

**My Daughter's
Suicide,**

I Barely Survived

My Journey of Loss and Hope

Bob Duff

This book is dedicated to the memory of my precious daughter Michelle who lost her battle with the darkness on July 8, 2012. She was such a light and blessing to everyone who knew her. My hope is in that, by laying bare my grief and struggle to survive the most horrific thing to ever happen to me, it will make someone else's burden just a little lighter. Dealing with the suicide of a loved one is devastating. The shock and grief are overwhelming. I know what it's like to feel so alone and hopeless.

But we are not alone. There are so many out there who have survived even when they didn't think they possibly could. This book is the story of my own struggle to survive. Its purpose is to help show that no matter how dark it is, there is always hope.



My Heart Is Shattered

Bob was on top of the world. He was finally ready to publish his first book, a memoir about his life. It had been brutal reliving his childhood, but somehow it felt good to write it down almost like exorcizing his demons. The family reunion had been great, just what he had needed. There had been a good turnout and he'd gotten a chance to visit pretty much everyone. The only cloud in his sky was that he hadn't got to spend any time with his daughter Michelle. He had been planning to bring her down with him but when he went to pick her up she had been sick and had decided she wasn't going. Bob had been surprised; she always looked forward to the reunion every year. She would've loved it this year, he thought. The family had done a skit, complete with hula skirts and coconut bras.

They, the cousins, had gotten Bob to be one of the hula dancers. Bob laughed when he thought about it. Michelle would've been up there with him hamming it up. She was always wanting to put on a show. Bob remembered when she was about 7 and Ashley was 6 or so they had done this neat little magic show. They

had used one of his hardhats for a “magic” hat. Michelle had waved her wand, the one she had gotten with her fairy costume that Halloween and said the magic word. “Abbadabra”. Bob chuckled, she was always getting her words just a little twisted. Michelle had been so serious, and Ashley was so cute in her “lovely assistant” outfit.

Bob checked his phone, still no service. He frowned. He needed to check on Michelle, but he hadn’t had service for the last four days while he was at the reunion. That was the only good thing about the reunion being over and driving home, he would be able to call and check on Michelle. He had meant to call and see how she was feeling but every time he tried he got distracted. He loved the fact that everyone wanted to visit but he had been worried about his little girl. Michelle should’ve been there, the more he thought about it the more worried he became.

Michelle had been diagnosed with schizophrenia when she was younger, but she seemed to be doing really well as long as she was on her meds. She was special, everyone he knew was constantly telling Bob that she was the kindest, most compassionate person that they had ever met. Michelle was always making these amazing crafts that she would give away as gifts. Bob never ceased to be amazed by how creative and artistic she was. She loved performing and would often organize the kids at

the reunion and help them put on little skits. She was 23 years old now, but she still seemed to have that child-like wonder. Bob loved that about her.

As Bob drove he looked over at the passenger seat at his youngest daughter McKenzie and smiled. She was singing along with the radio and bobbing her head to the music. She seemed to have had a good time visiting with all her cousins. Bob loved the fact that she had enjoyed herself. When he had been a kid, his time in Virginia and family reunions with his extended family had been the best parts of what had been a very difficult childhood.

They reached the edge of Christiansburg and Bob's phone dinged to let him know he had new messages. He felt a sense of relief now that he was "reconnected", and he could call to see how Michelle was doing. She must've been really sick to have missed the reunion. Michelle had said she hadn't wanted to get everyone sick, which was very much a Michelle thing to think, but her not going to the reunion was a big deal. If she was still sick when he got home he was going to make her go to the doctor if she wanted to or not.

Bob pulled into the gas station. He handed \$20 to McKenzie, "Can you grab me a Mountain Dew and chips or pretzels or whatever and get whatever you want".

Bob started pumping the gas and reached into his pocket to check his phone. He saw that he had 14 voicemails. He was surprised that there were so many. I didn't realize I was so popular, he smiled to himself. He dialed his voicemail.

"Dad...I...uh...I...need...uh...I...call me...please".

Bob felt the blood freeze in his veins. It was bad...really bad. He knew by that tone Michelle was in trouble. He felt a fear growing as he listened to the next message.

"Dad, I R-E-A-L-L-Y need to talk to you. Please call me back."

Bob could hear the pain in her voice. He felt himself getting frantic as he listened to the next message, and the next, and the next... He could hear the despair building with each new message. As he listened to the last message he felt a cold chill in the pit of his stomach.

"Dad," Michelle sobbed. "Why won't you answer me! I need...please...daddy..." The message trailed off with her sobbing uncontrollably as the line went dead.

Bob felt his hands shaking as he tried to calm himself down. He needed to keep it together. Michelle was in a full-blown crisis, and he needed to focus. He took a deep breath and went to press the button to call Michelle back when his phone rang. Bob was so startled he almost dropped the phone. He looked at the number apprehensively, he didn't recognize it. He cringed as he answered.

"Hello?" Bob said, barely above a whisper.

"Hello, this is Deputy Shaw from the Guernsey County Sheriff's office, is this Robert Duff?" The voice asked.

"Yes," Bob replied

"Do you have a daughter named Michelle Duff?"

Bob could hear his pulse beating in his ears. "Yes," he heard himself whimper.

"Mr. Duff, I regret to inform you that your daughter is deceased..."

The voice was still talking but Bob could no longer hear it. He felt like he was going to pass out. He felt as if someone had ripped his beating heart out of his chest. Bob felt soul numbing despair grip him as he realized that his little girl...his sweet, innocent, angel...was gone.

My name is Bob, and I am a survivor of suicide, my daughter Michelle is not. Either you understand what that means, or you don't. If you have lost someone that you truly loved to suicide then you don't need an explanation and if you haven't lost someone then you could not possibly understand. If you are a "survivor" you know that surviving doesn't mean that you are not scarred. You cannot experience something that horrific and not be changed. You have to learn to operate in a new world, you have to learn to survive whether you want to or not. You have to survive because you now know how devastating it is to lose someone like that and you can't do that to the people who love you. You have to do what it takes for you to survive, if not for yourself then for them.

I tried writing the story of when I learned that she was gone but I struggled terribly. I could feel my chest tighten when I wrote "I felt my hands shaking" or "I was startled and almost dropped the phone." Somehow saying "Bob" did it makes it almost like I'm talking about someone else. I can't bring myself to talk about it much. It's been 10 years now, but that nerve is still raw. Writing about it like it happened to someone else is the only way I can do it. It's one of the things I do to help me to cope. If you are a new survivor you will need to learn what helps you make it through. I wish I could tell you the things that will make your struggle easier, but they are different for each of us.

I've heard it said that being a survivor of suicide is like being part of a fraternity that no one wants to join. Even though nobody wants to join, the fraternity grows by leaps and bounds. Someone takes their own life every 13 minutes in this country. They leave behind all the people that love them. Mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, husbands, wives, friends and lovers, anyone that loved them is forced to bear the pain of their loss...to survive.

I know that you probably feel utterly alone right now but the unfortunate truth is that there are literally millions of members of this fraternity of loss. You may not realize it, but I have no doubt in my mind that you know many other people that have suffered through the suicide of someone they loved. These people may understand the pain of losing someone to suicide, but the truth is that the pain is different for each of us. Our pain is uniquely our own.

You are probably going to have a lot of people that are going to try to empathize with you. A lot of them will have absolutely no clue what to say and some of them will probably say ridiculous things that may piss you off. I actually had one lady tell me that she knew how I felt because her cat had run away, and she really missed it. It was a struggle not to scream at her, to just grab her and shake her and ask her in what world was that possibly the same. Looking back, I understand that she was just trying to be supportive but at the time I was so angry that I just wanted to cry. She had never experienced

anything like it before, so she had no concept of what I was going through. She wanted so bad to say something to empathize with me, to show support, to ease my pain. The truth is that even now, as a survivor and having had some time to give me perspective, I don't know what to say to ease someone's pain. All I can do is share my experience and hope that it helps others that are hurting in some small way.

