



The Compassionate Friends, Queensland Inc.

Grief Support for Bereaved Parents, Grandparents & Siblings

Newsletter (Extracts) Aug - Sep 2007



Shannon

Written by Brian Byrne, Father of Shannon Byrne 29/6/76—17/12/95

Some teenagers may look rough or wild,
But don't forget each is someone's child.
We worry about exams, police and how they drive,
But we should celebrate their goodness while they are alive.

We compare with peers and say "you can do that too",
But we should be happy with the good things they do.
Shannon was not one to act like the norm,
He acted the rebel, rather than conform.

But under the shell he was sensitive and deep,
Shannon grieved Aiden's death, but refused to weep.
Our family came closer after that fatality,
And we lived every minute as we accepted mortality.

We enjoyed each other's feelings over the years
And shared our joys, triumphs and tears.
Shannon loved life and liked to party
And banked his money to buy a Harley.

We know the Shannon who washed up for his mother,
Mowed the lawn and played with his young brother.
He shared everything air-conditioned room to motor bike,
And his loud music, which some don't like.

We may have debated rules, right or wrong,
But we agreed on Harley's and the odd song.
After a disagreement we wiped the slate,
And when it was over, he was like a mate.

When teenagers go out, parents are concerned,
And we considered it a bonus when they returned.
So we enjoy our children's happiness, troubles and fears,
and we'll still enjoy Shannon's memories, the last 19 years.

Lovingly taken from TCF Qld Anthology, 20th Anniversary Commemoration, May 2005

I Have Nothing but Memories to Replay Over And Over in My Mind

Grant Coles and Lesley, TCF, WA, "Reflections", Dec 06, Vol 25 No 4

My name is Grant ... 3 years ago I tragically lost my only child Natasha in a work related accident ... I need not tell you how her loss has devastated my life ... She was 20 years old with all of her future ahead of her and never in my most horrible dreams did I ever think that one day she would go to work as normal and a few hours later I would be standing in a morgue identifying her and holding her in my arms and questioning life itself and WHY ME ... The night before we were planning her 21st party and laughing and hugging and kissing her goodnight only to have her taken away from myself and her step mum Lesley in a blink of an eye ... Only then did I think about how fragile life is and how we take our loved ones for granted. Everyday I would read about and watch on the news families losing their loves ones and never thinking it would happen to me ... I loved her so much—she was my everything, she was my Tasha and now I have nothing but memories to replay over and over in my mind and photos to constantly cry over and an empty bedroom to sit in where I try to savor every piece of my life I spent with her—my darling Tasha ...

How many times have I been told "It's OK Grant—time heals" ... Well it's BULLSHIT ... I will only heal when I am no longer here as well and for all those parents out there you know exactly where I am coming from !!!! ... We all have good days but they are few and far between but she is the first thought in my life everyday and she is always the last thought at night and so much of the in-between ... But I am so grateful to The Compassionate Friends who are parents like myself and Lesley who are always here if ever we need that extra shoulder to lean on ... Thank you so much ...

A Father's Grief

By Bob Rosenberger, TCF South Africa

"How can I be thankful ... for what he was?
The pain of NO MORE outweighs
The gratitude of the ONCE was.
Will it always be so?"
From "Lament For A Son" by Nicholas Wolterstoff.

How does a father grieve? Is the process different from that of a mother? I believe we fathers feel the same emotions, but it is how we experience these emotions and how we deal with them that can differ greatly from a mother's grief experience. Men may be articulate, even garrulous, but women are expressive. Many men prefer to talk about ideas; women feel comfortable discussing feelings. Yet grief is about emotions and feelings and how to work through them; it is not about ideas.

To complicate matters further, a lot of working through of grief involves communication. Most men, however, don't know how or are reluctant, to talk about their feelings. Men are conditioned not to show feelings but to stifle them. We build a shell, layer after layer, as a defence against the bumps and bruises of boyhood, the hurt limbs, and the hurt feelings. For many of us, this is the perspective from which we must confront our grief.

