



Painting by Aunty Bea Edwards



*Holding our heads up:
Sharing stories not stigma after losing a loved one to suicide*

Compiled by Mamie Sather and David Newman



Dear reader,

Within these pages are stories and wisdoms from many people who have had to deal with a suicide of a loved one. They have been generously shared from diverse places: Australia, Denmark, Israel, Nigeria, South Africa, United States, Canada, Brazil, Hong Kong, Russia, and the United Kingdom.

Amongst honouring the heartache and loss of the suicide of a loved one, these stories also shine a light on the often small acts that people use to get through such an experience. We want to mention that we understand that it is not always easy to notice or acknowledge such actions.

We are deeply appreciative for all of the stories shared here; of the tenderness, the loss, the honouring of those who have passed away and the determination shown in people's words.

We are particularly appreciative as we know something about what it takes to deal with such an experience. We know of the agony and complexity of losing a loved one to suicide. We set off on the journey of this project pulled along by such experiences.

At times it has been a struggle for us to hold our heads up through our experience of the suicide of a loved one. But we have noticed that we are more able to do this now as a result of hearing the stories of others and we're also able to see and tell our own stories more clearly. It is our hope that this resource will help others to hold their heads up.

Marnie Sather

David Newman

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PS. We would like to acknowledge Aunty Bea Edwards who is an Aboriginal Elder who has guided us through this process. The painting Aunty Bea created has been an image that has kept us moving forward.



The story of the painting: two brothers and a son

Bea Edwards

This painting represents the strength and vulnerability of my family web and how, despite the final choice my son and brothers made, there is so much more to their story.

In this painting I have depicted my brothers and son in the form of the male Blue Wren. This is because the Blue Wren is our grandfather's totem. I have included the goanna, echidna, butterfly, snake and tortoise as they are dreaming signs.

My mother and grandmother are represented through the butterflies, due to their courage of survival and their journey through their own lives. They reflect an intricate entanglement within the lives of my son, my brothers, and myself.

The echidna represents the fun and laughter we shared together throughout their lifetimes. The snake represents the growth that I had to make to adjust to life without the presence of their physical beings. The goanna gave me my spiritual guidance to enable my beliefs to gain strength. The tortoise showed me how to protect myself at my most vulnerable times.

I have chosen the colours that flow through me in remembrance of my loved ones and the joy of the memories I have of them. I paint my world with hope and love.

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How we created this resource

This resource has been developed from the words, stories and knowledge of people who have lost loved ones to suicide.

The first step was to develop a series of questions to help generate responses and stories from those who are bereaved by suicide. In coming up with these questions we used two forms of knowledge: knowledge from the field of narrative therapy and community work*, and our own 'insider knowledge' of suicide – our perspective as two people who have lost loved ones ourselves.

After gathering feedback on the questions, we then sent these out to people who had expressed interest in responding. Their responses have been woven together to create this resource.

* If you would like to learn more about narrative therapy and community work, see www.dulwichcentre.com.au

Making sense of the suicide

- What efforts have you made in trying to make sense of your loved one's suicide?
- What has that been like?

I'll catch up with him later...

At first glance, 'making sense of suicide' seems to be an oxymoron. I wear seatbelts, I don't hang glide, and I press the button at crosswalks three times for good measure. So, for someone like me, there isn't a whole lot of 'sense' to be gleaned from deleting all of that for keeps. Yet, all these precautions I take, all the routines I've developed to sustain and prolong my life, were taught to me by my father. He taught me how to do push ups and how to take vitamins. He watched basketball and worked hard for a job that he loved. He taught me how to live a good life, and then he killed himself. He committed suicide. I prefer the former. 'Commit' has too many legal connotations, although, I do like the word 'commitment'. 'An engagement or obligation that restricts freedom of action' is what it says in my dictionary. I suppose that is how I've made sense of it. I don't like to make it about me. Sure, I wish he had been around longer, but if he couldn't (which is how it seems to me, he couldn't) then he has my retroactive blessings to go on ahead. I'll catch up with him later.

Protecting his family

We have had many conversations about all the facets of his life, not just his death. Through those conversations we were able to come to the conclusion that he took his life to protect his family from the voices of paranoid schizophrenia that drove him to violence.

Ballad Verses

On a personal basis, I wrote, every day for several months. Quite quickly it became a commitment, and the form evolved into a ballad verse form. The commitment was to 'write three pages each day'. The writing started after the funeral in February of that year and went on daily until my job of that time came to an end five months later. Then suddenly not having to go to work meant the discipline of writing was not needed in order to honour/cope daily. The day itself was available.

History can make hardships more bearable

Another way of coping was to read. I read history in particular. All this helped to put the death into a more understandable or at least more bearable picture.

A life valiantly led

Some months after the suicide of my son, Peter, in 1996, I tried to trace his tortuous life that he valiantly led from 1989 when he became 'anorexic'. I visited the military hospital and private clinics that he attended in attempts to get access to his records. I needed to better understand what kind of life he had lived over this time. The efforts at getting records and the writing turned out to be a way that helped me understand the horrific experiences that he had to deal with, and the kind of demons that had invaded his life.