People don't know how to react when something like this happens. They don't understand how incredible the pain is or how deep the loss is. Losing someone to suicide is different than losing someone to say cancer or a heart attack, it just is. I have lost people I loved to everything from cancer to pneumonia to car wrecks but losing someone to suicide was more painful to me by far. What made it more painful for me was the incredible guilt that I felt. I knew that cancer or a heart attack, etc...was not my fault but I definitely felt a tremendous amount of guilt that I had not been there when she needed me. She was the one that had pulled the trigger but somehow I was to blame. I realize, intellectually, how unfair that is, but understanding with my head did little to ease the pain I felt in my heart.

What I finally realized, and this is something you need to understand, this is an incredibly important thing that you need to remember...IT IS NOT YOUR FAULT. No matter what may

have happened, whether you and your loved one had just had a huge fight or your last words to each other were kind and supportive, the person who actually took their life is the one that is responsible for their actions. I had an amazingly difficult time accepting that fact, but just because I had trouble accepting it didn't make it any less true. I think that any of us, if we could go back, would do anything possible to save our loved one. There is no way to keep from having regret, but we need to try to keep from taking too much blame for ourselves. Taking the blame is what leads to the guilt which can destroy us. I hope you are better at understanding this than I was, I barely survived.

I think that everyone in that situation invariably starts going through the "if only" I'd done this or "maybe if" I'd done that. The simple truth is that we will never know what may have saved them. We can run the scenarios over and over in our heads until we go crazy, but it is a futile exercise, there is nothing that can come from it but pain. I doubt that you will be able to keep from doing it, but I can tell you from experience that you cannot begin to heal until you accept the fact that you will never be able to fully understand why it happened. I wish it weren't true, but it is.

You can't hope to make sense of suicide because suicide is a senseless act. My daughter Michelle was the sweetest, kindest, most caring person I've ever known. She never hurt anyone as long as she lived, but she rained down incredible agony on those who loved her with her last conscious act. She was so selfless in life but so selfish in death. How can I expect to make sense of that? I can only guess that she didn't understand the devastating impact that she would have, the hole she would leave... I just realized I'm doing it again...asking why. I don't know if I will ever get to a place where I don't wonder at all. I guess the real trick is to learn not to dwell on it, the more you gnaw on it the more it gnaws on you.

I know this advice is easy to give but hard to take. I know it's hard to take but I also know it's good advice. If I hadn't learned not to spend all my time dwelling on the "what ifs" and the "whys" I would've never come out of my downward spiral. I was in incredible pain and the guilt of feeling that I had let her down was eating me alive. I was looking into the abyss and seriously considering pulling the trigger on myself. I know how devastating it would be to my family, but I could only think of the pain that I was in. That is one of the dangers in being a survivor, the possibility that you won't survive.

I think it is exceptionally heartbreaking that, so often, one person committing suicide can open the floodgates. Other people in their circle that are having their own struggles may see it as a solution to the pain they are feeling. The first person takes their own life, then the next, and the next, the pain spreads like ripples on a pond. It is hard to believe that someone, a survivor that knows first-hand how much pain that will cause to those they leave behind, could still consider passing even more pain to their other loved ones. It may be hard to believe but I know how easy it is to do, I was there myself.

If you are considering checking out, I would ask you to consider all aspects of that decision. What will it do to those who love you? What has your loved one's suicide done to you? Is that kind of pain the legacy you want to leave those you leave behind? You know as well as I do that suicide doesn't end the pain, it just passes it on. It amplifies the pain until it becomes almost unbearable. What will happen to those in your circle, your brothers or sisters, children, parents, or friends, some of whom may already be struggling to cope with the same loss that you are. If you give in to the pain you feel and pass on more suffering to them, will they survive? I would ask you to be strong for them even if you can't be strong for yourself.

I don't know if you lost a mother or father, a son or daughter, sister, brother, husband, wife, lover, or friend. I don't know if your loved one was rich or poor, young or old, healthy or sick. I don't know if you feel responsible or hold someone else responsible. I don't know if you believe in God or are a card-carrying atheist. There are a lot of things that I don't know, but there are also some things that I do know. One of the most important things I know is that you are not as alone as you might feel.

When Michelle committed suicide I was beyond devastated. I didn't think anyone could possibly understand the incredible pain and emptiness I felt. How could they understand what it felt like to have a sucking chest wound where my heart had been? I didn't see how I could survive so I didn't see how anyone else could've survived either. I felt like there was no one I could turn to, I felt utterly alone. Hopeless...helpless...and alone.

Then something happened that changed everything for me...I realized that I was not alone in my suffering. No one may completely understand what you are going through. How could I expect someone to know what it felt like to get the news and then have to drive 6 hours home trying to hide the tears from my youngest daughter so she wouldn't have to feel that pain until she was home and surrounded by people

who loved her. How could I hope to explain the feeling of listening to those messages, hearing the pain in her voice, and hearing her get more frantic with each one. The pain of knowing that she needed me, and I wasn't there and then getting the call that she was gone and there was nothing I could do that would bring her back. The guilt of realizing I was acting silly and goofing around in a hula skirt and coconut bra at about the same time as my precious daughter, who I loved beyond measure, was putting a shotgun in her mouth. How could I expect someone to understand that?

No one may be able to understand exactly what you are feeling and why; everyone's pain is different, but it is also somehow the same. The circumstances and details may be different, but we are all experiencing the pain of loss. The loss of what the future may have held for our loved one. I can't help but wonder what her children would've been like or what she may have accomplished in her life if she had just held on (there I go again). The truth is that everyone has those moments where they wonder what their loved ones' future may have held. It is natural to lament the loss of what might have been. I don't know if it's healthy or productive, but I do know that it is nearly impossible not to do. I also know if you hold all that pain inside it can grow until it slowly and painfully eats you alive. It can become a cancer that saps your strength, your will, and eventually your ability to be there for those who need you or even for yourself.

I truly believe that I would not have survived if I had kept everything bottled up. I don't know what made me think I could carry all that pain, sorrow, and toxic guilt without it poisoning me. Sharing about Michelle and about the pain of losing her was the only thing that seemed to ease the misery that I felt. There is something about crying with someone as opposed to crying alone. For me, when I lay there crying alone in the dark, I could feel myself slipping deeper and deeper into the darkness. Even if the other person can't totally understand your own pain, they are there for you to lean on. We all need someone to lean on sometimes. We also need to let go of the pain and anguish we carry. Writing this book is part of that process for me. I hope reading it helps make that process easier for you.

There are tons of books out there that can explain the technical aspects of grief. Experts with letters after their names can lay out the steps in the "grieving process," and explain why we react the way we do. There is something comforting about talking to someone that understands how grief works. Knowing the process can help us make sense of our emotions. There are people that are educated and have a lot of knowledge about what the grief of suicide *looks* like. They have a lot of what my pastor used to call "head knowledge" or "book smarts." There is nothing wrong with head knowledge, a guide through the process can make the journey easier.

I personally do not have any formal education which would qualify me as an expert on loss (unless you count talking to shrinks as an education). My knowledge didn't come from a book, although there's not a day that goes by that I don't wish it had. My knowledge is "heart knowledge". You can't get heart knowledge by reading about tragedy, heart knowledge comes from experiencing tragedy. This book is written from the heart. It is not about what losing a loved one to suicide *looks* like, it's about what it *feels* like. There is a bit of "head knowledge" mixed in. I've read a lot of books about grief at this point, but this book is mainly about the *experience* of losing someone you love to suicide.

This book is about what happened to me when Michelle took her own life. This is the story of the pain and incredible despair I felt, how it affected me and everyone around me. This is the story of my experience and what I have learned through countless conversations with other survivors. I hope knowing there are others that share your pain can help you begin to heal. It is my fervent hope that you may learn from these experiences, sometimes when you understand why something happens it makes it easier to deal with. Hopefully, by knowing some of the things you are likely to experience, you will be better prepared to weather the storm.

My Journey

I know that you are hurting right now. When I lost Michelle it felt like I had been thrown headfirst into a furnace. I was in absolute agony. I wanted to die. I went back and forth, cursing God one minute and begging him the next. I begged and pleaded and offered to take her place...anything to bring her back. And when she didn't come back I begged to wake up. It had to be some kind of nightmare...she couldn't be gone. I thought I was losing my mind.

