



**Finding the New Normal
After the Loss of My Child:
a Story of a Bereaved Mother's
Fight to Rebuild Her Life**

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Dedication

There are so many people to thank for their support over the years. My family and friends who have given more love than I ever deserved, Louise Quigley, our wonderful nanny who did the bravest thing imaginable and helped hold my family together in the worst of times and Jennie Young who showed me The Way.

I would like to thank my PhD supervisors, Professors Ronan O'Carroll and Rory O'Connor , who gave me the chance to achieve something which, at times, I thought was impossible and I thank them for having the courage to take on this challenge in the first place.

My extraordinary parents and children have supported me way beyond what could reasonably have been expected. My parents, who have been my role models, have never doubted my ability to complete the doctorate and I hope I have repaid their faith in me, if not their financial investment. My children, Heather, Peter and Claire, have put up with a crotchety, distracted mother for long enough and I look forward to making up for this in many ways, from this point forward.

In 2010, my dear friend Mark emerged as my true lifelong soul mate. His belief in me and his advice to "keep calm and carry on" have encouraged me to do just that, through the last stormy months of the PhD and beyond. For this I thank him, from the bottom of my heart.

Finally, my thanks are extended to my darling Ross, to whom this story is dedicated. I have felt, through everything that life has thrown at me in the last few years that my purpose here was to use what skills I have to help others who have experienced this devastating loss. Whenever times have been particularly hard, I have thought of a wee boy with blonde curly hair and enormous blue eyes whose short time with me has changed me forever. Ross, you are my inspiration, always.

This book is dedicated to the memory of Ross Munro

5th July 1994 – 18th January 1999

Thank you for the days x

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Introduction

I've thought long and hard about what to say in this book. I wondered if I should try to play down what happened in my story but I think it's better to be honest with you all, even though some of what has happened might be hard to hear. I suspect my story may not be that different to many other parents who have been through this horror, but in my story there have been a few unexpected setbacks along the way.

Anyone who knows me knows that music is important to me in my life and I've chosen a few pieces of music that sum up the feelings I had at each stage of my life. Often, the words don't fit exactly, so I've taken the liberty of changing to odd word to make more sense of my experience. I hope the songs help to explain the changes that I've seen over time. So, let's begin.

Chapter One

My story starts in January 1999. I was the owner of a successful IT and management consultancy, making lots of money as the new millennium approached. We'd been away on a skiing holiday in France which we'd all thoroughly enjoyed, even though I spent three days in bed with flu in the middle of the week. On Monday the 18th of January, I returned to work as normal. Ross had come down with a heavy cold the day before so I had given him some Calpol and tucked him in, promising him the cold would get better soon. I left for work early before everyone was awake so I listened at his bedroom door to see how he was. His cough had stopped so I hoped he was indeed feeling better and set off for work.

Around mid-morning, I heard a commotion in the hall outside of my office and my partner Alan burst in. He looked at me and said "I don't know how to tell you this but it's Ross. He's dead."

I was taken home, not believing that a happy healthy 4½ year old boy could go to bed and just die in his sleep, but that's indeed what happened. When I got home, my dad was there, as were the ambulance men and police. I was allowed to see Ross in his bedroom. He'd probably died in the early hours of the morning and by the time I saw the body, it was obvious that he was gone and there was no coming back. His face was

reddened and distorted and my immediate reaction was "Meningitis! Oh no, Heather!" but the policeman explained that the redness was not caused by anything like that. I remembered from the many cop shows I'd seen that changes take place in bodies after death, so I put two and two together and understood what had happened.

I was taken out of his room whilst they took his body to Falkirk Hospital for a post mortem. We followed behind and we waited and we waited outside the morgue for what seemed like hours. Finally, I was allowed in to see him but with strict instructions not to touch him. I held him and kissed him anyway. There was no doubt my lovely boy was gone and nothing could bring him back.