Men are conditioned to ignore pain, to tough it out, to be a "good trooper". As E.E. Cummings wrote, we "put on a face to meet the faces that we meet". In our culture, the notion that a man's pain should be endured alone derives from the male ethos that goes back to the ancient Greeks. This tradition has been manifested in many ways: the British stiff upper lip, the athlete who plays on in pain, and the little boy who must act like a big boy when he's hurt. These values have become male character traits. Thus when a father is confronted with the death of his child, his first instinctive reaction is that he must not show his

pain or cry. And when asked, as fathers frequently are, about how his wife is doing, he is amazed that no-one realizes he is barely holding himself together.

What do men do with pain they cannot shrug off? We keep up appearances long enough to quietly slip away to nurse our wounds in solitary silence. It's so hard to go against custom and habit. Men of my generation may try to ignore the pain, but the death of a child results in a level of pain that is impossible to ignore. So we acknowledge it, and then we try to carry on. Even in the business world, men are not granted leave to recover from a loss. We're expected to observe the rituals of mourning and then throw ourselves back into our work, put up a good front, and continue to function at a light level of concentration and dedication. I carried this expectation to a ridiculous level.

When I learned my son died, I flew out to the city where my son was attending college and made the necessary arrangements. Then I called my boss to let him know that we would be staying over one night and I would be back to work the next day!

Grief is a label attached to such a myriad of emotions that it is impossible to identify all of them adequately, or describe their intensity. For me, anger was probably the most intense emotion I experienced. As a parent, I expected to protect my family; and as a man, I expected always to be in control. The sense of helplessness I experienced and the lack of control over events overwhelmed me. For months I carried a white-hot anger. Why couldn't they save him? Why wasn't I there? While I experienced the most intense emotions of my life, it was difficult for me to communicate and share these feelings. It was even more difficult to recognize that I needed to reach out for help.

Anger was not the only intense emotion I experienced. Guilt consumed me. Why wasn't I a better father when Bryan was alive? Why didn't I spend more time with him? How could I have allowed my career to infringe on time with my children? I always seemed to be looking forward towards the future, rather than experiencing the present. Perhaps this issue is particularly significant for fathers who invest so much of their time and energy focused on the future, preparing a child's way, too often deferring activities with the family. Mothers, it seems to me, spend more time with the children, experiencing the here and now—the present. In other words, the death of a child for a mother is the loss of the present, for a father it is a loss of the future compounded by a loss of direction. We are left floundering, unfocused, and feeling guilty. These regrets flooded over me until my brother said, "Bobby, you are tormenting yourself with guilt, but you were a good father to Bryan. You did the best you could."

These intense, unfamiliar feelings and unanswered questions created a tangled web of feelings and emotions that gradually changed the fabric of my life. Soon I was grappling with the "if only" and playing the "might have beens" over and over in my mind in a vain attempt to change the outcome of events over which I had no control. Feelings of failure and hopelessness left me with an incredible emptiness. Depression swept over me. As T.S. Eliot said, "We are the hollow men". I was immobilized. My feelings and emotions were raw and close to the surface. Nicholas Wolterstoff again expressed this so well: "But I have been assaulted, and in the assault wounded, grievously wounded. Am I to pretend otherwise? Wounds are ugly, I know. They repel. But must they always be swathed?"

So where do men go for succor in their pain? Where can we turn for support? As youngsters we tend to have many group experiences. We join clubs, sports teams, the army, and fraternities. Men enjoy the experience of "esprit de corps", but there are limits as to what is acceptable. It's okay to talk about some of the common problems, like a damp basement, an increase in the variable mortgage, and even, superficially, concerns about children. But in this kind of custom-limited camaraderie, there are built-in rules that conversation be kept light. No heavy stuff allowed. You can talk about your daughter dating a SOB but not about your son dying in an emergency room. The first allows a response, the second is a show-stopper.

"We are healed from suffering only by experiencing it to the full." Marcel Proust.