You probably feel the same way. More than likely, you are in shock. I can think of nothing that is a bigger shock than losing someone you love to suicide. After "it" happened I was on autopilot (when I talk about Michelle taking her life I tend to talk about "that day" or when "it" happened. Somehow it makes it easier for me to talk about). Looking back, I remember being so numb that I couldn't speak. I could barely nod and was constantly breaking into sobs. The funeral home was like an out of the body experience. It felt like I was watching some type of horror show on TV. where every so often they would hand me something to sign. I would scrawl my name on the line and try not to get tears on their paperwork. My wife led me by the arm like an Alzheimer's patient.

I couldn't function. All I could do was walk around in a stupor. I have talked to people about things that happened during that time, and they have told me things that I said or did but I have no memory of. I was in a fog where I was just going through the motions. The lights were on but I wasn't home, the elevator wasn't going all the way to the top floor or however you want to say it. However you say it, I was a mess.

I don't know if you shut down like I did or if you're the type of person that throws themselves into their work, or hobbies, or takes up a cause. Some people spend every moment looking at pictures of their lost loved ones and others can't bear to look. I know people that treat their lost loved ones' room as a shrine and others that give everything to charity. One said that leaving her daughter's room like she left it made it seem more like she was still there and the other said that seeing her son's things was just too painful. I don't know if one approach was more healthy than the other (I'm not a shrink but maybe I'll ask mine next time I see her) . What I do know is that you need to do what **you** need to do to help you deal with your pain. Don't let anyone decide what it is that you need to do to cope with your loss. Do whatever you have to do to deal with it and accept that not everyone may approve of your approach.

Part of “dealing with it” is accepting the fact that everyone else that loved them is also doing what they need to deal with it. Looking back, I realize that they were dealing with their own pain in their own way. I had not cornered the market on pain, there was plenty of misery to go around.

As much pain as you may be in, you have not cornered the market either. I don't mean to piss you off or hurt your feelings, it's just a fact. I know it may be hard to believe but other people are sobbing, or writing sad songs, or getting tears on their photo albums even as you read this. Remember you are not alone. There are people, probably people in your own family or circle of friends, that are dealing with the same loss as you are. I had a lot of trouble understanding that, even though others weren't reacting the way that I was, they also loved her just like I did. I wasted a lot of time and energy worrying about how other people were handling their grief. I didn't understand at the time that they needed to deal with it in their own way. It was hard for me to accept this fact. You need to understand that just like no one can decide what you need to do to cope, you can't decide how anyone else needs to cope either. Not understanding made it a lot harder to deal with when it happened. I hope you come to this realization sooner rather than later. Understanding this fact will make it easier to deal with when it happens...and it will happen.

Another thing that will likely happen is that you will have lots of folks saying how sorry they are for your loss. I was nearly overwhelmed by the waves of casseroles and condolences after Michelle died. People wanted to console me, to reach out to me in my pain, but I didn't feel consoled. Some people told me that they understood how I felt. There were times I wanted to scream for them to leave me alone. They couldn't possibly understand my pain. My beautiful daughter, the apple of my eye was gone and nothing they could say or do could take away that pain. Most of the time I was too numb to react, which was probably for the best. Lashing out at those that are only trying to help did nothing but add to the pain. Another lesson I learned the hard way and another mistake I hope you can keep from repeating.

Dealing with all the people that were trying to help was probably one of the hardest things I had to do. A lot of people don't know what to say any time you lose someone, but with suicide it is so much worse. Most people feel uncomfortable talking about suicide in general and are worried about saying something to upset you. I noticed that, once they had told me how sorry they were and that they were there if I needed them, conversations tended to turn into a series of awkward silences. Looking back I understand better but at the time it felt like they were rejecting me or judging me. I felt as if I was to blame and that everyone blamed me.

The problem with awkward silences is that some people can't handle them, so they wrack their brains for something to say to break the silence. I have learned that sometimes people say things that make no sense or are hurtful or hateful without realizing it. One friend told me that he was going to miss listening to Michelle talk about how much fun she was having doing target practice. A week after she put a shotgun in her mouth was not the time to reminisce with me about Michelle's fascination with firearms. You may very well have people that say things that are insensitive or that hurt your feelings. My advice is to do your best to give them the benefit of the doubt, it will make your burden easier to bear.

Another thing that may well happen, I hope not but it very well might, is that there may be those that can't contain their grief and need to blame someone. I've heard it said that hurting people tend to hurt others and I have definitely found it to be true. It is an unfortunate reality that survivors will often turn on each other, lashing out at each other in their pain. I know of nothing that is more devastating to a family than dealing with the aftermath of the suicide of one of its members. It is a natural human reaction to want to find someone to blame when something horrific happens. It makes it easier to make sense of it somehow if we have someone to blame. When we lose someone to suicide we are desperate to understand why.

I know we've already talked about the fact that we will never know why it happened. A majority of suicide victims don't leave a note. I know that Michelle didn't leave one. I don't know if that would've made it easier or harder. Not knowing the "why" will eat you alive if you let it. I have heard survivors, even some in my own family, blaming each other. I heard that it was my fault because I didn't answer my phone, that I was somehow responsible because I didn't realize that she was so close to the edge the last time we actually spoke. I heard that it must've been some traumatic event from her childhood and since I was her dad that made it my fault. I had gotten on her about cleaning up her place. We had been talking about starting a craft booth at one of the local antique malls and I had been too busy to get much done on it. (There I go jumping on the "why train" again.)

People desperate for answers will grasp at any possibility. When you already have a lot of guilt, it's easy to start believing that it actually is your fault, whether it makes sense or not. You may have people say hurtful or hateful things to intentionally hurt you. You may be in a very vulnerable place and take those unkind comments too much to heart. I beg you not to swallow that poison. When you suffer a loss like this you tend to be vulnerable. Taking too much

blame for yourself or accepting too much blame that others place on you, can cause you incredible pain. The important thing to remember is that nobody else knows why they did it any more than you do, and they are searching for answers just like you.,

Something I had to watch out for was not trying to put too much blame on myself...or others. Just like you need to guard against accepting too much blame, you also need to guard against placing that blame too heavily on someone else that may be as vulnerable, or more vulnerable, than you feel. Survivors of the suicide of a loved one are several times more likely to take their own life. You don't want to increase and spread the pain by doing something to yourself or by pushing someone else to hurt themselves. Your loved one wouldn't want the family destroying themselves to be their legacy and you do not want that for them.

Another thing that happens a lot of times is that people don't know what to say or how to react, so they avoid having to deal with it. I had people that I had known for a long time, people that I considered good friends, that would avoid speaking to me. Some of these people were the very same ones that had told me to call if I needed anything. I would see them at the store, and they would duck down another aisle or act

like they were totally captivated by reading the ingredients on a tube of Preparation H. I understand that it is uncomfortable dealing with someone that is grieving. I had to realize that it is human nature to avoid things that make us uncomfortable. I am not proud to admit that I have done it myself. I have walked past someone that I knew could use a word of encouragement because I didn't know what to say. I didn't know what to say so I didn't say anything...I avoided it.

Just like some people avoid awkward encounters or dealing with others that are in pain, some people are drawn to them. Some of these people may want to help you deal with your grief. Some may be fellow survivors that know the pain of losing a loved one to suicide and want to be there to support you. Sometimes helping others to heal can help you heal yourself. Helping others can give your pain purpose. That is the reason why some people start organizations to prevent suicide or to help survivors. There is a list of some of them at the end of this book. This book itself is an attempt to give purpose to my own pain. Hopefully it will help you in your journey and losing Michelle will have served some purpose.

Just like there may be those that want to help you, but there may also be those that just want a ringside seat to your misery. Some people are not happy unless they are wallowing in sorrow, theirs, or someone else's. This type of person is not looking to ease your pain, they are only

looking to feed on it. These people feed on our pain, so they tend to keep our wounds raw. Sometimes they take pleasure in the pain of others, a sadistic fascination. Others are just so full of bitterness from their own hardships that they can't help but spew venom and bitterness at whoever will listen. These people can sow the seeds of bitterness within us, but we mustn't let them bloom. These kinds of people are poison and poison is the last thing you need when you are trying to heal. You cannot get both bitter and better.