- Have you found yourself reviewing the person's life?
- Have you at times felt that the person's suicide was understandable, that it just doesn't make any sense or somewhere in between?

Maintaining Connection

I have had no urge to 'review' my daughter's life in that sense but I have had a strong urge to maintain a connection. To honour my memories with her. I feel the suicide was understandable, although an immense shock. She had become quite ill as a result of upsets to her body chemistry as a result of her eating disorder.

Pride

Yes, I have spent a lot of time reviewing Peter's life – living in the past with him; enjoying the happy times together, the successes that he achieved; trying to understand what I had not understood when he was growing up; being proud of him as a person; being proud of his relationships he had with a wide group of friends; being proud of his fantastic sporting successes and his academic achievements. All this did not make his suicide understandable. My research, contemplations and writings about his life from 1988 till his death, gave me some understanding what life for him could then have turned into and had been like. That gave me some indication of the demons in his life.

- Have there been certain ways of making sense of the person's suicide that have made the path more difficult or brought more turmoil for you or those you care about?

No-one's life can be described in one sentence

In my case, the county coroner's office ruled the death a suicide. Apparently he was distraught over marital problems. This is what the coroner released to the press. How he came to this conclusion was by reading the suicide note written to me. This is how my husband's full life is scripted; it ends with one sentence distraught over marriage problems. And this one sentence version was very unhelpful for me. No-one's life can be described in one sentence.

Silence and suicide

One of the things that made it much more difficult was, generally, nobody wanting to talk to me about it. Not one of my partners' family have spoken to me about it. What struck me very much over time was the way that people avoided me as if they could see death in my eyes, and also avoided speaking about my son's life and death. In fact, the psychiatrist whom I consulted soon after the suicide, also could not/would not 'go there', even when I brought to a session my son's suicide note for him to read. He read it, folded it up, handed it back to me, and sat and looked at me, for, what seemed like ages. He never referred to the suicide then, or later.

Having no-one to talk to

Without doubt, the path that made things difficult for me was having no-one to talk to, no-one understanding that I had big trauma, emotional upset and grief deeply hidden within. I easily and readily told people that my dad had died from suicide, but didn't feel much. I felt like I understood his death, given his personal circumstances and his own grief, and perhaps I was quite matter-of-fact about it. It's only in the last few years that I've had the curiosity to meet a couple of distant relatives and find out more about my dad, and felt the pain and confusion. As is often the way, I now wish I had asked my dad more about himself and his life when he was alive.

Language can hurt

My son was told to see the school counsellor without my permission and the counsellor told my son that it was a cowardice act and selfish. My son said at the time it was not helpful and these words only caused pain. My son said he felt like she was trying to teach him that suicide wasn't the right choice. That was obvious to him!

- Have there been certain ways of making sense of the person's suicide that have made the path easier for you or those you care about?

Keeping precious memories alive

My children and I find that remembering his best intentions is the most helpful. It has been eight years since my husband passed and there is not a day that goes by that he is not mentioned or thought about in some way. My son just graduated from high school and we all sat down and thought about how proud their father would have been. My children remember times he spent with them: taking them to chess tournaments, swimming in the pool, reading at night time, making funny voices, watching sports, drawing, and cooking. They can remember how much he loved them and how he would cry when they made a hoop in basketball. These precious memories make the childrens path easier, as we can hold onto love and not get lost in the path of despair. There are sad days but these stories help us to keep going.

A book of memories

One father I knew created a memories book for his daughter. He included stories people had written on Facebook, happy memories, photos, things he would like to share one day. This was an ongoing project.

- *What did you find helpful in piecing together the person's life?*
- *Did you ever have the sense that you were putting things back together, or has it been quite different?*

Piece by piece

The day I heard the gun shot it was like my life shattered into a million pieces. It has felt like I am putting so much back together, even how I think and focus on tasks. Piecing together my husband's life was crucial to my coming out of the shadows. I started with talking to his father. He recounted how my husband had been a loner as a child and would pretend to play in coffins: and he had tremendous focus as a child in his writing, photography, and even building boats. This helped me not blame myself. There were seeds before me of his complex relationship to life and death. Reviewing my husband's life and our family life helped me have appreciation for all that we had, and what an effort my husband had made at living when it was never easy for him. Life for him had been a battle. I felt proud that he had tried so hard and for so long for us to be the best that he could be.

The initial news

- What was helpful or not helpful in the initial 24 hours after discovering your loved one's suicide?

