

A great loss can shine a light on what is most important

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DEATH comes in many forms and affects us in different ways. Soldiers and civilians are killed and maimed in war zones, thousands die in tsunamis and droughts and many more die of diseases.

Such suffering, loss and pain, while appalling and distressful, is seen for the majority of us from a distance — viewed on the nightly news, heard on the radio or read about in the morning paper. Thankfully, such distance allows us to remain detached. Not so, when death comes knocking and takes a loved one. For our family, even though it was nearly seven years ago, nothing will erase the memory of two police knocking on our front door in the early hours of the morning to tell us of our son's death in a hit-and-run accident only a few kilometres from home.

Based on our experience, I know for those families whose young sons, daughters, brothers and sisters were cruelly taken at the weekend, their lives will never be the same.

As we have, they are about to embark on a remorseless journey that will test their resolve. Like ships on a dark, stormy sea, they will be battered and tossed; yearning for safe shores and a time when all is well.

First comes bewilderment, shock and a numbing sense of loss. How can someone so full of promise and life, someone ingrained in your very being, be taken? How can years of parenting, celebrating milestones and shepherding a loved one through life's travails amount to nothing? There is also anger and rage that you and your family have been chosen to suffer. How can there be compassion or justice in a world where, for no rhyme or reason, death has stolen a loved one?

Coupled with the shock and pain is the need to know why — what caused the accident and who was responsible? In the face of what is random and arbitrary we seek explanations. As grieving parents we also ask: what if someone else had been driving? What if the car was not travelling as fast?

In that darkest hour, family and friends provide unconditional love and support. At an instinctual level, we reach out to one another and through the tears and sobbing pain, there is human contact.

For us, flowers, words of sympathy and support, cards expressing shared sorrow and neighbours volunteering to cook and carry out the daily chores all provided evidence that we were not alone.

After shock and disbelief, comes the finality of death and the realisation that what has happened can never be changed. In life, unlike in Hollywood movies and romance novels, we cannot control our own fate or the destiny of those we love most.

While the idea of closure is empty and facile, for those who believe in God and life after death, there is the knowledge that this life is ephemeral and the belief that the world after this is a better place.

The funeral ritual provides reassurance that all is not lost and that a son or daughter's soul lives on. For our son's funeral, we chose the words of the Christian mystic Julian of Norwich: "All shall be well and all manner of things shall be well."

Accepting that we are mortal and that life is imbued with a deeper, more profound sense of spirituality, while never fully explaining suffering and pain, provides a sense that there is a larger plan and that we should give ourselves up to forces beyond our control.

While wounds never fully heal, with the passing of time life does improve. Memories of time spent together, milestones achieved and intimate moments shared, provide comfort and happiness as all is not lost and nothing can erase the love between a parent and a child.

If I had to choose between never having a child and having a child who was taken, the choice is simple. The time spent together, no matter how short, far outweighs the pain caused by death.

Experiencing loss also binds those most affected. In the depths of despondency and despair, the realisation grows that those suffering share a unique relationship tempered and strengthened by the experience and their love for one another. Strangely enough, instead of being numbed by death, life takes on a more moving and vibrant dimension. While death is a constant, new life and regeneration are also ever present.

The intensity of loss is balanced by an equally powerful sense of living the moment and experiencing life to its fullest. The aphorism "great love, great loss, great joy" sums up the possibility of renewed faith and hope.

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