I feel a special need to warn you about those that I feel are perhaps the most dangerous of all, the wolves in sheep's clothing that are sometimes drawn to those who are suffering. Sprinkled in with those that were honestly trying to help me heal were a few that had no real interest in my recovery and healing. One example that comes to mind is a supposed "friend" that, when I had finally strung together a couple of days without bursting into tears, told me how "proud" they were of me getting on with my life after I had "failed" my daughter. Another time this same person told me that "even though I hadn't been there for Michelle they still loved me." They delivered these doses of hemlock with a soothing tone and mock concern but their intent and affect was not to help me escape my darkness but to amplify it. I pray that you don't have any of these people in your orbit but I think it's important to know that they exist so that you are not blindsided by these toxic vampires. Some of these people that are full of bitterness

may be fellow survivors. The pain of losing a loved one to suicide is devastating, not everyone will recover. I know that this may not be the pep talk you are looking for, but unfortunately it's true. When someone experiences a tragedy it changes them. Sometimes the people we think of as strong will crumble and those that we think of as weak will rise up stronger than before. You may be shocked by those that are not there for you when you need them, but on the bright side you may also be shocked by those that are there for you. It boils down to the fact that no one can decide for you whether you will rise from the ashes or wither, you have to decide for yourself.

Something I have learned from my own experience, as well as talking to countless other survivors, is that recovering is a choice. You have to decide that you are going to recover and then you have to do the things that are necessary to help yourself heal. You have to find a reason to go on even if there are times when you don't want to. This reason is different for each of us. Some people are motivated by the desire to be there for their families while others may dedicate their lives to trying to preserve the memory of their lost loved one. Still others make the choice to spend their energy trying to help others who have suffered a similar loss. Whatever your reason is, you must find it if you want to recover.

I understand if at this point the wound may be too raw and you can't think of a reason to go on right now. After Michelle took her life I couldn't imagine that I could ever recover. I thought that nothing in my life could ever have meaning again. My heart was broken and I felt nothing but anger, emptiness and despair. I broke down sobbing whenever I thought about her final hours and how I had failed her. I wanted to die more than I had ever wanted anything in my life. I finally realized that I couldn't do that to my family but I just knew that I would carry the cold empty feeling with me for the rest of my life. I would love to tell you that the pain you are feeling will one day just magically disappear, that you will simply wake up one day and it will be a distant memory. I would love to tell you that but I've promised myself that in writing this I would strive to be encouraging but also honest. My pain has not gone away but it has changed, time has made it easier to carry. The sucking chest wound where my heart had been has been replaced by a scar, but I am not the same as I was before and I doubt that you are either.

Even after I had decided to live I felt anything but alive. I don't know if this is something you can relate to or not but I know it is like that for a lot of people. Pain can be so overwhelming that we begin to shut down. I was so overcome with

grief that I could barely function. I was on autopilot and couldn't focus on anything more than putting one foot in front of the other. If you are feeling this way my heart goes out to you. It is a horrible place to be, but the good news is that in time the pain begins to subside. Grief is like a flood, it can overwhelm you but eventually the waters recede. I know it may not seem like it now but I promise it will get easier if you allow yourself to heal.

Sadly, some survivors simply choose not to recover. Whether out of guilt or anger or pain, they decide to simply endure their misery. Some of them seem to think that they deserve to suffer or that their suffering is somehow some sort of tribute to their lost loved one. Nothing could be further from the truth. Your loved one would not have wished such an existence on you, I would not wish such an existence on my worst enemy. Would you wish something like that for someone you love? Of course you wouldn't, and neither would they. We both know how devastating suicide is to those around us, so we know that is not an option. The only real choice is whether to recover or to simply live out our days. Your loved one would want you to carry on. They would want you to learn to laugh again, to pursue your dreams. They would want you to be happy.

Something I want to make clear is that, when I talk about recovering, I'm not talking about forgetting your loved one. I can never forget Michelle, her memory will be with me for the rest of my life. What I had to do, and I admit that it was a struggle, was to get to the point where I could think about her without her final act being all I could focus on. Until I was able to do that, the very fact that she had existed at all was painful. Erasing all the happy times we had spent together was not fair to her or to myself, but I've learned that grief is not particularly concerned with being fair. I've had people ask me if it wouldn't be easier to forget, to put all my memories of her away and consciously not think of her. I can't say for sure if that would be better or not because there is no way that I can do it. It seems to me that if I strip away all the thoughts, memories and love that I feel for Michelle it would leave a gaping hole. I think it's human to try to "fill in the blanks" and in that case all I would have to fill the hole would be darkness. To boil her entire life down to the senseless tragedy of her final act would erase all the love and compassion that was the core of who she was. Personally, I needed to hold onto that love if I was going to be able to motivate myself to heal.

When someone commits suicide they are not thinking about other people, they are trying to escape their own pain. Your loved one did not wish for you to suffer the pain you have endured, it was an unfortunate byproduct of their tragic decision. If people in that moment were actually thinking about the effect it would have on those they love there would be a lot fewer people taking their own lives. Often times people make the mistake of thinking that committing suicide is the end of the pain. You and I both know that is not the case, it simply passes it on.

I don't know the key to your recovery any more than I knew what the key to my recovery would be when I started it. All I can do is share what worked for me and what other survivors have told me worked for them. Something we all need to remember is that healing does not take place all at once. Healing is a process not an event. I had one survivor I talked to compare it to growing a garden. Planting a garden is a lot of hard work, there will be weeds that need to be pulled...negative and painful thoughts we must conquer, pests to deal with...those that feed our grief and bring us down, and periods of drought...times when we feel like we can't go on. The thing to realize is that, once we have put in the work, we get to enjoy the fruits of our labors...our healing.

The image of a garden seems particularly appropriate to me. Planting a “memory garden” for Michelle was one of the first things that I did and something that gave me a lot of comfort. Sitting on a bench in the garden somehow made me feel closer to her. To be honest, I did not personally come up with the idea of a garden dedicated to Michelle’s memory. My daughter Ashley was the one that actually suggested it. I was not even that involved in the initial planting and landscaping of it. It was others in the family that loved Michelle who cleared and planted the area for the garden. I was still in too much of a fog to really participate and cannot tell you even now who planted what or even who all was involved. Even though I didn’t do much to get the garden started because I was too numb, once I had recovered to the point that I could function I spent a great deal of time working on it or just sitting in it.

I don’t know if something like a memory garden would appeal to you. I don’t know if you have a place to plant one or the resources. We are all from different situations, but a memory garden is one thing that helped me. It gave me somewhere to go when I was missing her. I have talked to several other survivors that have done similar things as a tribute to their lost loved one. Michelle was cremated so there was no

actual grave I could go to, her garden became that for me. For myself, the memory garden was something that made me feel almost as if Michelle was with me. I can't explain it but there was something very healing about having a place where I could feel her presence.

I know of other people that have decorated a wall or room with pictures and mementos from their loved ones' lives. I think for a lot of folks it is a comfort to have some type of memorial to their lost loved one. It doesn't have to be anything big, sometimes it can be something as simple as a photo album or a scrapbook. For myself, my wife and I have founded a non-profit called "Abbreviated Angels." It is an organization dedicated to providing support to those who have lost a loved one to suicide. For myself it has given me something to focus on besides the pain. It's a fairly common theme for many survivors that channeling their pain into something positive helps them to begin to process their pain. For me, pouring that pain into helping others has helped me to continue to heal, even though doing so is unbelievably hard sometimes. I can't explain all the reasons why, but I've found that pain with a purpose is easier to bear. I don't know what you will do to find a purpose for your pain, but I firmly believe that doing so can help with your healing.

As I sit here trying to figure out how to tell my story in a way that people could relate to, I realize how out of my comfort zone I am. Most people know me as the joker, always telling funny stories and jokes. I've done that since high school, I was always on, always acting the fool. The truth is that, most of the time, my smile was painted on. It's a defense mechanism, if I get 'em laughing I don't have to talk about the serious stuff. The more stressed out or more uncomfortable something made me the more desperately I would try to do anything to distract from what was going on and humor was what worked for me. I had a friend tell me one time that when I get freaked out I would chatter and run around like Robin Williams with his hair on fire. I think I might have an even worse tendency to ramble aimlessly when I'm writing.

