the cross.

Jesus’ mother was at the cross, along with Mary Magdalene and other faithful women. No matter the horror that Mary witnessed, she was faithful to her Son to the end. Jesus must have been torn in heart knowing his mother was watching him die the most terrible of deaths. And so he reached out to the disciple he loved and instructed him to love and care for Mary in Jesus’ place (Joh. 19:25-27).

In the course of our lives, we will find sorrow and grief. It is an unavoidable part of this mortal journey. When we do, we should embrace the opportunity to feel that much closer to our Lord. In the moving words of Isaiah, Jesus **was** a man acquainted with sorrow and grief. So, with Paul, I have recited these words over and over in recent weeks, “That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the **fellowship of His sufferings**, being conformed to His death, if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead” (Php. 3:10-11 NKJV). Our fellowship

is far more than bread and wine. It is walking with him through suffering, especially our own.

STANDING SOLEMN GUARD

I have wrestled much in recent weeks. Most of the wrestling has been over “Why” questions (more on this below). But one of the issues very much involved is a “Where” question. In the days following Rachel’s death I pored over this Psalm time and again, “The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them” (Ps. 34:7). **Where was Rachel’s guardian angel that fateful Sunday?**

In time I realised how presumptuous the very posing of that question truly is. But my true breakthrough came with the help of a dear brother with whom I shared my wrestling over this Psalm. He kindly shared a commentary that Bro. N.P. Holt published in *The Testimony*. In line with author of the article, this brother suggested we can interpret David’s words too glibly and fail to capture the true, eternal import of the promise given. I commend *The Testimony* article to you all, but here is the essence:

Some psalms have hearts—in fact, most of them have—but in some they are quite obvious. You can almost see them steadily beating in some deeply embosomed word or in some central, power-motivated sentence. They are places to which we repair when, weary and footsore at the end of the day’s pilgrimage, we seek rest and repose. Such is the seventh verse of Psalm 34, and the powerful word is “encampeth”. It is essentially an eventide word; whether we are on a pilgrimage or on the battlefield of life, at sundown we must pitch tent ... For the time being we must give in and let someone else take up the struggle. But who? After we have crept into our little tent at eventide, do we ever think of drawing back the flap and looking out again? We ought to, for there, in the far-stretching realm of the Eternal’s unseen things, we should see the Angel of the Lord encamping with us. There he stands erect, sword drawn, his shining never-sleeping eyes watching. He has shadowed us throughout the day when the harshness of the rough road was hard to bear; when, in the heat of battle, arrows fell thick and fast and swords flashed around us, and he was there at the dressing post when we

bathed our wounds. He guarded us not from every arrow piercing and sword and slash, for some of us fell mortally wounded, but in the eternal sense he "kept" us; whether we came through or fell in battle, he preserved us unto the Kingdom which is yet to be. Where angelic ministrations are concerned, we find that it covers both temporal and everlasting deliverance. - *Bro. N.P. Holt, The Testimony.*

The angel of the LORD does encamp around us. But his is an eternal vigil, one intended to deliver us unto eternal life. The dear brother who shared the article with me offered this closing thought, "Just consider the last verse of this Psalm (v. 20)...this redemption strongly suggests 'from death!' That very thing—death and the grave—is surely the last place where the angels 'encamp around us.'"

By God's grace, I have replaced my wrestling over "Where" with a far better mental picture—an image of Rachel's guardian angel standing solemn guard beside her resting place. I know he will deliver her from the greatest enemy of all—death. And I know he never sleeps.

NOW I SEE

I feel a kinship with Job that I never felt before. He certainly suffered far more than me. He lost all his children. But among his losses was the loss of a daughter. That makes us kindred spirits.

Tragedy is the starting point in the book of Job. The loss of a child, especially through sudden cataclysm, is a horrible punch to one's being. It leaves you spinning, doubled over in pain. But then the pain subsides enough for the questions to begin. Nearly every one of them starts with "Why?"

Job wanted to know why. He desperately wanted an audience to present his questions to God. But that quest was made all the more difficult by his wife and friends. His wife, herself deeply distraught, told him that such an audience missed the point, "Curse God and die!" Meanwhile, Job's so-called friends made matters much worse. Instead of lifting up Job out of his deep distress, they taunted him, "If something this bad happened, you must have done something **really** bad! Time to confess, Job! Out with it!"

Trauma and suffering reach inside our souls. And somewhere deep within each of us is a voice that connects suffering with punishment, “Why am I being punished?” Sooner or later this voice speaks after we suffer. The message of the Book of Job is that this voice is always wrong. It is a human voice, not God’s voice. I have spent a lot of time in Job 41 and 42—the end-of-the-matter chapters for Job. One verse in particular has cried out to me:

***“I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now
my eye sees thee.” - Job 42:5 (KJV)***

We all come to God through hearing the Word of God, whether spoken through the pages of Scripture, the mouths of faithful men and women or through the epistle of their lives. But ear learning is not enough. At some point in our lives God speaks to us through the things we see. In ways that I am not yet capable of articulating, I now see God in ways that go far beyond any class on first principles.

Two of the things I see are very plain. One is the full realisation that tragedy is a part of this mortal world; you simply cannot escape it. The other is that God never forsakes us, especially not when our hearts are breaking.

I recently read something that brought these two points home against the backdrop of my own meditation on Job. In Bro. Len Richardson’s account of his sixty-year walk in our faith, he recalls his years as a young man in England during WWII. As the War began, many British brothers and sisters believed their faith would shield them from the Luftwaffe’s nightly bombing raids.

There was an idea prevalent in the brotherhood early in the war that God’s protection would be afforded to His children and that if we had faith we should be in some way immune from the effects of the bombing. This view was rather quickly dispelled when several brethren were, in fact, killed by bombs.

Bro. Len’s conclusions mark a profound commentary on the deep matters of Job, the deep issues of life itself.

“Our [community’s] losses from enemy action shattered the naïve expectations of some who had been convinced that there would be divine protection for God’s people. For myself, the experiences of life have led me to think that the important thing is not so much being spared from danger and suffering as being helped through it. **God has never undertaken to prevent our being involved in the heartache of human life, but He has said He will see us through it if we trust in Him.** To a large extent the bombs that fell indiscriminately represented the catastrophes which fall on mankind because of sin, whatever form they take, and **saints and sinners share them alike. It is what they do to us that should mark us out; how we stand up to life’s blows;** and in how much we prove “more than conquerors through him that loved us.” *[Emphasis is my own.]*

As Job did, I listen daily for the voice in the whirlwind but look even more for what my eye now sees. And like Bro. Len, I hold tightly to my Father’s hand as I go forward each day, secure in the knowledge He will see me through the deepest darkness. God never lets go.

WHEN ONE SUFFERS

We have experienced a magnificent tutorial in kindness in recent weeks. The outpouring of love, kindness, support, tears and arms is beyond any feeble words I might muster. We have thanked so many of you, but for all that we have missed please accept our heartfelt gratitude for lifting us up. We surely would not be standing were it not for the hands and hearts holding us up.

So many brothers and sisters have reached out in cards and emails. I have been struck at how often they write something like this, “We are weeping with you, for when one suffers all suffer **together.**” The fellowship of suffering is not just with our Lord. **It is with one another.**

I discovered something more in my tutorial. As I received the hug, the tear, the heartfelt letter, it always seemed like there was something more for me than the simple act of loving concern. And then I finally realised—there **is** something more. It is our Lord’s touch through others.

We cannot be with our Lord in person now, but he surely touches us—through our brothers and sisters. We cannot feel our Lord’s tears reach our shoulder, but he surely weeps with us through the tears of our brothers and sisters. In purely physical terms, we cannot wear our Lord’s yoke now, but he surely makes our burden light through the strong arms of our brothers and sisters. We do not hear the voice of our Lord today by our ear, but he surely speaks to us through words fitly spoken by our loving brothers and sisters.

We have seen and felt our Lord in all these ways. We thank Him. And we thank *you*.

CONCLUSION

Our lives are full of passages. Each of them can teach us about things eternal, none more so than the horrible loss of a dearly loved one. Many Bible scholars believe the book of Job is one of the oldest books of the Bible, if not the oldest. Others say it is almost impossible to date the book—as if it bears no time stamp. Perhaps there is good reason for that view. Job’s message is primal and timeless. Tragedy can strike anyone. We prefer to think that some measure of goodness gives us a shield against harm. But tragedy is no respecter of persons. It is simply the sad result of a world still suffering the ravages of sin.

The transcending message, though, is one of hope. No matter how dark the grief, God will see you through it. He shines light into darkness. He offers hope when you only feel loss. He lifts you up when you are writhing in pain. In all this, we see God instead of just hearing about Him.

Scholars have no disagreement on which book is the last one in the Bible. The beloved Apostle wrote it as he received the visions, alone on the Isle of Patmos. If Job represents the beginning of our struggle with life, it is worth considering Revelation as the end of that struggle. That seems right in so many ways, not the least being the “anthem” of the seven churches. Each church had its own challenge. Yet the antidote was the same, “To him that overcometh...” Overcoming adversity through faith is what life is all about. For many of us, the greatest adversity is watching a loved one die. Such anguish calls on the greatest measure of our faith.

It is also worth remembering to whom the letters were written. In each case the letter is addressed to “the angel of...” Should we be surprised that there is a guardian angel standing watch over our spiritual families? Surely not!

“The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him.”
(KJV)

Each day now I think of that angel who stands solemn watch beside the resting place of our beloved daughter. And I look forward to the day when he will deliver her, and all those who love our Lord’s appearing. Even so, come, Lord Jesus.

By Mark Drabenstott, reproduced with kind permission from an Editorial published in the North American Beacon quarterly magazine, 2016.

**“OVERCOMING ADVERSITY
THROUGH FAITH IS WHAT
LIFE IS ALL ABOUT.”**

THE GOLDSMITH AT WORK

“It is a grievous task which God has given to the sons of men to be afflicted with.” - Ecclesiastes 1:13 (NASB)

Peggy and I enjoy going to Kansas City Symphony concerts. One great feature of the performances is a pre-concert discussion of the program led by Maestro Michael Stern. He is passionate about music and extraordinarily eloquent in talking about music and life. [He is also son of one of the world's great violinists, Isaac Stern.] The featured work at their recent season-opener was Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony, which carries throughout a powerful theme of sadness and struggle. In relating the work to life more generally, Maestro Stern recalled a conversation he had as a young man with his conducting mentor. He asked the mentor why orchestras play “heavy music” rather than sticking to a more optimistic and upbeat genre. His elderly teacher said the answer is very simple: “Life is a tragedy. In time, you will understand this.” Stern recalled this on a wry note, but with a knowing voice.

I know this, too. Tragedy has an indelible definition for us: The sudden death of our beloved daughter Rachel last December. A beautiful life taken way too soon. Such tragedy stays with you. As noted here a couple of issues ago, my head has worked hard at pushing a small mountain of ‘Why questions’ into a distant corner where I wag my finger at them and say, “God alone knows the answers and by His grace I will know them when my Lord comes.”

The only problem is that my heart often forgets what my head has done. The waves of grief keep coming, often in unexpected and untimely ways. Grief is a burden, a daily task that does not go away no matter how hard you work to banish it. It is an unwelcome, steady companion.

The loving hands and hearts of literally hundreds of caring brothers and sisters have made our burden easier. I found some especially welcome comfort and insight from Bro. Tim Galbraith's class on Ecclesiastes at

Great Lakes Christadelphian Bible last July (audio available on the GLCBS website).

I believe God sent those words for me, and I thank Him and my dear brother for being such an able messenger. The class contained many wise nuggets, but my mind has dwelt especially on three of them. I share them now with a few of my own thoughts in the hope that they may assuage the grief of others. They have mine.

***“The heart of man is desperately sick. There is a remedy.
Part of it is sorrow and affliction.”
- Bro. Tim Galbraith***

The untimely death of a loved one seems utterly senseless. The same holds for most other tragic events that tumble into our lives.

It is the very senseless nature of these events that triggers our instinctive response: Why? What purpose was served? Each of us must find and then make our peace with the answer to those questions. Mine are forming more clearly after pondering Bro. Tim’s nuggets on Ecclesiastes.

Ecclesiastes is a timeless book because it is about life. (The frequent quoting of chapter 3 on a “Time for Everything” is but one witness to its abiding quality.) Bro. Tim suggests the whole purpose of the whole book is summed up in chapter one:

***“And I set my mind to seek and explore by wisdom concerning
all that has been done under heaven. It is a grievous task
which God has given to the sons of men to be
afflicted with.” - Ecclesiastes 1:13 (NASB)***

Many read this verse through a sort of Genesis 3 lens: We earn our bread by the sweat of our brow. Life’s tough; get used to it. But there is a much deeper and better meaning. It is that very meaning that resonates so deeply in my soul today.

The real point of this verse (and the whole book of Ecclesiastes, for that matter) is this: We are sick and God has the cure. Our hearts have a

horrible disease. These mortal hearts are selfish, deceitful, and weak. The only thing they lead us to is death. The wonderful news is that God has the prescription for spiritually strong hearts.

That prescription is affliction and suffering.

Ouch! We don't like that cure. We prefer a sweeter tonic. But the clear message of scripture is that this is the one, and the only one, that works. It is administered by a loving Father intent on saving everyone who believes in the cure and in Him.

We recoil at God's prescription for good reason. Our world fairly shouts that we are entitled to happiness. You mean to tell me I don't have a right to happiness? The happiness message is subliminally placed in our minds in school, in the workplace, and in literally millions of messages from our news, commercial and entertainment media.

What we must understand, however, is that God does not guarantee happiness in this life. Scripture makes no such claim. What He does assure us is that He will give us what we need to cure our mortal illness. Bro. Tim summed it up this way: "God gives us not what we want but what we need."

Deep down, maybe deeper than we care to admit, we know this. We learn it the hard way in many parts of our life. A fine example is physical fitness and exercise. (Bro. Tim powerfully illustrated the idea with a brother running in place on stage as he continued on in Ecclesiastes.) If you want to get fit and lose weight, you must exercise. Strenuously. In ways your mind and body inevitably find painful and resist. But if you do exercise, good results will follow.

God's prescription for eternal life works the same way. We don't like suffering and affliction. But in ways we cannot fathom and may never fully comprehend this side of eternity, suffering is good for our spiritual fitness. Just consider the key phrase from Ecclesiastes 1, now from the New King James Version: "...this burdensome task God has given to the sons of man, by which they may be **exercised** (v. 13). Exercise is the path to wellness—whether talking about our physical hearts or our spiritual

ones. We understand physical fitness; spiritual fitness much less so. But the message of Ecclesiastes—indeed, the message of Scripture—is that suffering and affliction are the exercise that yield eternal wellness.

We understand the prescription even better when we remember it is provided by a loving Father (and the Grandest of Physicians!). The writer to the Hebrews lifts up this theme in a beautiful way, recalling the echoes of Ecclesiastes.

"My son, do not regard lightly the discipline [nurture] of the Lord, nor lose courage when you are punished [admonished] by him." For the Lord disciplines [nurtures or instructs] him whom he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives. It is for discipline [nurture] that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline [nurture], in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Besides this, we have had earthly fathers to discipline [nurture] us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined [nurtured] us for a short time at their pleasure, but he disciplines [nurtures] us for our good, that we may share his holiness. **For the moment all discipline [nurturing] seems painful rather than pleasant; later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.** - *Hebrews 12:5-11 (RSV)*

The idea here is both simple and concrete: God treats us in the best possible way as our loving Heavenly Father. Many English translations try to give an 'Angry God' slant to this passage. But "nurture" is just as good a translation for the Greek as "discipline." Do we really believe our Heavenly Father is a Being who takes enormous delight and glee from "taking us to the woodshed?" Of course not! The far better idea is that He loves us—guiding us gently but firmly along the way that is best for us. Nurture and admonition, our whole life long.

Every father among us understands this principle. A loving father wants nothing but the best outcomes for his children. But those outcomes don't just happen on their own. Experience shows they result from countless acts of nurturing and from the admonishments given when a child is

headed in the wrong direction. Paul makes this very case in exhorting the fathers in our community: And, ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: but bring them up in the **nurture** [same word as “discipline” in Hebrews 12] **and admonition** of the Lord (Ephesians 6:4 KJV).

*“Through affliction and struggle we become
spiritually strong. Affliction is of God.”
- Bro. Tim Galbraith*

Grief follows you—day after day. It takes no vacations. Over time, the grief leads you to a question deep inside each of us: Who is trying to hurt or punish me? We all want to affix blame. Such thinking is misplaced. It is rooted in the philosophy of Human Entitlement that defines our current world. I don't deserve this!

Our Father has a very different view of our lives. What He wants us to understand is that our life is not about what we deserve or want. It is about preparing us for eternal life. What He knows, and what we only slowly learn, is that affliction creates a character fit for eternal life. And in that critical sense, affliction is a good thing. It takes a lifetime to fully understand that.

