

There for me

Madeleine Davies remembers the help she received after she lost her mother at the age of 12

Mothers who die young, leaving behind small children, are quite common in literature. I grew up reading *Anne of Green Gables* and *What Katy Did*. Disney princesses are also quite frequently motherless. Even Nemo is brought up by his dad.

When it happens in real life, you feel extremely unusual, an object of sympathy, but also of curiosity. I can remember cards coming through the mailbox from neighbours who had never spoken to us and being eyed with what felt like slight fascination at school.

Our family attended Adeyfield Free Church in Hemel Hempstead, and had spent two years praying for healing, pinning up hopeful Bible verses around the house, and trusting that God was with us and able to do anything. My mum visited a Christian healer – a wonderfully kind man who made a video of us all, which we still have. Healing ministries can be regarded suspiciously, but I wanted people to try, at least.

After my mum died, our thoughts immediately turned to heaven. I remember picking up *A Grief Observed* by CS Lewis from our bookshelves and reading: “Where is she now? That is, in what place is she at the present time?” It was what I was wondering. It was highly surreal that one moment my mum was here, on earth, in my parents’ bedroom, and the next she wasn’t. I believed firmly in heaven (I still do) but couldn’t get my head around it. It was a very strange time.

Philosophical questions aside, there are lots of practical things to be done immediately after a person dies and I will be forever grateful to the women who took care of those things. They did it so quietly and sensitively that I don’t even remember them that clearly, just that the jobs were done and that we didn’t have to worry about them. We came home to a house that smelled of clean laundry and fresh flowers. I also remember going to St Alban’s Cathedral to light candles and a woman seeing how sad we were giving my dad five pounds to buy us drinks in the cafe. It was such a kind thing to do.

A lot has been written about how to talk to people who have been bereaved and I’m sure that’s important, particularly in our culture where we lack ritual. But what I would like to say is: Never underestimate how much practical good you can be to people at such a time. Grief is exhausting, confusing and disorientating. My mum died in November, and I can still remember the relief of sitting in other people’s big, warm, tidy



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living rooms (our house felt small, quiet, cold and sad), central heating blasting out, KFC passed around (what a treat), no pressure to talk. For a few weeks, my brother, sister and I lived with a family from church. I remember my dad explaining that God sometimes blessed people with big houses for times just like this.

We had a very sociable church youth group, run by a young couple who, looking back, were incredibly dedicated. I recently found a huge stack of cards from Claire when I was clearing out my old room at my dad’s. There was one mentioning how proud my mum would have been, the summer I got my GCSE results. Others were offering considered advice when I was worried.

Another piece of advice I would give to those supporting bereaved families is: Let children know they can always call. When you lose a parent, you have to grow up very quickly, and observers can be impressed by your seeming maturity. It’s important to let children know that they are still children and that you are keen to hear from them, whatever the problem is. As a child, it is incredibly reassuring to know that there is someone at the end of the phone.

I would like to say thank you to our minister at Adeyfield Free Church, John Hardaker. He was so encouraging throughout my awkward teenage years and while he never brought it up without my mentioning it, I always got the sense that he had not forgotten what had happened to us and was willing us all on, to keep going. ●

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