All of that to say that my wife is right, and I should probably tell it in some sort of structured way so I don't "chase rabbits", and lose my train of thought for God knows how long. (See, I told you I can ramble. I promise I'll try to keep it from getting too bad.) After chewing on it a while I decided that maybe I should consider using the same type of structure that so many of the books on recovering from loss do. I've decided to tell you about how the "grieving process" played out for me.

Most experts seem to agree that there are at least 5 stages of grief. These are denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Many scholars add two extra stages to their timelines. The first of these is shock, which many consider to be the first stage of the grieving process. The second is processing grief, which some consider to be a separate stage at the end of the process. From everything I have researched and my own conversations with doctors, no matter how they classify the stages of grief, there is a general consensus that how long each stage is, or the exact order of the steps is different for each individual. They also generally agree that a person's journey through grief is not a cut and dried process. Often a survivor may often be working through more than one stage of grief at a time.

I personally don't know how many stages of grief there are. I can't tell you if you will finish working through your loss in a week, month, decade, or lifetime. I look back at the journal I kept, and I couldn't make heads or tails out of what stage of grief I was dealing with most of the time. As I read what I had written, it seemed that there was no rhyme or reason to how my own recovery unfolded. One day I would spend my whole day in bed, sobbing and cursing God, the next I would spend apologizing, praying, and begging him to bring her back.

This seems to be an appropriate place to put a disclaimer. My faith has been a comfort and part of my healing and recovery. If I mention my faith please don't be offended, I accept the fact that you may or may not agree with me and that's ok. I don't know if faith in something bigger than yourself is part of your journey or not. I know survivors that are devout believers and some that are committed atheists. I doubt that most of us are going to church every day and we're also not burning down houses of worship. I think that most of us are somewhere in the middle. I want to be clear. I am a Christian and am not ashamed of the fact that my faith has helped me heal. I've heard all the "religion is a crutch" stuff and I would have to say I understand the analogy. I have leaned on my faith when I felt weak, and it has comforted me. That having been said, this book is not intended to be a book about theology and what God is or isn't or if he even exists at all. The fact that I am a Christian and you may or may not be makes no difference. I have talked to, laughed with, cried with, comforted, and been comforted by people from about any belief system you could think of. If you are reading this book I expect that, no matter what we believe in, what connects us is tragedy.

I have decided to simply write what I was experiencing at times in my healing and what I was thinking and feeling as I dealt with it. I've given up on trying to figure out which stage I was in at any particular moment. One thing that I did notice was that I was all over the place with what I was dealing with at any given time. I wouldn't be surprised if that was how your healing happens too. There are those that go "by the book" and their path might be straight as an arrow, and they may hit the milestones like clockwork. I know one of the things I struggled with was how messy my own attempt to recover was while I saw others that seemed to breeze right through. It took me a long time to realize that I was only seeing what they showed me and that some of them were as broken and struggling as much as I was.

Before I go off on some tangent, let me explain how I'm going to be laying this out. I tried to keep a "grief journal" like one of my therapists recommended. I did the best I could, but I have to admit that there are large gaps in my entries. There were times, especially right after it happened, that picking up a pen and simply jotting down a single word was beyond my capabilities. I suspect many people reading this may be able to relate. If you have never

experienced this after your loss I am happy for you... and more than a little jealous. Many of the entries that I did make were just a few words, some only a word. What I've decided to do is use a sampling of my entries as points of reference. I will use them as headings and try to explain my thoughts and feelings at that time. I can virtually guarantee you that you will find my story messy and painful. I'm sure I'll ramble and repeat myself or babble incoherently at times so let me apologize in advance.

I want to point out that my thoughts and feelings about losing my loved one are no more important or insightful or valid than yours or anyone else's. I'm just trying to share what I have experienced in the hope that I can comfort others who have suffered a tragedy similar to my own. Our journeys may be similar in many ways, but our pain is also uniquely our own. Your experience and story will be every bit as individual and powerful as mine and I would encourage you to share it when you're strong enough.

With that in mind, here we go...

Devastation

Out of all the stages in the grieving process, this is the stage that I think most of us start out at no matter what the rest of the journey looks like. This was the first entry in my journal, and it perfectly sums up what I felt at the time. I felt utterly and totally devastated, like my life was over. The pain, guilt, and anger were overwhelming. I spent days sobbing uncontrollably. I would stay in bed with the covers pulled up over my head and would barely get out of bed to use the bathroom. Of course I didn't have to use the toilet much because I wouldn't eat or drink anything. I was in indescribable pain yet I was also numb to anything but that pain. The times when I was forced to go somewhere or do something I walked around like a zombie. People would try to talk to me, to explain things but I couldn't process anything.

Disbelief

I couldn't process what had happened. I would wake up, after crying myself to sleep, and actually forget that she was gone. I guess that it would be more accurate to say that I convinced myself that it was all a horrible dream. I would wake up and eagerly call her phone, desperate to talk to her. I actually left messages for her to call me back. I cried uncontrollably when her

phone was finally shut off. It took me a long time to get to the point where I didn't check my phone for new messages from her. I guess it was a self-defense mechanism to keep me from completely melting down.

You're Lying

I would get incredibly mad when people would try to make me face the fact that she was gone. I had a "tough love" advocate that seemed to be obsessed with making sure that I wasn't in denial. He was constantly telling me how unhealthy it was to avoid dealing with things. His big pep talk was about how I needed to "rip that band-aid off" and simply discard all the pain and anguish I felt. I was not in the mood to be preached at, belittled, or bullied into recovering. Looking back, I realize his intentions may have been good but trying to force feed me reality wasn't doing anyone any good.

She's gone

This was when it started to register that she was gone. She wasn't on vacation, she wasn't being a brat and refusing to answer my phone calls or call me back. Slowly, all the little ways that I tried to distract myself and to pretend that she was still alive, didn't work anymore. I would be overwhelmed with waves of sadness and

break down sobbing at random times. I would still try desperately to force the fact that she was gone from my mind. There were times when I would still convince myself that she would be walking through the door at any moment, but they were getting further and further apart. I suppose it's more "healthy" to reside in reality but that doesn't mean that it's less painful. I think that not fully accepting the reality of losing her was something my mind did to protect me from more pain than I could survive in a single dose.

My life is over

Once I finally accepted the fact that Michelle's life was over I didn't see how I could possibly live my life without her in it. I didn't see what the point was of living a life where anything that I loved and cherished could be gone in the blink of an eye. I was in such incredible pain that I couldn't imagine that I *could* survive, let alone why I would want to. I know that I had people that loved me and that were counting on me but that didn't matter. I'm ashamed to admit it, but I spent most of my time focused on my pain and shutting everything else out. Looking back, I realize that was selfish but I didn't think that I could possibly make any positive contribution to anyone's' life. My pain consumed me, and pain was all that I felt I had to offer.

Please take me too

Remembering this feeling is why I wrote this book in the first place. This feeling, mindset or whatever you want to call it, nearly killed me. It almost killed me like it has killed so many other survivors of suicide. It is so easy for me to understand why this thought is so seductive. I would think about all the pain that I was in and how I had failed her and all I wanted to do was have the pain end. I wasn't thinking about what that would do to my family and friends. Pain makes it hard to focus on the needs of others, suffering seems to make many people selfish and cynical. I felt so guilty that my pain made me so self-centered. The guilt fed the pain and the pain fed the guilt. It was a vicious cycle that I couldn't seem to break. I was actively coming up with ways to end it all.

Just lay here and die.

Even when I realized that I couldn't commit suicide, that didn't mean that I wanted to live. For weeks I refused to get out of bed. I didn't shower brush my teeth or change clothes for weeks. I would force myself to choke down a few bites of food so everyone would leave me alone but that was all I could do. I had absolutely no energy or motivation to do anything. Even when I wasn't actively planning to end it all, I would pray to God that he would

put me out of my misery. I remember having chest pains and feeling a flutter of hope that I was getting ready to have a heart attack. I saw dying of some natural cause as almost a best-case scenario.

It's my fault

The thing that drove so much of my pain was how much guilt I felt over failing her. I couldn't get over the incredible shame I felt. She was my little girl, I was supposed to protect her. How could I have been acting the fool and having fun while she was putting a shotgun in her mouth. What kind of father was I if I wasn't there for her. She would still be alive if she'd had a better father. I kept running through what I could've done differently. Maybe it wouldn't have happened if I had done this or if I had done that. I listened to her messages over and over, torturing myself by reliving the moment I got the phone call that she was gone. I would cry like a baby as I sat there clutching my phone. It was a blessing from God when I finally dropped and broke it.

