

# A Million Oysters

Retired Royal Navy officers David and Sabrina Stanesby talk about their faith journeys after battling cancer, being burgled and coping after the death of their precious son William.



David Stanesby (65) is a self-confessed Christian, who has lapsed along the way. He said, "As a child, I attended Sunday school and church, but as a typical teenager, I let it all go. I wasn't ready then. I found faith again when I was 30, with the birth of my daughter Joanna in 1979. I was on a sailing trip, working towards the Royal Yachting Association (RYA) skipper's qualification. The weather was dreadful and we were all very seasick. Our instructor took control of the boat and returned us to harbour. He told us in no uncertain terms that we could not be seasick and take care of ourselves properly. The course was over."

The outcome was that, disappointed, David returned home earlier than planned. When he arrived, his mother-in-law said that she thought the baby may arrive early. David explained, "We called the midwife at 1am that morning, and Joanna was born shortly after that. I remember driving in the car with the window wound down shouting 'I'm a Dad!'. I was thinking, 'This is a miracle! The Lord had sent a storm which sent me home in time for the birth of my daughter' – she was 6 weeks early."

There came a time when David returned to church on a regular basis. He explained, "Every Sunday, the sermon

we started thinking about his development and attending church again. Will was baptised in Staughton at the Church of St Mary where our marriage had also been blessed."

Military life inevitably resulted in the family moving around - first to Norway and later to Plymouth. Retiring from military life, David, Sabrina and Will moved to Langton Green, in Tunbridge Wells. Sabrina said, "We were passive rather than active Christians then. We certainly had a moral code and were definitely believers. Will was very musical and he was invited to join one of the church choirs, and although he did like to muck around, he also really enjoyed the singing."

Around this time, Sabrina was diagnosed with breast cancer. David said, "We were very frightened when we were given the cancer diagnosis. Will was just eight years old, and the fact was his mother may not survive." Sabrina added, "No matter how supportive people are, you still have to go through all the cancer treatments on your own, which is scary. I do remember that I never blamed God, but I did call on his help getting through it."

After surgery and chemotherapy, Sabrina needed to return to hospital for further treatment. Concerned about losing her wedding and engagement rings, she decided to leave them at home. Sabrina said, "We were burgled whilst I was in hospital, and all of my jewellery was taken. It was

grateful that William has been saved from the pressures of life. Occasionally, I have been angry with Will but then I remember that at 12, he didn't know that what he was doing was dangerous, or that he was about to die. After the death of a child, some friends do fall away. I have been blanked by former friends in the supermarket and that's hard. I understand that they think you are about to burst into tears, but that's not what happens. We need to talk about Will just like other people talk about their children. Our church group have been wonderful and very supportive. People without faith don't believe it, but David and I do have the certainty that we will be reunited with our loved ones. We will see Will again and that helps us keep going. Looking back, I can see that people do put their awkwardness before your grief and I can see how we have relied on church members not to do that. I am very good at putting on a brave face. I know faith is up and down for all of us. Who knows what is around the next corner?"

David and Sabrina try to give something back by volunteering within their church and community. Sabrina said, "I have found that just when you think life can't throw anything else at you, something goes wrong. Life is just not fair. Working with the homeless, we both see that for many people, love goes out of the window and poverty comes in through the door. The Rev Canon Jim Stewart does some fantastic

a blow, but I didn't want to replace the jewellery then or now.

**"I remember my father saying you should never let your possessions possess you. It was a blessing in the end."**

During this time, William was studying Religious Education (RE) at school, working on a project about believers and non-believers. David remembers asking Will where he was in his faith, on a scale of 0 to 9. Zero meant Atheist. David said, "Will said he was a 2 or 3, which surprised us. He loved cubs and scouts and was enthusiastic about going to St Mary's and the youth groups. He needed to do some research for his project and he worked hard on it. When I asked him again later, he said 5 or 6. I think we were all moving toward a greater understanding, knowledge and belief. Someone at church invited us to go to Spring Harvest and William loved it. He had never been to a place like that. We needed to leave early, but Will said he wanted to go to the last evening session. He came back from that session and said, 'you'll think I'm silly, but I want to commit my life to Christ.' On that scale of 0 to 9, Will was now a 9!"