We are not road kill and need a sacred place to gather

- My advice to people in the field of first responders (Police, ambulance) is that this is a critical time for a bereaved person. If care is not taken in these initial 24 hours, I think it can mess with your brain ... difficult images are often seen and remain with you which means making sense of things gets that much harder.
- The police phoned me because they found my number on his phone and assumed that I was family: I was the first to get the call. I was given no details: just that he had been found dead. They sent the police to my door. There was no answer to my questions: it was just mechanical.
- I felt I had been left sitting there with nothing. I was left without any support: not knowing what to do, how to get his body back. No suggestions of who I could contact or who might have suggestions.
- It was like road kill. No-one said, 'What would you like to do for your brother? What do you feel about it?' There was no time to grieve: to say, 'I love you, I miss you'. It was six months until I had the chance to think about that.
- The first 24 hours I felt very alone. I had to fly across the country and cried all the way. In hearing the initial news, I wanted to understand how he could take these very difficult actions. I wanted to understand how his body stopped working, what would he have felt. What would he have been looking at, when he took his last breath? Many different thoughts, many of what others would never dare to think about let alone talk about. Many would have called me morbid or weird.
- In the initial 24 hours there was an intrusive social worker in my parent's home who asked way too many questions and I think this contributed to my matter-of-fact attitude in my responses. I have gleaned over the years that there seems to be a sacred space, a frozen block of time, where the family needs privacy. The other unhelpful action was the police holding me back from viewing my brother's body.
- It was a totally unacceptable scene for most of the day after my son's suicide. The house was filled with (invaded by) curious and inquisitive policemen, strolling around and whispering to each other. I just wanted to be left alone.

Here are some of things we found helpful:

- *Having a close friend that I could talk to was helpful.*
- *Going to a counsellor with my mom and dad*
- *I had a friend. I don't remember today what she told me, I think it wasn't what she said, but that she understood what I thought and felt, and she was ready to be there with me. She didn't run away, she stayed.*
- *My friend put me in a warm bath and fed me water with a spoon. This is all I remember.*
- *My friends made a roster and took turns sleeping over and being with me during the day so I was never alone in the beginning weeks.*
- *My children's school sent meals every night; this was the most useful practical thing.*
- *The most helpful thing at the time were three friends who asked me over to dinner - two in one house, one in another - and who were unobtrusive in their questions about my dad, yet gave me*

the sense that it was alright to talk about it. They weren't friends I normally saw on my own; they were people I saw as part of a group and I didn't see them on their own again, but I remember those dinners with relief and gratitude. I am very glad of their kindness in inviting me over.

- Was there anybody with you when you found out?
- Were there things that they said or did that settled you in any way at all?

My sister

My sister was with me and she held me and made all the important calls. There were so many phone calls to make to family, and it was very late at night.

- As the days or weeks went on were you able to talk about your loved one's suicide freely?

I would not lie

Yes and no. Two days after his death, my Nan, my mum, and my dad were gathered at the kitchen table having our usual tea (being Welsh). When my Nan pipes up and says, 'What are we going to tell everyone?' It was unclear as to what she was referring to so I asked, 'What do you mean?' 'Well, what do I tell everyone back home, how he committed suicide?' What came next was me spewing my tea. My Mom announced, 'What about brain aneurism?' I told my family I would not lie.

- Did you detect any ideas about the importance of protecting others, especially children, from the news or details of the death?
- If so, what was that like for you and have there been any long-term effects of this secrecy or this notion of protection?

Complex truths

- *I was encouraged not to tell my children by their school teachers and certain friends how their Dad died. I decided to tell my older children what happened and a softer version to my younger children. They all know the truth now, and I can't imagine where we would be today if we lived in the shadows of secrecy instead of complex truths.*
- *I don't believe in telling children lies: you need to look at the fact that the person is dead.*
- When you found out about the news, was the trauma so powerful that you felt like joining your loved one, or did it have you wanting to cling onto life even more tightly, or something quite different again?
- If the suicide was some time ago, do you experience these things still?

Some of us talked about how there is not a lot of space to talk about how your loved one's loss of hope can affect your loss of hope. Many of us had to reconnect with purpose and meaning in our lives:

- *There were times when I felt that I could just 'slip away' to join her. Especially in the week or two following the funeral.*
- *I did not want to live after that. I thought, 'Nobody loves: nobody cares'.*
- *I sometimes have to remind myself that the fear will only serve to distance me from the people I love, or become too smothering with them.*

Guilt, shame or blame

- Has guilt, shame or blame visited you or even swamped you in response to your loved one's suicide?
- If so, what effects have these forces had on your life?
 - *I think there is a difference between guilt and shame. I don't feel shame, but the guilt has swamped me at times.*
 - *The shame surrounding my own inability to live life to the fullest and my sense of drowning in despair were attacking me pretty strongly for five months. I had friends tell me I wasn't letting myself be happy and that maybe I was feeling guilty if I did let myself be happy, but the truth was I just really needed to be sad.*
 - *I did not experience shame. I had a sense of guilt, but more so, blame after my son's suicide. I felt that I should have, could have been more sensitive to his struggles with life and provided more support for him. I also felt I failed to prevent the form of suicide as he asked about the gun on the Saturday before his suicide. At that time the interest was couched in terms of my personal security and safety at the house, staying by myself. I was not alerted to the possibility of the gun being used by him at all.*
- Do you find you have to regularly negotiate shame, blame and guilt, or do they only visit occasionally?

Big blob

Guilt is different. Sometimes it comes around like a big blob. Sometimes I find myself wishing I had done certain things, or said things, or not done or said certain things, and I start to blame myself.

- Is there anything that makes these forces of guilt, shame or blame less powerful?

Speaking

Just being open about them when they come up – usually when my sister talks about missing John. She sometimes does that in the context of blaming herself, so we talk about the impact of guilt and shame on our lives and then that opens us up to talking about how we can remain close across the miles.

