

Finding God In Bereavement

**This heartfelt book will be a comfort
for all who have experienced
the loss of someone dear,
providing hope in the
difficult and painful days.**

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Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Gospel of Matthew, chapter 5

My own experiences of bereavement have been limited. My mother and father have died; friends have died, or have killed themselves; pets have had to be put to sleep; plants (particularly cyclamen) have shrivelled up; relationships, and jobs, have ended - all leaving a strong sense of loss.

Each has been a bereavement. Each has brought different emotions. And for each, I have been unprepared.

My father was old; it was time for him to die. Yet his death was a shock.

My friend had Aids. We knew he would live no longer than six months. We saw him getting thinner and weaker. When he died, we were stunned.

The vet diagnosed our cat as having leukaemia; we made a date for him to be put to sleep. When the day came, even though we had signed his death warrant, we were horrified and confused to get back to find that his furry body no longer entwined itself round our legs for his evening meal.

Of course some deaths bring such relief that they do not shock. Those who have given us such a big burden to bear in illness over the years that we find their life unbearable - these deaths bring not shock and misery, but relief and, indeed, understandable rejoicing. There is nothing to be ashamed of in these feelings.

But most deaths bring pain. And each of us deals with our feelings of pain in different ways, one perhaps wanting to keep grief private, one wanting to shout it from the rooftops, one finding physical human contact and loads of hugs and kisses a comfort. When my father died, I found it hard not to actually pluck at strangers' arms in the street and say, my eyes brimming, 'I just wanted to tell you - my father's died!' I longed for the days of the black arm-band.

A painful journey

Bereavement, as everyone who has been through it knows, is a journey that has to be taken alone. And the journey is one without any real ending. The path simply fizzles out. But even when it has apparently disappeared, you can find

that years later you stumble and, looking down, see with sudden choking emotion that your footsteps are treading again that dreadful route.

As Elizabeth Jennings wrote:

'Time does not heal,
It makes a half-stitched scar
That can be broken and you feel
Grief as total as in its first hour.'

Elizabeth Jennings, 'Words about Grief'
(*Collected Poems*, Carcanet).
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When I wrote an article about my father's death someone sent me a letter saying, 'I went through it a year ago.' Then she added, 'That past tense doesn't feel right.'

C S Lewis, in the marvellous diary he kept after his wife's death, *A Grief Observed* (Faber) wrote, 'Grief is like a ... winding valley where any bend may reveal a totally new landscape ... Not every bend does. Sometimes the surprise is the opposite one; you are presented with exactly the same sort of country you thought you had left behind miles ago. How often will the vast emptiness astonish me like a complete novelty and make me say, "I never realised my loss till this moment"?''

A recently-bereaved widower commented despairingly to me that he would just have to resign himself to a life waiting to die. He complained that his neighbours had said he should cheer up because at last he'd be able to go away on luxury cruises alone and get chased by glamorous widows. But the truth - and it's a much worse truth than either option - is that when you are bereaved you have absolutely *no idea* what lies ahead. The journey isn't charted.

My friend sat in his chair, four hours after the death of his wife, and stared into space, as his cat howled by his feet. 'I feel as if I'm entering a long black tunnel,' he said.

But the journey isn't all black. The dark tunnel leads to patches of sunlight, to insights and friendships, to swamps and icebergs, but also to peaks and strange views. Friends can help, particularly if they too have been bereaved. 'I remember that particular corridor!' they can tell you. 'Beware - it gets very narrow at the end.' Or 'Hey, I'm over here! Watch out for that swamp you're getting to!'

Some people find it easier to see grief as an entity rather than a journey, something outside themselves, like a fire, which has to run its course. The flames burn and crackle round you, and all you can do is wait, for weeks, months, even years, until it gutters out.

My sister likened her tears to a barrel of salt water. They simply had to be let off in bursts until they were all shed. If she didn't cry, she felt, she would have to carry this barrel around like a burden for the rest of her life. Perhaps, but I know that many people can get over a bereavement without crying. When you see grief as a thing, with an existence of its own, it is no good being told to keep occupied, keep your mind off it. Action is only an avoidance technique, putting one's finger on the pause button. The moment you stop doing whatever you were doing - going to parties, helping others, whatever - you still return home to the same tape, which hasn't moved on since you stopped watching it.