The Bible message on the effect of affliction on our character is broad and deep. It starts in Genesis and runs to Revelation—a sort of ‘Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony’ to remind us of the power and purpose of our struggle. The theme starts in one of the seminal places in Scripture: Cursed is the ground for **thy sake**; in **sorrow** shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life (Genesis 3:17 KJV). The ground we walk in this life was cursed for our sake. All those thorns and thistles we encounter are for good, not ill. The sorrow that accompanies our walk among the thorns is never for naught. It is the soil in which a far better character grows.

Grief can overcome us at times, but it has a higher purpose. That is what we must discover and not forget. Job certainly learned this lesson. He was afflicted in ways none of us will ever fully experience. He lost his family. He lost his wealth. He lost his health. His was a long, deep journey into grief. Yet he ultimately discovered the very principle by which Jesus lived: affliction prepares our hearts for eternity.

“He delivers the afflicted by their affliction, and opens their ear by adversity.” – Job 36:15 (RSV)

To the unknowing, the idea of “delivering the afflicted by their affliction” seems to be a meaningless tautology. It fell on the ears of Job’s so-called friends exactly that way. They thought Job was crazy (and guilty!). Yet affliction is a central part of God’s Grand Prescription for us: Affliction cures the mortal heart in ways we may not understand but with results that are eternal. It is worth pondering the second half of Job’s insight. Grief initially overwhelms. It crushes you and leaves you broken. But there comes a point when the affliction does open the ears of your heart. It certainly has mine. We might also consider these words of David, which find even deeper resonance in the life of our Lord:

“Before I was afflicted I went astray; but now I keep thy word...It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn thy statutes...I know, O Lord, that thy judgments are right, and that in faithfulness thou hast afflicted me.” – Psalm 119:67,71,75 (RSV)

David knew his afflictions came from God. He didn’t blame Saul or anyone else. He knew they were meant to make his heart fit—strong and right for eternal life. For David, affliction was a good thing.

Our Lord knew this founding principle of life even better than David. Jesus had memorised the Scriptures. They were his daily bread, his source of strength in every trial. This was never truer than when he hung on the cross. Remember how that tragic event began? My God, my God, why has thou forsaken me? (Matthew 27:46; Mark. 15:34) I believe these words did not express how Jesus felt toward his Father at that moment. Rather, they reflected Jesus’ extraordinarily meticulous preparation for that very moment. With those words Jesus was starting the final meditation of his mortal life.

He had carefully selected the scriptures for this meditation: Psalm 22 to 31. The cross was sapping his physical strength, but his mental energy was fully given to this poignant collection of Psalms. And so with the bodily strength he could muster, he uttered his first words (Psalm 22:1) and his last (Psalm 31:5). His mind surely covered all the words in between.

He started in Psalm 22 knowing fully well that he would then arrive at one of the great messages of Scripture:

“For he has not despised or abhorred the affliction of the afflicted; and he has not hid his face from him, but has heard, when he cried to him... The afflicted shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek him shall praise the Lord! May your hearts live for ever!” - Psalm 22:24,26 (RSV)

The ever-nurturing Father did **not** forsake Jesus. He designed a path of affliction that made our Lord’s heart strong for eternity. And then He raised Jesus from the dead, alive for evermore. He designs a similar path and ‘heart-saving fitness regimen’ for each of us. And that is precisely why Jesus can say to us, “May your hearts live forever.” For that to happen there will be affliction for us in this life, just as there was for our Lord.

The pain of affliction comes to each of us in this life. The real point is to understand why it has come. Jesus knew. He knew his suffering was refining his character for eternal life. It is doing the same thing for us.

***“The purpose of life now is not enjoyment;
It is refining our character.”
- Bro. Tim Galbraith***

Seeking enjoyment has never reached the zenith that now surrounds us. Shopping is 24/7, in your underwear if you prefer. All those possessions show up on your front step in a day or two. Entertainment is nonstop on 500+ channels—or streaming on your smartphone wherever you are, whenever you want. Satisfying the senses is just a click away.

This cacophony means, of course, that deeper purpose is so much harder to find. We meet people every day whose senses are sated but whose souls are empty.

There is so much more to life than the world we now see. The LORD provides affliction to help us find true purpose in life. The real purpose in life is refining our character, a treasure that will never fade away.

We think of our Lord as a perfect man. And surely he was a man with no sinful acts. But his character—the spiritual qualities that define him—was richer at the end of his life than at the beginning. How did that happen? He faced countless trials, culminating in the cross. He triumphed over them all. That lifetime of struggle yielded a wonderful, beautiful character.

Over and over, the Bible points to affliction and suffering as the refining fire for our spiritual hearts. It is the very same process by which gold and silver are refined. Here are just two passages that connect our suffering with the refining fire:

“Behold, I have refined you, but not like silver; I have tried you in the furnace of affliction.” - Isaiah 48:10 (RSV)

“But he knows the way that I take; when he has tried me, I shall come forth as gold.” - Job 23:10 (RSV)

Bro. Tim spoke often about this refining process, with several poignant examples of affliction among the Indian brethren. In every case, he said, the Great Goldsmith is at work to help faith, hope and love to replace all the imperfections in our character. He recited the fabled tale of a goldsmith who was asked: “How do you know when the gold is refined enough?” The answer was simple, said the goldsmith, “When I see myself reflected.” A Godly heart. The Goldsmith is a work to produce that in us.

The New Testament makes it very clear that our Lord went through the same process to refine his character. Affliction was surely the furnace of his refining.

“Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and being made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him.” - Hebrews 5:8-9 (RSV)

“For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through suffering. For he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified have all one origin. That is why he is not ashamed to call them brethren.” - Hebrews 2:10-11 (RSV)

As an aside, the word “obedience” does not quite capture the full meaning here. Our Lord was always obedient. Suffering made Jesus more attuned to His Father. It made him lean on his Father. It made him listen to his Father. That is exactly the root meaning of the word: To hear. When we suffer, sooner or later we listen to our Father. Just like Jesus. Just like Job.

WHEN ONE SUFFERS

My unwelcome companion is still with me. I’ve banished him from my head. But he still finds his way into my heart. What is changing is my own awareness of the good that can come from this furnace of affliction. In ways I will never fully understand, God is refining my heart.

I now think of it this way: Rachel’s life lives on in my fond memories. Her death is helping to make my heart more like my Father’s. And so I pray for endurance—that no matter how painful the affliction may seem, my heart will be more like His when the process is done.

In reflecting on my own grief, I have pondered one passage from the book of Romans many times. I must confess that it is still aspirational for me to rejoice in my suffering. But I readily acknowledge a process is at work in me, the same one the Apostle describes.

“We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us.” - Romans 5:3-5 (RSV)

I take comfort in knowing that any suffering now pales beside the promise of eternal life. The Apostle’s powerful words remind us of this fact:

*“For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, because we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen; for the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.”
- 2 Corinthians 4:17-18 (RSV)*

Affliction never seems slight or momentary. Paul is just helping us see our suffering from a very different perspective. From God's point of view, from the Master Goldsmith's perspective, affliction is always slight and momentary.

Our affliction may seem overpowering. But that is exactly when we must remember that the godly weight of a heart of gold is eternal. To our Father, a faith-filled heart is a heart of gold.

So, I keep looking forward, ever forward, to a day when the grievous task will be ended, the furnace past. The bread of adversity and the water of affliction will be done. I will see the One who is refining my heart, the One Isaiah calls the Teacher. I have a lot of questions for my Teacher now.

The answers will all be known then.

“Yea, O people in Zion who dwell at Jerusalem; you shall weep no more. He will surely be gracious to you at the sound of your cry; when he hears it, he will answer you. And though the Lord give you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, yet your Teacher will not hide himself any more, but your eyes shall see [“behold” NASB] your Teacher.” - Isaiah 30:19-20 (RSV)

Until that glorious day, I take comfort from knowing the refining process is at work. More than that, I know the Goldsmith is also the God of all comfort, helping me bear the burden now. As with His own beloved son, He will never forsake me, no matter what affliction I bear now. And seeing His hand at work in me, I dedicate myself to providing greater comfort to those who share the crucible with me.

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction.” - 2 Corinthians 1:3-4 (RSV)

By Mark Drabenstott, reproduced with kind permission from an Editorial published in the North American Beacon quarterly magazine 2016.

THE BIGGEST UNSEEN THING

We spend a lifetime preparing for it. We are not told when it comes. We know only that it will come. When it does, the final test will have arrived. Do you believe in the biggest unseen thing? The writer to the Hebrews puts it this way: “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). To be sure, there are many things in our life we cannot see, all those decisions through which we walk by “faith and not by sight,” as the Apostle puts it. In the end, though, there is just one huge unseen thing. Job pithily puts it this way: “If a man die, shall he live again?” (Job 14:14).

I have reflected much on that biggest thing this past year since our beloved Rachel died. As I’ve told some of you, her death made resurrection searingly personal for me. It is for all of us. But Rachel’s untimely passing put a forceful punch for me behind that big Unseen Thing.

The foundational passage in Hebrews suggests faith unfolds through a series of tests, each flying in the face of the eminent reason of our age. Today’s world is one founded on the logic of science: perform an experiment, repeat it, gather the data, analyze it, and then draw a reasoned conclusion. Faith is not like this. Yes, you could say we have countless ‘experiments’ in Scripture that help us reach our faithful conclusion. But all of these are removed from us, by time, distance and culture. We live our lives in the moment of 21st century [in the West], not in Jesus’ Galilee.

What makes our faith real is believing God even when confronted with “unseen things.” We must make decisions throughout life (whom to marry, which job to take, where to live), each representing the proverbial fork in the road. We choose prayerfully. The resurrection is different. We die. Will we live again? This is the ultimate unseen thing—the grand final exam, if you will. Believing in the unseen forces us to suspend the life we know, look up and then boldly go where reason alone would not take us. The resurrection to new life is the real test of faith.

THE EASY WAY OUT

Humans have wrestled with life after death for millennia, of course. Ever since we started dying, actually (which was early on!). We should not be surprised that our forefathers usually took the easy way out. Through my own life experience, I've determined that human beings usually take the easy way out in any number of circumstances.

The easy way out from the Greatest Unseen is denial—to say you don't really die. You just change into something else or your eternal soul simply goes someplace else. History is replete with this Denial Theology. The Egyptians buried their mummies with food to sustain their journey into the next life toward the sun. Quite independently and an ocean and continent removed, the Incas also buried their dead with food and presents for the journey to afterlife in the sun. Another continent away, Buddhists believed in an endless cycle of life and death, with one path to Nirvana by exercising intentional action (karma).

Much of Christianity quickly fell into this same line of thought. Leaders arose in the early church (among them: Athenagoras, Tertullian and Augustine) who melded Denial into Christian theology. A heaven full of immortal souls soon replaced the gospel of the Kingdom. Sadly, these early Christian theologians built on the foundation of Plato, not Peter or Paul.

The point here is a simple one: Most of our fellow human beings (including our Christian neighbours) are in denial about death. The Final Faith Exam our Father has for us is framed very differently. What He asks is something far more profound—and requires far more faith—than believing your soul lives on and sails freely to heaven. This is what He asks at the end of your life:

You're about to die. The breath of life will be removed from your body. You will stop being a living soul. Do you believe that I can bring you back to life again?

When you watch the breath of life flow out of a loved one, this question takes up camp in your mind.

THE COMMON STRUGGLE

For reasons we cannot know in this age, faith is God's key to eternal life. Hebrews puts it plainly: Without faith it is impossible to please God. What we do know now is that our test of faith is not entirely solitary. Our test of faith is a common struggle, one that crosses ages and spans those we know and love. That is surely the design of a loving Father. He wants us to have faith, and to grow it over our life. But he knows this is a mighty struggle with the Unseen, so He lovingly, carefully provided for others to help us along the way.

The Scriptures provide our helpers across the ages. Two have been especially useful to me this past year.

Job holds a dearer place in my heart after a year of grief and struggle. I understand him so much better now. The book of Job has no historical touchstone that establishes its age, which has prompted a lot of speculation on exactly when it was written. Some scholars believe Job may be one of the oldest books in the Bible. I happen to agree for a very simple reason: His struggle is truly timeless.

The epiphany at the end of the book was God's answer to Job's tireless campaign to have his case heard by the Almighty. (He learned this was entirely the wrong campaign.). Yet we sometimes lose track of Job's unswerving belief in the Big Unseen Thing. Not only does he provide what may be the most lucid statement of the Big Question in Scripture (14:14), he also excels in stating the answer:

“For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then from my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold, and not another.” - Job 19:25-27 (RSV)

We can read this with entirely too much haste. We should remember when it was written and under what circumstances. This could be among the earliest fragments of Scripture ever written. So, just ponder the wonder of what Job is saying. When He wrote these words Jesus' birth was still millennia away. The word "resurrection" had never been spoken

in Holy Writ. Despite such daunting handicaps, our dear brother Job provides one of the most beautiful and powerful expressions of resurrection in scripture. And all of this was spoken after Job had experienced the gut-wrenching death of all his children. Job surely passed the faith test!

My other faithful companion this past year has been Abraham. He waited a long time for the great promise (a child of promise) to be fulfilled. And then he encountered a Great Unseen. Are you willing to sacrifice your beloved Son? We all remember the powerful story of Abraham's journey up the mountain with his faithful son. With each step, they carried the wood and fire higher and higher, symbol to the struggle swimming through hearts and minds. Was there no other way? Like Job, Abraham was sustained by his unyielding focus on the Great Unseen. As each step drew them nearer the altar, he kept telling himself one thing: The same God who brought Isaac to birth (against all odds!) could give life to him again if he died. Remember that Abraham was operating with the same handicaps as Job. Jesus was millennia away. The word "resurrection" was awaiting New Testament writers far, far away.

Well done, Abraham! You answered the final question with passion and resounding conviction. So well done, in fact, that his powerful belief is enshrined in the pantheon of faith in Hebrews:

"By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son, of whom it was said, "Through Isaac shall your descendants be named." He considered that God was able to raise men even from the dead; hence, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back."
- Hebrews 11:17-19

Resurrection is no idle 'consideration.' Our English translators hardly do Abraham justice with the word "considered." Resurrection is something you believe deep within you. In Abraham's case, it was a conviction so sure that he possessed the strength to lift the knife above his beloved Son. By God's grace, lifting was all that was required. God told him, in effect, 'Abraham, don't sacrifice your son. I will sacrifice my son.' The ram in the thicket was the physical sign to seal this promise.

MOURNING TO MORNING

My reflection on resurrection this past year has often brought me to the subject of sleep. Again and again, Scripture teaches that death is like sleep. This is surely a commonplace analogy. Each of us has a lot of experience with sleep—and with awakening. By the time we reach the biblical benchmark of 70 years of age, we will have fallen asleep and woken up more than 25,000 times!

Through such gentle familiarity God wants to turn our mourning into morning. Death comes but once, but God makes it more familiar in a gentle sort of way. He wants us to understand that death is like the slumber that comes each night. But that is not the real point of the analogy. Resurrection is. Just as day follows night, we wake from sleep each morning—a rising triggered by the return of the Sun. None of this natural design is accident. It is the daily lesson preparing us for the Biggest Unseen.

Resurrection is, of course, far more magnificent than just waking up. It is the creation of a new living soul, with God's own breath of life supplying the energy. Job surely understood this whole magnificence when he offered the details on what would become of his body in the cold grave.

But that's the point, isn't it. Our faith is in an Almighty beyond compare. He created the heavens and the earth, man and woman his crowning act of creation. He made us with amazing bodies to multiply and replenish the earth. And even though those mortal bodies all die, he has the power to bring them back to life, no matter where they are nor how long they have been dead. That, dear friends, is an awesome God!

Over and over this past year, I have returned to the words of the Apostle, who provides what may be the finest soliloquy on "Mourning to Morning" in Scripture.

"But we would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For this we

declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord.”
- 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 (RSV)

For Paul, the dead are not dead. They are asleep. They await the return of day, just as we do in our natural slumber. There is not one shred of doubt for Paul that morning will come, driving out the darkness. What is especially beautiful about this passage for me is the trumpet. We tend to blithely connect trumpets with the return of Jesus, a sort of herald for the King. But our King needs no herald. He comes with all the glory and power of the Father. No, I believe the trumpet is God's grand way to awaken all those who sleep awaiting their Lord—a holy alarm clock, if you will. The word “command” provides another poignant note of comfort to us. The resurrection is no afterthought. It is a commanding priority for the Almighty Creator. There is wonder in that thought.

RISE AND SHINE

By any measure, the year just past has had more than the usual moments of darkness. Terrorist acts ring out round the world. Violence and murder have risen in many U.S. cities, dramatically in many cases. We've endured an especially long political season full of nastiness and narcissism. Against this backdrop, personal trials still weigh on us.