I wasn't negligent

Blame sometimes enters my life, but I do not feel that it is welcome, as I do not feel that I was intentionally negligent at all, in regard to the gun. To help alleviate the sense of blame, I handed the gun to the police a few years after the suicide.

A friend believed my pain and felt it in her heart

Some people told me it wasn't my fault, including my mother, but I didn't believe them because they couldn't believe my pain through the heart. There was one woman who believed my pain, loss and guilt and she felt it in her heart. When she said it wasn't my fault, although it didn't solve the pain, it made the effects of guilt less painful.

He did try and was up against it

When I think about what has helped me not to feel shame, I think of a number of things. Remembering what he was up against in his life helps a lot, especially how unwell he was, that he felt like he was in a black hole, and that he didn't know how to cope. What also helps me is remembering that my son did try to cope; he did try to help himself. And that it was his decision. Suicide is how he decided to deal with what he was going through, and it was the only way he saw to deal with it. The decision was his – I might have been the last straw, but I'm not the whole reason. I also don't feel the shame because I think that suicide is not a cowardly thing or a stupid thing, in fact sometimes I feel proud of him because he completed his suicide.

Think about the person he was

There are some things that help make the guilt less powerful. I try to think about the person I've lost, rather than think about what he did to take his life. I think about his talent for music such as playing the guitar. I think about his talent with kids, the way he took time to help younger kids by teaching them things like tying their shoelaces or playing music, and the way he helped others who might have been struggling, for example when he was doing his volunteer work. Thinking about what others did for him reminds me of the likeable kid that he was, and this helps lessen the guilt.

- Were you visited by regrets, second-guessing, or if-only thinking about the days and weeks and months leading up to your loved one's suicide?
- Is there anything you have learned from these regrets, second-guessing or if-only thinking?
- Or anything you have learned about keeping them at bay?

The 'if onlys' and guilt won't go away but the weight might change

- *We have made a shrine for him, which includes flowers and other things, and being at that shrine helps me to forget the guilt. All of these things help lessen the guilt. For me, I've learnt that the guilt won't go away but the weight of guilt is going.*
- *Guilt also has a companion, which is 'if ...' a little word with a big meaning. These days I try to accept the 'if onlys' and know that they will always be there, because you can't change an if. Accepting that I can't change the guilt, the ifs and doubts, somehow helps me, but I'm not sure how.*

I resolved it by saying 'I'm not God'

I still feel sometimes 'if only I had more time' ... but I was just out of an abusive relationship: I could not have done more. I still think that. I am not a saviour, just an ordinary human being. That's my resolve.

Stories not stigma

There should not be stigma. It should be treated for what it is: a sad, sorry business. (Aunty Bea)

One of the things that we have been conscious of with this project and with our experiences of someone ending their own life is considering the discourses or dominant cultural meanings associated with suicide. We want to find ways to make visible the discourses of suicide, particularly the ones we understand as the harsher ones (for example 'suicide as a selfish act', 'suicide as a violent act', 'suicide as an easy option', or 'as a society we must stop it and it is 100% preventable'). We want to understand that these are simply ideas and to examine how useful they are for people's lives.

- Do you have ideas about honouring your loved one's life that is different to the singular story of 'they died by suicide'?
- *People understand suicide as passive, cowardly, or as an easy way out. That was my understanding too before. I was told this from the media; all forms – movies, books, comics. And we can be encouraged to be angry with those we love who have suicided. I thought about my sister's suicide, 'it's the easy way out for you to treat life like this'. I don't know about all that. I was the last person to speak with my sister. She seemed just so tired. It's a complex thing to think about; you have to be so bloody strong to do it. When it boiled down to the end, I think she was really scared, it was not some careless disregard of life, an easy way out. Was it cowardly, was it an easy way out? No, I think it was a super scary personal act. Now I get frustrated with those who see suicide the way I used to see it.*
- *I am helping my sister honour the life of her stepdaughter in September. My sister has had a hard time. We have talked about the death of our brother that happened in the August. One death (cancer) seems understandable and reasonable, but the other unacceptable and frustrating to her. Remembrance of their life is very different. My brother is remembered as a brother with many recollections of shared events and stories; Debbie is remembered for having committed suicide. Actually most people avoid any discussion of her, it seems as if the act of ending her life erased the very essence of her. We can't even take the respectful time to remember who the victims to depression are, as we are so shocked and ashamed by how they died. No-one ever describes a suicide obituary as, 'died after a courageous battle with depression'. It does take courage to battle every day, but most people don't know the war. It would be wonderful to acknowledge who Debbie was in life, what was important to her and her talents. Debbie can be embraced and therefore found through her loss.*

Preparations made for the survivors

- Did you have a sense or did you see evidence that the person, in their suicide, prepared you and/or others for the fallout?
- What steps were made or do you imagine were made by the person to prepare you and/or others for the fallout?
- What is it like to think about such steps?

