

WORDS: APPRECIATING THEIR POWER TO SUSTAIN AND REMIND

by Margery Toll

“May will always be Mark’s month,” My sister’s simple statement touched all the sadness and love and regret and hope I was feeling as the anniversary month was approaching. Mark William Henry Anderson was born on May 3, 1965. He died twenty-five years later, on May 15, 1990. His death was a suicide. Mark was my son.

Recently I came across a note that I wrote to myself shortly after Mark’s death. I had wanted to put my indescribable grief onto paper somehow. The note says, “My skin stretched tight over the hole in my chest where my heart used to be.” Reading the note, I remembered the nights, those scary nights, when I would wake up in panic, with sharp pains and short breath, certain that my own death was near. How could I ever think about anything other than the terribleness of what had just happened – the heavy, heavy terribleness that filled me, hung darkly around me, and spread into space as far as all the future? How could I do anything at all now that Mark was so suddenly gone?

When friends and family heard the news of Mark’s death, they sent words of support or called or came to be with us. Their presence in these different ways were crucial to our survival. Not all the reactions were comforting, however. Two people expressed their own pain in a way that added to mine. “Couldn’t you have stopped him?” Twice I was asked this question and twice I fumbled with an answer as I registered its implications. I had already been asking myself the same question, and a hundred more. Couldn’t I have stopped him? How could I have missed certain signs? What if I had rocked him more when he was a baby? If only I hadn’t gone back to school full time when he and his sister were teenagers and needed me at home more. Why hadn’t I talked to him more – really talked to him? And so began the inevitable process of what-ifs, should-haves, and whys.

One place where I found some answers was a monthly support group meeting for survivors of suicide loss. For a while I couldn’t say anything much there in that circle, but I was good at listening. I listened to the others, each one in a unique personal phase of grief, everyone so different and so much the same. I began to understand my own grief and its many manifestations. I learned that I could go ahead according to my own grief schedule. Eventually I began to talk. Because of the group, I had the opportunity to practice saying the word “suicide” so that I could eventually use the word comfortably outside the meetings. I also began to understand depression – both Mark’s and my own.

I don’t know when it started, but there came a time when I didn’t think of Mark all day long. I felt guilty about that. And there came a time when I could

sometimes think of Mark without associating him with his death. I hadn’t believed it could ever happen. A friend whose fiancé had died in an accident told me some words that had helped her “Remember that he had a life.” I’m grateful that my friend knew she could give me something important when I needed it. Mark certainly had a life. It was one of creativity, inquisitiveness, patience, sensitivity, and humor. At the age of nine he invented the French fry cutter. When he was about eleven, he secretly made baked custard from scratch, delivering it in warm bowls on a tray to his startled and delighted recipients in the back yard. He later mastered the Rubik’s Cube from a book and could do it at high speed for our entertainment. (His girlfriend said he could do it blindfolded, and I believe her.) As a teenager he bought a 1967 Mustang for \$750, restored it and sold it for \$3,100. He made us laugh. He loved rabbits and cats. He was going to college because he wanted to learn. He was a genuinely good human being.

So, where am I now, going into the fourth anniversary of Mark’s death? I’m still going to the support meetings and I’m still learning from them. Mark’s sister, Monica, attends them too. We are far enough in our healing to be able to help plan and facilitate the meetings. Some days, when I am feeling Mark’s absence more acutely, I’ve been comforted by Monica’s words in a Mother’s Day letter to me a year after Mark’s death. “You’ll forever be Mark’s Mom,” she wrote.

I’ve kept the words I want to remember, appreciating their power to sustain and remind, and I’ve respectfully set aside some of the others, knowing now that even the painful ones have helped me understand the forces of human grief.

reprinted from Surviving Suicide, 1994, published by American Association of Suicidology.

Speaking the Truth - May 8

Once suicide touched Evon’s family, everyone shut down. Suicide survivors know the bizarre behavior that can occur within a family after a loss. There was no mention of Evon’s mother’s death by pill overdose for 11 years. There wasn’t even a discussion about agreeing not to discuss it. There seemed to be an unspoken pact of shame. Even now, speaking about the suicide around family members evokes blank stares and attempts to rapidly change the subject. However, Evon is determined to go on telling his truth. He says he’s made a promise to himself to keep talking about what he knows and how he feels.