In such dark times, and in a season when the nights are at their longest, we should remind ourselves that sorrow and mourning are but temporary, like the night of slumber. Soon, perhaps quite soon, the Son will rise with healing in his wings. He comes to rouse those who sleep in His name. He comes to gather in one great body all those who love His appearing. In a world founded on science and technology, these ideas seem fantastic indeed. But faith is fantastic. It suspends life as we know it and believes in the Unseen. And it dares to believe in the greatest unseen of all—the resurrection of the dead. Mourning will turn to morning.

Is it really so hard to believe? The next time you have that morning cup of coffee (tea in my case), offer up an extra prayer of thanksgiving. In the most ordinary of ways He provided your daily lesson, preparing you for the Biggest Unseen Thing.

“Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you. ...The sun shall be no more your light by day, nor for brightness shall the moon give light to you by night; but the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory. Your sun shall no more go down, nor your moon withdraw itself; for the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your days of mourning shall be ended.” - *Isaiah 60:1-2; 19-20 (RSV)*

By Mark Drabentott, reproduced with kind permission from an Editorial published in the North American Beacon quarterly magazine 2016

**“ARISE, SHINE; FOR YOUR
LIGHT HAS COME, AND
THE GLORY OF THE LORD
HAS RISEN UPON YOU.”**



CHAPTER THREE

LOSS OF PARENT(S)

GRIEF

My journey with grief started with a phone call in the night. It was my Dad's voice, telling me that Mum had collapsed and was in hospital after stepping off the plane for a holiday. At that time, I wasn't too worried as my childhood had been full of hospital stays for Mum and she always came home. But not this time – a fatal brain aneurysm meant that this was the end, and she was switched off after a day, alone and miles from home in a Spanish hospital. There was a lot of guilt that kicked in as we realising that she had shown signs of a bleed previously, but we had not acted to help. And that was my introduction to one of the major symptoms of all deaths – that feeling of guilt and 'if only' moments.

“one of the major symptoms of all deaths – that feeling of guilt and ‘if only’ moments”

Then a second phone call five months later started the nightmare again. This time my only sister had collapsed with an aneurysm at her doctor's surgery whilst telling her GP about the headaches she was having. Within hours the machine was switched off – she left behind three young children. So once again we were arranging a funeral and going through the painful motions and grim rituals that nobody prepares you for.

I then entered a year of intense despair. My main struggle at the time was with the differing reactions to what had happened within the family that was left and the resulting deep fractures that have not healed to this day. I had lost the only females in my family and without their support I had to readjust to life on my own. Thankfully I was in the throes of parenting three boys myself and had my sister's three children to support when I

could, so the distraction of that and the determination to keep alive for them was a huge help. Just before my sister died, I had told her that we would like another baby. Now my prayer was that this baby would be a girl to help me to heal and God heard me; we were blessed with a baby girl and the gift of new life got me through the darkest times.

The word 'despair' really resonated, and I started to have a new awareness of other people in despair; my eyes and heart had been opened, so a few years later when my life was level I enrolled with 'Cruse Bereavement'. I had been interested in how people around me dealt with the experience and needed to understand the process and was also driven to helping others who were in that dark tunnel I was emerging from. The ten-week course studied every aspect of bereavement and loss and I then spent three years counselling clients and saw the whole width and depth of the subject in the harrowing stories I heard.

It was a huge step in my journey, and I could relate to what had happened within my family much more. Very often you are not dealing with the actual death but the shifting dynamics in a family when a death occurs. You quickly learn that although the steps of shock, denial, anger, depression, and acceptance are usually all there, you have no time frame or expectation that everyone will go through them. The factor that affects all of them is the amount of support you receive. That's where my faith kicked in for me. My support system was gone, and I felt deeply lonely. I can recall two people who were instrumental in picking me up and that was because they both pledged to make regular time out for me and came to the house. I didn't always want to let them in but it's quite hard to turn people away and gradually I learnt to share my grief. So many people casually invite you to meet for coffee or pop round without realising that your energy levels in grief are sapped and getting out the door is not an option. We all naturally yo-yo grief- it's a method you use in counselling where you talk deeply but then change to a lighter subject to give the person a break. I still do this now- there are times when I choose to dive back into my memories and times when I don't. But this does mean that for people in need it is hard to find people that are free at the time when you need them, so letting someone know that you are there any time is so valuable.

“The factor that affects all of them [the steps of grief] is the amount of support you receive”

Through it all, my abiding memory is the dawning on me that I had to relax in God’s hands. I felt let down by people around me – many couldn’t deal with my raw emotions and open anger. I craved advice and guidance but when people gave advice, I felt upset as it didn’t work for me as I navigated the choppy sea in my leaky boat. I often felt myself drawn to the story of Jesus in the ocean calming the waters; for me grief feels very like a drowning sensation where your whole compass in life is moved, and you are forced to reach out from the tidal waves that make you feel out of control and completely helpless.

Everyone’s journey is so personal that the only way a human can help is the power of listening which is like a rare pearl. God’s ear is constantly open, and you find the power of prayer is strongest when curled up in a ball on your bed exhausted by tears. The verses about Jesus sharing our burden and carrying us through trouble become so real when you are in despair. You can only look up to God and you become acutely grateful for the gift he gave of making our brains heal from trauma as you feel yourself coming back to life.

“the only way a human can help is the power of listening which is like a rare pearl”

I don’t feel you ever ‘get over’ the loss of someone you love and as the years go on it can often get harder in a way, as it dawns on you that they can never be replaced. I still break down at times, but it no longer scares me, and I have learnt to cope. You learn to reach out and you adapt to a new life.

When I worked for Cruse, we gave people ‘tools’ to use and it was so rewarding to see people regain their lives and recover. People often just need reassurance that the scary things they are feeling are all normal and they need somebody to give them permission to smile again without feeling guilty. Giving someone love and warmth at a time when they really need it is a privilege and my life was changed by the despair I felt. I now work with vulnerable people in community and when I need to

empathise, I simply switch back to my feelings all those years ago and see myself in that person and reach my hand out for them to hold. In my mind that is the hand of Jesus reaching out to the broken and the Gospel message is to reach out and heal people. These two verses became my favourites:

“when I am weak then I am strong” - 2 Corinthians 12 v10

“you put my tears into a bottle” - Psalm 56 v8-11

References

Cruse bereavement care: www.cruse.org.uk



WHO CAN EXPLAIN THE PAIN?

Who can explain the pain?

Images on a reel...very unreal...how do you feel?

Phones ringing in the night..hearts thudding..deep cuts inside..

Reeling, shaking...disbelieving.

It's awful, he says...final text...she's gone, gone, gone...?

Hand putting coffee down..'Here you are , dear'...so near..

What happened?...did she know?...did she need me?.

Who helped her?...surrounded by Spanish..our precious mum.

Flying home in a lead box..viewed through a window..

Move the square veil...look into your life...

Where's her glasses?...just flashes...mouth crooked, hair wrong...

Inwardly aching..shaking..emotions rise up your throat..to choke

Tears and more tears..all your fears

Her voice gone..locked away forever..stretching to see her..

Heart moving inside you..arms and legs heavy.

Who can explain the pain?

Cards and more cards pile up on the table..shreds of comfort..

but nothing to help

Nothing replaces her understanding..talking my language..our rhythm..

Shared feelings .. mutual lives..always my friend and defender...

How I admired her love, her bravery..her strength.and her humour

All in a box..with locks..

no goodbye..you just die.

Then again..a phone call..'it'll be alright' I say again..'don't worry'...

Running down the path..stumbling, panicking, wringing my hands,

Trying to keep calm.. no, no, no...not again..

Hospital room..tension and fear..my dear..

What are you doing!?... lying there on your back..

I see the white of your eye, your crooked tooth..the monitor..your soft

freckly hand...my sister..
I want to shout 'She's my only sister!'..but feel heavy and weird..
It's a blur and I slur..
need a chair, I'm in despair.
Nurse brings me water..This is a joke..please wake me up..
I'm stuck in a scene..I need to break out..
Her children all watching...got to be there..
All of a sudden I daredn't touch her..can't push her hair forward ..its all
fopped back..she wouldn't like that..
but she's not real any more...she's gone through a door.

They talk about donors...? my beautiful sister?
I look at her records..
born '64..not seen that before.
Everyones still..frozen around her body...dad walking in..surreal..a very
bad dream...don't cut her up!..I hate the nurse team.
You vultures..nurses are meant to be nice..give good advice..
I want to shout..want her to say no..she wouldn't like it,
I know..she's my sister, I'm the only one here that really knows.
She has to wake up and tell them.
Don't move, don't make a scene...need somewhere to lean.
Stroke her arm..always so pale..my big sister..I loved you..
Scared, very scared...need help here...
robotic, move your arms and legs...
Keep moving and you may wake up.
Get away..take her lovely children away from this scene.
Protect and shield them
Who can explain the pain?

Hush..another coffin.I hate them now..so formal..its not normal..
I see her there...frilly white lace...all covered up..
Long gaunt face... needs more space.
Where have you gone?..
You've turned to stone and left me alone..
Cold like marble when I touch your arm now..How bizarre..
We talked about this, didn't we?...how strange!.. you said you'd like us all
to be there..to say goodbye..
Feel very alone , where are they all?...shall I give them a call?

Feel like laughing, but scared it'll be hysterics..no real goodbye..
Suffocated by people..need to talk to them..
Who can explain the pain?..

Last night we talked..for the very last time..
shared our worries and laughed..
Why didn't you tell me you were going?..
Guess we did say bye...didn't know you'd die..

So now they've both gone..and my world is quiet..
Three has become one and I'm left in the boat..can't stay afloat...
Always sinking and dipping..my anchors have gone...
No more can we share and care.. piano and knitting...no emotion..no
laughing...
All of a sudden that's history...familiar phrases and voices..
And the tears won't stop flowing..don't know where I'm going..
Feeling very lost..people moving on , but my mind keeps going back...
Clinging to my pictures..don't want them to fade...feeling so afraid..
Stop time..just want to say..don't go away..
Who can explain the pain?..

The deep yowling inside..curl up..floating images surround you..
They're ghosts in your head..they're dead.
Why didn't we know...why didn't we see..the blood in your head
leaking..
Unseen and unspoken like my own dripping wound...
We all keep going on and on..
Then down like a skittle and filed away in a box..- did you wear any
socks?

Left with small remnants of their life on this earth..
Two nighties, a cheap watch and a bus pass..what a farce!
Grief like a thief has taken our future...

Want to ask people, where's your hidden wound..
Covered and locked away? ..for today?..
The scar on my heart..my wrist...show me your pain too..

Tell me I'm not alone..falling, slipping,...rocking the
calm boat for others..
Don't speak..hush..too much pain...
The shutters are down..like cutters..quiet mutters..
'Too much talk'..'too deep'..'shh,they're asleep'....I weep.
Don't languish in anguish..pick yourself up..

Never again will I be totally happy..
A scar on my mind..a shadow inside..
A sleeping volcano..waiting to shake..
a well of memories waiting to wake..
Brings out a torrent of anger and pain....
Then calm once again..
Sleeping and weeping..

Life is so short and we never reach perfection...
But if I do go..please know..
that I will understand your pain.
I've walked that valley before you..I've been there..
There's a meaning for us all, if we dare..
The meaning of life is seen in death..that last breath...
And we have to let God be our guide..by our side..
To breathe in our ear..never fear..I am here.
It's very hard to see Him when we're weeping, like Mary..
our eyes are clouded and we just feel the ache..
But at the base of our being, we know that He's seeing..
God can explain the pain.

Like a potter, He'll shape....you can't escape!
Moulded and chipped..to bring out your core
Now blow on your fire..rekindle once more
Can you rise above the pain and the strife
To go on and live a normal life?
I know that I'll see them
One day very soon
The stone flesh will change..and move once again
Till then, they sleep..in the deep..where they're lain.
God can explain the pain.

LOOKING BACK

The most important relationship in my life, full of nurture, love, kindness, delight, modelling of good qualities, learning how to enjoy my gifts and to be generous, these are the things that my mother taught me. Her loss was devastating. I will try to share how I learnt to adjust and thrive after her death.

I count myself very fortunate that I enjoyed her positive presence in my life for twenty-five years. I could have lost her so much sooner. I watched her fade and that was heart breaking, but even then, she was teaching me how to cope with life's challenges, how to value myself and how to shorten a skirt! She really wanted me to have practical skills that I would find useful. I still can't do the latter. Many of her wise words and thoughts I do remember though and hold close to my heart. I remember as a small child she once said to me that life was like looking through a window, you can look at your own reflection in the glass or look through and notice the people at the other side. A deep thought to share with her seven-year-old daughter.

Looking back and remembering happy times with my mother has really helped me over the years to still feel a close, warm relationship with her. I recall the small events that made us laugh, the times we used to walk along arm in arm and the funny traditions that we shared. I do feel that reliving special times and happy memories in your mind can help you to heal following a bereavement. Also, looking at photos of your loved one taken at different times in your shared life. It's not morbid, it is heartwarming and natural. Make a collage of photos that make you smile and immerse yourself in the fun times that you shared.

“Looking back and remembering happy times with my mother has really helped me”

Some people seem to avoid talking about the person who has passed away, possibly out of embarrassment or maybe they feel unable to deal with the

tears that may flow. This point is worth emphasising as I certainly remember wanting to talk about that last afternoon when I saw my mother in the cottage hospital. I had no idea that those would be the last hours of her life. It was important then and it is important still. As time has passed, I have wanted to share memories of her with my family and friends and have done so piece by piece. I remember hardly anyone talking to me directly after my mum's death about her as a person. I did receive some cards and flowers which were kindly meant, but what I really needed was to talk and to find a few people who were happy to listen to me. Time spent listening to someone who has been bereaved is a great gift. Sometimes initially words may not be possible and hugs can convey sympathy and warmth.

“...what I really needed was to talk and to find a few people who were happy to listen to me. Time spent listening to someone who has been bereaved is a great gift”

I have been bereaved since my mother's death but this was when I was older and I had already experienced this greatest loss of all. I was baptised a few years after the death of my mother and I know how pleased she would have been. Not an active Christian herself, she still ensured that we as a family attended our local Baptist church each Sunday and my sister and I happily attended Sunday School. She gave me a start on my own journey to become a Christian, if I chose. My Christian faith has been the strong foundation for my life and has given me hope at times when I felt that all was lost. To conclude, I would simply say make many happy memories with those you love and when the time comes to say goodbye you will know that they have a store to last them a lifetime.

THOUGHTS ON LOSING A NON-CHRISTADELPHIAN PARENT

Some thoughts based upon losing my Dad when he was relatively young. He wasn't a Christadelphian, so not part of the 'tribe', and often people struggled with this as they couldn't fall back on the usual platitudes about

the Kingdom. Nor indeed did many of my Christadelphian friends even know him, unlike the multi-connected families elsewhere. However, I found that physical handwritten cards expressing sympathy DID help as they showed people were thinking of us, and I have tried subsequently to 'pay it forward' by sending cards to other people who have lost close family members, even if I didn't know their relative/loved one personally.

A few Dos and Don'ts for sending cards:

DO still send a card even weeks after the death – the loss and grief won't have gone away, and your card may arrive in that flat time after all the busyness of arranging a funeral and be all the more appreciated

DON'T assume the death of someone who has been seriously ill was simply a 'release from suffering' and that therefore the bereaved suffers less: the shock of loss and of the end of an intense period of caring/worrying is still huge, and the end of hoping for a miracle can be devastating.

DO choose a card thoughtfully, without trite pre-printed poetry. A simple card with a landscape and room to write your own message is probably better.

DON'T resort to cliches and platitudes, tempting though it can be. Even if someone was a fellow-believer the prospect of future reunion may seem distant and unhelpful to those left behind.

DO write something about your memories of the person who has died if you knew them: it helps the bereaved feel that their loved one hasn't vanished without trace. Celebrate the positive or quirky memories that made them unique.

DON'T assume anything about the person who has died if you didn't know them – your focus is on the shock / loss of the bereaved. Even if you know there was a difficult relationship there is still loss and regret that time to reconcile is gone.



CHAPTER FOUR

LOSS IN EARLY LIFE

MOURNING THE CHILDREN I'D ALWAYS WANTED

I spent so many years having days where I just wished I wasn't here rather than to carry on feeling this way – bereft, alone, excluded. I kept trying to count my blessings and thank God for them, and not be ungrateful for my life, but there was a hole that just could not be filled. Within nine months of marriage, we'd found out that my husband probably wouldn't be able to have children through an unrelated medical appointment. This was devastating immediately, even though we'd discussed the possibility before marriage and how we would handle it – throw ourselves into ecclesial work and fill the gap with cats and cars – no-one can truly understand how it feels to be childless not by choice until they've experienced it. The following three years were a myriad of medical appointments which eventually confirmed that the chance of conceiving together was pretty much zero. During this time, I experienced medics discussing my husband's case in earshot of other patients in the waiting room, being told that if we weren't considering a medical procedure that was heaps more complex and risky than IVF and had little chance of working, or a sperm donor, then we shouldn't be wasting the genetic counsellor's time, or being told to look at adoption.