He wanted us to know he had tried

In spending that day with everyone, I definitely had the picture in my head that he was letting them know that he wanted to protect them and that he would do whatever it took to ensure their safety. He had developed a relationship with law enforcement – they had told my sister how much they liked John and felt bad for him when he was overcome by the effects of schizophrenia. They checked in on him periodically so I think John knew they would be able to share with my family how much he tried. These are preparations that I think John made for us.

- If you had a sense that your loved one didn't make preparations for you and/or others has it been difficult living with such a guess?
- Have you come up with ideas as to why your loved one seemingly didn't make preparations for the fallout?
- Do you have some ideas for what might have made it difficult for your loved one to take such steps?

He gave my boyfriend his approval

I was 14 years old, that day in the car with him, but I did sense some odd behaviour the day before. The day before he died he told me he approved of my boyfriend and that he would make a great husband to me. That was the last time I saw him.

Community responses

- What were the ways that members from your community responded? Are there any particular responses that stand out?
- Could you tell a story about that?
- What did others do that have made things a little lighter?

Others helping us remember

- *The best things that stand out are the times we sat around and told stories about my brother.*
- *I have fortunately been able to correspond with an overseas very good friend of my son, who is a mental health practitioner (a psychiatrist) and who, through correspondence, has kept alive the fact that Peter loved me and respected me all his life. This has relieved the possibility of guilt, and thoughts of not being a 'good enough' father for Peter. He has also helped with many discussions about the suicide.*
- *My other children have shown their love of their brother and that they miss him in their lives. This makes me feel that he is still in our lives.*
- *My grandmother when she was alive talked with me about dad and that helped. She understood better than anyone and she would tell me stories about him from when he was little. She told me how once she had been sick and he was only nine years old and he came home from school and cooked rabbit stew. She told me what a lovely little boy he had been, how capable and helpful. I keep those memories about him.*
- *Our friend wore colourful, interesting clothes and had a home filled with lovely things. Many of her women friends now have a treasured item or two of her clothes, and there have been a few occasions when I've commented on something someone is wearing only to be told, 'It was our friend's'. On the recent first anniversary of her death, her friends did a clothes swap sale and raised money for a mental health charity. We have recognised her in different ways.*

We were not alone

- *What was helpful was that some friends came straight away to the hospital to sit with me and be with me. As soon as I told them the news they said 'we'll be there'. What was important was that they were there, they were offering support and care by being there. We didn't talk, just to sit with me was good.*
- *The hospital volunteers, the woman priest and counsellors come and sat with me too. I had a chance to talk through with them what had happened – that listening helped me get through that long night.*
- *A man my husband worked with gathered money to put into my children's college funds. The men in my husband's community came together to try and take care of the future of my children's education. At the time I couldn't take in these responses, but on reflection these actions helped sustain me and I didn't feel so alone.*
- *In days and weeks and months afterwards, when people expressed their condolences and acknowledged that they knew I was going through a very difficult time, this made me feel less isolated. This was much more helpful than people avoiding me in the street or supermarket.*

A plant and a cup of tea

My mother's friends checked in with me after she died. One day, unexpectedly, her best friend turned up to my flat. I had been hibernating and she brought me a plant. This was symbolic. I held onto the plant and we had tender conversation over a cup of tea. My mum did a lot in the community and was well-respected. Hearing stories of how she had helped so many people gave me the strength on difficult days to keep going.

- Were there particular conversations that stand out as more helpful? What was the tone of them?

Collage of love and protection

There was one conversation in particular that my sister and I had about how John had started to realise that his command hallucinations were getting out of control and that he loved his girlfriend and daughter so much and didn't want to ever see them hurt. When I heard that, it immediately made sense to me what had happened. My sister told me this in the context of preparing for his funeral, and this developed into a discussion of a collage of his life that shows his love for, and protection of, those around him whom he loved.

'Inappropriate' humour

- *A very supportive workmate told me a personal story about her loss and how she and a close friend shared a joke, amongst tears, at the critical moment of viewing the body. This conversation confirmed, absolutely, the value of a shared sense of humour and private understanding.*
- *My brothers and I made very inappropriate jokes. The day before the funeral we had been watching a TV show with a comedian called Goat Boy. We made an agreement that if we were about to lose it at the funeral, one of us would baaaaah, like a goat. And we did!*
- *My aunt, mum's sister, is very straightforward and she talked about it openly. She laughed and made jokes, we all made jokes. It was the best way for us to do it. My dad would have been making jokes himself.*
- Is it like you carry forever gratefulness for those who stood with you or those you love during your most anguished times?
- How does this gratefulness contribute to those who responded to you or those you love in such a way?

Absolutely. And since it made us all closer, my older siblings now see me as someone who can also be there for them. I am the youngest of 13 but they no longer feel they have to take care of the 'baby'.

- What difference do you think it made to those members of your community who responded?
- How might it have contributed to their lives?

Hope

Many people were surprised at how my sister and I were able to talk things through in depth so early on and appreciated that permission to be open. We just decided that there was no secret about his life that was too dark or scary to talk about. Bringing those times to light helped us all look at his life with more clarity and hope.

