

## **Down the Rapids Without a Paddle**

*My family is involved with TCF Wanganui and I co-ordinate the Wanganui Men's Grief Support Group.*

*I shared this experience at a recent candle-lighting.*

*It relates in part to my journey with grief as well as to a father/son experience.*

*In light of it soon being Father's Day I share this with you too.*

In February of 2011 , along with my then 10 year old son, I went on a 4-day/3-night canoe excursion of the Whanganui River from Whakahoro to Pipiriki. We went with one of my aunties, my sister and four of her friends.

There are some aspects of our canoe trip that gave me some insights into the journey that is grief.

On that point and to give some background, my wife and my journey of grief started in 2005 when our second son was diagnosed at the 20-week scan with an encephalocele. Basically the skull had not formed properly and his brain, or part of it, was forming in a sac outside of the skull cavity. Our doctors said we would be lucky if we got 1 hour with him if he survived long enough in the womb through to birth. Well he went to 38 weeks when my wife was induced and he hung on to life for another 36 hours. Those were the most intensely precious 36 hours we had with him, treasuring every breath, not knowing which one would be his last. He died peacefully in our arms.

Coming back to the canoe trip, I want to talk about a couple of aspects of grief I learnt while on the river.

**The river stops for no-one.** It just keeps flowing. If you fall out – and we did once – it doesn't stop and wait for you to get back in before re-commencing its flow. It is the same with grief. Life goes on regardless of what happens to us. Other people who are not directly affected by the grief we are experiencing, may feel sympathy and/or empathy for a time, but soon after they get back on with their daily lives. When we fell out of our canoe, our group slowed up, rescued our paddles and waited for us to catch up. Everyone else who was on the river – and there were quite a number of other paddlers – just kept on paddling past. Some asked if we were ok, others just kept going without any acknowledgement. The thing that kept us going was the small group of family and friends who knew us well and were there to help when we needed them.

**Time brings strength and confidence.** In relation to Father's Day, there is no substitute for time spent together. Yes it cost me money and time to do the trip but the memories created and the bond developed between my son and me is priceless. He just turned 17 a couple of months ago and still fondly reflects on the things we achieved together. They were Canadian canoes with one person at the front and one at the back. It relied on the two of us working together. At the start of the trip he was quite unsure of himself and terrified of falling out. By the end of the trip he was reading the rapids and paddling in the right way and intensity. If we were to do the trip again, I would have total confidence that he, from the confidence gained and things learned on this trip, could be the main paddler taking a learner – say one of his younger sisters - in his canoe. Knowing him, he may even want to 'teach' them how to fall out properly too!



As I mentioned before, we fell out once on the second day. He started to panic but I grabbed him and said to him "Relax, hold the upturned canoe and we will float down to the next shallow pool." He got a whole new confidence that falling out didn't have to be the end of the trip or the enjoyment of it. When trauma or death happens that causes us grief to the point where we no longer have control, our natural reaction often seems to be to fight it. Sometimes we just have to go with the flow, endure the rapid and re-group at the next shallow pool. Easier said than done I know.

I would not want to go through the things again that I went through with and following the loss of our son. My life is forever changed for it. I am, however, very grateful for the things I have learnt about myself and the opportunities I have since had to offer comfort and support to others who are being 'dragged down the rapids in an upturned canoe' – so to speak.

Doug Benn

Wanganui TCF

Wanganui Men's Grief Support Group

September 2018