

The Suicide's Son
A Story of Loss, Struggle and Hope

Preface

The last time I saw my father alive was on Father's Day, 1962. I was ten years old, an only child, fresh out of the fourth grade. While the passing of fifty-nine birthdays since makes the sequence of events a little uncertain in my mind, the scenes themselves are burned into my memory in vivid detail.

Do you know how you can call up certain segments of a favorite movie that you have watched time and again- describe the setting, recite the dialogue, relive the emotions you felt when you first saw it? The events surrounding that fateful and pivotal weekend in my life, like snippets from a movie I wish I had never seen, are like that for me. Without warning- with some trigger, some word, some encounter, some feeling in the air – they pop into my consciousness again. It is as if someone hits the “play” button, and the scenes roll across some inner screen one more time, whether I want them to or not.

Jumbled emotions crowd together when I think of my father, long gone. Maybe that is the case for all of us, but certainly when a suicide is involved. The words that follow on these pages are an attempt (long overdue) to “un-jumble”, as much as is possible, some of those emotions. In that sense, this book began as a highly personal quest to discover a measure of peace by finding a more coherent narrative of my father's death and a fuller appreciation of his life.

Is such a quest even possible? Emotionally, can you ever recapture the good times and the richness of the relationship, unsullied by the memory of how the relationship ended? Do the good qualities of the person get lost, considering the definitive act of his or her life? How does one honestly confront the failings that lead to such an action and yet not lose the breadth of the person that was beloved? It is no easy task, but the act of writing has helped. Putting thoughts and memories to paper has at least moved me further down the road toward peace, toward coherency, and even toward a rediscovery of who my father was to me beyond the grave hurt his death brought to me.

Outside that somewhat therapeutic goal, daunting as it may be, lies the desire that in sharing my story, others whose lives have been touched by suicide would find comfort in being reminded that they are not alone in the tangled emotions and unresolved questions that comprise their own loss. Suicide is such a staggering reality with which to deal. It is incomprehensible. It can never be explained satisfactorily. You want to ask the only one who could possibly answer your questions, and he (or she) is gone. And even if they were here, could even they explain it? I doubt it. Explanations are rational. Suicide is not. It seems so unnatural and so painful that (at least in my experience) few, if any, of those left behind opt to speak of it.

As a minister, only when I have dared to publicly refer to my experience, usually in a sermon, has someone sought me out, away from the crowd, and whispered, “You know, I lost someone like that, too.” Sometimes, haltingly, they share bits of their story- who, when, sometimes how, seldom in tremendous detail. Mostly, they just want me to know they share the bond of the

unspeakable. I have been continually surprised at how many lives have been touched by suicide, because by and large it is not talked about.

Lauren Oliver describes it well; “Suicide. A sideways word, a word that people whisper and mutter and cough: a word that must be squeezed out behind cupped palms or murmured behind closed doors.”¹

With this book, I choose not to whisper or mutter or cough, but to speak as openly as I am able of my father’s suicide, and of the impact I perceive it has had upon me. It is not easy to do so. For one thing, because it is so personal, I find myself asking, “Is the sharing of this story somehow a betrayal of my father, and others whose lives were entwined with his?” I hope not. Instead, I trust that those who read these pages will share my affection for the very real, extraordinarily complex people of whom I write. Silence is no longer an option.

In her most helpful volume, *Night Falls Fast: Understanding Suicide*, Kay Redfield Jamison, a Professor at the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, points to the challenge of speaking or writing about a particular suicide: “Each way to suicide is its own: intensely private, unknowable, and terrible. Suicide will seem to its perpetrator the last and best of bad possibilities, and any attempt by the living to chart the final terrain of life can be only a sketch, maddeningly incomplete.”²

The story of any suicide is complex. One does not arrive at such a decision without a complicated back story. My father was no exception. The first part of the book recounts my memory of my father’s life... and his death, but as Jamison says, all I can offer is “a sketch, maddeningly incomplete”. I wish I would have written it earlier. In some ways, I may have waited too late. My father would be ninety-five this year, if he had lived; so, almost all his contemporaries are gone. (Amazingly, I discovered and reconnected with some, including one couple whose friendship with my parents was deep and reached beyond the time of their courtship). Even when others were alive, they were not prone to talk about him, or especially the particulars of his death and the circumstances that surrounded it. I think they were afraid to broach the subject with me; and I was afraid to address the subject with them.

Still, most of my memories are clear, and I have clung to every morsel of information shared with me down through the years. Though I look back through the lens of a ten-year-old, those memories have been refined by the insights and experiences of decades of living.

In voicing the second part of the story, I try to capture and better understand the perceived impact my father’s suicide has had upon my own life. I do so with the aspiration that others who have been touched by suicide will, at the least, find comfort from knowing they are not alone in their struggles. Even better, I dare to hope that, for some, the courage to face the

¹ Lauren Oliver, *Delirium*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2011), pp. 10-11.

² Kay Redfield Jamison, *Night Falls Fast: Understanding Suicide*, 1st⁴ edition (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1999) p.73.

unsettled feelings they carry with them will awaken, enabling them to move forward in life with renewed resolve, despite the wounds they bear. Telling this part of the story presents challenges of its own. In many ways, trying to decipher the impact suicide has had upon my life confronts as much a mystery as trying to understand my father's actions.

How well does anyone really understand themselves? How clearly do we recognize or acknowledge either the strengths or flaws within us? Would I have had the same insecurities, the same personality, the same experiences of faith, the same perceptions of God if my father had lived? I do not think so. I believe his death shaped my life and made me a different person, for better or worse, than if he had lived.

This is his story... and mine.