As Iris Murdoch said in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (Penguin), 'Outsiders often help bereaved people by reminding them that they have urgent duties and must not remain in still contemplation of what is uniquely terrible. There are immediate tasks, arrangements to be made, others to be comforted, ordinary life at last to be carried on. Can less extreme lessons enable us to take in our mortality and see the world in its light? Can it be done through art, through meditation, through psychoanalysis, through reading books or listening to preaching?' No, she concludes.

The first stage that we all go through is shock. When my father died, all the members of my family felt as if we had been in a car crash. We felt cold and shivery; then our faces burned. I felt light-headed as if I were suspended, floating above everything like a hot-air balloon; that was when I didn't feel my head was filled with molten lead or blood-soaked cotton-wool and buried six feet underground.

I found it difficult to get up in the morning because my limbs felt crippled with arthritis. My father did in fact have arthritis, and it is quite common for the people left behind to experience belated 'sympathy' pains. My widower friend, whose wife had died of a heart attack, kept telling me how his chest hurt and how frightened he was of having a stroke. But our aches and pains were prompted by stress, shock and tension. Each of us stumbled over our sentences; our mouths didn't seem to work properly; and all of us were exhausted, falling asleep for hours in the afternoons, going to bed at nine - and then waking up in the night.

We were too tired to perform even the simplest tasks. We woke with splitting headaches after extraordinary dreams in which our father featured, alive or dead. Then, as if at the end of our physical tethers, we were relieved by periods of rather sinister calm, as if the body had provided its own tranquillizer to deal with a situation too difficult to handle.

From my diary: 'I am writing this at 3.15 in the morning, unable to sleep because of pains and aches in my legs. I wonder if I should see the doc. I find it quite difficult getting up and down stairs. Don't like the shooting pains at all. It is quite peaceful now, sort of all cried out, the London night sounds outside.'

Keeping a diary is a help, if only because after a bereavement you are totally absorbed with yourself. It also helps to feel that even if you are not in control of the wild beasts of grief that beset you, you are in control enough to record their actions. Control is the opposite of helplessness - and loss breeds a feeling of unbearable helplessness.

I work in a 'helping profession' and I found it impossible to be remotely interested in other people's problems. One day I sat on the office floor looking for a book on Grief to take home, and realised I couldn't get up. I had no energy at all, I was chained down by gloom. I felt like just sitting there and waiting for someone to take me away in a sedan chair; or I thought perhaps if I stayed long enough, the cleaners would come and simply put me in a black binbag and dispose of me. Grief robs one of all power, even over oneself.

Only a day after the death of his wife, my widower friend, in a manic phase that is also quite common in bereaved people, was suddenly afflicted by a wild energy, wondering if he should get a job as a voluntary worker, whether he should move, whether he should get a dog. He was desperately grasping for some control over his shattered life. But the balance of his mind was completely disturbed. The advice of all bereavement counsellors is to make no drastic changes in one's life until at least a year after the death of a loved one.

The other 'stage' of grief may be guilt - or 'if only'. Despite the fact that he was married to the most irritating woman in the world, whose nature would have tried the patience of a saint, my friend tormented himself with having been impatient with her. Others torture themselves with arguments that 'if only' they had got a better doctor sooner, their loved one would not have died. 'If only' they hadn't asked their friends to supper, they would never have got involved in that fatal car crash.

This is a very natural reaction. But it is only a desire to feel in control of a situation. By saying 'if only' we are, in effect, implying that we had some power over our loved one's life and death. But the price we pay for the illusion that we had any power at all is guilt. In virtually all cases there was actually nothing we could have done. Had we taken different action, true, the dead person might have lived an hour or two longer; similarly, he might have died more quickly. We forget the times we saved their lives by prompt action, the time we cried 'Watch out!' when they were overtaking on a dangerous bend. We only feel guilt because it comforts us; it means we had something, in however small a way, to do with their passing. In fact we had no power at all.