“no-one can truly understand how it feels to be childless not by choice until they've experienced it”

Over the next nearly two decades, I lose count of the amount of times we were insensitively asked when we were going to have children, or couldn't we have children? Worst of all were the people who asked 'have you thought about adoption?' As if we wouldn't have considered this! We're

not stupid, of course we considered it, but the question itself shows very little awareness that adoption is just not the same as having your own biological child (something very important to me), and is actually very difficult and complex in the UK, generally these days not resulting in being handed some lovely new-born baby, but rather rehoming a child who has come from incredibly difficult and deprived circumstances, with potential emotional, physical and/or learning disabilities, while still having to remain in contact with the birth family – the source of all these issues including potential abuse. I didn't think this was something we were strong enough to cope with on top of the potential side issues associated with my husband's genetic condition that might develop over time, and I applaud those who are strong enough.

Meanwhile we were surrounded by all our friends having children, and I mean all. Even the ones who claimed they didn't want them or couldn't have them, eventually did. I stopped holding babies or playing with small children because it hurt too much, reminding me of what I didn't have, and it so often seemed to prompt someone at the meeting asking an insensitive question. I started avoiding most friends with children, as all they seemed to talk about were a) childbirth, b) how amazing whatever their child was doing now, and c) how they needed to move to a posher area so to get into the right school catchment areas. While of course I understand that children rightly became the focus of their lives and raising them was a massively important job, I didn't think these activities were necessarily more spiritual or more important than the things that single people or myself were doing, but it was all they could talk about, and that made me feel excluded over and over again. When it's on your mind, you also see families and children everywhere which reinforces over and over again what you don't have. Even now I find it easier to talk to men in the meeting – we seem to have more in common, like work challenges, and they don't turn around and tell me that 'I won't understand because I don't have children', without realising how much that hurts.

I wasn't really allowed to feel sorry for myself because there was always someone who had it worse, including in the family, but no amount of knowing this is the case can actually make you feel better yourself. I was diagnosed with depression and spent a lot of time in tears before medication actually numbed this and I could no longer cry. You would

think that eventually people would stop with the insensitive comments – certainly they had at work, in fact it was less likely there as people often made the direct choice not to have children and were not judged for that. However, in the meeting it seemed never to end and with every new birth I felt renewed pain and loss for the child or children that I could never have. Every insensitive comment or excluding conversation made me build up a protective shell to try to contain my emotions where it got to the point that people in the meeting didn't really know the real me at all, I think I came across as someone blunt, confident, and a bit stand offish (according to my husband), but it was my only way of coping. I really tried not to dwell on the situation, I threw myself into work by first going back for further education, and gradually taking on more and more responsibility while also trying to do as much in the ecclesia as possible for balance (not Sunday School – this hurt too much. It was easy when I was younger and saw no reason why I wouldn't have children one day). I focused on the advantages that come with not having children – freedom to travel, more relationship time, less complete exhaustion...except I was exhausted, exhausted with feeling so miserable and alone and different.

After a while the nature of the insensitive comments changed, now I had a decent job, people assumed I had chosen not to have children and was a 'career woman' – something that seemed to have negative connotations in comparison to the virtuous nature of child rearing and wasn't even true. I'd only gone back into further training because my dream of children by the age of 27 was never going to happen. Was I supposed to not use my God-given talents if they weren't going to be able to be used to raise children? I was trying to employ myself diligently within the ecclesia and the workplace and work as if working for the Lord, but somehow always felt like a second-class citizen at the meeting, either invisible or someone who must have their focus wrong because they had a job which had long hours and was stressful. Whether this was true or my perception alone, or a combination of both, I cannot know, but it is how it felt week after week. I dreaded bible classes or exhortations about Hannah, or Elizabeth, or Sarah – always from a male perspective, and often insensitive, and of course, all these women received children from God in the end whereas I did not. Did this mean God did not love me as he loved those women? Did it mean He had some other purpose for me? If so, I did not know what it was. To be fair, my husband was incredibly supportive. It was difficult for

him and his family too, probably made worse by me finding it difficult to be around small children such as nieces and nephews. Even though I actually loved being with them, it was always tainted by sadness or worry that someone was going to make a hurtful remark and sometimes I just wasn't up to dealing with it. Despite my strong belief in the impact of nature as well as nurture, we did look into adoption abroad as well as other more extreme measures but the impact of the difficult situation had taken its toll on our marriage over the years, and we eventually decided we should not bring a child into a situation where we were arguing so much, and I do thank God for that. I had tried hard not to blame him, it was not his fault, but he seemed to cope better than me with our loss, perhaps due to having a fulfilling life at work and in the meeting, or perhaps it genuinely is just a bit different for men. I always felt that a part of me, maybe an arm, was missing. Sometimes I was absolutely horrible to him, and he didn't deserve that, but it came from a place of desperation and pain and wasn't helped by me using alcohol to numb my emotions. It also didn't help that brothers and sisters always assumed it was me (as a woman) that was unable to have children (an interesting one that!) or me that had chosen not to have children. Should we have just explained the situation upfront to everyone to prevent this? Why should we have to? Being infertile and not having children is very emotional and very personal – we didn't want this spread all round Christadelphia and our wider families; Christadelphians are too good at gossiping.

Over twenty years later, I am coming to terms with the situation a lot more despite still being biologically of childbearing age, and still sometimes getting the insensitive questions or assumptions. Sadly, my husband and I split up; not being able to have children together was a strain too much for our marriage on top of other issues. Despite much counselling over the years, we both think it was a strong contributor to breaking us in the end. I have always believed in that verse about God not testing us more than we can bear, and that we both survived this is testament to that, but our marriage didn't. Perhaps things are a little easier now because I'm being allowed to use my talents in different ways in wider Christadelphia, although not in ecclesial life, and also in my job, my leadership roles sometimes feel a bit like parenting.

Perhaps it is a bit easier because I can see that it's important that I have a

relatively secure full-time job so that I can provide for and look after my (now) husband who has struggled with poverty over the past decade and severe illness and being out of work more recently and helping mend his broken heart gave me real purpose. Perhaps being with someone who is not the biological source of our sad situation is easier than being sad together as a couple day after day, I don't know. I am grateful and amazed that I now have adult stepchildren, and my ex-husband also has remarried and has stepchildren, which I imagine must be a great blessing for him too, even though our situations do not meet God's ideal for marriage.

It doesn't ever completely go away though, that longing to produce and love and look after your own children with the person you love. I still wonder who will look after me when I am older, and my loved ones are all dead, and how I will cope with the loneliness if my husband dies first. I still get a brief moment of pain when hearing about someone else expecting a baby even though I am happy for them, and I still feel like a pariah when all the sisters in the meeting talk about motherhood as if it is something we have all experienced. Yes, I am grateful for all that I do have, and I appreciate that I have always had a relationship, which must be a loss really difficult for our single brothers and sisters to bear, but I plead with anyone who has not really thought about this - please consider how hurtful thoughtless remarks about having children can be to those without, and try to include everyone in ecclesial life, not just those who fit the average middle-class married with 2.4 children mould. Jesus reached out those who were hurting, and he asked us to love our neighbour, so we also need to try to include everyone, and particularly to help bind up the broken-hearted.

“Jesus reached out those who were hurting, and he asked us to love our neighbour, so we also need to try to include everyone, and particularly to help bind up the broken-hearted.”

UN-CONCEIVED MOURNING

I am mourning a child that's not even been conceived.
I'm trying hard to tell my heart it should not be so grieved.
My heart is not responding to the logic in my brain.
The feelings that it holds within sometimes long remain.

I prayed for many years, to have future Godly seed.
The joy of little ones I thought is what my family needs.
Did I set myself for a fall by having a dream and hope?
Now that they're not coming true, I find it hard to cope.

I lay my heart before you Lord for only you can see
Deep within my inward parts to know what's best for me.
Only you can sooth my soul; Only you can change my will.
Though I may feel forsaken, help me to praise you still.

I LAY MY HEART BEFORE
YOU LORD, FOR ONLY
YOU CAN SEE.

MISCARRIAGE

I had a missed miscarriage around 12 weeks. This was my first pregnancy and I'd chosen to have an early scan as we were so excited and waiting for 12 weeks to see our little one seemed impossible! We had a scan during week seven and the baby measured perfectly, and we saw the little flutter of the heartbeat. It felt so surreal and such a miracle to be watching real life growing inside of my body. When we made it to the 12-week scan, we were sure all would be okay: I thought 'if something has gone wrong, I would know and have had physical symptoms by now, plus we've seen the little heartbeat so strong and been told everything looks perfect a few weeks ago'. 'I'm sorry, there is no heartbeat'. The baby miscarried almost exactly one day after the first scan we'd had. We were devastated. I felt like I had been living a lie. For almost the whole five weeks between the two scans, I had been carrying my dead baby. And I had no idea. How was that possible? I could not get my head around it at all and felt so ashamed of myself that I didn't know something was wrong.

During the first few days after the scan, decisions had to be made as to how to move forward. I opted for a small procedure to remove everything surgically. I couldn't bear the thought of just waiting and waiting for it to pass naturally, not knowing how long it would take after nothing happening in the previous five weeks. We had told a few people that we were 'expecting' prior to our 12-week scan, including close family and a few friends. My husband's parents were brilliant at supporting us physically at the very beginning. They took us in to be with them and my mother-in-law went to appointments and the surgery with me while my husband was working. The unquestioning physical support was so necessary in that time. There were distractions where we needed them and there was space to allow grief. After the physical side of things was over, different friends and family members really stood up to help with the emotional side of things. My cousin helped me immensely. She allowed me to talk about all the different feelings I had; the deep unexplainable sadness, frustration, confusion, guilt and she didn't always try and rationalise everything. She didn't turn a positive spin onto everything. She

just allowed me to feel and verbalise anything I needed to. This was such a massive learning point for me in this experience; while it is good to ‘look on the bright side’ of things, sometimes we all need space and time to grieve and sit in that sadness. Only by acknowledging the hurt we feel can we begin to heal inside.

“Only by acknowledging the hurt we feel can we begin to heal inside.”

Several comments were repeated to me as people became more widely aware of our loss within our ecclesia: ‘At least you’re young- you still have time/can try again’, ‘at least it was so early’, ‘at least you know you can get pregnant’, ‘It’ll happen (at the right time)...’, ‘I had a miscarriage (or two) but then went on to have ‘child x’ (within a year of the miscarriage)’. As I mentioned before, it is important to look for positivity and I could within certain settings. Mainly when it was balanced with an appreciation of the loss I was feeling. But many times, I heard these comments, and rather than helping me they made me feel invalidated and like I shouldn’t be feeling the loss as strongly as I was. At the time, I couldn’t see into the future and didn’t know that I would ever carry a baby to full term. It was frustrating that people sounded so sure of this. These comments also made me feel like I was expected to move on and get pregnant again soon to ‘replace’ the baby I lost. I didn’t want to do that. If I were to ever have another baby, it would be ANOTHER baby, a separate pregnancy, a separate experience, and a separate baby. Not a replacement.

“These comments also made me feel like I was expected to move on and get pregnant again soon to ‘replace’ the baby I lost.”

Almost more upsetting than the comments I did receive, were those I did not receive. Friends who knew I was pregnant from early on and friends who I know knew soon after the miscarriage just didn’t contact me at all. They avoided the subject and never raised it with me. I guess for fear of causing pain or upset. But all I wanted to do was talk about my baby. It was such a massive part of my life and changed my whole mindset, even if only for a few months, that I couldn’t forget about it in anything I did, and I didn’t want to. I wanted to share my experience with anyone who would listen. I only found a few open ears and arms.

Everybody has different timelines of healing. I don't think the pain of miscarriage will ever go away. I pray that I will never forget what I went through so that I can show care and empathy to anyone else who may go through this in the future. We need a listening ear, completely open to anything we might say. There is no judgement in true friendship. We need to be allowed to feel what we need to feel in the time we need to take, not the time that others expect us to heal in. I remember waiting for a daily message from my cousin in the first couple of weeks and this gave me so much strength. Do keep checking in with them as time goes on. Over the next few months there will be many 'milestones', they will be grieving not just the loss of the physical baby, but the life they had imagined for themselves growing more pregnant, and then having a new-born around. Check in with them around the time their 20-week scan would have been, and definitely check in around their due date. Keep up open communication and create a safe space for them to come and unburden at any time or day they need to. It may be a comment here, and a hug needed there. Just don't go silent. I will never forget the baby I lost, and I don't want you to forget either. Most of all – pray. Pray with them for peace of mind and for God's loving arms to be around them in whatever situation they are in. Pray alone for them that you will be of comfort to them and be able to help them. Pray for God to bless them in whatever way He sees best. Don't leave the power of prayer out. 'God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble'.

**“GOD IS OUR REFUGE AND
STRENGTH, A VERY
PRESENT HELP IN
TROUBLE.”**

STILLBIRTH

It'll soon be seventeen years since I lost my son in a stillbirth. It is hard to believe that its has been that long. I can remember the details of that day very vividly. There was nothing easy about grieving my son then, and even seventeen years later, if I think about it it will still bring me to tears. There are several things that I did that helped me cope, but it still is the hardest, most difficult, and faith-shaking thing I ever went through.

After my son died, I had extreme anxiety. I had developed a condition called pre-eclampsia and which contributed to my sons' death, but also made me very ill. I thought I was going to die as well, and I had those fears especially at night, and it made it hard for me to sleep. Sleeping became almost impossible and eventually I had to ask my Dr for help and needed to get on some medication to help with my sleep.

After the funeral and when my health began to improve, I tried to focus on things that made me happy. I was unable to sit in my house for long periods of time. The less busy I was the more my depression worsened. One way I stayed busy was planning trips. Sometimes, just traveling to a beach an hour away, or visiting a friend I hadn't seen in a while. My husband and I even took a trip to Hawaii.

When I think back on that trip, it was mostly a blur, but I know being in God's beautiful creation did a lot to help me. I also stayed busy by focusing on cooking and entertaining, something that I really loved to do. I invited people over and planned elaborate dishes to cook. Whatever it is that brings you joy, you should do it. Traveling, and cooking were those things for me then, but it could be anything you enjoy, like exercise, crafting, or reading. People say really ridiculous things sometimes, but it's important to remember that even though what they say might hurt your feelings, they took the time to try and come over and try to talk and comfort you.

“People say really ridiculous things sometimes, but it’s important to remember that even though what they say might hurt your feelings, they took the time to try and come over and try to talk and comfort you.”

I didn’t feel like going to the meeting. There were a couple of sisters in my ecclesia that were pregnant when I was and had healthy babies they were taking to the meeting. I received some good advice from a couple that had lost children many years prior, and they told me to just keep going to the meeting. Even if I didn’t want to or even if I would cry through the whole service, just keep going. So, I did. I just kept going. I fear that had I stopped going I wouldn’t have ever gone back. Sometimes, it felt like I got nothing out of it. I was so angry at God, sometimes after the memorial service, I would get in the car and scream with sadness and frustration and the tears would roll. I couldn’t sing the hymns. This lasted a long time, probably at least a year.

“I was angry, really angry, at God. This is something I’m not particularly proud of..”

I was angry, really angry, at God. This is something I’m not particularly proud of, but it is my truth. I felt like I tried to live a good life, I had tried to follow God’s commands. Why me? Why my child? Asking ‘why?’ is a normal thing to do after you experience a loss. However, I wasn’t just asking why. The tone of my why was accusatory towards God. Verses like “all things work for good for those that believe God”, would make me feel crazy. What possible good could come from taking my child? For me, there was no reason good enough.

Now that I have seventeen years of distance between that loss and my current self, I wish I hadn’t wasted so much time being angry with God. The truth is, I probably will never fully understand why that happened. I had to learn to put trust in God again. He is all powerful and wise, and his ways are not our ways. I recently read a book called ‘Trusting God’. It is by Jerry Bridges; he is not a Christadelphian. There were parts of this book that have helped me heal my heart, even seventeen years later. One of the things he writes is ‘If we are to experience peace in our souls in times of adversity, we must come to a place where we truly believe that God’s ways

are simply beyond us and stop asking Him, even trying to determine it ourselves. This might seem like an intellectual cop-out, a refusal to deal with the tough issues of life. In fact, it is just the opposite. It is a surrender to the truth about God and our circumstances.’ I wish I had read this seventeen years ago.

Six months after the loss of my son, it became clear to me that I couldn’t navigate my emotions alone. I had to seek out a therapist who was extremely helpful to me. I saw a therapist through the next two years of my life, and she helped me navigate the emotions and anxiety I felt about giving birth to my second child two years afterwards. Everything had changed in my life after that incident. I wasn’t the same person that I was. My husband and I had different ways of dealing with our grief and we needed help to navigate our relationship afterwards.