Most men don't know how to offer each other support. We can be struck dumb in the face of deep, raw emotion. Friends and family members may try to avoid us, but how can we run from the death of a child? Some of my friends did; so did members of my church and my pastor. I remember one friend, however,

who met me where I was emotionally and encouraged me to talk while he simply listened. That was all he did, just listened, but it was such a comfort. I also found support at Compassionate Friends meetings. My wife and I attended our first meeting about three months after Bryan's death, but it was almost my last. There were no other fathers attending that evening! It was several meetings later, however, with fathers in attendance, that I first came to understand how much comfort bereaved fathers could offer each other.

Before my son's death, there were times when I felt I had to have all the answers. Now I'm not sure I even know the questions. Wolterstoff writes "And now I know about helplessness—of what to do when there is nothing to do. I have learned coping". In addition, I'm learning how to turn outward from within myself. For too many years, like other men I stifled my deepest feelings, repressed my emotions and perhaps, as a result, postponed my grief work. So, how does a bereaved father begin healing?

There is an old saying that has some truth "The only way out is through". Thus the first step is to acknowledge the grief and to recognize that the road is tough and long. Perhaps communication is the key. Talking about what has happened and what we are feeling is the way to get started. Acknowledging grief and beginning to share is a first step. Then, a man must choose his path. We cannot lock in on our guilt, our regrets, and our anger. We have to try to find some meaning in life beyond our grief.

In the five years since Bryan's death, grief has been like learning to climb a mountain. The slope is steep and often slippery and the air is thinner the higher I venture. But as I work my way up, my muscles grow stronger. Periodically I turn to look down at the life I led and become aware of how that old life diminishes with distance and time.

My perspective has changed. What drove me before, what seemed too god-awful important to me, has shifted in focus to my family, my work with TCF, and my work with children. How did I know when I was finally beginning to heal? It was simply this: when I first thought of the joy of Bryan's life, rather than the pain of his death. Maybe in a year or so I'll know what the other side of the mountain is like.

*Originally reprinted from the Newsletter of TCF Sth Africa, June, 1993.
Taken from TCF Qld Newsletter August/September 1996*

We Want So Much To Know, "How Long?"

By Mary Ehmman, TCF Valley Forge, USA

Something came up at a recent meeting that I feel is worth discussing, because it might be some of the thoughts that are going through the minds of others.

A man voiced his uneasiness at the fact that so many people were talking about such a variety of emotions, many of which he had not felt. He also thought you would start at the bottom, work your way up, and that is that. Also what worried him was that some of the people there were one year, two years, and even more, down the road and were still there. He had been searching for a time table and didn't seem to find one here. At the time of our meeting it had been about 6 weeks since his child's death.

Those are not abnormal thoughts (few are) for that time, or even longer. We want so much to know "how long". If we are not feeling the various emotions or feelings we hear expressed, are we abnormal? To want to know "how long" frequently comes out of desperation. We want this "nightmare" to stop. The thought that we might get to "feel worse" later on, is frightening, and we wonder, is it necessary? Since we are not able to fully relate to the things we are hearing, people we are meeting, could being in this surrounding make us worse? Truthfully, the answer is no!

There is no answer to "how long". Perhaps it would make it a little easier if we could put it into a time frame, like an illness or an injury. If we had that goal on which to focus, we might be able to pace

ourselves. Having that focus, the end in sight, could be reassuring. It is looking into the unknown that is so frightening. But the truth of it is, we can't. Everyone is different, so will be their timetable. As we start out, there is no way for us to know what ours will be. To try to put one on ourselves is really making it harder. Unless you have gone through the loss of a child before, this is a completely new experience. You will not be able to accurately measure it against anything you went through before. For those of us who have come through "the valley" will tell you, unanimously, take one day at a time, do not put unrealistic expectations on yourself. The fact that you have come to a meeting is an important first step. You are reaching out for help and want to understand what this type of grief is all about. You have made the commitment to yourself and your family you are going to do all you can to get through it. AND YOU WILL. To be willing to face into your pain, to FEEL your pain, takes a lot of courage. It is not the easy way, but, it is the best way, really, the only way for a healthy "recovery". But, you will find it is not a straight line upward. Your emotions, and reactions will be much like a roller coaster. Up and down. One day, two steps forward, next day, maybe one step back, next day, three steps forward, and so on. You may even have some days you feel you have slipped all the way back. But, you really haven't. It was a momentary big slip backwards. We all have had them. You won't stay here. You will start to climb again!