There is a more positive view of the 'if only' syndrome. 'My religious belief helped me much more than I would have dared to count on,' wrote a mother whose daughter died of anorexia. 'Because I do not believe that this life is the whole story, my main concern was that Edie should have all the help possible in her next existence, whatever that may be. Phone calls and telegrams soon contacted the people I felt could help, and then when I knew of all the prayers and services that had been said for her, I felt surprisingly relieved. I really did feel that she was being well looked after. With this came the conviction that whatever her purpose in life was, it had been achieved. It didn't ease the pain of our losing her, but it made me feel quite positive in my reply to the many people who felt her life had been a waste. In terms of what might have been, perhaps 'what might have been' might have been a lifetime of torture. One can't speculate on that.'

Guilt is frequently mixed with anxiety. Bereaved people become supersensitive. With his skull-like face and his scythe, death seems to stalk every street. Who else has he got his beady eye upon? We bereaved cannot bear those close to us to go away; we may never see them again. After my father died, my son went on a fortnight's holiday to Greece, a long-planned trip. I gave him a lift to the airport. After he'd given me a loving hug, I waved goodbye, and felt terrible. Because my father had gone, I felt cut off from the land on one side; when my son went away, it was as if the water had suddenly flowed round and isolated me completely. All exits had been closed and I was completely on my own.

Loneliness is thrown over one like a shroud. The first thing I wanted to do when I heard the news of my father's death was to ring him up. He would have been astonished and sympathetic. 'Poor, poor you,' he would have said. 'How absolutely ghastly. Do come round when you want. And all those awful undertakers - and the funeral. I can't wait to hear about it.' The loneliness of knowing I couldn't share all the black stories of his funeral with him was as sad as the funeral itself.

Then, after the shock, the grief started to leak out. I've never understood it when people described themselves as having 'tears that are never far away'. For me, in the past, tears have either been very far away or pouring down my cheeks. But the sadness of bereavement brings tears just glittering behind the eyes, all the time.

Then the grief gets more intense, bursting out at all kinds of times, in the stillness of a church service, at a film, over a flash of memory. Loneliness turns to depression. The father of a little boy whose mother had been murdered was quoted as saying, 'Many times I wish I was dead; but I can't be dead because I can't leave my son on his own. He's always going to need me, and in a way it's a life sentence. I can't even be miserable. I can't afford to be bitter. I can't walk around all day screaming and shouting and swearing and wanting to kill people.'

Mary Stott, a journalist, wrote when her husband had died, 'At this stage, Death is the friend, Life is the enemy. It seemed to me at this time that being alive was just a habit, and a habit that had now become very disagreeable.'

A widow I know burst into tears a month after her husband had died, crying, in agony, that she just wished she could crawl into her husband's grave and pull the coffin lid over her.

A woman who had just had a miscarriage said, 'People say, "Don't be sad for you're only young and there's so much more life to live." But how strange I feel as I lie here at night. The tomorrows seem already to have gone.'

And one widow, commenting on her loneliness, said: 'No one touches me any more.'

Sometimes, missing that comforting hug, we look for things to hug ourselves. Certainly when my father died I felt a great longing to look after something - a baby, a refugee, a puppy. If I couldn't be cared for any more, second best would be to care for something else.

Other people find that they can ease the loneliness by talking to their loved one. A widower wrote to me about his wife: 'When I'm cooking in the kitchen and I suddenly remember that I have not put an apron on, I chide myself as I don it, "Sorry, darling, I forgot".'

The mother of the anorexic wrote, 'I had long dream talks with her and we did things together and sometimes they were so good and she'd be so like her old self that I'd wake up feeling good.'

Where are they?

In the early days, condolence letters are a fantastic prop. What is in the letters is secondary to the fact that they've been sent at all. 'The comfort lies in the fact that the pile of letters indicates that your grief has some importance, however brief,' wrote Mary Stott. Letters are tangible evidence of the life you led together.