Chapter Two

At that time, Ross's big sister Heather was 7 years old. She had found his body and shouted to our nanny, Louise, who raised the alarm. Louise phoned my dad, not having any idea what to do, and he came down to the house. When he arrived, he had thought it best to send Heather to school, to keep her out of the way until he could work out what to do. She knew, of course, but went to school anyway.

The post mortem in Falkirk was inconclusive so his body was sent to Yorkhill for further examination. Now was the time to go and get Heather from school and tell her what had happened and, to this day, this remains the hardest thing I have ever done in my whole life. To pass on the devastating confirmation that she had lost her best friend, much loved wee brother and our little bundle of fun and energy. I broke her heart that day, just as mine had been broken with the same news earlier.

On the way, I tried to contact someone, anyone, for help and advice for what to do, especially for Heather. I had the phone number for Cruse but when I rang I only got an answering machine. I had no idea who else to call. I was aware that Ross's dad, my first husband Donald, had to be told, but he was a long distance lorry driver and I wasn't sure how to get hold of him. I managed to track down the number for his partner and called her at work to break the news.

Again, devastation ensued. My mum was away on holiday with a group of friends and my dad, thankfully, called her to arrange for her to come home. I gave a list of names to Alan and he began the round of calls to let everyone know.

We were in total shock. Telling the story now, I can feel that aching, tearing, sick feeling in the pit of my stomach as if I was right back there in that moment. Even now after 14 years have passed, the pain of the loss isn't any less, it's just further away. People came to the house in tears. They hugged us and we hugged them back. They were sorry. They were shocked. They were devastated. I was bewildered. I didn't understand what had happened and with no obvious cause of death, how did I know it wouldn't happen to Heather too? The first night, when exhaustion kicked in, we went to bed and I held her until she fell asleep. It was all I could do to breathe in and breathe out. To me, it sort of felt like the earth had stopped spinning and I was glad for this, because it felt like time was standing still.

But it wasn't. People continued to come and go offering condolences. Each and every one was welcome. I cried buckets full of tissues and burnt the kettle out drinking tea. When someone arrived, the tears stopped until we had told the story before starting again. I never knew a human being could cry so many tears. Cry me a river, they say. That's what I did over and over again. Our GP called round and discretely left some little white pills in the kitchen. I

didn't want them. I needed to remember as much of this as I could, I needed to know I was really there.

Chapter Three

Hours turned into days and still nothing changed. Because it was a sudden unexpected death there would be a police investigation. I remember the PC sitting beside me on the couch and asking details about what had happened. I told the story calmly and as accurately as I could. Tears rolled down his face as he took the notes and I was glad. Not that the man was sad, but that he got it, he felt it, he understood that this was something horrific.

The post mortem was taking its time but they told us that the body would be released in a few days. In the mean time, a lovely man from the funeral place came to see us. We were a non-traditional family with a mum and a dad, as well as a stepmum and a stepdad. I was determined all of us would be involved as we all felt like Ross's parents. The phrase "united in grief", clichéd though it is, summed up the situation perfectly. We chose a coffin, a place for the funeral tea and a plot for the burial. We chose these things together and together we scraped together the strength to make decisions that no parent should ever make. Donald left the organisation of the funeral service itself to me, since I was the "religious" one. Ross had been baptised at Larbert East Church though we had a new minister now, Melville Crossthwaite. A kind man, who had experienced his own son in a life threatening situation, which I guess is as close to loss as you can get. He listened as we

told him memories of Ross. He was perfect and I thanked God for Melville's support. We chose two hymns, All Things Bright and Beautiful, which Ross was and Jesus loves me. This wasn't to be a celebration of Ross's life. It was to be a proper send off, accepting that Ross had left this world and hopefully helping us to accept the reality.