Places, people or things

- Have there been any special people; places or things that have helped re-shape a positive meaning to your life after your loved one's suicide?
- Who or what are they?
 - *Ducks of all things! My daughter had a fondness for ducks in the local park. Otherwise elephants. She had a passion for elephants. Her beloved soft toy (it was in somewhat tattered existence after 27 years) was theoretically an elephant. So I have now acquired a collection of elephants that honour this. But no ducks – or cats!*
 - *Sometimes when I was afraid to go to sleep, I would go down and sit under a tree, the cool air of a Be'er Sheva evening was nice. I used to think and think, sometimes write, sometimes knit, until I felt I was ready to go to sleep.*
 - *Right beside my bed on a chest of drawers, I keep some things that remind me of my son: his sunglasses, two hats, and two photos. One photo was taken three weeks before he died. He is wearing his usual white clothes, whereas his friends mostly wore black. This photo reminds me of what he was known for amongst his friends, and that he wore what he wanted to wear rather than going along with others. We are kind of similar in that way. The second photo is of him as a twelve-year-old sitting in a Ferrari. He was billeting with a family in another city when playing in a soccer carnival, and he was driven to the soccer matches in their Ferrari. This photo reminds me of one of his happiest times when he had the chance to do something very special and different from everyone else.*
- Could you tell a story about these places, people or things that evokes how meaningful they are for your life?
 - *The summer after John died I went to stay with my sister for several days. John's girlfriend and daughter came over, as well as his brother and his family. They pulled out the collage they had worked on together and it made me feel so reconnected to his life. I used to babysit for John when he was about 1-5 years old, so watching his daughter point to pictures of her daddy and look so loved and happy brought me back to the time when I was developing a relationship with him. That conversation and the whole day just talking with them and playing with the kids stays with me as the cornerstone of my memories of him and his life.*
 - *My son and daughter have both become very close in their relationship with each other, and I sense a great deal of caring for each other. They have forged independent and buoyant lives for themselves, but still remain very much 'family-oriented' persons. I draw on their love of life and the sharing and caring that they show to family and friends.*

Considerations of family and culture

- Have there been other familial or cultural aspects that have assisted you in your path?

Our own ways of understanding

Because Christianity's ideas were bashed through us, like teachings on the missions about sin, we do not know what our Aboriginal culture says about suicide. Christianity's ideas about suicide have been learned, instilled, bashed through me. I don't know if suicide was part of the culture of our older people. I honestly do not know. What I do know is that, because of the teachings of Christianity, we were made to feel shame.

My justification, my way of understanding, is that my brothers did the best they could at the time: that the way they died did not mean that they were not worthy. I felt that what killed them was seeing what the human race was doing to itself. Rah used to say to me, 'I want to live on a star, so I don't have to see these things any more'.

- Has music, art or creativity in general assisted for instance?
 - *My sister got a tattoo that commemorates her love for her son.*
 - *The importance of music and singing helped me. I joined a choir.*
 - *Listening to music my son enjoyed and I enjoy has been helpful to me. I've listened to more of the music he liked since he died. As I listen to this music, I also write about my feelings and my thoughts at that time. In a way I write to myself and this somehow helps me to connect to the music and connect to my son. Often I will go back over my words – review them, edit them, add to them. I want to feel right about what I've written.*
 - *One of the songs I listen to reminds me of my son's friends. At his funeral, one of them played it on his guitar and the other sang. When I think of that I sometimes have a proud cry – proud of their friendship.*
 - *I thank you for sharing this project with me and with others. I purposely waited to answer these questions until today – the 2 year mark from his passing – as I find that sometimes I just need to find ways to reconnect with him, my sadness, and my hopes. We made a CD with David's favourite music that I usually listen to when I want to be closer to him. Finding ways to talk about David and how I experience this loss is helpful. I go to a suicide loss support group from time to time and it helps to know I can talk about him and be open and honest about my feelings and thoughts. In society, we can't always do this. Writing this out will serve as a document I can re-visit and re-shape over time.*

Art is where I put all of it

After his death, I started a whole series of drawings. I did one about both of my parents' deaths and the aftermath. Art is where I put all of it. I have included one for you all (next page).

- Have there been particular stories, rituals or morals from your family or culture that have been lighting a path for you?



Painting by Toni Le Busque

My grandmother's wisdoms

My Grandmother's teaching has helped me. She gave me wise words. She had died a few years before all this.

My grandmother passed on this story:

'The spirit of the dead would be carried on the white stones.

They would be washed to the ocean. The dolphins would then carry them back to their homeland rivers. The bream (fish) would take them back to the top of the mother rivers: back to their dreaming, from where they would come back as rain.'

So, it is a never-ending spirit that never dies: the spirit is always there.

That's why I go to the river: it is a way of being with the ancients.

It is a spiritual context for me: sitting at the river, with my feet in the water: my spirit enlivened in me, so that I can move on.