It's your fault

There were times when I would come to my senses enough to realize that it wasn't my fault that she had killed herself. My problem was that I still felt an incredible need to assign blame to

someone for the worst thing that ever happened in my life. It was such an incredible trauma that it felt like there needed to be someone to be held accountable...to punish. Intellectually I realize that I should've placed the blame where it belonged, with her, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. Any time I even tried it felt like I was betraying her. I still needed to blame someone. I couldn't blame her, so my only options were to blame myself, someone else, or God. I definitely kept plenty of guilt for myself but there was more than enough blame to go around. That is something that I've learned from my own experience, as well as from talking to countless other survivors. When someone commits suicide it opens up a bottomless pit of pain and suffering. There is no limit to how many people can feel the guilt that a suicide naturally creates. Just like there's no limit to the number of people that feel blame after a suicide, there is no limit to how much each person takes for themselves. I have known cases where someone committed suicide and more than one person later committed suicide and left a note saying they were responsible for the first persons' suicide. Even if no one literally kills themselves, there are countless examples of people who've had a successful life and had it completely fall apart when they lost their loved one to suicide. I hope this doesn't describe how your life is going but it is an accurate description of countless other survivors' journeys.

Trade places

Pretty much from the beginning I tried bargaining with God. I offered everything I could think of to try to get him to bring her back. I don't know what I thought that would look like. I didn't know if it would be like Lazarus walking out of the tomb or if she would appear in a bright flash of light. In my desperation I envisioned all kinds of scenarios where there was some kind of mistake and she had not actually killed herself. I offered to take her place. I begged and pleaded for him to take me instead. She was younger, kinder, healthier and a much better person than I was. People loved her more, her absence caused pain and darkness. My death would barely cause a ripple where hers had been a tsunami that had nearly drowned myself and several others. I didn't understand how a merciful God could have taken such a sweet and kind person like her and leave the world full of murderers and rapists.

I promise

When I wasn't offering anything I could think of to get her back, I was making promises about what I would do. There is nothing I wouldn't have done to get her back. I would've jumped into a volcano or took an ax to a busload of nuns if it would've changed anything. I would sob and grovel, beg, and curse and promise that everything would somehow be different if he would just realize his mistake and send her back to her family who loved her.

Mourning the future that was lost

I think that one of the things that hurt so much is that I had this idea of what the future would've held for her. She was going to get married and have kids. She would've been such a great mom, she was so good with children. I couldn't wait to see her taking them to the park or going to their ball games and school programs. I was looking forward to going to her house for dinner and hearing her brag or complain about her kids. It was very painful to think about all the things that would never happen now. I'll never walk her down the aisle. I'll never see her children or what she would've done with her life. She was so artistic and creative. She was always making the most amazing crafts that she would give as gifts. The gifts that she has given me are among my most treasured possessions. After her suicide they had taken on an almost sacred importance. I spilled water on a scrap of napkin that she had scribbled a cartoon character on with a magic marker. The ink ran and the picture was unrecognizable. It was literally trash, a napkin that had been used to clean up something. Before I would've thrown it away without a thought, somehow her death turned it into some kind of religious relic. It was a smelly napkin, but I was more devastated than if I had ruined a priceless Rembrandt or Picasso. It was a long time before I was even

able to throw away junk mail that she had received. Everything that had been hers was suddenly precious in my eyes. Anything that was hers that was discarded, no matter how small, was like losing a piece of her. I expect that that is some sort of mental disorder with cool letters like PTSD or OCD or whatever, but I'm not qualified to diagnose myself or anyone else.

Please don't take any more

Once I started getting to the point that I could function, I started to realize that I wasn't the only one that was suffering and struggling. This realization really hit me like a ton of bricks. I realized how selfish and self-centered I had been in my grief and was ashamed of myself. I hadn't been there for Michelle and now I wasn't there for those that needed me. I wanted so much to be there for everyone else but any time that I dealt with anything I was overwhelmed. I felt guilty because I couldn't help which made me feel more overwhelmed which made me feel more guilty. My whole life had turned into some kind of hellish merry-go-round. Sometimes I was convinced that everyone was on the edge and would throw themselves into the abyss because of me. I would lay awake at night terrified and staring at the phone. I just knew that it was going to ring and they would tell me who was the next one to fall.

Nothing matters anymore

After that day, I felt like nothing mattered any more. No matter what happened, good or bad, I didn't care. If I won the lottery or my house burned to the ground it didn't make a difference. I felt the same about both possibilities, total apathy. To be honest I think that I actually felt better about things that affected me negatively. I felt that at least I was getting what I deserved. I had no ambition beyond surviving the day and I didn't really want to do that. I would regularly pray that something would happen, and I wouldn't have to suffer anymore. I couldn't bring myself to pull the trigger because I couldn't do that to my loved ones but terminal cancer or a fatal heart attack were something to pray for.

No relief

I was in constant agony and there was nothing I could do about it. I tried everything I could think of, but nothing brought me any relief from the thoughts in my head that I tortured myself with. There was nothing at the bottom of a booze or pill bottle that did anything more than knock me out. When I woke up my pain was still there, and it was often magnified.

I feel the need to mention something that I have heard from many other survivors and that I experienced myself. A tragedy like losing a loved one to suicide can totally obliterate our boundaries and make us do things that we normally wouldn't do. Chronic pain, physical or mental, wears us down and makes us more susceptible to errors in judgment. If someone has to constantly fight the urge to do something that is contrary to their best interests, like an alcoholic or a drug addict, it's very hard to battle both grief and addiction at the same time. If you are a recovering alcoholic or addict please be aware that you are especially vulnerable. The pain that you are experiencing creates an incredible temptation and no one has ever had a better justification. Please remember that you must stay strong for those that you love and need you. If you feel yourself losing the battle please reach out for the help that you need.

How could I have missed it

Yet another constant source of guilt for me was the fact that I had not recognized how close to the edge she was the last time we talked. I was so angry with myself for not checking on her before I received the messages. I wracked my brain for signs that I had missed. I replayed our final conversation over and over in my mind. I struggled to remember if there were any red flags that I missed. I couldn't identify anything

that I had missed but I was sure that there was something that I should've spotted and saved her. I was so intent on blaming myself that I couldn't accept the possibility that it wasn't my fault. With the benefit of hindsight, I realize how unfair that was, but at the time I didn't understand.

I'll never forgive myself

After Michelles' suicide I was consumed by guilt and self-loathing. I knew it was my fault and there was no way that I could forgive myself for letting her down. I hated myself and blamed myself for her decision to end her life. When Michelle was born I had been a meth addict. I had attempted suicide several times in an attempt to escape the pain of my childhood and all the things that had happened then. Michelles' mother, my first wife, had been a hard-core meth addict and a total dumpster fire. When Michelle had been born I had expected her to give up partying and take care of her daughter. She had laughed in my face when I told her she would need to mellow out and take care of Michelle. Once I had time to think about it I knew that leaving Michelle with her was not an option. She couldn't take care of herself let alone take care of a child. I was a train wreck, and she was the only person that I had ever known that made me feel better about my own problems by comparison. I knew what I had to do, even if I didn't want to do it. I got a room in a run down, roach infested, fleabag hotel

and quit everything cold turkey. It was a horrific week but at the end of it I had conquered my demons to the point that I was able to put away the hard-core stuff. Without Michelle I would've never had a reason to quit and if I hadn't quit there's no way that I would have still been alive. I had told people for years that Michelle had saved my life. It ate me alive that I had not saved hers.