Just two-and-a-half months later, William was dead. The result of a tragic accident, David and Sabrina struggled terribly to come to terms with this tragedy. After facing cancer, being robbed and losing her consultancy business because of her

work with a homeless shelter in Tunbridge Wells. I have coped with a lot, but I don't think I could cope with homelessness. I have become much more compassionate and humble as a result of losing Will and working with people who have lost everything they valued."

David has now retired from his job as a school Bursar. He said, "I am a member of the men's evening Bible study group. They were a huge support to me when Will died. People offered us their second homes so we could get away for a while. One young family invited us to share their Christmas. People are wonderful and they think about what they have that they can share."

**Maybe religion does make people behave better than they would otherwise. Maybe you have to earn your place in the next life. I have had periods in my life when I have thought, 'what if there isn't a God? If that is true, what happened to Will? What will happen to me?'**

"In the study group we socialise, have a glass of wine and discussions often lead to other discussions. Quite often we look at faith and some people struggle with that. But we all struggle to reach the standard that Jesus reached. It makes the world a better place. I don't want to blame God for what has happened."

Sabrina said, "Care for the Family is a great resource. You do have to reach out for

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sounded like it was personal and that it had been written just for me. My faith was stronger then and I attended confirmation classes and was confirmed when I thought the time was right."

Originally married in church, the marriage ended in divorce. David said, "My wife and I drifted apart. Divorce definitely challenges your faith. When I divorced a second time, I found the challenge to my faith even more difficult, but I knew we could do nothing other than divorce. My wife Sabrina and I met in 1994, 20 years ago. I don't think we really went to church that much at the time."

Sabrina and David met when they were both serving officers in the Royal Navy. She said, "My mother had asked me if I wanted to be confirmed when I was 14 or 15, but I said no. I wasn't ready then. I was confirmed in my early days in the Navy when I was living at the training base, HMS Dauntless. The vicar there was a lovely man, and I felt the time was right for me. After David and I married, he was working away near London and so our weekends were precious, with church relegated to high days and holidays. It wasn't really until our son William was born in March 1999, that

illness, Sabrina had lost her only child and David had lost his youngest son. It was a dark time for them.

Sabrina said, "I have not been angry with God. Will's death was an accident. I have honestly felt the Holy Spirit which has given me calm – a peaceful calm. The church home group were fantastic at the time, and made the funeral happen. They made the cakes, sorted out the parking, directed the traffic; we were overwhelmed with their generosity."

David and Sabrina had been supporting a charity called Care for the Family for some time. David said, "By May, we needed help but I was very wary of attending one of their weekend bereaved parents' events. When we arrived on course, there were 64 people in the room, and they had all lost a child. The circumstances were all very different; some had been the result of motor accidents, NHS negligence and even criminal acts. We both approached it with huge trepidation. Very early on, we were asked to consider what we wanted to get out of the weekend."

**"We knew - we wanted to go from existing to living."**

Both Sabrina and David agree that in the two years since then, they have started to do that. They have bought a motor home and hope to travel. They both agree that losing a child is not the natural order of things. Sabrina said, "There were people in the workshops who were angry with God. In some ways, I am

help and to others or you will go under – especially with the death of a child. You have to keep trying; you have to open a million oysters to find one pearl. You can't do this journey on your own. Like cancer, it's good to talk to people who have faced this before. People are scared stiff if you mention your child – they think you are going to break down. You have to try and move on. Find the right church for you. We are lucky; St Mary's found us."

Sabrina added, "Find a church that has a good social community. You don't have to believe in God to go to church. In fact, you would be the most welcome person as a non-believer. Church adds a huge dimension to your life. You can have another family. I know religion is supposed to be the opiate of the masses, but I am well educated. The bottom line is that this is all about being with people who won't shun you. Then you can enjoy the fellowship. It makes everyone behave in a supportive, generous way. You may fall out with each other from time to time, but faith is the umbrella. That sense of belonging is worth it for its own sake, even if you don't believe. You never know what might happen if you let Jesus in, other than he will welcome you."

David agreed. He said,

**"Who knows what you may experience if you just open your heart and mind to faith?"**