

Dear Parents

We started the term with the sad news of Richard Dittmer's death. Those of you who are Founders' parents will have read excerpts of Grant Norton's report on Richard and realized what a larger-than-life sort of character he was. He was in my rugby team and always played with determination and enthusiasm. Now, at 21, his life was cut short. After the funeral (a huge one of about 800 people) there was a strange and poignant scene outside the chapel where people just stood around for some time, talking quietly and not feeling it was right to leave yet. Funerals for young people are always desperate occasions and deeply affect those present. (My school chaplain, who had to go and take many funerals for young men in the late 70's, fell apart after a while and it took him a number of years to pull things back together.) As parents I know we feel most keenly for Richard's parents and wonder how on earth they will cope with such a loss. We all know that it could just as easily have been our son or daughter. There is no protection against this except the protection to love deeply and seek to parent wisely so that, even though there will be intense trauma and loss, regrets are few and there is an easier path to peace.

Outside the chapel stood dozens of young OD's, looking sad and talking in whispers. Richard has many friends (more than most) and, because he was so full of life and joy, it was very hard for them to come to terms with his death. I felt very sorry for them. Death is a confusing thing for a young person. They tend to think they are immortal and few consider death seriously (a good thing, I think), so when it confronts them it is shocking and painful. I felt for them but I know they will get over it. Even Richard's close friends will grieve and move on and remember Richard with laughter and jokes (and the odd twinge of sadness) in the years to come. Richard will always be the fun-loving young man they knew. He will not get old.

I was reminded how fortunate we are to have such a big and beautiful chapel. Bless those people who built something far beyond their own needs at the time! At times like this it is a good place for our OD's to say goodbye to a friend – a place that represents hope even in the face of death.

Helping boys cope with grief requires wise parenting. Once they are in their teens and beyond it may be that they will cope by talking things through with their friends, especially if the death is of a friend. As parents it may not be necessary for us to intervene at all, except to let the child know we are sorry. However, if the grieving seems to be going on for too long or he becomes and remains melancholy or the death is of a close family member, then it would be worth convincing him to talk to a grief counselor. In addition, if he was involved in the violence around the death or in any way could feel guilty for the death, then he should receive counseling.

The death of a young man reminds us to love our children without condition.

Yours sincerely

Peter Westwood

(Deputy Headmaster Pastoral)