Certainly, I will never let another death go by without dropping the relatives a line. Letters that say things like 'He will live on forever in your heart' - trite lines I'd usually wrinkle a lip at - seemed to have huge significance, laden with meaning.

Certainly, despite the aches and pains, my step always got light at the top of the last flight of stairs when I saw that there was a pile of letters waiting to be read. One friend wrote, 'These sad losses are signposts to new and different

routes.' Another, comforting in its very ambiguousness: 'We share the mystery of his passing.' And 'He'll be with you in your mind and memory of small things - a sort of pragmatic form of immortality, perhaps.'

Which brings us to the big question asked by all bereaved people: where are they?

In *A Grief Observed*, C S Lewis wrote, 'I know that the thing I want is exactly the thing I can never get. The old life, the jokes, the drinks, the arguments, the love-making, the tiny, heartbreaking commonplace ...' It's impossible for this to come back, he says, 'unless, of course, you can literally believe all that stuff about family reunions "on the further shore", pictured in entirely earthly terms. But that is all unscriptural, all out of bad hymns and lithographs. There's not a word of it in the Bible ... Reality never repeats. The exact same thing is never taken away and given back. How well the Spiritualists bait their hook! "There are cigars in Heaven." For that is what we should all like. The happy past restored. And that, just that, is what I cry out for, with mad, midnight endearments and entreaties spoken into the empty air.'

And yet they must go somewhere. Certainly when I visited my dead mother in the chapel of rest, my first reaction was to look around for her. For the thing in the coffin - no, for certain that was not my mother. That was a shell, like a bundle of old clothes. *She wasn't there*. Therefore, she must be somewhere else.

Do they live on in our hearts, or our families? Certainly there are bits of my father and my mother that I can see in my son. Even bits of my grandmother, although he never knew her. And I don't mean just a certain smile or a way of walking; I mean an attitude of mind, a cast of joke, a streak of personality. And one of the reasons that Canon Holland's poem - the one which starts 'Death is nothing at all ... I have only slipped away into the next room' - is comforting, is because it implies that the relationship you had with the dead person has not ended. It continues, but just in a different way. As St John Chrysostom wrote, 'For think not, because he is not present, that therefore he is lost; for had he been absent in a foreign land, the title of thy relationship had not gone from thee with his body.'

Early in the stages of grief we sometimes 'see' the lost one - out of the corner of our eye getting onto a bus, kneeling in a church pew. And how difficult it is to explain these sightings to other people without being thought completely crazy!

Other people

Some of the burdens the bereaved have to bear are the well-meaning but hurtful remarks of other people. Since the bereaved are super-sensitive, they are extra-quick to take offence if anyone gives them a piece of advice that is just the tiniest bit off-key.

'You'll get over it.' Just a remark like that is offered as comfort - and received with rage. How dare they suggest you will ever get over it! How dare you tell me how I will feel! 'Remember, he died peacefully. It's something to be thankful for.' How dare you concentrate on his experience when you should be concentrating on mine! I don't care how peacefully he died, it's the fact he died at all that upsets me! It is loathsome to suggest there is anything to be 'thankful for' in his death!

'You have suffered so much you should go away and have a good rest. You need a holiday.' How dare you suggest a holiday could help this grief at all! I would simply be unhappy and alone in a foreign country! You just want to get rid of me!

Even close relatives of the dead person may appear to be remarkably unsympathetic. As one man, whose wife died, said of his in-laws: 'It's very difficult for us because we're grieving for different people. Her parents are grieving for their child who played with the rabbit. I'm grieving for the woman I was going to share the rest of my life with.'

And the bereaved person can look for things in their close relatives and partners which they cannot ever fulfil. When a parent dies, they may look to their partners to fulfil a parental role. When a husband dies, a widow may look to a son to fulfil the role of a spouse in comforting her. When they don't come up with the goods, as they cannot, the bereaved person feels even more cut off, and misunderstood.

Certainly I found it very difficult, when my father died, to explain to my partner how lonely I felt. Quite naturally he thought, 'How could she feel lonely, when she's got me?' But one does feel lonely, and particularly lonely when there is no one to tell.