Ongoing relationship

- Does the person live on with you in some way? In what ways does this happen?
 - *I can remember all aspects of my brother. He was more than bi-polar. He was incredibly intelligent, he saw things that others were not attune to, he was creative with writing and playing music. He was sensitive to those who are marginalised and would often bring home a homeless person for dinner and a sleepover. I have pictures of David everywhere and want him to continue to be part of my life.*
 - *I sometimes wear my husband's sweater; this gives me comfort and has me remembering the happy times.*
 - *I wear my Dad's watch, this helps him be close to me every day. Sometimes I think about the places he may have gone to wearing the watch.*
 - *Sometimes, especially when the season changes, I think about my friend.*
 - *Whenever I am with my sister she mentions him in some way, and we are able to become closer through our stories about him. I also think about John when I am talking to students at the middle school where I work when they are talking about a loved one who has died. It has helped me become a better listener.*
 - *I put together a family fun day at David's favourite amusement park, Belmont Park, on his birthday and asked my family members to join me last year.*
 - *I used to say that my brother was born with a 'forest' on his shoulder. He had issues and a label of being anti-social, but he wasn't. He cared about nature and preferred his own company. He was the silent type. My memories are of sitting quietly with him in the bush. He would put his hand in the water and say, 'See how cold that is?' He appreciated the environment. He was at all the anti-war moratoriums. He felt so strongly that people should not fight with each other. He used to write to newspapers. He was a brilliant writer. He would read me his poetry and it was beautiful. It was 'way out there'. He was 'before his time'. Profound. It was as if he could see through mankind. I remember all these things. He lives on in this way.*
 - *In my work as a counsellor I have found it extremely important to share the struggles and pain and be able to in some ways use David's story as a way to incite more action in the community and from others. Other parents and family members have more openly talked with me about their fears, struggles and experiences.*
 - *My son lives on in my memories, which are prompted by little things that I see, do and hear. This is nice for me, it's like he is still there in his own way. He also lives on in my other sons, his brothers. In them I see a part of him, a piece of him. For one brother it's his looks that are a reminder to me; whereas it is the actions and mannerisms of his other brother that are a reminder.*
 - *If your loved one was still here, what would stand out to them the most in how you have carried on?*
 - *I think she would be happy for me that I made it; she used to care for me. When I was in the army and had a very bad time, she understood and cared. We were there for each other. She would be happy that I made it.*
 - *He would notice that I have tried my best to carry on despite it being so incredibly hard. That I tried to hold onto things that were important to him in raising the children, learning a foreign language, completing university, reading, and keeping healthy.*
 - *My Mom would notice that I held onto hope after she died, and that I am in my first meaningful relationship with a man. She would be proud that I didn't let despair get the better of me day-to-day.*

*What my brothers would say
Aunty Bea*

They would say, 'We taught her well'. They taught me how to care, how to respect myself. They would never give up on me. They would never walk away and say I was not worthy. They proved that by staying with me when I was in trouble.

My brothers taught me compassion: self-love, how to fight on in the world, how to keep growing, that you can't be stagnated. My brother would say to me, 'Don't end up like a stagnant pond!'

I go back to the times by the creek, when my brother would pick up the stones and say, 'Feel the ancient!' He would say, 'Feel those stones. We get worn like that.' That's why he liked the stones. They were always smooth and bright.

*I still go back to the creek, down to the water.
I still hear my brothers' words.*

Prayer

I have kept my loved one's memories by writing prayers. These prayers are a recognition of each life; an acknowledgement of their significance while on earth; an acknowledgement of their pain which led to suicide and their courage to stand alone; an acknowledgement of what might have been; and lastly a prayer that they know peace in death and the afterlife (if there is one). It is through these prayers that I keep my loved one's memories.

- What do you imagine would stand out for them in how you have cared for those whom they love?
 - *I think she would be happy I kept connection with her mother, she did love them, her family, and cared for them, and they love her.*
 - *Holding onto and building on my love for his brother and sister and the closer relationships I have with them. Also, my greater love, compassion, understanding of, and assisting with problems in their lives. I think that's what would stand out to him.*
 - *That I kept on writing – although largely for myself. We had talked about writing, and she had showed some interest in what I had done.*
 - *I think he would be pleased to see me be reconnected with his mum. He had tried to talk to her for a few years about reconnecting with her siblings, so I think he would like it that we have.*
- What do you imagine the person would want to say to you when speaking about these things?
 - 'I'm proud of you, Dad!'*
 - 'I miss you.'*
 - 'I wish I could have held on.'*
 - 'Keep going.'*
 - 'I'm sorry times a million.'*

A dream
by Rafis Nin

My dad's death made my grieving very difficult for me. My dad 'killed himself' around the time I turned 11 years old. He had 'chosen' a taboo death—suicide. This timing of his death was hard for me. I had lost my dad at that age when a boy begins to need his dad the most. My family's silence and the 'town' people's whisperings and negative comments had made his passing 'something' I was happy to 'mourn and let go', and not to talk about.

But recently I have remembered a dream that I had during the first week of my dad's passing. It was a dream in which my dad came to visit me.

About this 'dream', my mum said that I was talking aloud and moving my hands while I was dreaming. She said I was just having a 'bad dream' as she woke me up! But to me it was not a bad dream. In this dream, my dad had come to visit me; he showed up in his full military shining uniform and stood there in this perfect surrounding light, looked at me in the eyes, and then waved and smiled quietly, peacefully, at me.

I took his waving then as he came to say 'goodbye' to me because my family suggested this was what it all meant. It made sense then as he did not have a chance to say goodbye to us as he died alone in another city.

