

## Debbie says

If only I could turn back time. I now realise that I once had the perfect life: a great job, a husband I loved, two naughty but wonderful daughters and a golden retriever, called Ralph. I can't believe that I didn't realise how lucky I was, and I regret every moment I spent moaning and striving for more.

In March 2010, life changed for ever when my younger daughter, Chloë, was diagnosed with Ewing's sarcoma, a type of primary bone cancer. She was 15, stunning, clever, talented – we thought she had the world at her feet. For three years, we battled through months of chemotherapy, radiotherapy, operations, emergency hospital admissions and hair loss. It was like a tsunami of trauma, loss and horror, and looking back, I'm not sure how we got through it. We had some good times (some great times even) and every single moment was so precious, but I think we all knew that we were just buying time. Chloë Jane, the child I'd promised to keep safe for ever and ever, died two weeks after her 18th birthday on 28 February 2013.

The visceral grief I felt was like nothing on earth. I would spend days curled up in a foetal position. I had no interest in whether I lived or died. But time is a healer of sorts and, gradually, I did start to find reasons to live again. I wrote a blog about Chloë, and people started writing back and sharing their losses with me. I felt a tiny bit less alone. A few years before, I had trained as a yoga and meditation teacher. Working gently with my body, keeping a regular practice and sharing and connecting with others all slowly helped me feel a little more hopeful.

I was just resurfacing into some kind of manageable pain, when my husband, Simon, complained of numbness in his mouth. It was an innocuous-sounding symptom, but something seemed amiss to me. I was right. My 'rock' was diagnosed with motor neurone disease. His symptoms progressed quickly. He lost his power of speech within three months of diagnosis and was unable to walk after six. It wasn't

really a surprise to me when my big, brave husband opted for an assisted death in a Swiss clinic in October 2015, nine months after his diagnosis.

Once again, we were left reeling. But this time, I felt I had built some resilience to dark times and I kind of knew what to do. 'Don't look up, down, behind or forward,' I told myself. 'Just take one step at a time.' I got writing again, campaigning and doing everything I possibly could to look after myself and Chloë's older sister, Hannah.

As a journalist, I'd once covered a story about the US military's use of horses to help veterans with post traumatic stress disorder. I'd always wanted to learn more. PTSD, with its all-consuming symptoms of flashbacks, emotional numbness and a failure to find any joy or meaning in life, is not limited to those who've experienced the battlefield. It perfectly describes how it feels to live after the death of a child.

I was also becoming worried about Hannah, who is now 28. She'd been such a fearless child, but I was noticing how little phobias were creeping in, including a fear of flying. Was it the trauma? I so wanted her to live the best life possible; not one blighted by the shadow of grief and

Sun Tui, both trained in equine therapy. They managed to combine a kind of warm, motherly kindness with huge presence and a quiet wisdom. After brief introductions to the others in the group, we were told to stand in a field with our backs to a herd of some 14 horses, all different sizes. I felt strangely self-conscious, vulnerable and a little ridiculous standing in a field with nothing to do. Sun asked us to focus inwards. I was surprised this felt so difficult.



## CONFRONTING GRIEF

We were asked to focus on the strongest feeling in our bodies, to name it and to try to picture it, too. I didn't have any trouble with this, as after five minutes in silence, in a field, my mind had sped into overdrive. It was literally screaming at me: 'Get out of here. This is way too close, too dangerous.' But I held tight, it would have been embarrassing to do anything else, and I let myself imagine cartoon-like speech bubbles erupting, containing the words ouch, zap, bang, wallop. Was this what I'd come for? Was this my grief speaking? I got a sense that it might be.

'Now turn towards the herd,' Sun said gently. I was thrown by the most incredible surge of emotion as my eyes laid on these magnificent, gentle, serene animals. The contrast between the calmness of the scene and my manic mind could not have been more powerful.

Sun pushed on, asking us to see if any horse caught our attention. For me, it was obvious. There 'she' was: an older white mare, a little beaten up, muddy, but proud, graceful and strong. This horse had really lived, or so I imagined. The power of projection! I couldn't have been more wrong. My 'mare' was, in fact, the alpha male of the herd. Named Ko Li (the Daoist meaning is fire in the mist and light at the end of the tunnel), he was the confident boy who'd had a stable, loving background and lived life entirely on his terms.

We went into a paddock with our chosen horses. I rode as a child and was looking forward to showing off my horsemanship. I marched into the

  
**The horses reignited  
some kind of life  
force, and I've felt  
lighter and brighter  
ever since**  


sadness, but she was opposed to any kind of talking therapy. I wondered if she'd take better to something action-orientated, like equine therapy. She just loves horses, and, for the first time, she agreed that she'd like to explore something that might help.

The sun was rising when the two of us arrived at Hale Court Farm in East Sussex. We were greeted by Erika Uffindell and