So, if there was anything I would tell someone struggling with a similar situation it would be, do the things that bring you joy, seek help from professionals, continue to go to the meeting, and trust God to see you through.

“...do the things that bring you joy, seek help from professionals, continue to go to the meeting, and trust God to see you through.”

References

Bridges, J. (1988). *Trusting God: Even When Life Hurts*.
Colorado: NavPress Publishing Group



CHAPTER FIVE

LOSS FOLLOWING A LONG/TERMINAL ILLNESS

GRIEF BEFORE DEATH: A PERSONAL JOURNEY

This is a personal account and thoughts of a journey which started more than four years ago. The first and an important point is that the circumstances surrounding every death are different and the way an individual will react is also different. This is, therefore, an account of the experiences my late wife and I faced, and how we decided to handle them. I would emphasise there is no right or wrong way.

The journey started with a 111 call after I found Ruth looking rather vacant and, as I thought, about to collapse. She did not collapse and was in fact totally lucid when talking to the 111 team. An appointment was made that afternoon with our GP who arranged for Ruth to attend a clinic at the local hospital for a suspected mini stroke. She had a series of tests culminating with a consultation with a clinician. We were shown the brain scans and you didn't need to be a radiologist to see the tumour. This came as a real shock and the immediate next step was to inform our two daughters. The diagnosis was a grade 4 glioblastoma, a particularly virulent tumour with a typical survival of approximately one year from diagnosis.

We were transferred from the local hospital to St George's Hospital, which was the regional centre for brain tumours and where Ruth underwent surgery. She was then transferred to the Royal Surrey County Hospital, which has links with St George's Hospital, for follow up.

The first few nights and days after the diagnosis were particularly difficult. We, however, quickly decided that the first thing we would do after we woke up each morning and while still in bed, would be to discuss the

thoughts and worries we had during the long hours of the night. This enabled us to share, discuss and confront our concerns and anxieties, which we both found helpful.

“This enabled us to share, discuss and confront our concerns and anxieties, which we both found helpful.”

From the outset, Ruth and I decided we would be totally open and transparent with each other and others. The only proviso was that we ensured there was an appropriate pecking order, because of the highly efficient Christadelphian grapevine. We also found that this transparency made a big difference when talking to the health care professionals.

During the year following the diagnosis our faith clearly sustained us, but it did not make day to day living any easier. Initially life was reasonably normal, and we made an early decision that we would do as much as we could when we could. This included going out for meals with family and friends and going away with the whole family for a long weekend.

The first line of treatment post-surgery was steroids and a course of radiotherapy which Ruth completed. She was also a candidate for chemotherapy, but this was discontinued after one round because of complications in her condition.

Ruth had two major periods in hospital during the year and these were rather difficult and harrowing times. The first was for a neurological problem, which was never really diagnosed. It started with a loss of speech, but her condition then deteriorated. She could not obey the simplest commands and started speaking total gibberish. This was particularly difficult, as it was the one time we couldn't communicate, and I felt I had 'lost' my wife. However, over the next few days her condition gradually improved from not being able to communicate and not remembering her birth date and daughters' names to being not only able to remember but also to write them down unaided. Although her cognitive function deteriorated a little, it didn't stop her being competitive at Scrabble.

The second admission followed a few days of intense pain, which was not alleviated by drugs. I found this very distressing as until then a real positive

was that Ruth had not suffered any pain. She was diagnosed with pneumonia and a lung abscess. In addition, she had some unusual skin lesions. These two hospitalisations were at the local hospital, which did not have specific neuro-oncological expertise, which caused me some concern. I was, however, in constant contact with the clinical nurse specialists at the Royal Surrey County Hospital who were a great support throughout. I found it rather ironic that whereas Ruth was only in hospital for four days following brain surgery, she was in hospital for nine days and three weeks for the neurological episode and lung problem, respectively.

Post-surgery, Ruth had a series of brain scans which were initially positive but then a scan showed deterioration. At the following outpatient visit we were told very pleasantly but clearly that no more could be done and there was no point in attending further outpatient visits, although the staff would always be at the end of a telephone if required. We both drove away from that consultation content and at peace, principally because all medical decisions had been taken out of our hands.

Ruth wished to be cared for at home, which I managed to do until the end. Initially I was able to care for her on my own but there came a point when it was recognised that I needed more help. We were put on the list for the Community Intermediate Care Team, but we didn't know when they would be able to start. One evening I was feeling particularly low as we had got ourselves into a bit of a mess with personal hygiene issues. However, within a couple of hours the doorbell rang and there were two carers on the doorstep just when we needed them. That was one of two occasions when I was clearly being looked after by God. The carers came initially three and then four times a day and were excellent. It meant I could have quality time with Ruth and not concern myself about her personal care. Until the last couple of days, Ruth was totally aware of everything and that was horrible because of the indignity of what was involved.

Ruth's major goal was to see my milestone birthday, which she managed to do and enjoy. However, within a couple of days I could no longer understand her. The GP, who was lovely, visited at that time. I can't remember what was said, but Ruth replied twice and very clearly, 'What's the point?', and I had to agree with her.

I was aware that there was the possibility of overnight respite by Marie Curie nurses and so a week after my birthday I made enquiries. I was told that there was no vacancy that night. However, a couple of hours later I had a call to say there was a slot after all and that a nurse would come at 10pm. That was when God directly intervened a second time, because Ruth passed away at five minutes to ten. So, literally within a couple of minutes after her death, the Marie Curie nurse appeared and took over. She was wonderful and reassuring and told me to take my time, ring my daughters etc. She tidied things up, laid Ruth out and eventually called the doctor and undertakers. What a relief and support.

“God directly intervened a second time”

I was taken by surprise by the undertaker when I was asked to select an outfit to dress Ruth before her burial. Fortunately, my daughter and particularly my 14-year-old granddaughter took control. My granddaughter made an excellent choice and said Ruth had to look smart at the resurrection.

The time between death and the funeral was protracted but I coped, and then I realised it was exactly a year to the day from Ruth’s diagnosis to her funeral. At the first anniversary of her funeral, I visited the grave and spent a quiet period in prayer and meditation before returning to the car. I was relieved that a year had passed and that I had coped with all the birthdays, anniversaries etc. Then I realised that it was not one year but two, because for me the year from diagnosis to death was more difficult than the first year on my own. I think that was because most of my grieving had taken place together with my wife of 46 years. For some time, I felt guilty that I had not experienced the ‘usual’ post death grieving until I was reassured after speaking to a sister who I knew well, who had also had a similar journey and reaction.

I will conclude with a few final thoughts and advice. Because I had managed to look after Ruth at home and we always tried to do things together when we could, both before and after the diagnosis, I had few regrets after she passed away. This I believe made the grieving process easier. As I mentioned earlier, Ruth and I were totally open from the outset with each other and with others. I personally found this helpful, as it was

much easier to talk about situations as they arose, and I didn't need to worry about who knew what.

Throughout I was greatly helped by a sister and a very good long-term friend who specialises in end-of-life care. She often gave me much needed practical advice, some of which I didn't really want to hear at the time. For example, she asked whether I had arranged an undertaker and whether I had discussed with my daughters what I would do about contacting them etc. immediately after Ruth had passed away. I knew I had to consider these issues but until prompted, I didn't want to confront them. I also took her advice that I shouldn't forget my own wellbeing and that I needed a confidant. I chose a brother who I knew well and could totally rely upon. I knew that anything I said would remain confidential between us. I was able to contact him at any time and he would listen when I needed to get things off my chest. Throughout the whole period and at every stage the much-maligned NHS was excellent. Finally, always accept any appropriate help that is offered.

“...always accept any appropriate help that is offered.”

LIFE AFTER DEATH

You hear the words 'It's terminal'. The time that followed those words felt like a death sentence for me. My husband was suffering from cancer and shortly I was to lose the one person I loved and cared about more than any others. When it finally happened I felt I should have been prepared but was I? I put on a front and carried on and just bulldozed into all the plans we had discussed during those long months of waiting. Never once did I stop and think 'I should give myself time'. This was not on my list of things to do.

“I was to lose the one person I loved and cared about more than any others”

I felt I would be letting my husband down if I did not start what I had promised him I would do, so I just got on and did it. I put the house on the market within a month, found a new house in a totally new area and moved home within four months. I did all this despite many people saying to me ‘don’t do it so soon, wait.’ I felt the need to do what we had planned, it was important and kept me going.

Prayer time died, as my focus just revolved around OUR plans. I never once prayed, as I couldn’t. Instead I found myself just talking, shouting, crying to God, telling Him all sorts of things, even telling Him I didn’t believe in Him.

During the loneliness of grief, the brain starts thinking in an ‘I’m on my own so I have to look out for myself’ way. My daily life went from happy and laughing, to unhappiness and sadness because I was missing the love of my life. I was trying to cope with the desperate situation endeavouring to put his terrible suffering and death behind me and cope with all our memories, plus packing up my house and moving.

Four months after moving to the new house and all was straight and probably everything my husband would have hated. I lost it and totally broke down.

It’s the empty and bottomless heartache. It’s the feeling when the sadness has become well-worn that exhaustion takes over and the well of tears has run dry.

“It’s the empty and bottomless heartache”

In Genesis 23:1-3, Abraham mourned for his wife, sat and wept by her. Who knows how long he grieved the loss, but it would not have happened overnight. Who knows how lonely Abraham felt after losing her, but I am sure he felt the same loneliness and heartache just as much as I did, and others do.

I know I should have let Jesus carry my burdens and let Him bind up my wounds and heal my broken heart. **It is others who help us to do this, His hands and feet.** I was the one who could not give in and let Him do that, until the day I finally arrived at the point when I had to ask for help.

“A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling.” – Psalm 68:5

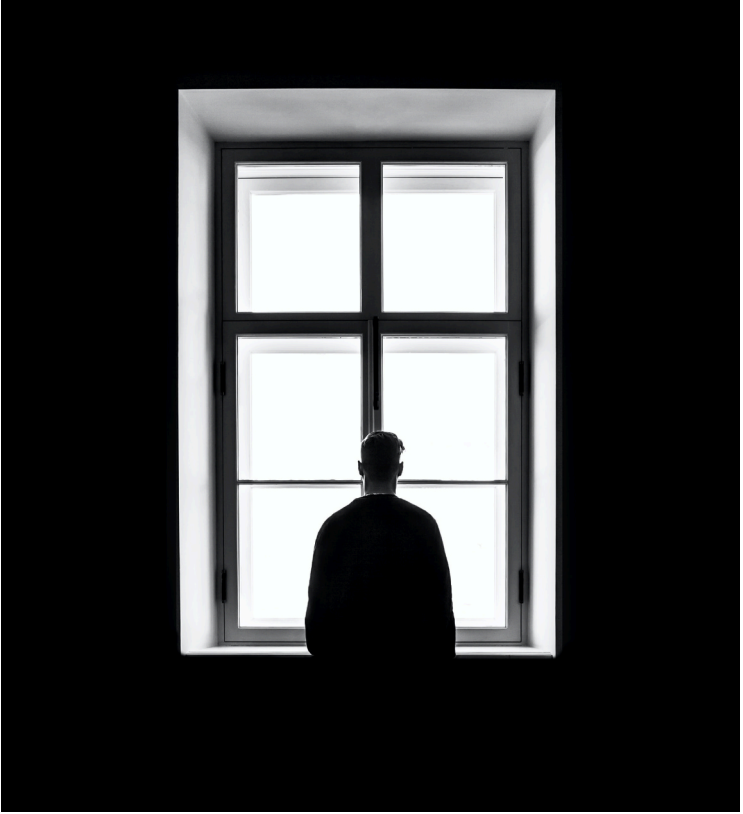
Prayer is now different for me as I do just find myself talking to God especially when I need to plan or have a worry. My prayers are informal, spontaneous and not planned. Had I ever stopped being able to pray, or, just like the rest of my journey, did I have to find a different route?

Where was my ecclesia in all this? With moving, that did not help as my new ecclesia did not even know that I had just been widowed. My old ecclesia tried to say things to me, to slow me down and help in any way possible but it was me keeping everyone out, as I had my planned list that my husband and I had made together. Now I know our planned list was not meant to be done straight away but when I was ready. Everyone tried to tell me to wait but I put up more and more barriers in front of them, especially with my new ecclesia. This is something that I am still having to work on. Nearly four years have passed and I now realise that I need to let people in. Those I have allowed in are supportive and have worked to help me to find a way forward.

“There is life after a death, you will always have a special place in your heart for the person you have lost but you can move forward and have a new life”

There is life after a death and although you will always have a special place in your heart for the person you have lost, you can move forward and have a new life. So, you may not believe it, but life can continue after the death of a loved one.





CHAPTER SIX

LOSS OF A CLOSE FAMILY MEMBER OR FRIEND

LOSS OF A CLOSE FRIEND

From a very early age I was introduced to death and bereavement. To begin with, I think my responses were the same as those with whom I was living. However as I grew older each death became more meaningful to me personally. Worst to cope with were those of people my own age and children. As life went on, I lost those very close to me – my grandparents, my aunts and uncles, and my father. I suppose being able to involved with those who were left helped me, and there were those who needed support. Having had this background I was confident that I would cope with such loss as it came along. That was until my younger brother died very suddenly on the golf course. I had been with him the previous day as he did our mother's garden. We had chatted away, he giving me advice as to what I should and should not do for Mum's care, realising I would please myself anyway. We parted on good terms as I went to collect Mum from the hairdresser and he went home for lunch. That was the last time I saw him and I will never forget that awful phone call the next day. I put the phone down and wept and wept and wept. I had to let the family know and my sister was three hundred miles away. I could not reach her and so my nephew was the next one I looked to for help. He and his wife were marvellous. And still I wept. Ahead of me was the awful realisation that I had to tell our ninety-two-year-old mother that her only son was dead. My nephew came and shared this task with me. I cried and cried and cried. He had no God in his life and his life was suddenly cut short. Life had not prepared me for the impact of this loss. I was not prepared for this reaction but the focus had to be on my mother and her care and I had to focus her. She lived for a further three years after this, and my reaction to her falling

asleep was one of relief and hope. She was asleep and at peace awaiting the return of her Lord.

“He had no God in his life and his life was suddenly cut short. Life had not prepared me for the impact of this loss.”

Throughout my life I had never married but had a wonderful friendship with a sister, a friendship which lasted over fifty years. We were so different: I was a career person and she was a mother with four children. I was out in the world while she was very busy at home. I was always welcome in her house and we shared so much together. We were together through tragedies in her life: the sudden death of her brother and the tragic death of her daughter. I was with her when one of her children was born and helped when the others made their way into the world. I was part of the family wedding celebrations and her children were part of my life. We were often mistaken for sisters in the flesh. And so, it was with fear and dread I listened to the diagnosis of her cancer. At the same time her husband was diagnosed with cancer too. I felt that my world had suddenly become a disaster area. But this was not the time to sink. There was work to be done. There were hospital appointments scheduled, the aftermath of treatments, the drug routine to master, the house to keep running.

“I felt that my world had suddenly become a disaster area. But this was not the time to sink. There was work to be done.”

There were ups and downs that came upon me unawares. I did not keep the spoon drawer tidy; I did not hang out the washing properly nor did I turn it at the appropriate time. She was most upset that I had put a non-matching sheet on her bed when changing it in the middle of the night. I am colour blind!! I could not understand such criticism as we had never disagreed, but laughed instead at our own strong and weak points. However, a young brother who had lost his wife put it into perspective for me. I had taken over (and not very well) all the tasks that she had done so well over the years and I had removed her independence and strength. I smiled again. We had always shared our love of scripture. I often phoned her to discuss something from the readings. Our special likes were different. I loved the Psalms but she so enjoyed reading about the Kings and slotting them into place. As time went on, I would read to her. One

day she asked me to read the Psalms of my choice. I did willingly. I asked why she had made that request to which she replied that she could feel my passion for them. These are moments that make everlasting treasure.

“These are moments that make everlasting treasure”

The kingdom became very real and we spoke about working together there. We would have to find each other too! Never in my life had the kingdom been so real and meaningful. She was concerned about my life without her and I told her what I would miss and we were able to share and thank each other for what we had enjoyed. There were times I had to leave her to sort out things two hundred miles away at home. Each parting was painful but I tried to be positive. This was made easier with help from the family. This devastating disease was taking over her body and the consultant advised her to fulfil any last wishes before the drugs made that impossible. And so it was that we had an amazing week at Arisaig on Scotland's west coast. We sailed to the Isle of Muck and she took me to a very special bay. We walked along the shore and for a final time she tried to teach me the names of wild flowers. She was so weak but the strength of that week will never leave me. There was her husband's death and funeral and a gradual sinking. Her time had come to go into the hospice.