Self-destruction

My pain and guilt generated a lot of self-destructive thoughts and behaviors. I was not eating or drinking or even showering. I was a total mess, alternating between sleeping all day and not sleeping a wink for days. I would play what had happened over and over in my mind, making sure to keep as much blame as possible for myself. I couldn't focus on anything beyond getting through the day. I couldn't even begin to heal because I didn't want to get better. I knew that everything that had happened was my fault and I didn't deserve to get better. Looking back, it seems like I was craving the darkness, I could not bring myself to do anything that might contribute to my healing. It was like I was willing myself to get worse instead of better. It felt like I was in a deep dark hole and all I wanted to do was keep digging. Any decision I made added to my darkness. These decisions tended to hurt my family and anyone that cared about me, but I couldn't help myself. There were times when I

would get angry at anyone that tried to help or get me to help myself. I would pity the people that cared for me, it wasn't their fault that they didn't understand what a piece of crap I was. Pushing them away seemed like the kind thing to do, torturing myself seemed like justice.

Why her

Even after I accepted the fact that she was gone, I was still obsessed with trying to understand why God had taken her. With all the selfish, hateful, and hurtful people in the world, why had he taken her. I spent hours reasoning with God, begging him for answers. I'm not proud of the fact, but I actually spent a significant amount of time detailing other peoples' failings and demanding an explanation as to why they deserved to live, and she didn't. Somehow it made me feel a little bit better, chastising God for this horrific mistake that he made. Many of the people I used as examples weren't especially bad people, some of them were even people that I liked and respected. Sometimes their only offense was that they were not her. Something else I did, and this is something many other survivors told me they did as well, was to totally banish any conversation or thought that showed her in a negative light. Somehow her death had transformed her into this sinless perfect angel that was beyond reproach. Instead

of remembering her as she was, with faults and flaws like we all have, I placed her on a pedestal. I had failed her in life, but I was determined not to dishonor her memory.

Why me

Just like I spent a lot of time asking why her, I also spent a lot of time asking why me. My life had devolved into an endless cycle of hating myself one minute and feeling sorry for myself the next. I would do things that made it harder then have a pity party for myself about how hard things were. I would wall about how much pain I was in and beg to understand what I had done to deserve such misery. I know how crazy it sounds but I couldn't help myself. No matter how hard I tried I could not break this cycle of anguish, to be honest, I can't say I tried too hard. I think in some way I saw my suffering as some kind of tribute to her. I was like a martyr to her memory.

Because of me

The bad thing about asking "why me" is that sometimes I actually tried to answer my own question. Then "why me" turned into "why would she," and "why would she" turned into "she must have done it because...." Once I started asking that question it was easy to come up with reasons it must be my fault. I would simply list all the ways that I had failed her and wallow in

the pain and misery that thinking about such things caused.

As I read back over this record I realize that I might seem like a one trick pony. I talk about my guilt time and time again. It seems like everything in my journey always led back to the fact that I felt responsible. Talking to other survivors I've learned that it is a fairly common thing to feel responsible for a loved ones' suicide to some extent. I think between the messages she left, the fact that I'd left her when she was supposed to go with me to the reunion, and my regret at not having spent more time with her, it was a perfect storm to create guilt. Guilt seems to be a dominant force in a lot of survivors' stories. I don't know how big a factor guilt is in your own journey, but I don't know of anything more toxic or damaging to someone's ability to heal. I'm not saying that you can't survive if you don't deal with your sense of guilt, but I don't know how you could ever truly heal. As for myself, if I hadn't finally been able process my guilt, there is no way that I could've survived, let alone healed.

Everyone blames me, everyone hates me

I could ramble on again for page after page about my guilt, but I hope you understand that it was a constant presence. I will try not to emphasize it so much but just remember that it was always there. I blamed myself which made

it easy to convince myself that everyone else blamed me too. I can't say for sure how many people really believed that I was responsible but at the time it felt like everyone did. Just like I was desperate to place the blame somewhere, other people were also looking to blame or punish someone. Some people were cruel and told me point blank that she did it because I was a terrible father. At this point I understand that it was natural for people to lash out and hurt each other, hurting people hurt people. Understanding this now doesn't change the fact that I was devastated when it happened. If someone is blaming you for your loved ones' suicide, I would ask you to understand that they are probably desperate for answers just like you are.

I thought that if I could figure out whose fault it was I could make it make sense. I turned that rage inward but often people are looking for someone else to blame so they won't have to take the blame themselves. If others are blaming you I would beg you not to drink from that poisoned cup. Likewise, if you feel justified blaming someone else, please remember that you are in pain, and they probably don't deserve it any more than you do. I have seen so many times where families and relationships were destroyed by accusations made in the heat of the moment in the aftermath of their tragedy. Please understand that you have the power to destroy others by heaping guilt and misery on

them when they are struggling themselves. I beg you to do your best not to add unnecessary pain to your journey or someone else's. Surviving a loved one's suicide is hard enough without working against each other or ourselves.

Distrusting kindness

I blamed myself for Michelle's decision and believed that everyone else blamed me too. Believing that everyone blamed me made it almost impossible to accept help or comfort from anyone. When you're convinced that everyone blames and hates you, you don't trust them even if they are honestly trying to help. I was utterly exhausted, physically, mentally, and emotionally, but I still couldn't let my guard down. I was constantly on the verge of breaking down but all I could do was grit my teeth and push through. I would sob uncontrollably when I was alone but suck it up and put on a happy face whenever anyone else was around. More than anything else, what I needed was a shoulder to cry on, but I didn't feel worthy of anyone's compassion. I didn't have anyone that I felt I could cry with, so I cried alone. Crying with someone else is somehow therapeutic. I think it's the knowledge that you're not alone in your grief that is such a comfort. Crying alone, for me, made me feel more alone and more unworthy every time I did it and I did it a lot. I was on the edge of the abyss and the darkness just kept growing and growing. Something had to give.

Why not

I was struggling just to get out of bed, and it felt like I had to force myself to breathe. Nothing I did seemed to ease the terrible aching hole where my heart had been. I watched everyone else going about their lives and couldn't understand why they were doing so well, and I was in hell. It didn't feel like I was getting better, it didn't feel like I would ever get better. I had always been the guy that was joking around and keeping everyone laughing. Now I was the one that was bringing everyone down. It seemed like I couldn't even carry on a conversation without struggling not to cry. There were awkward silences and then people would excuse themselves. At this point I understand that it's human nature to avoid things that make you comfortable. They didn't know how to ease my suffering and that made them uncomfortable. I understand now but at the time it felt like they were rejecting me. They didn't want me around. The main reason I hadn't ended my own suffering was because I hadn't wanted to cause anyone that I loved that much pain. I had been struggling to get out of bed every day and they didn't even want me to do it. Everyone was happier when I wasn't around, when they didn't have to deal with me and my weakness. Even when someone would reach out I felt that they were just doing it because they felt guilty for hating me. I was sure that everyone would be better off if I was gone. Now I know that it wasn't true for me, just like it's not true if you are feeling

that way right now, but it was hard for me not to feel this way. I've learned that it is very common for survivors to get to the place where they consider suicide themselves. Studies have shown that when someone in your immediate circle commits suicide you are ten times more likely to attempt suicide yourself in the aftermath. A lot of us survivors get to this place and how we handle it is what determines if we are survivors or simply the next domino to fall. When there is a suicide, sometimes others in their circle that may be struggling themselves decide that it is time to throw themselves into the abyss. Then the next one causes the circle even more pain and the next one falls, causing more pain, knocking down the next domino etc...etc.... The cycle feeds on itself and one suicide can turn into a dozen or more. If you allow yourself to become that next domino to fall, how many will fall after you?

Reaching out

Of course, at the time, I didn't know any of these things. All I knew was that I was in agony. If they didn't want me around, why was I putting myself through such torment? Once I had talked myself into believing that everyone hated me and that the world would be better off without me, the only plan that made sense to me was to end it all. I grabbed a bottle of pills and

went to the apartment where Michelle had taken her life. The door was locked so I sat on the back steps, sobbing, talking to Michelle and screaming at God. I don't know how long I had been there, five minutes or five hours, but I didn't plan to be there or anywhere else much longer. I sat back down on the steps, screwed the cap off the bottle, closed my eyes and took a deep breath. Before I could lift the bottle to my lips I was startled by a voice and a flashlight in my face. Apparently someone had called the police about me sobbing and screaming. I hid the bottle, tossing it in a storm drain as the officer came over. He talked to me, and I put on my happy face. I don't think he believed me but he hadn't seen me pitch the pills so there was nothing he could do. He talked to me for several minutes and then went and sat in his cruiser watching me. Eventually I got in my car and headed home. I still planned to kill myself, but it wouldn't be that night.