To address the question—why are there people who are still coming after one, two or more years? First of all, let me, personally, say, thank God we are! Can you imagine a meeting with everyone there being in the initial months? The one very important thing from which we draw strength is being able to look at, and talk to others who have been through these earlier stages, and made it. They may have further to go, but, they got this far, and you will see them as they progress even further. Role models are absolutely essential. It is so important to see people laugh, feel at ease, and most of all helping others. Something they could never have done at the beginning of their grief. And, by being there for others, they are also getting help themselves. It is in giving that we really receive. After coming through an experience like this, one of the changes almost everyone notices is their desire to help others through it, empathy for others, in general, is much stronger. It is a terrible price to pay for this very good trait, but we had no choice in what happened to us. We do have a choice in helping ourselves and others through it, however. We, in TCF will do all we can to do just that.

Lovingly taken from TCF Qld Newsletter Aug/Sep 1997

A Witness To Resurrection

By Sister Madeline Contorno, Birmingham, Alabama Bereavement Mag, Jan/Feb 1997

Bad things happen to good people every day. Tragedy is an all-too-familiar experience, whether it is the sudden death of an infant, the suicide of a teenager, or advanced cancer in a young mother with three children. Tragedy has a way of touching the life of every person, saint and sinner alike, and frequently it overwhelms even the most faith-filled of people. How are people of faith to approach the pain of life?

As a hospice pastoral minister and social worker for the last several years, I have grappled with the meaning of suffering and death. I have witnessed the effects of suffering on the lives of hundreds of dying patients and their families. I am convinced there are no satisfying answers to why people must experience so much pain. But there are unique, personal, noble responses to suffering that people have taught me that have uplifted me, comforted me, strengthened my faith. No one can prevent tragedy. No one can be protected from tragedy. No one is exempt. But I believe that deep inside each human person is a power that can redeem tragedy. Time and again I have witnessed how people's response to suffering bears testimony to the power of resurrection within them.

People dealing with tragedy often ask, "Why me ... Why my family?" Denial, anger, depression, confusion and guilt are natural responses to hurt. All too frequently there may also be bitterness, withdrawal, conflict, resentment, hostility. But in the greater number of cases, I have found heroic courage, humility, tenderness and greatness of heart in people struggling with suffering. Their responses continually amaze me.

People somehow found a way to allow their pain to make them better people, they allow their pain to bring them closer to God. I have witnessed a power released within suffering people that is almost tangible. I witness this power again and again, and the reality of it brings me to my knees. The power seems to reside in the ability to surrender, to trust that the unknown future still holds something good, despite the pain and heartache of the present. This choice, this instinct to trust and somehow transcend the darkness, seems to be embedded in the human spirit, and was voiced by the Psalmist: "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life". (Psalm 23:6).

Whereas tragedy can and does rob people of their most cherished life treasures, I see people of faith responding to tragedy by allowing God to take control. I see people acknowledge their powerlessness over the situation and yet they maintain their courage. They sense God's power within them as they struggle, and they implicitly recognize that God will remain with them until the end: "I know the plans I have in mind for you, says the Lord ... plans for peace, not disaster, reserving a future full of hope for you. (Jeremiah 29:11).

The French artist, Renoir, once said, "Pain passes, but beauty remains." So often this is the unspoken, but lived response of people who face suffering with faith. Despite the harshness of pain, there is the triumphant hope that life can still be gracious and beautiful and worthwhile.

How do people of faith approach the tragedies of life? Not by avoiding pain, or denying it, or explaining it away. People of faith accept life as it is, surrendering to life's limitations, softening its blows with gentle strength and courageous trust. People of faith ask God to make them strong in all the broken places. People of faith allow the power of resurrection to take hold of their lives.