There it was that we spent our last weeks together and bade each other farewell till the kingdom. The funeral took me to my lowest ebb again so unexpectedly. As she was laid to rest, I wept and wept and wept. I cried for the loss to me of my friend and the void she had left. This was final. To my shame I did not think of the kingdom at this point, but only of my own pain. The years have passed now and there is still a void in my life I cannot phone her and during lockdown how amazing that would have been. We cannot share holidays, knitting, family stories and most of all the laughs about things which we alone found amusing. I have no close friend at Bible School. However, I have her Bible and it is there beside me every day. I am on the Welfare committee at Gowanlea and amazingly the opportunity arose for me to go to South Africa and work in the townships there. Her family keep in touch with me and I feel close to them. The void will always be there but the certainty is that in the kingdom we spoke about in those dark days we will again be able to share our one sure and bright hope.

LOSS OF A SISTER

Losing a sibling is never easy. Losing a sibling who you were very close to, both in age and relationship-wise, shared a room with as a child, relied on for company as a teenager, and was my best friend as an adult was especially hard. People had thought we were twins growing up and were so used to seeing us everywhere together.

My sister was diagnosed with a degenerative condition when she was only 23. As the slightly older sibling, and the one who lived with her, I felt that my role was to support her to come to terms with this. I was the one she shared her fears with about the diagnosis - we were both very familiar with a couple of people who had the same degenerative condition, and it fell to me to share the diagnosis with our parents and wider family. This was especially difficult, but not nearly as difficult as anything she had to go through. I watched her put a brave, smiley face on every day in the hospital when people came to visit and then relapse after they left. She was a shining example of trying to put others first whilst coming to terms with her own diagnosis and condition.

“She was a shining example of trying to put others first whilst coming to terms with her own diagnosis and condition.”

I feel like I lost my sister twice: the first time was when her condition meant that she could no longer communicate with us, except for through six words: ‘fine’, ‘indeed’, ‘excellent’ and three others which I can’t remember now. As someone who had been very articulate and had demonstrated a very strong personality - this was incredibly difficult for everyone close to her. It was even worse when those six words left her. The second time was when she passed away with pneumonia in hospital, pumped full of morphine to dull the pain.

Her condition was a progressive one, and unlike many others, each time she regressed, she stayed at that stage without improving until the next regression. This was so hard to see in someone so young. In our

conversations, we never questioned ‘Why her?’ It was something that we all accepted, no matter how hard. So many people sent cards and prayed for her recovery, but that was not to be. After an initial 12 months of fighting her condition, and at times trying to pretend that it wasn’t happening if she ignored it, she settled down into an acceptance and tried to make the most of what she could do. She was a great example of endurance in the face of adversity.

As the big sister, I found it frustrating that there was nothing I could do. I was used to taking action, to sorting things out, to organising and arranging things, but in this case, living 100 miles away and with a young family, my hands were tied. This meant that I didn’t see her as often as I would have liked, and this is still something that I regret. At one stage when I was really worried about her condition, my boss was very clear, I could have time off work to sort out her care, but not to do her care as that would be needed every day. I was able to use my knowledge and skills gained through work to help get her the care package that she needed from social services - it didn’t feel like much, but I hoped that it made a difference to her quality of life.

She suffered from the condition for 18 years before she was released through death. During that period, we had frustrating times - trying to cook meals with/without particular ingredients; memorable times - singing in choir together even though she could hardly see the words/music (this was something we had done together for years in church on a Sunday, in choir, at youth weekends and fraternal... and something which gave us both great pleasure); hilarious times - nearly wetting ourselves with laughter at some of our family’s musical antics when we celebrated her 40th birthday; and heartbreaking times - sitting with her on Christmas Day while she had an ongoing seizure for several hours. These are just a few of the memories we shared.

Really, the loss was a progressive one as her condition developed. The only way I could cope at the time was to box up my feelings, put a brave face on and do what I could to help. That was my way of coping and to some extent still is.

conversations, we never questioned ‘Why her?’ It was something that we all accepted, no matter how hard. So many people sent cards and prayed for her recovery, but that was not to be. After an initial 12 months of fighting her condition, and at times trying to pretend that it wasn’t happening if she ignored it, she settled down into an acceptance and tried to make the most of what she could do. She was a great example of endurance in the face of adversity.

As the big sister, I found it frustrating that there was nothing I could do. I was used to taking action, to sorting things out, to organising and arranging things, but in this case, living 100 miles away and with a young family, my hands were tied. This meant that I didn’t see her as often as I would have liked, and this is still something that I regret. At one stage when I was really worried about her condition, my boss was very clear, I could have time off work to sort out her care, but not to do her care as that would be needed every day. I was able to use my knowledge and skills gained through work to help get her the care package that she needed from social services – it didn’t feel like much, but I hoped that it made a difference to her quality of life.

She suffered from the condition for 18 years before she was released through death. During that period, we had frustrating times – trying to cook meals with/without particular ingredients; memorable times – singing in choir together even though she could hardly see the words/music (this was something we had done together for years in church on a Sunday, in choir, at youth weekends and fraternal... and something which gave us both great pleasure); hilarious times – nearly wetting ourselves with laughter at some of our family’s musical antics when we celebrated her 40th birthday; and heartbreaking times – sitting with her on Christmas Day while she had an ongoing seizure for several hours. These are just a few of the memories we shared.

Really, the loss was a progressive one as her condition developed. The only way I could cope at the time was to box up my feelings, put a brave face on and do what I could to help. That was my way of coping and to some extent still is.

WHAT HELPED AT THE TIME?

- Her positive attitude and response to her condition and my positive attitude. The fact that we were both positive people helped.
- Knowing that there were so many people praying for her.
- Holding on to the big picture of the future and the certain knowledge that I/we will see her again in God's Kingdom and we will laugh and sing together again.
- A boss who was supportive even though she'd never met her.
- A youth worker from a local church who offered some bereavement counselling after her death.

WHAT WOULD HAVE HELPED?

- The offer of some food/emotional support in the early days when I was working full time and spending every evening with her in hospital early on. This was a very difficult time for me personally and a situation that I'm sure many carers can relate to.

“...in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me ,”My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” - 2 Corinthians 12:6-10

“For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness”, made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God’s glory displayed in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.” - 2 Corinthians 4:9-9.

“If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.” - Philippians 3:4-6

“At my first defence, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them. But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength.” - 2 Timothy 4:16-17.

BEING THERE AT THE END

Sometimes you feel like you've not been a very good friend. You've lost touch for years then an opportunity comes up and you reconnect and it's as if you were never apart. Sometimes perhaps God is giving you an opportunity to be there for someone at a really important point when you were the right person in the right place at the right time. I've felt this several times over the years of my close friendship with D. First, meeting at university hiding in the background when neither of us could stand the racket and realising we shared a similar sense of humour. A year later, talking about faith, and the amazing realisation that he was actually interested in God and wanted to know Him. He helped me when a relationship ended and we tried out being together but I realised that if we were, it would be so intense, there would be no room for anyone else in our little world. We went through the difficulty of readjusting to being just friends, and then he surprised me returning to university after one holiday announcing that his local ecclesia had baptised him - I was so thrilled. Friendship retained, we were able to sort out a house share with other students via a kind Christadelphian couple, and walk to the nearby meeting together. Our lives went separate ways after university but years later we met again in the workplace not realising we both had the same

employer. Years after that I found out he lived 10 minutes away from my new house and just turned up, so many coincidences. But I wasn't there for his baptism, or when he felt like a misfit in the nearest ecclesia, or when his dad died and he left the meeting, or when his contract ended and he was living in poverty, or when he got embroiled in a difficult relationship.

Life had moved on for me, marriage made it awkward to maintain contact, and life and moving home took over, but it was my loss. Perhaps this was why God allowed me to reconnect in latter years, and to be at his hospital bedside when he fell asleep. Perhaps this was why I was given the opportunity to make sure his faith was part of his funeral when his family from the other side of the world weren't sure what to do. Being with someone you love while they die is hard and horrible, but it is also a privilege that some do not get to have. D didn't pass peacefully, he hadn't had a peaceful life, and he wasn't very old, and it was a sudden violent illness ending in critical care with the cause found too late. But I was glad I was able to be there holding his hand and talking to him, hoping maybe he could still hear. He'd been a friend for over 20 years and at one early point during that, my closest friend and support. I didn't expect to be so bereft, and given my marriage had just ended, it was also the first funeral I attended alone. I missed D. We didn't talk often, he was a bit of a hermit, but when we did it was like being back where we started. Losing someone who has been in your life for a long time, no matter how regularly, leaves a hole if you were close.

Its difficult to understand compared to the loss of someone close like a spouse, but it still hurts, and feels like something is missing: a piece of history, a unique relationship. Many may think I will not see him again, but I think a relationship once built with God is not easily broken even if it doesn't involve church attendance. I pray that others going through the sorrow of watching someone die will also at some point appreciate the privilege of being able to be there right at their very end.



CHAPTER SEVEN

SUDDEN LOSS

LOSS FOLLOWING ADDICTION

My twin brother, David, died suddenly and unexpectedly in June 2018. We were 48 years old, and David suffered heart failure. Born prematurely, we each weighed approximately the same as a bag of sugar, and while David was born naturally, I was born by caesarean an hour later. David and I were exceptionally close – our older sister being six years older, we very much formed our own separate unit. As a twin, you come with a ready-made friend, confidante, soulmate. We did everything together, until our early teenage years where, due to our ages, we could no longer sleep in the same room or share the bath. It was around this time that David developed schizophrenia, and although he was treated in Exeter, once we turned 18 the mental health support for him stopped, and David turned to increasing his use of alcohol and drugs to, as he told me several times, ‘shut the voices up in my head’. David and I remained very close even during his darkest times, and indeed throughout my own dark times of depression, suicidal thoughts/ideation, marriage breakup, the death of our parents and my own life limiting physical illness.

Although I had spent most of my adult life afraid that one day, I would get a phone call telling me that David had died, his death was still a shock. David had been clean for about four years, following time in prison. He was heading down the road to addiction again, but he was more like the twin I knew before the alcohol and drugs took over his life. David was gentle, kind, compassionate, with a lot of empathy and we each knew how the other was at any time. At the time of David’s death, I was heading towards a breakdown myself, following a period of sustained bullying at work, the ending of a relationship and feeling unable to cope. This meant that in the last few weeks of David’s life, we only spoke once on the phone,

and any text messages were sporadic. I remember feeling frustrated with David many times that year, as I had fallen once more into the role of defending him, and his life choices, to others in the family, and feeling that I had to take responsibility for him on some level. When David's probation officer told me that I had to make sure he remembered to keep his appointments I remember replying that he was an adult and could look after himself, I was so tired of trying to keep both myself and David together. After so many years, almost an entire lifetime, of feeling like I had to 'make up' to my parents for where David had failed in being the son they had hoped for, of feeling like he was my responsibility (I lost count of the times I heard my Dad refer to David as 'your brother' rather than, 'my son' or, simply, David), that year of 2018 was when, looking back, it all came to a head. David and I still loved each other, and we knew we did, but I wanted a more equal relationship; I wanted a relationship where I could lean on him, instead of the other way around, and at that time, that year, I needed someone to be there for me.

On the Friday before his death, David had texted to say 'I miss my sister' and that he had limited his alcohol intake, and that he loved me. I replied and said that I would ring him on the Saturday, and that I loved him. On Saturday morning, the person I had recently ended a relationship with contacted me, emotionally in pieces. He came to give me a lift to work and while in the car told me that someone with whom he had been hoping to start a new relationship had killed herself. I had never seen him so upset. I became upset, then during the day increasingly angry. Despite my promise to David, I didn't ring him as I intended to on the way home from work, as I didn't feel like it. The following day, Sunday, I drove to the meeting in a state of utter rage and spent the morning service totally angry at my friend and myself. I calmed down, called David that afternoon, but there was no response. It was Wednesday before I got the phone call that David had been found dead in his room. He was last seen alive, in a 'good mood' on the Saturday – the day I said I would ring him.

It has taken me nearly four years to revisit how I felt about how David might have felt that weekend. Ever since David died, I had been beating myself up that David was happy on the Saturday because I had said I'd call, and that he woke on the Sunday feeling terrible, sad, lonely, unloved, betrayed by me, his twin sister, because I hadn't called him as promised. I

imagined that his last moments alive were of complete loneliness and heartbreak, and it was all my fault.

It was only after a couple of sessions over the phone with Cruse Bereavement Support over recent weeks which allowed me to reframe that last weekend, based on how I felt, what I know about David and the facts. I realised that yes, David probably was happy that Saturday because I said I'd call him, however, when I didn't call him, he could have rung me. I would usually call David on a Sunday afternoon, so he may well have been thinking that I would do that, and that it would be in the afternoon, because of going to church in the morning. I know that David knew I loved him, and I know he loved me, and that these two facts are unalterable, and set in stone forever.

I will never know how David felt on the Sunday when he died, but I can take comfort from the fact that, as the coroner told me, David would have known nothing and his death would have been quick – like 'a switch going off'. I can take comfort from the fact that no matter how long David lived that day, he would still have been looking forward to my phone call, and would have been feeling positive about it, as we would usually talk on a Sunday afternoon. I can also take comfort from the fact that I will see David again in the Kingdom, and he will be whole, and perfect. I give thanks to God for David. Growing up as David's twin was often very hard, very challenging, but I have shared a wonderful relationship that was truly one of unconditional love and support, and I feel very blessed. At the time of his death, the post-mortem revealed no presence of alcohol or drugs in David's system.

"I can also take comfort from the fact that I will see David again in the Kingdom, and he will be whole, and perfect."

WHAT HELPED ME

- In the immediate aftermath, the support of our sister, Heather, and that of the vicar of the church where David had been going, called Tony. He led David's funeral service, and was kind, understanding, supportive and patient.

- I joined the Lone Twin Network, which is active via Facebook and has annual meetings where Lone Twins can meet and share stories and experiences. Finding out through the Lone Twin Network that another Christadelphian is also a Lone Twin, and being able to connect with him. There are specific books about twin loss, available through the Lone Twin Network, which were a source of comfort. The Lone Twin Network also hold meetings across the UK where you can go and meet other lone twins, share experiences, feelings, memories, with people who truly understand.
- I read a lot about grief and death; two books which stick in my memory is Grief Works, by Julia Samuel; and Thinking Out Loud, by Rio Ferdinand.
- Using Facebook as a sort of online therapy.
- Writing. Writing everything, anything. I wrote letters to David, kept them until I was ready, and then I burned them in the fireplace in my home. Writing at various times of the day, writing to David, also to myself, how I was feeling, describing the feelings, the pain, the utter raw hurt and seeming impossibility of being alive when David was not. Eventually I was able to put aside a specific time to write to David, so that the grief would not crash over me and overwhelm me constantly. I wrote a diary/book, in which I also included photographs, and I sent a copy to Tony (David's vicar), the counsellor at Relate and one other person I knew through counselling services.
- On the Sunday after David's death, I went to a different church, where the vicar saw I was upset, asked me why, and in the following few services I attended, mentioned me, and my twin, by name, in his prayers.
- The first time I went back to the Sunday morning breaking of bread in my ecclesia, I cried pretty much non-stop all the way through. A sister came up to me afterwards and told me that 'when one is hurt, we all hurt'; I felt their loyalty and love for me and with me.
- Continuing going to Relate for counselling, using my GP for support,

getting signed off work. Being honest, asking for help.

- The number of brethren and sisters who came to David's funeral service, and who also provided a huge tea in the ecclesial hall after the service.
- Not starting a new job immediately, having the time between losing David and his funeral (about a month) off work, being able to take the time, to find a place which offered a measure of healing – in my case, a local naturist beach, helped by the extraordinarily hot summer that year.
- Earlier this year, four years later, I referred myself to Cruse, and have been accessing their help and support through telephone therapy sessions.

WHAT DIDN'T HELP

- Someone brought round the flowers that had been in the hall the first Sunday after David died, and then within a few days contacted me demanding that I return the oasis that the flowers had been in.
- Going away with my cousin for a week just a few weeks after David had died, to a family birthday party with family I didn't really know, but at that point I was in shock and didn't know how to say no – I didn't know what I needed the most, I was hurting so much.



“There are no rules about grief”

The most important thing I think I would say is that it takes time to heal. It's crucial to remember that there are no rules about grief, and that although there are recognisable stages of grief, we all grieve differently – it is intensely personal and profound. Personally I don't believe we ever 'move on', or 'get over' loss – we move forward in our lives with the loss, and will always grieve, however as time goes by it does become less raw.

It is important not to make big decisions during the early period of grief. Although I left my job and accepted a new one only days after David died, this was something that I had decided I needed to do for my own sanity some months before. Even so, I didn't start the new job until a month after David died, and I lasted only three months before I had a breakdown and had to find another job closer to home. I remember being in a state of shock for many months afterwards, and I required a lot of support from my GP, friends, and prescription medication. Don't be afraid to talk to your GP and if necessary, use medication to help you get through the particularly raw early times. Talk to God, even if it's to shout at Him or tell Him you're not talking to Him – which is what I did, a lot.