Shame silenced my tongue. Today, healing has given me back my voice.

Excerpt from Healing the Hurt Spirit by Catherine Greenleaf.

A Letter from Dorothy Davison in honor of her brother, Richard Rankin Davison (Ran)

“How did my younger brother, so joyful and mischievous, so full of life and talent, reach the point of death by suicide in May 2001? He is still my “Broreguard.”

Why did I live after eight years of talking on the phone in the middle of the night to suicide prevention for myself, buried under depression and schizophrenia?

My dad was so miserable he took his boat out from Marina del Rey and the boat washed up on a beach, but his body was never found.

Dearest “Little Bod” (my younger sister) has a deeply mentally ill and physically fragile son to try to care for while she fights her own demons.

Then there is our 81 year old mother, who is our rock, dealing with the mental illness in her family with tears and strength and immeasurable love and self sacrifice.

I write this for the “final four” of our family and pray for special memories this May 12.”

printed in this May newsletter by request. Thank you, Dorothy, for your courage to share.

September 1995: I share the following thoughts in memory of my son, Larry Downing, a precious young man who was unfortunately addicted to drugs and huffing. I felt led to make a video in his memory. It aired on our local (Hopkinsville, KY) channel and touched many lives. I'll never know how many... Margaret Downing, SOS

“How does it feel to lose a child by suicide? It hurts like no other pain I’ve ever known. I feel like I have a large gaping open sore in my heart. It has left me with an emptiness that nothing can ever fill.

Not a day goes by that I don’t wonder why he chose to end his life by putting a bullet through his head. He ended his pain but my pain has just begun. There is so many unanswered questions when your child commits suicide. He was 19 years old. He had a whole future ahead of him but he ended it with the pull of the trigger.

Larry has a grandfather who loved him dearly who has been devastated by this. Jim, his grandfather, found Larry and there is no way I can imagine the pain he has gone through because of his suicide. Time does heal some but memories never fade.

Larry’s suicide has changed me in so many ways. My life seems so empty. The holidays are upon us. I dread them immensely. I wish they would just pass me by.

I loved my son and I know his pain is over. Mine has just begun. I know by the grace of God I’ll manage to keep on living but the quality of my life won’t ever be the same. He was my only child and I miss him very much.”

reprinted from SOS newsletter, Nashville, TN April 1998

Thoughts from a parent who lost an older child *by Helen S. Godwin, TCF Orange Park/Jacksonville Chapter, Florida*

Perhaps I had my child longer than you had yours, but thirty-eight years does not seem long. Perhaps there are more memories to hold in my heart, but I know yours are just as dear to you as mine are to me, even if your memories are only one or two days. Your dreams for your child are gone, So are mine, Never did I imagine that I would have to deal with my child’s death instead of having him deal with mine. In thirty-eight years there was time to give me a legacy of three granddaughters. This is a very special blessing and one that I do not take for granted. My mission is to sustain the relationship with my three granddaughters who now live three thousand miles away from me.

My son died from a terminal illness that is not one of the “acceptable” diseases. My child died of alcohol and drug addiction. The tools for remission of this disease are placed in the hands of the person who has the disease. Even with the help of four treatment centers, the recovery was not to be. One day at a time, my recovery is taking place. The pain, after two and one half years, has gone to a place where it can be tolerated. My story and my age may be different from yours, but the bottom line is the same: my child had gone to a place where I cannot go and I miss him so much. The pain of grief is still there, but I am living life one day at a time enriched because my son came through my body into my life.

NEW BOOK: *Voices of Strength: Sons and Daughters of Suicide Speak out,*

by Judy Zionts Fox, RN,LSW, and Mia Roldan. 269 pages, 2009

Published by New Horizon Press, P O Box 669, Far Hills, NJ 07931

In this deeply moving book, Judy and Mia surveyed survivors of parental suicide, delving into the ways their lives have been affected and shaped by this life-changing event. Addressing many of their emotional, psychological and physical effects, sons and daughters revealed their reactions throughout their respective lives. This comprehensive book offers insights that are reality based with advice from therapists and clergy. Chapters include the impact on infants whose parent suicides, and also as adolescent and adults. The authors compassionately offer survivors helpful strategies and steps to gain comfort, deal with memories, find recovery and realize promising, productive futures. I found this to be an amazing book full of information that is helpful to all families and professionals that work with families.