The message came through that the post mortem had not ascertained a cause of death, but there was no sign of foul play, so the body was released. The funeral director told us we could view the body later that day. A short while later he rang back to say we might want to reconsider the viewing as there had been quite extensive post mortem change. I couldn't bear the thought of not being able to say my final goodbye so the funeral director told us he'd do his best and we should arrange to visit that evening. Dad, Alan and myself went to their place in Falkirk. We were led into a dimly lit room full of lilies. In a coffin was a small boy's body. It only bore a passing resemblance to Ross but that wasn't important. We had taken a few things to go in the coffin beside him. I'd asked for him to be dressed in his favourite t-shirt, fleece top and joggy bottoms. And he needed to have socks on - I didn't want his little feet to get cold. I gave him his favourite toy digger, a book and a soft toy to cuddle. I was advised not to try to pick up the body, so I stroked his hair one final time and said my goodbyes.

Somehow we got through to the day of the funeral. When the car arrived, I wanted more than anything to run away and never come back, but that's not an option, so we drove to the church and went through the service. It was shocking to see the little coffin, and my emotions were all over the place, wanting to scream "NO", run away, anything but this. But we did it and afterwards set off for the cemetery. The service was excellent and when the time came for the pall bearers to step up, the four parents took a cord each. We lowered our son into the grave and that was it.

For the next few days I just about managed to breathe in and out, but that was about all I could do. It felt like I was clinging onto the world as it spun, desperately trying to claw my way back to the day before Ross died. I prayed, I begged, I would have happily sold my soul to the devil to get back to life with Ross in it and couldn't imagine how I could possibly live in a world without him. Looking back, the song which pretty much summed up this time for me, is this one:

Yesterday, all my troubles seemed so far away
Now it looks as though they're here to stay
Oh, I believe in yesterday.

Suddenly, I'm not half the man I used to be,
There's a shadow hanging over me.
Oh, yesterday came suddenly

Why she had to go I don't know, they couldn't say
I did something wrong now I long for yesterday.....

(Yesterday, Lennon & McCartney)

My words were - Why he had to go I don't know, they couldn't say, I did nothing wrong now I long for yesterday.....

If only I could turn the clock back, if only I could go back. But as the days turned into weeks and weeks turned into months, I gradually came to understand that this was not going to happen.

Chapter Four

Business is a hard game. Being self employed and having staff employed on project works for the fast approaching new millennium, I was conscious that we were in a very shaky place and that there might be competitors who could exploit this situation. Most of my staff were men with families of their own and I didn't want their family's happiness to be affected by losing jobs and so on, so I took the decision to go back to work one week after the funeral. I was crying all the time, obviously, so I had to sit myself down and force myself not to cry. Every day I managed this for a bit longer than the day before. When I managed to keep the tears at bay until 3 o'clock in the afternoon, I went back. This meant that the floodgates would open on the train on the way home. I don't know what the other passengers must have thought as I stood there with tears pouring down my face, but that was what I did. When I went back to work, I saw that two competitors had indeed quoted to take over the remaining period of the project, so, in going back, I had secured the work for my team, and this was important to me at the time.

You might hear people say that you should let your grief out, not bottle it up. I bottled it up, trying to hold it together for my family and my staff. This was a seriously bad idea, as you'll see later on, but at this time, I seemed to be staggering through the days, in auto pilot, but inside I was broken. This was a time

before the internet was as big as it is now and finding someone who could help me or my family was very difficult. And I wondered, who could possibly help me, because nobody could possibly understand how bad I felt and how much I missed my lovely boy. Eventually, I found a support group called The Compassionate Friends and thought, what the hell, I can't possibly feel any worse than this, I'll go to the meeting and see if it helps.

It helped. I joined a small group of women who had lost their children at various ages and through different circumstances. If I'm honest, on the first night, I wanted to see what these people looked like who lived with this loss. And, to my utter astonishment, they looked normal. Well, reasonably normal. Some of these women had lived with their loss for many years. In my early 30s at the time, I was aware that I might expect to live with this for maybe 30+ years. Surely that was not possible? Surely I would die of grief? But the ladies in the group had survived. They had what seemed like reasonably happy lives. If they could survive and rebuild a life, was there a possibility that I might be able to do the same? This was the first time that I considered that there might be a future, and these friends could help me find it.

