EDITORIAL

Many years ago I was asked by a friend with cancer, who had been told that he might not survive much longer, what he could do for his children. He so much wanted to leave them with something tangible to remember him. At the time they were very young, and I suggested that he write each of them a letter to be opened on their birthdays each year. In the letters he might remember himself at that age, reminisce about the things he enjoyed and some of the pains of being 5 or 15. He might make some guesses at how they were developing and give them some encouragement. He took my advice, but fortunately the children, now nearly grown up, have not had to read them as he made a good recovery and was able to be a father in real life to them. I was reminded of this when I read Lesley Elliott's article. She made videos, wrote books for each child, and tried to be honest with them.

Another article in this issue tackles ways of helping children to understand about death, and what the experience is of losing a sibling in a horrific accident. Madeleine's essay was written as a school exercise, and her teacher sent it to us with her permission. Would she have felt so betrayed if people had been more honest? Children, even more than adults, need help to grieve. But they rarely get it. Should we not be attempting to remedy this?

Dora Black
UK

Tomorrow, for me, is a luxury

Lesley Elliott, *BA*

In February this year my family and I went to Kenya. It was a very special holiday to celebrate the end of a 12-month battle. A year earlier, in February 1992, I had been told my breast lump was malignant. I had breast cancer. I was 33 years old. Until then I had been a full-time mum. My three children were quite small: Jack was five years old, Nancy four and Eve just 14 months. My husband, John, was a farmer and there seemed, until this time, nothing remarkable about us.

Following diagnosis I was immediately given a mastectomy. I spent a week in hospital, and some time recovering at home. During this period Grandma moved in and took over. Grandma was very much a short-term solution to what was going to be a long-term problem. I was to receive radiotherapy, which meant making four trips a week to Poole, 25 miles away, over five weeks. At the same time I was undergoing a six-month course of chemotherapy. It has to be said we struggled. Extra help around the house came in every form. Nannies, au pairs, family and friends. Our main concern was to disrupt the children as little as possible.

By August 1992 the chemotherapy was over. I was rather pallid and two-and-a-half stones heavier, but I had made it. Now I felt able to piece family life back together. While John was harvesting I took the children camping in Cornwall. Windblown and drenched, there was an overwhelming sense of normality; we were just like everybody else.

My mastectomy and I learnt to live together; my weight was beginning to drop and we decided to go to Africa as a treat. But while in Kenya I developed breathing problems. They did not spoil the holiday but there were underlying concerns for my health. Within 24 hours of arriving back in this country I was told I had secondary cancer of the lungs. The consultant told me how they would try to slow the cancers with a hormonal repressing treatment. But I realised that what he was really saying was that there was no cure. I was dying.

Nobody can say when I will die. We take each day as it comes. It seems something of a miracle that I have survived this long. Christmas shopping has been a bit of a surprise. Back in March I imagined it would be John's problem, yet here I am lugging about armfuls of gifts, with, it has to be said, more pleasure than I have experienced in years gone by. Tomorrow is a luxury; nowadays 'the future' is a period of time that doesn't include me. But it doesn't stop me planning ahead.

As parents, our priority was to organise our domestic regime. I insisted on a rigid routine that we could all depend on. We were not looking simply for employees, but for people with their feet firmly on the ground who would make a commitment to us as a family.

EDITOR'S NOTE

'What I do with them today is their memory of me tomorrow.' Lesley Elliott's children now have only their memories of their mother as she died eight months after she wrote this article, reprinted from *The Independent*. As Pynoos pointed out in his paper on the interaction of trauma and grief[1], children need to have their memories constructed for them if they are to carry a picture of a dead parent with them throughout life. I think readers will agree that this brave and moving account of how one mother did just that will act as a model for those working with dying parents to help them to leave behind the framework for lasting memories.