Then so many people don't want to talk about your bereavement. It is not because they are unkind. They are shy or embarrassed themselves. Or they think that if they mention it you will get upset and, as they don't wish to upset you, they keep quiet. What they don't realise is that the bereaved person is just dying to talk. 'Some people think if you don't talk about it you won't think

about it,' said one bereaved parent. 'In fact if you do talk about it you will be more quickly able to stop thinking about it constantly.'

'We would go out with people and they wouldn't even bring up the topic. But it was all we wanted to talk about and nothing else.'

The problem is that other people cannot know when you need them unless you tell them. Maddeningly, usually the consolation and comfort comes at the time when you need it least - between the death and the funeral, when you have plenty to occupy your mind. It is rather similar to when you have a cold. Just before a cold you usually feel lousy and no one sympathises; during the cold when you are sneezing like mad you usually feel fine, but everyone sympathises, because the symptoms are visible; after the cold, when there are no symptoms but you're feeling drained and weary, no one sympathises. Similarly, at a time when you are surrounded by obituaries, high drama, undertakers, coffins and so on, you get a lot of sympathy; but it is after everything is over that you really need the comfort. And of course it is then that you have to ask for it - which is always difficult.

Many of us feel embarrassed at bursting into tears; or find that tears only flow when we are alone. Many realise that others might be embarrassed at our tears, or know that friends will immediately try to offer comfort, when what we want is simply a hug, a kiss, a shoulder to cry on, an ear to listen and an acknowledgement of the pain. We do not want bucking-up advice. Many of us do not know how to ask for help.

From my diary: 'Somehow if I describe how I feel to Sue I feel she thinks I'm a fraud. Describing how unhappy one felt yesterday or an hour ago - it's like describing the fish that got away. "Oh yeah," you can think they are saying. "You cried buckets? How many buckets precisely? Sure you cried buckets. You felt sad? How sad exactly? This sad? You can't remember? I put it to you - *did you really feel sad at all?*"

But while some friends seem incapable of helping, others reveal hidden depths, full of love and helpful insights. I had more, and closer, conversations with more friends when my father died than I had ever had with them before.

Rage

Other people may well be wary of the bereaved person. Because anger and rage are a common symptom of grief, anger and rage are often dished out to whoever happens to be nearby.

At funeral rituals, the Indians used to shoot spears and arrows in the sky; and at military funerals guns are still fired, in an apparent expression of fury. Woe betide you if you happen to catch a stray bullet.

'Rage creeps up on you unawares, too,' wrote Mary Stott. 'I was coming back from London and as I walked along a crowded compartment and saw people laughing and talking and reading and sleeping, something in my mind went briefly out of gear. Their normality was hideous to me. I was in hostile country, an enemy alien.'

Some people feel furious with the person who has died. I simply felt unfocused rage, eating myself up with undischarged fury. But after my mother died, a lot of this anger was directed at a member of my family. I would wake in the middle of the night thinking about this person, filled with loathing. I would sit in a chair addressing the person, citing everything they had done in the past to upset me. My whispered voice would grow hoarse with rage as tears poured down my cheeks. And when I had got up to the present day I would simply start again. Take Two. 'To start with, you did this, you didn't do that ...' And so it would go on, for hours sometimes, until I was burned out. In the morning my mood might have changed. What had I been fussing about? They were only human. They had nice bits to them. They were unhappy, too. I would ring them up kindly, just to check they hadn't been harmed by the evil rays I'd been shooting out in the early hours of the morning.

I am certain that one of the reasons why wills are the subject of so much upset is because the bereaved feel fury that they have to pin on someone. It could be the vicar who took the service and got a prayer wrong, or the solicitor who didn't smile when he was talking; but often anger is directed at the relations who are also beneficiaries to the will. Why did they get the books in his library when I only got the shelves? Why did they get anything at all, indeed? Didn't he love me best? Often when someone dies, the first thought that creeps unwelcome into the mind is: 'How much will I get?' This is not a sign that you are a soul-less miser. No, their death left a hole in your life. The natural reaction is: 'How can I fill that hole?' The mind turns to the will. People say, 'Don't get fussed over the will, it's only money.' It is quite true. But the beneficiaries often don't see it as 'only money'. They see their legacies as gifts of love, that will fill the aching hole of loss.