At this time I can only describe myself as feeling totally lost, alone, broken. I was highly vulnerable though I didn't know this at the time. I met someone whose opinion I respected and he suggested that having more children might help. Truthfully, if he'd said sawing off your left leg with a rusty pen knife would help, I'd have believed it. So I thought, let God decide, we'll see what happens, what will be will be. And I fell pregnant right away. I was ok with this and another baby would be OK but only on the condition that I would have a girl. Having another boy would be totally unacceptable. The week before Christmas I had a scan and there I found out that no, I was having a boy. So many doubts, so many questions, so many worries, but like it or not, this baby would be here soon so I would need to get ready for this. To add to the worries, I became unwell during the pregnancy with pre-eclampsia. This had happened when I was pregnant with Ross. And, just like with Ross, the baby was induced at 35 weeks and spent two weeks in the special care baby unit. Peter was born on the 4th of February 2000, less than 13 months after Ross had died. And from the minute he arrived, he was so loved, so wanted. The déjà vu was unbearable, but this wee baby brought hope and I loved him for that.

Chapter Five

The business was still coasting along and, since I was the only breadwinner for the family, again taking time off was not an option. Maternity leave was impossible, so I worked the day I went into hospital to have Peter and I worked the day I got out. Peter came to the office with me and feeds were scheduled between meetings. It was a really difficult, I'd been very unwell, but supporting my family was the most important thing for me, so I struggled on.

The weeks and months passed and the world kept turning, even though my world had been completely blown apart. I carried on going to the TCF meetings. I remember asking questions a lot of the time. I wanted to know how my new friends could possibly cope with their loss. Could it be possible that they perhaps didn't feel quite as bad as I did? Yes, they certainly did. But the circumstances of their loss were different to mine – did this make it any easier? It seemed no, some of my friends had lost their child in much worse circumstances than me. Ross had not suffered, he had not been hurt. He just died in his sleep. There was nothing special about my feelings, or my experience – my TCF friends understood the full extent of what I was going through because they had been through just as much, sometimes more. Yet they had still managed to survive. I couldn't bear the idea of changing, of moving on because it felt like I would be letting Ross go. It seemed somehow to be a betrayal, a

denial, that I would somehow be letting him down. I had to find a way to keep him with me somehow, yet allow life to move on. I remember Elaine Finlay telling me the story of her son and his love for ladybirds. They would often come across a ladybird in some pretty unusual locations, or at times when somebody in the family was struggling with life and this was like a sign, a message from her son as if to say, it's ok. You're ok. You'll be ok. There was nothing like this that reminded me of Ross, but you know it's the strangest thing. Gradually, I began to see ladybirds too. And when I did, it was as if it was a message from her son Alan to say Ross is here and - it's ok too. Strange. Very strange. But in a good way. With the help of my friends from TCF I was finding a way to keep Ross with me and yet live a normal life. I didn't realise it at the time, but I was finding a future with the help of these friends. I remember being in what is now the BHS store in Stirling one day and hearing a song over their sound system. It was a song by the Spice Girls, who Ross loved when he was here. And I realised then that this was the song that summed up where I had got to at that time:

Look for the rainbow in every storm,
Find out for certain
love is gonna be there for you,
You'll always be someone's baby
Goodbye my friend,
(I know your going searching although I can still feel
ya here)
It's not the end,

(You gotta keep it strong before the pain turns into fears)

So glad we made it, time will never change it no no no

No no no no

You know its time to say goodbye

No no no no

(Goodbye, Spice Girls)

Goodbye my friend. Goodbye in a way that I know you're not coming back, but neither are you gone completely from my life. I was just finding a new future, a different one to what I'd expected, but one that bearable, just. It was ok.

