

Grief

"He jests at scars who never felt a wound"

Shakespeare: Romeo and Juliet

*"For all pairs of lovers, without exception, bereavement is a universal and integral
part of our experience of love.*

*It follows marriage as normally as marriage follows courtship or
as autumn follows summer. "*

C S Lewis: "A Grief observed"

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 of 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 get up or sit down. 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 enlarge 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 unanswerable. 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. In a sense, it seems time stands still for the griever. For others it does not. But I 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 grief 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 realise 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.