Grieving your own way

By Michele Aprias, Bay Area, TX TCF Chapter

Each of us is an individual. Each of us grieves in his or her own way. With certain variations, there are generally two types of grieving; outward and inward. The person who grieves outwardly will seek comfort through friends and relatives, books and articles and support groups such as Compassionate Friends. The outward griever may feel the need to go over the events of the death again and again, or keep the child's memory alive in special ways. The inward griever reacts quite the opposite. He or she may refuse to discuss either the child or the death. This silence may be misconstrued as a form of denial or indifference.

Each of these grieving reactions is quite natural depending on the personality of the individual. The problems arise when spouses are at opposite ends of the scale. The father who is an inward griever may become angry when his wife introduces the name of the dead child into a conversation. The mother who is an outward griever may believe her husband didn't love the child as much as she did because he keeps his emotions in check.

The death of a child is a traumatic experience and we expect others to react in the same way we do. If our spouses' grieving pattern differs from our own, misunderstandings may arise causing anger and resentment.

The first way to ease the tensions that arise in a marriage when a child dies is to realize that husband and wife are each entitled to grieve in their own way. Simply understanding that your partner is reacting in a normal way for his or her own personality type will reduce your own anxiety. Grief is enough of a burden without feeling guilty because your emotions differ.

The second step towards healing is to recognize your own personality type. Are you an outward or an inward griever? If you are an outward griever, do not hesitate to seek support from outside sources. If

you want to talk about your grief and your spouse refuses to discuss it, find a friend or group that will allow you to express your feelings.

If you are an inward griever, do not feel ashamed or guilty because you cannot bear to discuss your child's death. If the subject comes up in a conversation and you don't want to participate, simply excuse yourself from the group and busy yourself with another task. If you do not mind listening but do not want to take part directly, then listen and brush aside direct questions.

The most important thing to remember is that you have to grieve in the way that is right for you. Grief over the death of a child can be likened to drowning in a swimming pool. Each of you are struggling to keep your heads above water. To add to the dilemma, you are swimming in opposite directions. There is no way you can save each other. Attempting to do so will only drag you both under. You have to concentrate on saving yourself through whatever means possible.

The healing of grief is an individual process. Respecting the fact that your spouse's healing process differs from your own will reduce the strain on both of you. Treasure the moments when you are able to share your grief, but at the same time, allow each other the room to grieve individually, whatever way it may be.

Reprinted from TCF Qld Newsletter, August/September, 1996

Riding the Waves

By Ramona Lyddon, Chester, California, Bereave Mag July/Aug, 1997

I feel as if I have been body surfing in the ocean, cruising at the top of the wave, enjoying the ride—then suddenly, being body-slammed into the sand. Unable to move, the waves rush over me, pounding and crashing onto me. Occasionally, the tide recedes, and I lay breathless on the wet, sandy shore.

I cannot move. I wiggle my toes, squint, open my eyes and see the rest of the shoreline. While my view is obscured by my tears, the salty sea, my straggly hair and my prone position, there is some daylight. Just as I prepare to roll over, and maybe get to me knees, the waves of grief lap at my toes and suddenly crash upon me once more. Unable to withstand the power of the waves, I fall to the beach once again.

Finally, the tide recedes again, but I still cannot move. I am bone tired from my past efforts. I am aware of noise around me. I can hear the chirping birds, and the warm sun. The laughter of children beckons me to once again open my eyes. Helping hands are touching me, encouraging me to rise up. Gentle hands soothe me with their light touch. Warm hugs embrace me. It feels good, for a while ... until the voices drift on down shore, leaving me alone with the setting sun.

I marvel at the beauty and thank God for His presence. It becomes dark again. The wind blows in, bringing dark clouds and a chill to the air. I shiver, and the sense of calm and peace is not so reassuring. The tide is at my ankles, and my toes sink into the sand. I can do this. I can stand up against this set of waves—maybe. Or, maybe it's easier to lie down and let them roll over me.