Now, however, all these years later, I am starting to think differently. Perhaps my father knew how I was feeling then, grieving his sudden loss and trying to make sense of it all. And maybe he had chosen to come to say 'hullo again' to me that day when he stood there looking at me in the eyes and waving at me. Maybe, I had mistaken his hand waving gesture for 'goodbye' when in reality he was just waving a big 'hullo again, my son.'

Remembering my dream of his visit in this way brings me comfort and it reminds me that he did not abandon me that day. He loved me enough to come back to visit me, and to say 'hullo' to me in my darkest hour.

Legacy

- What would you say about how this person's suicide has shaped your life?
- Has this person's suicide meant that you have commitments in your life or work that you wouldn't have otherwise had?
- Has it shaped particular life purposes?
 - *The thing that has impacted all of my relationships in my life is that there is nothing so embarrassing, shameful, scary, etc. that can't be talked about. This has led to some huge changes in my relationship with my in-laws and with my own children. My kids know that they can talk to me about anything, and they feel comforted in that. It has brought a much richer closeness with my husband also.*
 - *It made me more sensitive to the experiences, lives and stories of other people, and the problems being faced by them as individual persons. It made me embrace the values of kindness, consideration, understanding and empathy for others that my son showed in his life. I believe that in this way my son is still influencing me, and will continue to do so as I move with him through my life.*
 - *Yes, it has shaped my life's purposes. I have restructured my life from a university academic to working with the mentally disadvantaged and those needing psychological and psychotherapeutic assistance to deal with problems in their lives.*
 - *This event has turned me away from a technically orientated career – although that took a while. It made me content to just go out and do a casual job – driving a van for 3 ½ years. It has driven me on to do counsellor training, and work at other social service jobs such as Disability Support and Aged Care.*
 - *Part of my son's legacy is about me helping others and helping the community, through things like this project, or White Wreath Day, or helping some close friends and their family who have also lost a loved one through suicide.*
 - *My most proud commitment to his life was the co-founding of 'Survivors day' in Calgary in which 250 people each year have participated for the last nine years. We come together to share experience and stories.*
 - *We started an Aspergers awareness campaign and resource website with donations that came in honour of my brother.*
 - *He lives on in me when I can feel my own gentleness and kindness because that's the man he was.*

A message to others

- If you were to pass on a message to others who have lost a loved one to suicide, what would it be? Why?
 - *You might go through anger, get angry at the world: mankind is all out of touch, but you can't fix that.*
 - *My brothers were people and I loved them. They gave me good things and I carry them with me.*
 - *We are taught to have control in life, and we can't.*
 - *With your own child, it becomes very personal: I would not let others have ownership of your memories and life of your child.*
 - *This would have happened no matter what I would have said or done. It is bigger than a psychiatrist's number, or a crisis call. It's about a lifetime, built up over years. I don't think anyone understands the full psychology of losing hope.*
 - *I would say talk about it in terms of the whole person, the whole relationship, not just the suicide.*
 - *I would say embrace the memories of your loved one; embrace the person, the values they had. Bring them into your life; celebrate the relationship with them, and acknowledge and accept that they were a very special person for you: that you did your best to show them your love, and that they loved you too.*
 - *You may have to follow many paths before you find a way that honours the memory – in your way - of the person who is gone. Eventually people imply that you 'should get over it'. Some do this quite soon, as has been well-documented. But some people close to you may eventually hint at or say the same thing. There is not the conception, or at least it is not widely held, of honouring the memory in a way that is particular, near and familiar to the one who is grieving.*
 - *If I were to pass on a message to others who have lost a loved one by suicide, it would be to know that it's okay to have this as part of your life. It's okay to be different than others you know. You may want to seek out others who have been similarly affected and talk about it. Know that whatever you feel is understandable and that the range of feelings may be wider and stronger than for many in mourning. There are differences to being suicide bereaved than other bereavements. Confusion and mess of feelings is normal. Nothing anyone else did is a reflection on you - it really is true that they would want you to be happy, and you're allowed to get on with your life without them and be happy.*

A closing note

As we reach the end of this resource, we want to again offer our heartfelt appreciation to all those who have included their stories here.

As we share our stories, we are reducing the power of stigma associated with suicide.

To those of you who are reading these stories and who may have only recently lost your loved one, our hearts and minds are with you. If, after the reading the words here, you would like to write to us, or even send in your own responses to the questions, we would very much welcome hearing from you!

This project is continuing. Marnie is currently working on an additional resource in relation to situations in which a person who has done harm (through violence or abuse) then ends their own life. If you would like to contribute to this project she would welcome your contribution.

In closing, we want to say something about complexity. We know of the complexity of suicide from our own losses. And now, through this project, we know even more about these realms of complex loss from the stories people have shared.

We appreciate whenever there is room for conveying complexity. Through our involvement in this project, we have become even more determined to make room for complexity in our lives and other's lives when thinking about those who have died by suicide or those who have experienced the loss of a loved one through suicide.

Finding a sense of company within the complexity seems important.

Perhaps this is one of the things that will assist us to hold our heads up higher.

With respect and gratitude,
Marnie and David

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