Chapter Six

The millennium had come and gone and the IT industry was in a state of big change. It was becoming increasingly obvious that running the business alone was too much for me, so I began to look for a business partner. I found what I hoped would be the answer, and offered a directorship to a young man who could help with sales and marketing and ultimately taking control of the whole company. However, fate intervened and I found out that I was pregnant. Again. Another one. I told the chap I was recruiting and he was happy to continue with the deal. So he joined us as we developed a software package which we would sell to new and existing clients and all was going well.

Another year came round again and the second anniversary of Ross's death loomed large. I couldn't face work on that day so spent the day at home. When I got into work the next day, I was greeted with white faces and worried looks. And an empty bank balance. The chap I had recruited had turned out not to be what I had hoped for. He had gone and I had lost quarter of a million pounds in the process. He had taken a copy of our software source code and tried to set up a deal with another company. Our client base had not been impressed with the software he had shown them they had lost faith in us. Essentially, the company was bankrupt.

I sought the advice of my accountant and various others and the overwhelming conclusion was that I should close the company and sell the software rights to myself personally, then start up a new company to take that forward. Based on my track record, this seemed reasonable, but nobody factored in the impact of the loss of a child and how early I was in grief, even two years later. However, the decision was made, so I remortgaged the house to raise the necessary funds and carried on. By this time I was 35 weeks pregnant and again, had pre-eclampsia. Again, I was admitted to hospital, the baby was induced and moved to special care. This was Claire, my much loved, wonderful little daughter, born on 5th March, a year a month and a day after her brother Pete. Again, no maternity leave was possible so again, I worked the day I went into hospital and worked the day I came out.

I wanted to do everything I could to keep the existing workforce employed so I paid their salaries whilst all of the restructuring was taking place. It looked as though this might just work out and things were progressing well when tragedy struck again. My brother Tim, then aged 39, was a keen mountaineer and climber. That Easter Sunday he was on Ben Nevis on a routine climb, when his crampons iced up and he slipped and fell 700 feet. He suffered massive head injuries and was airlifted to the Southern General Hospital in Glasgow. He was in a coma and, despite being supremely fit, the battle to survive was too great. A week after the fall, his condition deteriorated and he died, leaving a young widow behind. Now, my parents who had supported me as a bereaved parent, had become bereaved parents themselves. Claire was six weeks old and had not had the chance to meet her uncle. Peter was 14 months, Heather 8 years. I was still the only breadwinner trying desperately to keep a struggling business afloat through all of this grief. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it was then that my mental health suffered.

Chapter Seven

Clinical depression, as I guess many people reading this might know, is a lot more than just feeling sad. My mental health declined to the point where I was barely functioning, not eating, not sleeping, not speaking. But I was thinking, very dark thoughts. I wished the pain would just end. I just didn't want to live with this emotional pain. Outside of my depressive bubble I became aware that people were worried about me and a doctor was called to examine me. He worked out that I was thinking these dark thoughts and had me admitted to the mental health ward in the local hospital, where I was placed on suicide watch. This was quite an experience and I was treated both wonderfully well and with appalling insensitivity. I worked out I would need to appear sane to be released so focussed on this and was discharged after a week. Pretending to be sane is not as easy as you might think especially when people are assuming that you're a bit of a basket case. I wasn't mental though, I was just overwhelmed by bottled up grief. It was like everything that I should have been feeling in the past 3 years hit me all at once, like a psychological tsunami. Some nursing staff were not as compassionate as they might have been and others got it, without needing too much of an explanation. But as far as I can see, its like that the whole world over – the muggles either get it or they don't. But either way, they believed I was sane and they let me out.