***“Talk to God, even if it's to shout at Him or tell Him
you're not talking to Him”***

References

Ferdinand, R. (2017). *Thinking Out Loud: Love, Grief and Being Mum and Dad*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.

Samuel, J. (2018). *Grief Works: Stories of Life, Death and Surviving*. London: Penguin Books.

PERSONAL THOUGHTS ON BEREAVEMENT OF A SPOUSE

Nothing can prepare one for the unexpected death of someone very close to you. There is something very surreal about such a death in the initial stages. Is it reality? Is it a bad dream that, although upsetting, is not something that has really happened?

After almost four decades of marriage on top of a three-year courtship the hammer blow fell. It's not a situation that one can anticipate when a spouse kisses you 'au revoir' in the morning as you depart from home to go speaking at an ecclesia many miles away to then receive a phone call in the late afternoon to tell you to go straight to the hospital where your wife has been admitted totally unexpectedly. That's the case I experienced. A wife in a coma with what eventually turned out to be a bleed on the brain stem with no hope of recovery. How was I going to react? Let me share my reaction with you.

Firstly... utter disbelief that such an event had happened. A full expectation (however illogical) that she would walk through the door at any time...that feeling lasted several months.

Secondly... anger with her...how dare she leave me now? What was she playing at!

Thirdly... being terribly upset that God had allowed such an event to happen. Surely, she was far too young to die and, besides that, I needed her!

Fourthly... the realisation that I needed to accept the situation because no matter how much grief I felt, life had to go on.

I suspect that many others in this situation would have had similar reactions.

After several tough months I began to adjust to my new situation. Please do not use the word ‘cope’ in these circumstances. Adjusting implies a positive approach whereas coping can imply a less positive way of dealing with such bereavement ... at least that was the case in my situation. I would suggest that, from my own experience, brothers and sisters do not use the word ‘cope’ but rather ‘readjust.’

“Do not use the word “cope” in these circumstances”

Also, may I suggest that rather than sending merely a card with a minimum of wording and a signature, that time is taken to write a letter or at the very least something substantive. I can assure you that I thought far more of people who took time and effort to write comforting words of condolence than a mere brief comment on a card.

Additionally, when one is in the depths of despair it does little to comfort the loneliness, with statements being used such as ‘you’ll see each other again in the Kingdom’. If we are found worthy that is very true, but that is THEN and the devastation is NOW. In any event those who are found worthy will not be renewing married life with their deceased partner in an immortal state. True, they will know each other but not in the way they once were. The heart needs time to heal and for some it may take many months, perhaps years. Yes, it is quite right that brethren and sisters sympathise but there is also an onus on the bereaved to relatively quickly try to be positive and not be full of self-pity which can happen although not in all cases. Positivity is both good for the bereaved and also for the sympathisers. For those who are fit and able it is a good thing to get away from the four walls as much as possible. One of the best forms of therapy is to visit and help others who may well be in a worse state than ourselves. There will always be someone in a worse predicament, so by helping them we are actually helping ourselves.

***“Positivity is both good for the bereaved
and also for the sympathisers”***

A word of suggestion to sympathisers. Never, never say to the bereaved ‘we must have you round sometime’, but that time never comes. Pastry crust promises are useless and do no one any good.

“Pastry crust promises are useless and do no one any good”

So there we have it. I hope these words may be of help to both bereaved and comforters. Patience is needed by comforters and once the rawness of loss has passed then the bereaved for their own sake and others need to put on a brave front. By trying to carve out a new life is in no way disrespectful to the one who has died. It does not diminish your love for them.

“He will cover you with His feathers, and under His wings you will find refuge: His faithfulness will be your shield and rampart.”

- Psalm 91:4

FINDING PEACE IN GRIEF

Grief comes to everyone at some point. The death of a loved one is a major form of it, but it shows up in other aspects of life too. A subtle form of bereavement is growing old. It comes gradually so there's more time to deal with the loss of a young you and things you used to be able to do. The same kind of ageing grief can happen in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye.

One summer evening in 2007, my husband, myself and our 9-year-old son had just finished cleaning our garage, a huge bi-yearly task. The garbage bin was full of broken toys and trash. The car was filled with boxes and bags holding items to get rid of. It felt good to purge and get rid of clutter in our lives. The sun was going down. We had taken out some lawn chairs to sit with the garage door open and feel the peace our hard labour brought.

We pointed our chairs to see outside and enjoy the evening breeze. It started to rain and thunder. I found comfort in the rain as long as my family was in the house and protected, like when all my children were young and beneath the shadow of our family's wings. It's a big adjustment

for a parent when children become adults and fly out on their own. It's the normal course of life if you've raised well-adjusted adults, but that does not keep a parent from worrying.

On this particular evening our older son was traveling home from a Bible youth camp. He had called much earlier in the day to say he was on the way home. He had to leave the camp three days early. As we sat in the chairs physically relaxing, my brain was starting to go into anxious mode. 'Why wasn't he home yet? He's only 20 making a 7-hour trip alone. Now it was raining and stormy. What if something happened to him?' I finally picked up my phone and called his good friend. He was expecting my son that evening to work on a project that they had committed to do. I asked him if he was there yet. He said no. I could hear the cynicism in his friend's voice when he added 'He's not a teen anymore, he'll be all right.' I wanted to believe that with my rational mind but my heart was not following suit. When it got too dark to see outside, we went into the house. An old black and white movie 'Harvey' was on TV. It was a good distraction. As we sat eating popcorn and watching Jimmy Stewart play Elwood P. Doud, a delusional character that sees an invisible rabbit, we heard the doorbell ring. It was about 10:00pm. We were not expecting visitors, so, who could that be? I went to the front door. When I opened it, I was face-to-face with a policeman. Our older children were not home, making noise in the garage with their garage band. What else could the police be here to complain about? It only took me a few seconds to figure out he was not there because neighbours wanted a quieter Thursday evening. I could see it in his face. My chest tightened making it hard to breathe. Before the policeman had a chance to speak, I called out to my husband to come to the front door and told my 9-year-old to go up to his room. I had a horrible feeling and was shaking by then. I held on to my husband's arm as we both faced the policeman. 'There's been an accident with your vehicle. The young man driving is unconscious in the London Victoria Hospital.' 'That's my son', I cried. My knees buckled. 'Is he okay?' I asked, subconsciously knowing full well that unconscious is not okay. 'All I know is that the young man driving your vehicle is unconscious.' The policeman repeated. I could see the pain in his face watching our pain. I turned around and saw my younger son at the top of the stairs listening with wide eyes. Could this be happening to his brother who was his best friend and mentor? It was like time stood still.

“One moment closed a chapter of a familiar, stable life and opened a door to a new life filled with uncertainty, frustration and heartache.”

Without a thought about bringing clothes or food or going to the bathroom we got into the car to head towards the hospital, three hours away. I tried calling family and friends to pray but I was having a difficult time focusing. That proverbial knock on the door, the one every parent dreads, had become a reality in our lives. One moment closed a chapter of a familiar, stable life and opened a door to a new life filled with uncertainty, frustration and heartache. Our healthy, active, talented, fun loving and generous son laid still as though lifeless. We were told to let him die as he would be no better than a vegetable. We had no idea what it was like to care for a vegetable but we were not prepared to say goodbye to him. We didn't take him off life support and he didn't die, but the son we once knew was not the same. He suffered a Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) and was in the coma for six weeks. He had to relearn to sit up, to feed himself, to use the bathroom and to walk with a cane. He had a significant amount of memory loss.

In the beginning we received a tremendous amount of help from family and friends both in and out of our church. Our son was well loved wherever he went before his accident. Many people felt pain and loss as he lay there in the hospital bed. We received support for several months. After a while the support waned. By the third year, we had very few visitors. The friends he spent time with before his accident were no longer around. We didn't blame people. It's hard to watch someone you love, who was so full of life, struggle. Besides, they had their own lives to live and moved on. And we had to move on.

It wasn't easy and still isn't. There is a grieving process. On one level we are extremely grateful that our grieving did not include the death of our son. But on another level, there was a loss of the son who had so much potential and so many hopes and dreams ahead of him. We gained a son who was going to be dependent on us, perhaps for good. He has left side deficit, is blind on the left side of each eye and pretty much lost half of the normal use of his body. He hyper speeded time and became like an old person. He has learned to look at what his right side can do and not dwell

on what his left side can't. He types with one hand faster than I can with two. He can walk a mile with a cane now and his memory has significantly improved. We have learned much from watching him work so hard. I can't complain about getting out of bed as I age when I think about all he has gone through to be able to get up and walk.

My husband and I are teachers. We gave up careers outside the home to become full-time caretakers and ultimately teachers to retrain an injured brain. Now 14 years later we are in our retirement years. We had plans for when our children became independent and moved out. We thought we would be able to have a life to ourselves again after 45 years of marriage and perhaps travel. Our dreams and our son's dreams turned out to be different than God's plan for our lives.

We have learned from our son to look at what we can do with what God has given us and not look at what we don't have. We learned to accept His will with a positive attitude. We learned to have empathy for others who suffer. We learned to stand up for and be consistent friends to people with disabilities or people who are lonely, including older people and those who have problems that we can't see, like Elwood and his rabbit. We learned to declutter what wasn't important in our lives and make more room for love and care of others. We learned to feel peace in a different way.

“We learned to have empathy for others who suffer.”

Though we would not have chosen this path, we have grown in faith and are not sorry to be on it. How happy and thankful we will be at Christ's return when our path will be reversed in moment, a twinkling of an eye. A time when sorrow and sighing will flee away. A time when we will all be at our prime and leap like calves from the stall. Even so come Lord Jesus.

By Juliana K. Anderson © 2021

CONCLUSIONS

The fellowship we share in our ecclesias is very important spiritually and also in offering practical support and friendship to one another during those difficult times which we will all experience at some period in our lives. After bereavement, those involved and their families are extremely vulnerable and in need of gentle, loving, non-judgmental and consistent support. Below are some thoughts on practical fellowship and ways in which we can improve communication and care in our community. We have discussed some of these suggestions before in previous publications on loss but believe they are just as relevant to bereavement.

We have an amazing, shared faith which brings us together as one family in Christ and it is this quality of shared fellowship that is so important for us to fully understand, value, and put into practice. As brothers and sisters, we are each struggling through this life together, experiencing its joys and sorrows and many challenges along the way. These challenges impact practically, emotionally and spiritually on us individually and our community. Challenges in our work, families, relationships, personal goals, finances, health, or doubts and other anxieties in our faith; the list is long.

We all need a close friend or friends from within our spiritual family with whom we are safe to share our thoughts, doubts, concerns and feelings. Often it is just to listen as we get our thoughts and worries out into words, and to give us gentle encouragement, non-verbal as well as verbal and sometimes practical and consistent support.

Whilst our trust in the ultimate mercy of God is always there to strengthen and comfort us, the Bible shows that as fellow human beings we need the body of Christ, our brothers and sisters, to be there too. It is a vital part of us being a true family in Christ embracing the love that God shows to us by showing love to each other.

“Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ.” - Galatians 6:2

IMPROVING UNDERSTANDING AND MUTUAL SUPPORT

Despite our different personal experiences and challenges, our needs are very much the same. We all need encouragement, understanding, love, sensitive support, kindness, a practical helping hand and often someone else to help restore our sense of perspective and humour. Our human frailties bind us together and we need to try our best to understand, empathise and help one another in our various challenges and difficulties. In doing so our understanding and appreciation of each other will be improved and we will be better placed to provide support in the good times and the bad.

LET'S LOOK AT SOME IDEAS

Learn to listen, really listen. Then it is easier to get chatting to others as usually people are pleased to talk about what they are doing. We need to show a genuine interest in each other, ask a couple of questions and repeat bits back of what you have heard. Some eye contact and appropriate smiling or nods show that we are listening carefully. Using the person's name also shows care for them when saying hello or goodbye.

Expressing ourselves – what do we really want to say? What are we comfortable to chat about and share? We need to be concise and invite and give time for the other person to respond. If we feel someone does not understand what we are trying to express, then try to use different words or give an example.

Socialising in some situations may feel overwhelming. Being invited to a family Sunday lunch, although a thoughtful invitation, may be daunting for someone on their own. If this is the case, try to be positive. Either suggest bringing along a friend if possible or suggest an alternative way to meet up where they might feel more at home, like having a coffee in an informal setting or a meal out. No one wants to feel anxious or stressed, but rather safe to speak with confidence. Concentrate on the person you

are spending time with and not on relating your own experiences. Providing a sensitive listening ear is so valuable.

HOW CAN WE SUPPORT OTHERS?

We need to open our eyes, ears, and hearts within our own ecclesias and beyond, by asking subtle and gentle questions like ‘What are you doing at the moment?’ or ‘How are things with you this week?’ Open questions like these are helpful, as they require more than a one-word answer and they give a person the chance to say something meaningful. A simple ‘How are you?’ (the usual answer to this question being ‘Fine, how are you?’) leads nowhere at all, as if you are not ‘Fine’ how can you easily say so? Simply being polite is not what we are asked to do, but rather to support one another sincerely and lovingly.

WHY DO WE FIND IT DIFFICULT TO OFFER SUPPORT?

Maybe

We feel embarrassed or afraid.

We’re worried we may say or do the wrong thing.

We think that we might make the situation worse.

We don't know what to say or do.

We feel we might get upset or not be able to cope with someone else getting upset.

We don't want the commitment or responsibility

Misunderstandings can occur and inaction may feel like a lack of love and care. If we feel someone may need support, we do need to do something. A regular, encouraging hand on a shoulder, a caring word, a hug and smile or a listening ear can be so helpful. If we feel further time and care are required, we need to pass on our concerns to someone else who can

sensitively and consistently support. Follow up conversations are vitally important as they show that we are continuing to really care about our brother or sister's wellbeing. Sometimes we may need to back off for a while as a person may feel they do not want support. Usually though a small amount of consistent and sensitive contact works wonders. A fortnightly 'how are you doing' phone call, text or message can be a tremendous comfort in making someone feel cared for and valued.

To those who are alone, our community may seem biased towards married couples. It is probably very difficult for brothers and sisters who have been married for decades to relate easily to the widowed amongst us. The 'couple bubble' is part of our community. Within the safety of a nurturing marriage there is constant companionship, someone to share life's ups and downs, concerns, questions, and practicalities. Life alone can be very hard to imagine. Alone, you have no one to talk to about spiritual matters and you also must deal with all emotional, practical and financial problems. Alone, you may feel different, uncomfortable, and vulnerable. Outside our community the 'couple bubble' is less noticeable. It is vital that those within our community who are married take every opportunity to include single brothers and sisters in all aspects of ecclesial life, and especially in the social context. They may lack confidence to step out on their own and will need gentle, sensitive, and consistent encouragement to do so. By including everyone, in everything, we are acting as a true 'family in Christ' and this will provide the key to help those alone to visualise a new and different life to the one they may have planned and hoped for. It is a harsh and upsetting new reality to have to walk into an ecclesial hall or go to an event on your own after having had a partner by your side.

Confidentiality and mutual trust are of the greatest importance in successfully providing support and need to be always remembered in our conversations. Careless talk can cause serious damage and hurt. When a marriage relationship has ended through the death of a partner, we may feel disappointed by the response of others to our loss. We may hope for acknowledgment, understanding and empathy and we could become disillusioned as comments may be made that appear to be scripturally correct, but the timing and mode of expression may feel unhelpful or even unkind. Kindness in times of personal difficulty is what is really needed. Sometimes we need to be prepared to put aside our own judgements,

opinions, and experiences. No one can totally understand the pain, confusion, and anxieties that another person is suffering but we can acknowledge their feelings and we can listen.

The needs of a brother or sister experiencing bereavement will change over time. This is where ongoing, consistent, and proactive care and communication are needed. Financial support may be an issue as a brother or sister grows older or becomes unwell, an increased responsiveness to possible loneliness and more practical help may also be required. A useful, open question to ask is 'How can I help at the moment?' Just asking if they are OK is unlikely to lead to real communication where we can establish in love, if any additional support is needed.

We hope that by reading this booklet we may each gain a deeper understanding of the anxieties and struggles – emotional, practical, and spiritual – of those who have experienced devastating loss. We also hope that the positive suggestions throughout the booklet can be taken on board and will help us, individually and in pastoral teams and ecclesias, to provide sensitive, loving care at difficult times.

The brothers and sisters who have shared their experiences and thoughts with such courage and honesty have chosen to do so to help others who sadly find themselves bereaved. Their heartfelt aim is to better inform and assist those who can offer support as the days, weeks, and months go by, as we patiently and lovingly await the return of our Lord and Saviour.

*Reproduced with kind permission from Helen Garner.
Edited by Anna Whittaker.*

WHERE TO FIND HELP

WELCOME TO THE
CHRISTADELPHIAN SUPPORT NETWORK

0800 9545 099

Helping the hurting and encouraging awareness.
All calls in confidence by trained volunteers.
Bringing together those in need and seeking help, and the skills and experience of brothers and sisters in the love of the Father in Christ Jesus.