Better yet, I wade out further, a little deeper, challenging the waves of grief. And then—surprise—I lie down and float. The waves roll under me, crashing harmlessly on the shore. As I float, I look up at the rising moon. The waves lull me to sleep in the moonlight. Maybe, just maybe, I will rest well.

Maybe, I can ride these waves. Maybe a new, sunny day is coming.

The Loss

What parent doesn't wake in fright,
In the middle of the night
When a child is not in bed
Past the curfew that they said?

Then the knock upon the door,
Touches nerves already raw.
Knowing what you're going to hear
Every parent's dreaded fear.

At the parties tempting fate,
Driving with a drunken mate
Taking chances whilst they're young,
In the guise of having fun.

They forgot to say goodbye,
Didn't know that they would die
Thought that death was for the old
Wouldn't listen won't be told.

So the parents torn with grief
Hear the news with disbelief
One less child around the place
Mealtimes see that empty space.

For a time, they cannot cope
Lose their faith, abandon hope
Then one day a voice so dear
Mum and Dad, I'm very near.

Submitted in loving memory of Mark Andrew Van Raalte
29.3.75 - 2.9.93
on the 14th Anniversary of his death.
Loved and missed every day by your ever loving family,
Mum, Dad, Tanya, Dean, Joshua, Georgina, Karen, Nathan, Tyler and Ella xxxxx

Taken from Bridget's Book of Angelic Verse Author of Heaven Waits

Keeping Memories Alive

By Paul Debono, Indianapolis, Indiana, Bereavement Mag Feb 1992

In 1986, my brother died of a rare blood disease called aplastic anemia. I think about Matt often.

One of the ways that I have learned to become comfortable with Matt's no longer being here might seem kind of funny to some people. During the last days of my brother's life, as he was apportioning his belongings to friends and family, Matt said me, "I want you to have my bike."

"Thanks, great," I said; then added, "You know that fishing pole?"

"I want you to have that too," Matt said.

Now, I would always have something to remember Matt by. Later, while my mom was going through Matt's things, she would ask me, "Do you need a sweater? How about a nice pair of shoes? I think they'll fit. Matt's shoes are only about a half-size bigger. What about this necktie?"

Though I respected the special power I believed Matt's fishing pole had, when it came to wearing his old neckties, jogging shoes and T-shirts, I felt a little bit strange at first. Hadn't someone once said, "Don't get caught in a dead man's shoes"? I guess in the back of my mind I thought maybe we should keep Matt's personal articles intact as a memorial.

Then, I realized I was just being silly; I could really use some of the articles. We wouldn't want to hold on to all of Matt's things anyway, so I let myself get comfortable in some of his old clothes. Matt's clothes were just like my own, but they gave me a slight feeling of his presence. I also think it helped me get a sense of my own mortality.

"Today, in this world, I'm wearing these clothes; but tomorrow, who knows?"

Last year, at home, I discovered some of Matt's books about architecture. Not only did I feel his presence, I also saw myself carrying out something he would have wanted to do. In the same spirit, I once built a bookcase with lumber—the kind of thing Matt would have gladly done for me, had he been here.

I am secretly hoping that I will be able to complete some larger project that Matt would have wanted to accomplish—I don't know exactly what. Perhaps I will build my own house or design something. Whatever I feel guided to do, I know that I want to wholeheartedly embrace those spiritual and material gifts that were left to me. To seek out some activity that I think Matt would have wanted to do has helped me cope with his dying.

My father, mother, brother and two sisters have also gained from embracing their inheritances of Matt.

I'm sure you'll agree, there is nothing funny about it.

The above writings have been extracted from the official members newsletter originally compiled and printed by The Compassionate Friends, Queensland Inc. Our printed newsletter contains additional stories, verses, news, events, memorial notices & contacts. It is also sent to members much earlier than available on our website. Please contact our office if you wish to become a member to receive the full newsletter. We welcome contributions of articles, stories, verses etc to the newsletter. All contributions should be emailed to the Newsletter Editor.

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