The business couldn't survive all of this drama and after a few months, it folded. I was declared bankrupt but allowed to stay in my house since there was no equity in it. Because I'd been so heavily depressed, I was put to the top of the queue for counselling for depression and within a week, began a year long course of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy. This was for depression though, not grief, but was an absolutely life changing experience. The lovely lady who helped me taught me that I had choices in life and this was a complete revelation. I'd always done what people expected of me, worked hard, never really considered what I wanted in life. But now, at the age of 37, here I was learning that there's always a choice. The options may not be great, but they are there nonetheless. I decided that I wanted to help other people who suffered like I had, so when I was better, I looked into becoming a counsellor. In typical Mairi fashion, the plan got bigger and bigger and I ended up enrolling in a psychology degree at Stirling University. Me! Who had left school at the first possible opportunity and worked my way up from trainee to business owner. Getting an academic qualification? Yeah right. But I was motivated, I worked hard and I did ok. It soon became obvious to me that I was never going to make it as a counsellor though. Telling a client "you think you've got problems? Wait till you hear my story" was not a good opener for a counselling session. I just didn't have the people skills to take on a helping role and work with real people in distress. But what I could do was the research side of things. I loved to read the

academic papers and journals try to solve the puzzles and problems that they raised. I determined that this would be my new career and after I graduated, I was fortunate enough to win a scholarship to do a PhD. This could be in any psychology related topic, so much to the horror of the university, I chose to investigate how parents cope with the death of their child.

Chapter Eight

I started off with high hopes. I was naïve enough to think that I would be able to find some kind of magical remedy, a psychological wonder cure, something that would help everyone magically cope with the misery of the grief experience. I would find this answer and tell everyone who needed to know and we'd all be fine and we'd all live happily ever after. Yeah right. That didn't happen. I'm sorry to report there is no wonder cure, no magical solution to take away the pain of grief. And I've realised that this might be because grief is natural. Grief is the price we pay for love. If we love someone and lose them, we grieve for that loss. And when the lost loved one is our child, a part of ourselves, the pain is indescribable. Grief is not a mental illness, not a disease, not a disability. It is a natural consequence of the loss of a loved one. But what my experience with my TCF friends taught me is that a new future can be found. It is possible to find a future that you can live with, without denying your child's existence nor being totally dominated by your loss. As Elaine once said, grief and sadness are inevitable, but misery is optional. When the time is right, we can make a choice. With help and advice, we can find our own future, different to that we'd imagined, but one with hope, with love and in time, even with joy. At this time, I made a decision to come back to TCF and at the next gathering, I spoke to Jan Young. I was doing well, life was getting better, but I was still looking for

one of those last pieces of the jigsaw that just lets everything fall into place. Jan gave me that piece that was missing and, by following Jan's advice, I was able to hold on to my cherished memories and remember happy times with Ross and to share those memories and stories with those who cared, especially Heather my daughter, who had also lost so much. I heard a song on the radio some time after this which struck a chord and seemed to say everything about where I am now when I think of Ross, and this is it:

Thank you for the days
Those endless days, those sacred days you gave me
I'm thinking of the days
I won't forget a single day believe me

I bless the light
I bless the light that lights on you believe me
And though you're gone
You're with me every single day believe me

Days I'll remember all my life
Days when you can't see wrong from right
You took my life
But then I knew that very soon you'd leave me
But it's alright
Now I'm not frightened of this world believe me

I wish today could be tomorrow
The night is long
It just brings sorrow let it wait

Thank you for the days
Those endless days, those sacred days you gave me
I'm thinking of the days
I won't forget a single day believe me

Days I'll remember all my life
Days when you can't see wrong from right
You took my life
But then I knew that very soon you'd leave me
But it's alright
Now I'm not frightened of this world believe me

Days, thank you for the days
Those endless days, those sacred days you gave me
I'm thinking of the days
I won't forget a single day believe me

(Thank You For the Days, the Kinks, performed by
Kirsty MacCall)

Thank you for the days Ross. In truth, I think I've probably forgotten many of them but I remember enough to be able to smile, to remember them fondly and to be glad that you were here, even for a little while. Ross, you'll never be forgotten and you always will be loved.