Do you need help?

Someone to share your problem? However great or small, don't suffer alone, someone else has been there. Somebody can help.

Need information?

Brothers and sisters with professional skills and life experience accessible through our Helpline.

Our Helpline: 0800 9545 099 and choose option 1

All calls and e-mails are treated in the strictest confidence and are dealt with by trained volunteers.

Our Confidential Email Support: help@chsn.org.uk

Look at our website: www.chsn.org.uk to check out Confidentiality and how the Helpline works. We respect and value the privacy of everyone who provides personal information to us. Please see our Privacy Notice.



Helping the Hurting. Encouraging Awareness
TELEPHONE: 0800 9545 099

SEPARATED, DIVORCED AND WIDOWED CHRISTADELPHIAN SUPPORT GROUP. *A SAFE HAVEN*

In 2012 a sister founded a Facebook support group for Christadelphians who had been married but whose lives had been changed forever by the loss of that relationship.

The group aimed to provide a place of comfort, understanding and encouragement in our walk towards the Kingdom. Feelings of loss, confusion and anxiety about an uncertain future could be shared and brothers and sisters were able to reach out in love to others across the world. It continues successfully and aims to provide warm fellowship. Individuals' experiences and starting points may be different but the shared faith of the members of this unique group leads them to be 'bonded by adversity.'

Membership of the group is by invitation only so that issues of safety and confidentiality can be managed. Any brother or sister who is separated, divorced or widowed and wishes to join can do so by contacting a member of the group or the Christadelphian Support Network. There are four administrators, two brothers and two sisters who are on board to ensure that a supportive environment is maintained.

Support on the group comes in various forms. Members may choose to post their thoughts and experiences to seek acknowledgment and reassurance. Difficulties can be shared and kindness and positivity are forthcoming in reply. Bible quotes are posted and relevant pastoral material as well as opportunities to share photographs, music and inspiring moments. An online New Year's Eve party was held for the fourth time in 2019.

Brothers and sisters from a wide range of time zones came along to enjoy fellowship and to positively start the new year. Many friendships have been

made over the years and are sustained by private messaging and meeting up at group events. In the UK last year the group held four get togethers. Often these are arranged around Praise and Fellowship events but others are purely social where members have the time and opportunity to deepen friendships and provide support face to face. Meeting up before attending large gatherings can be helpful as such events may seem difficult to attend when you are on your own.

Separation, divorce and bereavement are amongst some of life's greatest challenges. The support group aims to address feelings of being alone, feeling different and struggling to cope with complex emotions and adjustments. God willing, the group will continue to provide sensitive, loving support as we await the return of our Lord Jesus.



LEGAL INFORMATION

Lasting Power of Attorney

The Office of the Public Guardian is responsible for registering LPAs and their website is very helpful: www.gov.uk/power-of-attorney/make-a-lasting-power-of-attorney. It is possible to make these arrangements yourself, but most will use a professional Certificate provider to ensure it is done correctly. There are many companies and individuals who provide this service and the costs can vary widely. Always check the qualifications if using a professional, even solicitors, as many are not fully conversant with the Law and its implications; and always ask for the total cost and whether this includes registration.

Also, there are two types of LPA: Property and Financial Affairs; and Health and Welfare. Both have the option to restrict the type of decisions an Attorney can make, although any restriction should be carefully considered as once mental incapacity has been declared these cannot be rescinded. For further information see Appendix below.

Making a Will

Many people resist this responsibility but making a Will is important to give peace of mind and assurance that things will be disposed of according to their owner's wishes. A Will avoids delays and complications for dependants.

It should be properly drawn up (with legal advice) and executors appointed. It should be deposited, along with other important documents, in a safe place, known to the executors and close relatives, possibly at a bank or with a solicitor. See Appendix

APPENDIX

Property and Succession.

(Making a Will and other things)

NB. The Law in Scotland varies from that of England and Wales.

Although we are “strangers and pilgrims” in a foreign land, many own land, property and other possessions which are subject to the Laws of

whatever country we live in, (or where we own property). When someone dies there are strict Laws that govern how property and possessions are distributed thereafter. These Laws are complex and are at times altered either intentionally or by default because of another Law that has been introduced that relates to those possessions.

Making a Will is part of our responsibility towards our family and the final active part of one's service to God, in disposing of that with which God has blessed us. Dying intestate causes much difficulty and worry for the family. Many people are still reluctant to make a Will.

Making a Will is an individual's choice of how they want their property and possessions distributed and, with certain exceptions, this negates the statutory Law. It is wise to take advice on this subject to avoid complications and hurt feelings after the event. In England and Wales it has been a tradition for solicitors to draft Wills and most people still use them for this purpose; it should be noted however that in recent years there has not been the necessity for solicitors to study succession Law and also there are many companies and individuals who run businesses in writing Wills and associated documents. As always it is best to check the qualifications of anyone who you are trusting with this important task – and the cost, both initially when the documents are drafted, and also if there are “hidden” costs associated with storage and/or probate; beware the “company representative” or “consultant” who is really just a salesman and also beware a “free” Will (who is paying?).

Wherever possible appoint family members or a close friend as Executor and Trustee and only appoint solicitors or other professionals if it is a complex Will with specialist Trusts. Keep a copy at home with a note of where the original is stored (ONLY the original can be used to obtain a Grant of Probate so it is important it is kept in secure, fire-proof storage), together with where other important documents etc. are kept.

Changes in legislation introduced throughout the first ten years of the 21st century have had a major impact on how Wills work especially in relation to Inheritance Tax (IHT).

The Institute of Professional Will Writers can help you find a reputable company. If you wish to use a solicitor ask whether they have a separate

qualification in Estate Planning as well as their law degree.

For foreign owned property you will need a separate Will in that Country AND it must be mentioned in your UK Will.

Last, but by no means least, IHT is a voluntary Tax: if you can (legally) avoid it you do not pay it and there are many ways to legally avoid it altogether with the right advice – giving to charity is one very simple way as well as utilizing the full Nil-Rate Band Allowance for spouses. If you have more than the Nil-Rate Band, (NRB), seek professional advice.

“For we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content” – 1Tim. 6: 7-8

Property ownership has also attracted the attention of the Government, relating to means testing and the payment of care. This is a very complex and particularly sensitive subject and again is fraught with misinformation. Sufficient to say here that THERE IS A WAY TO DEAL WITH THIS but it is far too complicated to detail in this publication. If you are concerned for yourself or a relative seek specialist advice and ask for proof that any scheme you are advised to undertake has been tested by Law. The solution is not cheap so beware of “simple” solutions including “giving” away property and “the six-month rule” as NEITHER WORK.

Selling or otherwise disposing of property needs careful consideration: is it necessary to sell? What are the alternatives? How will the money be invested/distributed? When an elderly relative moves into the home of someone else it is vital that ownership is not shared in any legal format. Should this be done and the relative subsequently needs to move to a Care home or need care provided by the Local Authority then it is highly likely that their “share” of ownership will be used in a means test and cause financial hardship for the family or even result in the property needing to be sold. Again, specialist advice is best sought when dealing with financial transfers and “rental” agreements.

When it comes to disposing of a property great care needs to be taken and sound advice sought; remember a property is the result of a lifetime’s work

and thrift; it is not the “rightful inheritance” of the children any more than it is the rightful inheritance of society by way of IHT or Care fees. It is the home of someone who has cared for it and maintained it and enjoyed the pleasures and responsibilities that came with it; more than that IT IS THE GIFT OF GOD who provided it – so always think how He can benefit from its disposal as well.

“Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work”

- 2 Cor. 9: 6-7

Lasting Powers of Attorney has already been touched on elsewhere. The Enduring Powers of Attorney (EPA) was replaced with Lasting Powers of Attorney (LPA). LPAs are in two categories: Finance Property and Affairs, and Health and Welfare. EVERYONE should draft these as the Office of the Public Guardian believes that 9 out of 10 families will be affected by incapacity at some time.

In short you (the Donor) is appointing someone you trust (your attorney) to look after your affairs in the event of your being unable to do so yourself. An attorney HAS to involve the donor as much as they are able so there is no danger of your wishes being ignored and it is far better to have a family member or close friend dealing with your affairs than a Court appointed Deputy who may not know you as well; in addition to this the Court of Protection will charge fees for every decision that has to be made and has a duty to publish your accounts yearly.

REGISTRATION of an LPA only becomes necessary when someone has or is deemed to be likely to lose capacity and may take up to 8 weeks to complete. If you are unsure ALWAYS register as there will always be the opportunity to change any of the provisions later (providing there is capacity).

As has already been stated the Law requires the Donor to be involved as much as possible in any decision making regarding their affairs, and this follows the teaching of Scripture as well. Part of our care for others is to

encourage them to be as active as possible in their own life and those with whom they share their pilgrimage – the natural and the spiritual family. With this in mind there should be no reticence in giving whatever degree of control is necessary to those we love and share our Hope with, secure in the knowledge that they will always carefully and prayerfully consider our needs and wishes in making decisions on our behalf: the Court of Protection, (the alternative to having a LPA), does not meet that criteria.

Information is available at www.gov.uk/power-of-attorney/overview.

“Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God” – 1 John 4:7

Probate

Probate is the process of proving a Will in a Court of Law, sometimes a dedicated Probate Court. If you are an Executor of someone’s Will you will need to obtain a Grant of Probate. In the majority of cases it is a relatively straightforward matter and anyone (over 18) can do it. There will be the need to “affirm” and the Court keeps the original Will which then becomes public property. In this increasingly litigious world there are always those who seek to gain from any legal opportunity so make sure you are robust enough to deal with speculative correspondence or phone calls, emails etc.

NEVER divulge any information to anyone without first thoroughly checking whether they have the right to know. Only a Court official or beneficiary or dependant has the right to challenge a Will. Always remember that a Will is a legal document and has to be executed as it stands unless a Deed of Variation has been agreed by ALL parties involved.

As an Executor and Trustee there is a legal duty to comply with the Will without unnecessary delay.

Andrew Collinge

HELPFUL RESOURCES

There are many sources of information and support for people experiencing a bereavement. Here are a few suggestions:

Bereavement Websites

Cruse bereavement care offers support, advice and information to adults, children and young people when someone dies.
www.cruse.org.uk

Services include a national telephone helpline (0808 808 1677) and trained bereavement volunteers who offer support to adults and children.

The website includes articles on grief which cover what you can do to help yourself, and what you can do to help others. *Cruse publish booklets which are free to download:*

- Has someone died? Restoring hope
- Supporting children through grief

Plus books to purchase such as:

- After the death of someone very close

...and a range of titles for children and young people.

Brake is a road safety charity aiming to make streets and communities safer for everyone, and supporting people bereaved and seriously injured on roads. They have some supportive information for dealing with sudden loss, even if not caused by road accidents.

www.brake.org.uk

The NHS website has information about some of the feelings that can arise from losing someone, and where you can go for help and support.

www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/coping-with-bereavement

There is a self-help guide at
www.moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk/bereavement.asp

The Bereavement Advice Centre is a free helpline and web-based information service provided by Co-op Legal Services. It gives practical information and advice and signposting on the many issues and procedures faced after the death of someone close.
0800 634 9494 or www.bereavementadvice.org

The Bereavement Trust was set up initially to support those affected by the Hillsborough and Kegworth disasters. Trained volunteers offer comfort, support and practical advice from 6pm until 10pm every day through a Freephone Helpline.
0800 435 455 or www.bereavement-trust.org.uk

Lone twin network: for those who have been bereaved of a twin.
www.lonetwinnetwork.org.uk

GENERAL SUPPORT

Here are some other sources of help for anyone when things seem difficult, and it is hard to cope:

The Samaritans offer a safe place for people to talk any time they like, in their own way, about whatever's affecting them. You don't have to be suicidal to contact them.

You can phone, free of charge, at any time on 116 123
or e-mail: jo@samaritans.org
www.samaritans.org

Mind provides advice and support to empower anyone experiencing a mental health problem including anxiety, depression, loneliness, low self-esteem and sleep problems.

Their Infoline offers callers confidential help for the price of a local call and there is a web chat option. Their website contains a wide range of information and support.
Infoline: 0300 123 3393 or www.mind.org.uk

Care for the family is a national charity, motivated by Christian principles, which aims to promote family life and to help those who face family difficulties. There is help for people who have been bereaved, including support for those widowed young. The marriage support section includes marrying for a second time and the experience of forgiveness and reconciliation.

www.careforthefamily.org.uk

BOOKS

A manual for heartache – how to feel better by **Cathy Rentzenbank** (published in 2017, ISBN 9781509824465) is a secular book. The author's brother was knocked over by a car when they were both teenagers, and he eventually died eight years later, without regaining consciousness. She uses this experience to talk about what it is helpful to say to someone coping with loss, and what it's not. She also discusses her experience of living with depression.

A grief observed by **C.S. Lewis** (first published in 1961, ISBN 9780571290680) consists of reflections on the death of Lewis's wife after their short marriage. Lewis is well known for his Christian faith, and this book is a raw and honest examination of his feelings of grief, loss and doubt, while offering consoling insights.

An Introduction to coping with grief by **Sue Morris** (2nd Edition published in 2017, ISBN 9781472140081). This is a short and very accessible book. It outlines that while grief is a natural reaction to loss, it can be devastating. This is a self-help guide which explains the grieving process and offers clinically-proven strategies, based on Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), to help adjust to life without a loved one.

The essential guide to life after bereavement: beyond tomorrow by **Judy Carole Kauffmann** and **Mary Jordan** (published in 2013, ISBN 9781849053358). This book helps navigate both the emotional aspects of bereavement and the practical aspects to be dealt with. It uses examples of people's experiences to provide compassionate and realistic advice.

INDEX

Loss of a spouse

- 07 *Loss of spouse while young*
- 08 *Realistic thoughts after bereavement*
- 09 *Sustaining the broken hearted*
- 14 *Reflections on the book*
- 19 *Farewell*
- 86 *Grieving before death – a personal journey*
- 90 *Life after death*
- 110 *Personal thoughts on bereavement of a spouse*

Loss of a child

- 24 *Age shall not weary them*
- 28 *Loss of an adult daughter*
- 34 *Lessons in Sorrow and Kindness (Suicide)*
- 42 *The Goldsmith at Work (Suicide)*
- 52 *The Biggest Unseen Thing (Suicide)*
- 112 *Finding Peace in Grief*

Loss of Parent(s)

- 09 *Sustaining the broken hearted*
- 60 *Grief*
- 64 *Who can explain the pain?*
- 68 *Looking back*
- 69 *Thoughts on losing a non-Christadelphian parent*

Loss in early life

- 72 *Loss of the children I'd always wanted*
- 77 *Un-conceived mourning – poem*
- 79 *Miscarriage*
- 82 *Still birth*

Loss following a long/terminal illness

- 19 *Farewell*
- 24 *Age shall not weary them*
- 28 *Loss of an adult daughter*
- 86 *Grieving before death – a personal journey*
- 90 *Life after death*
- 94 *Loss of a close friend*
- 97 *Loss of a sister*

Sudden loss

- 07 *Loss of spouse while young*
- 34 *Lessons in Sorrow and Kindness (Suicide)*
- 42 *The Goldsmith at Work (Suicide)*
- 52 *The Biggest Unseen Thing (Suicide)*
- 60 *Grief*
- 101 *Being there at the end*
- 104 *Loss following addiction*
- 110 *Personal thoughts on bereavement of a spouse*
- 112 *Finding Peace in Grief*

Loss of a close family member or close friend

- 60 *Grief*
- 64 *Who can explain the pain?*
- 94 *Loss of a close friend*
- 97 *Loss of a sister*
- 101 *Being there at the end*
- 104 *Loss following addiction*

Text copyright © 2023 Christadelphian Support Network

Edited by Anna C. Whittaker

Published by the Christadelphian Support Network

Unit 7355

PO Box 15113

Birmingham

B2 2NJ

www.chsn.org.uk

Acknowledgements

Scripture quotations are taken from The Holy Bible, New International Version® (Anglicised),

NIV® unless stated otherwise

Copyright © 1979, 1984, 2011, by Biblica, Inc®

Used by permission of Biblica, Inc® All rights reserved worldwide.

Images used:

All images taken from Unsplash.com and Pexels.com

Unsplash grants you an irrevocable, nonexclusive, worldwide copyright license to download, copy, modify, distribute, perform, and use photos from Unsplash for free, including for commercial purposes, without permission from or attributing the photographer or Unsplash. This license does not include the right to compile photos from Unsplash to replicate a similar or competing service.

All photos and videos uploaded on Pexels are licensed under the Pexels license. This means you can use them for free for personal and commercial purposes without attribution.



“GOD IS OUR REFUGE AND
STRENGTH, A VERY
PRESENT HELP IN
TROUBLE.”



www.chsn.org.uk

Telephone: 0800 9545 099

Cover and layout design by *Follis Creative*