The other recipient of my fury was, quite naturally, God. From my diary: 'I burst into tears on my way to work and felt so utterly furious with life that when Denis rang me I couldn't speak, I just said that I hoped I was never reincarnated and if I ever did get to some kind of spirit world and anyone asked me if I wanted to go back to earth or not I would not be putting my tick in the box, and if I had to go back I'd put myself at the back of the queue. What on earth was the point of all that loving when it's just broken? God is like a football hooligan, just destructive.'

I was amazed to read that C S Lewis had just the same feelings: 'Meanwhile, where is God? When you are happy, so happy that you have no sense of needing Him ... and turn to Him with gratitude and praise, you will be - or so it feels - welcomed with open arms. But go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence. You may as well turn away ... There are no lights in the windows. It might be an empty house ...' He added: 'Not that I am (I think) in much danger of ceasing to believe in God. The real danger is of coming to believe such dreadful things about Him. The conclusion I dread is not: "so there's no God after all" but "so this is what God's really like. Deceive yourself no longer.'"

The change in backdrop

When my father died I felt not only a sense of my own mortality, but his death meant a change in the backdrop to my life. And as, if you change a backdrop from a plain white colour, say, to a patterned dark one, so the objects in front change their tones and colours in relation to it, so all the people in my life had altered as well. I saw them differently. Some seemed to have feet of clay; others blossomed. I felt my father was like an enormous but beautiful rhododendron bush that had been growing bigger and bigger in the flowerbed. He was good-looking, extraordinarily clever, well read, he was a practising artist, he played the piano, he was exceptionally amusing, he had the OBE ... and he naturally rather overpowered us. When he died, his children couldn't fail to miss him but, also, they could not fail to flourish, too. The rain may have beaten down on us more heavily, but we got more sun, as well.

A phrase that comforters often use is 'Remember the good times'. When the first person made this hackneyed remark to me, I was naturally, furious. (Naturally? Remember, anger is almost the first response to anything, however inappropriate.) The remark implied that we had had bad times - which we had never had.

But death does something to memories. When someone is alive, they seem to hold the key to the strongbox of remembrance. Why look back when you have them there, in front of you? Your memories are of your last meeting, not the distant past. When they die, it is as if a scrapbook is suddenly opened. Memories do come flooding back. Bad memories, of course, as well as the good ones. But death gives access to the past in a way that nothing else can.

No comment on bereavement can be complete without a small mention of the practical things that can help. Don't decide to clear out your loved one's things all at once. If you can, do a little bit at a time, even if it's only twenty minutes a day. If you attack it too quickly you may get rid of too much too quickly; too slowly and you are left like Miss Havisham, in a shrine to the past.

If friends ask if they can do anything, ask them perhaps to ring you once a week for the next couple of months. The love and kindness of other people is just there, waiting to be tapped into. Give them a *specific* task. They want to know. For instance, ask them, if you can't face cooking for yourself, if they could either deliver a meal to you, or ask you to supper once a week. Make no major decisions like getting married again, emigrating, moving, getting a pet, or, perhaps, even dealing with the will, until a year has passed.

If your doctor offers you sleeping tablets or tranquillizers, think twice. Don't feel guilty if you take them; they can be a real gift in moments of despair.

However, you may be like the mother of the anorexic who wrote, 'Looking back over the time of my most acute grief, I feel strongly that it would have been very negative, even destructive, for me to have taken any tranquillizer or drug which might have dulled my perceptions and awareness. Just as nature has developed a very ecological balance, which a few thoughtless acts can upset, so I felt my body had its own physical and biochemical way of dealing with grief, and it dictated the right reactions at the right time. I do feel that if I had been fuzzy with pills, certain issues would have been delayed and I would have had to deal with them at the wrong time, for other people as well as myself. There wouldn't have been that 'one-ness' in shock. I wanted to be fully aware at the death of my kid, just as I was at her birth.'