So is this the happy ending? Oh no. Remember that as part of my therapy, I'd learned about choices? Well as a true psychologist, I examined the choices that I was making every day and began to analyse myself off the face of the earth. One key area in my life that was still a problem was my relationship with my, by then, second husband. We'd been through so much together and yet, I'd always been the one who seemed to keep the family going. Sometimes, no matter what you've been through together, a relationship just doesn't work and I knew at this point, it was time to make a decision. So I decided to make that change and separated from my husband. Bereaved parents are taken to hell and back with their feelings and there's a common belief that marriage breakdown is almost inevitable with parents who have lost a child. From my research, I've actually found that not to be true. If your relationship was strong before, it is possible that it can survive this trauma. Having been twice divorced and seen the impact this has on a family, I always urge my friends to see separation as the very last resort and try everything they can to see if a relationship can be saved, before it is completely gone. Unfortunately, it wasn't an option for me, and the marriage broke down.

Chapter Nine

Remember at the start of the story I spoke about holding back the tears and pushing grief away? And I said that doing this was a bad thing? Well my evidence for this became apparent after the marriage break up. I have now been diagnosed with a medical condition called fibromyalgia. It's one of these conditions that comes about after a major stressor – no prizes for guessing how mine came about then – and strikes the person down who tries to carry on working through the stress without giving themselves time to recover. This is something that I did twice – once with the grief over the loss of my son and once through the marriage breakdown. I would urge anyone here who suspects that they, like me, are an avoider, to let that pain in. Denying the grief and bottling it up will only cause more severe problems further down the line. I urge you to speak to people here who can help you find ways to express your feelings in a safe environment. Feel the pain so that it can be dealt with rather than become a time bomb, either emotionally or physically.

It's taken me a long long time to get to the place that I'm in now. It's 14 years since my son died and I'm still coming to terms with it. I hate the word "acceptance" because it suggests to me that there's a choice. If there was a choice I'd give everything I have to be back at the 17th of January 1999, when Ross was still with me here in this world. But that's not

possible, so like all of us here, I've had to find a way to work with what I've got, with the life I've been given. There's a song by Leonard Cohen that sums up how I feel about myself and the life that I've got now and it goes like this:

Ring the bell that still can ring
There is no perfect offering
There's a crack, a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in
That's how the light gets in
That's how the light gets in

(Anthem, Leonard Cohen)

The message I take from this song is that for me, there is no "perfect offering". The perfect life I imagined will not be the one that I expected, how I dreamed it would be. Yes, my life has been changed forever and my heart has been broken, just as it has for everyone here today. My life feels damaged, incomplete - there is a crack, a wound that will never fully heal. BUT - I can choose to "ring the bell". I can have a life that is meaningful, that is happy, where joy exists and, in fact, that's how my life now is. There's a crack in the bell but it still can ring.

I'd like to end with a message for those parents who are newly bereaved. This story might seem unimaginable for you right now. The worst thing that can happen to anyone in this life has happened to you. Nobody can take away your pain but it is possible to survive this. Please do speak to other people who have walked this path before. They might be able to offer some small glimmer of hope.

Then one day you will notice that there's the tiniest wee chink in this black cloak of grief. The smallest faintest spot of brightness. Your first instinct will be to feel guilty. How dare I have some relief? My child has no relief, I have no right to feel anything other than sorrow. But I would say to you, please, let the light get in. Find a future with the help of friends who understand. Grief may well be the price we pay for love, and we grieve most for those we love the most, but my belief is that it works the other way too. Those we love the most will always be in our hearts, and by grieving, we can find a way to let that love survive despite everything. This is what I wish for each and every person who reads this story. I hope we can find a future together that allows love to grow in our hearts and my wish is that all of us take home some small hope for that future.

Thank you.