And if you find you get 'stuck' in your grief, see a bereavement counsellor. She can't get you through the black tunnel, but she can yell directions from the other end. If your feeling is 'What's the point of seeing one?' ask yourself 'What's the point in not seeing one?' The worst that can happen is that an hour of your time is wasted; the best is that she gives you a nugget of consolation that helps you on your way.

I want to end on an odd note. There is - and I hope those recently bereaved won't find this offensive - a 'silver lining' to bereavement. You may not find it until a year has passed, but find it you will. Don't take it from me. Listen to these voices.

In her poem, 'Eurydice', Edith Sitwell wrote:

'Love is not changed by death
And nothing is lost and
all in the end is Harvest.'

Edith Sitwell, 'Eurydice' (*Collected Poems*, Sinclair Stevenson).
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What is this harvest? What can we 'get out of' death? We can realise that we are all mortal, and if we are to enjoy life we must live for the moment. 'Life is a preparation for the fullest enjoyment of the next minute; but to be aware of death is to appreciate the never-to-come-again worth of that minute, free of the dark,' wrote Christopher Leach, in *Letter to a Younger Son* (Dent).

And a woman who had a miscarriage wrote of other positive aspects of the experience: 'I know I can survive great sadness. I am less judgmental of myself and, I hope, of others. I trust my overpowering emotional instincts as healthy expressions of what Nature really intended of me. My experience of miscarriage has not been all death, despair and destruction.'

The mother of the anorexic wrote, 'Whatever life is all about we don't have an unalienable right to happiness. Suffering is just as much a part of living as joy.'

And Iris Murdoch writes in similar vein: 'In many cases something good can be retained or learnt from the experience of emptiness and non-being' (as a result of facing bereavement). 'Should it not be taken as a spiritual icon or subject for meditation? There is nothing that cannot be broken or taken from us. Ultimately we are nothing. A reminder of our mortality, a recognition of contingency, must at least make us humble. Are we not then close to the deep mystery of being human? When we find our ordinary pursuits trivial and senseless are we not right to do so? The experience of emptiness may be a shock soon forgotten, or a lifelong reminder, a moral inspiration, even a liberation, a kind of joy.'

I have a son of nineteen. As a mother I want him to have experiences that will help him to mature, both emotionally and spiritually. Recently he said, 'I hope you don't think I'm being rude, mum, but I do hope that when you die I'll experience it in the same way as you've experienced grandpa dying. I mean, terrible, but not *absolutely* terrible. You do seem', he added, rather nervously, 'to have found it extremely interesting as well as sad.'

I hope so, too. I also hope that I die young enough for him to experience the death of someone close so that, before he gets too old, he, like me, gets a glimpse of life from the rockface, and perhaps finds out why those who mourn are said to be 'blessed'.

Why? In the depth of misery you don't feel in the least blessed. You feel abandoned and betrayed; and yet at the same time, when you mourn, your vision leaps into focus. Everything important is heightened. Everything unimportant drops away. For a few months, at least, experiences are distilled, sharp - and real.

About the author: Virginia Ironside was asked for this essay by the Trustees of the Christian Evidence Society not because she is a theologian or an apologist for church doctrine, but because she is a truthful writer who could report with candour and, with her personal experience of distress in mourning, in a way that should speak for many and, it is to be hoped, come as a blessing for those who need it. The result is brave, direct and funny about bereavement, and enormously sympathetic. But it is not sanctimonious. It does not attempt to alleviate the hardness of reality with comforting religious mottoes about eternity.

Virginia Ironside accurately describes the shocks which bereavement can deliver to conventional ideas about a loving God and a safe passage hereafter. So it stands precisely in the biblical tradition of the Book of Job, without needing to quote scripture at us. The modern, secular world is often morbid. But in the Beatitudes Jesus taught his disciples that those who mourn are blessed. It is the underlying aim of Virginia Ironside to show how that works out. The Society, which was founded to look for Christian evidence, is proud to find such good evidence in the pastoral honesty and attractive advice given here for times of loss.