I went home and spent the entire night sobbing. The next morning my wife came in and told me that she was taking me to see the psychiatrist at the veteran's hospital. I had made an appointment shortly after Michelle's suicide but had skipped the appointment. I had rescheduled it several times to get my wife off

my back but had skipped each time. I had an appointment that morning which I had intended to skip but she wasn't having it. After arguing with her for what seemed like hours I agreed to go. I told her that I wanted to go by myself, but she demanded to go with me. It was a good idea because there's no way I would've gone without being forced. I agreed to go but I had no intention of actually trying to get help. I tried to tell the shrink that I was doing ok. He listened as I lied about how I had decided that it wasn't my fault and that I would never consider harming myself. Of course, I was lying, I already had another bottle of pills, and he seemed to know. Once I had finished speaking he started asking me questions. As I answered I struggled to keep smiling. The more we talked the harder it was until finally I broke down sobbing.

He let me cry for a few moments and when I had finished he told me that he wanted me to check myself into the VA hospital. I kept trying to protest but he had an answer for every objection I could come up with. He insisted that I needed help to work through everything and eventually I agreed. Since I've promised to be honest, I admit that I got the feeling that, if I hadn't agreed, I would've been taken to the VA whether I wanted to or not. Sharing this with you is difficult for me. I used to be ashamed of the fact that I had checked myself into an in-house treatment program. I thought I was weak because I couldn't just suck it up and let it go. It

took me a long while to understand the fact that accepting help was the hard thing. I had always thought of it as something that cowards did, but cowards don't do what scares them. Opening up and exposing those raw nerves scared the hell out of me, but I did it anyway. What did I have to lose?

I want to be clear, I'm not telling you that you need to run out and check yourself into a psych ward or even that you need to talk to a shrink. I don't know you, your past or present struggles or if you have a support system or not. Just like our pain is unique, so are our circumstances and life experiences. The way we look at things and the way we process things, including our grief, is unique to each one of us. All I can say with certainty is that, without getting help, I wouldn't be here to write this. My hope is that by sharing this with you I can show you that there is help and that there is no shame in accepting it or even seeking it out. You are not weak, you are not worthless, and you are not alone. If you are in crisis **PLEASE** get help before you do something to hurt yourself or someone else. If you want to be anonymous there are hotlines that you can call any time day or night. The easiest one for me to remember is 988. If you dial 988 it connects you to the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. Please reach out if you

need help. There is also a list of resources for survivors at the end of this book and additional resources listed on our Facebook group Abbreviated Angels. We are working on a website and other social media platforms but are not there yet. When we have them up and running we will have the information listed there as well. I will try to update this journal as we make progress on establishing them.

In a different light

I talked earlier about the fact that recovery is a process instead of an event, but certain events contribute to our healing more than others. For me, getting help was the event that allowed me to come out of the downward spiral I was in. Being forced to confront my thoughts and feelings about her suicide was what I needed to begin to change my self-narrative. My thoughts and feelings drove my guilt which fed my self-hatred. Some of the ways I looked at the tragedy and my part in it made no sense intellectually, but in my grief I wasn't interested in truth, only blame. I wish I could say that I talked to a counselor, they sprinkled some magic dust, waved their magic wand and "poof," I was redeemed. If someone tries to tell you that it was that easy I would be skeptical. Everyone I've ever talked to said it was one of the hardest things they'd ever done, I know it was for me.

What talking to a counselor did for me was to allow me to see things in a different light. As I told him about what had happened and what I thought about it he listened patiently. When I was done talking he would ask me questions about why I thought the things I thought. I would explain all the reasons it was my fault, why I deserved to suffer, why I thought everyone hated me etc... He listened intently as I poured out my pain and rage. When I was finished he gently started poking holes in all the theories that I had convinced myself of. I like to think of myself as fairly intelligent, but I had been basing all my reactions off of how I felt, my emotions. When he started applying logic to my argument it started to fall apart.

I'll admit that I resisted his attempts to re-frame the tragedy in a more realistic light. Placing the blame where it actually belonged, with her, was so contrary to the self-talk I had been having since it happened that I had tremendous trouble accepting the idea. I would offer emphatic rebuttals to any point that he made that absolved me of my guilt. I would explain over and over why I was right to think the way I was thinking and how he didn't understand. He would gently question my interpretation of things, not demanding that I agree with him but also not agreeing with my narrative. At first I couldn't step back and view things rationally, I was too fixated on my own guilt. What talking to him did was provide a

disruption of the constant stream of self-hatred that was dominating my thoughts. After we had talked I reviewed the conversation in my mind and couldn't help but notice that many of his points made more sense than mine.

I have a tendency to over analyze things, it was one of the things that helped generate so much guilt. Being forced to apply logic to my perception of what had happened caused me a great deal of inner conflict. It felt almost like I was engaged in a battle with myself, my emotional self against my logical self. My emotional self had been running the show since it happened and it had grown powerful, while the rest of me withered. Having someone disputing my guilt was a strange feeling. I'd had others tell me that it wasn't my fault, but I hadn't believed them. I had never allowed anyone to push too hard. I would joke around and change the subject or intentionally say something to piss them off and get them to leave. I couldn't piss the counselor off, he kept me focused, and I couldn't make him leave.

Talking to him almost felt like having someone in my corner in a boxing match. I felt like my guilt was a fierce beast, like Mike Tyson in his prime. I felt like a 98-pound weakling that he had been smacking around, but now I had a

trainer. This Tyson was super powerful, but he always threw the same punches. They were haymakers but my new “trainer” helped me learn to duck and counterpunch. The longer it went, and the better I got at it, the more powerful I felt and the weaker he seemed. I can’t say that I’ve scored a “knockout” and I no longer battle my guilt, but I can say it doesn’t have the power to utterly destroy me like it once did.

Not my fault

Getting help was the turning point in my story. I know that up until this point my story has been almost all darkness. I’m sorry if anything I’ve said has hurt or upset you. I wish my own walk through hell had been easier, for my sake as much or more for me than for the sake of you reading this. I really considered putting a happy face on my journey, putting in more sunshine and rainbows. I wanted to write something that would encourage others who were struggling, but without telling the truth of my struggle it felt hollow somehow. My hope is that, by showing how deep and dark the place is that I came back from, you will understand that you **can** recover. I made this entry, ‘Not my fault’, shortly after I started talking to the counselor. I don’t want to keep beating the drum about how great counseling is, even if it saved my life, so just remember how it helped give me the strength to survive and heal.

Once I entertained the possibility that it wasn't my fault, that **she** had chosen to take her own life, I felt a huge weight lifted off of me. I loved her more than anything or anyone else in the world. I would've done anything, and I do mean anything, to keep her from killing herself. The reason I was in so much pain was because I had loved her so much. It wasn't because of anything that I had done or anything that I hadn't done. Her death was a decision she made for herself; if I'd had a vote it wouldn't have happened. I expect that you would've done anything in your power to have saved your loved one. If any of us could go back in time we would give anything to keep them from doing it. I had tortured myself thinking about all the things I should or shouldn't have done. I would catch myself saying "if only I had... all the time. I have finally come to realize that, every time I thought about things I might have done, it was me trying to take more blame for myself.

Purpose for my pain

There was nothing I could do about how much pain her death caused me. The more you love someone, the more it hurts to lose them, it's just a fact. It's hard in the best of circumstances, peacefully, surrounded by loved ones, etc... Losing someone to suicide is possibly the worst circumstance I can imagine. I would struggle to find a circumstance that caused more guilt and helplessness in those left behind than suicide. Guilt creates more pain and there's no way that I

know of to stop that. Pain is an incredibly destructive thing, we can only survive so much of it. Another thing about pain is that it doesn't just disappear, at least mine didn't and it's not something that other survivors have mentioned to me.

I think that our pain can take only one of four paths. The first way we can deal with our pain is by putting it out into the world. How many people that you know, who are in incredible pain, who are any fun to be around? Sometimes pain hardens a person's heart, not doing a kindness that you would've done otherwise is passively aggressively putting pain out into the world. Oftentimes, it takes a much more aggressive form, and we may bully or belittle those around us and verbally or even physically assault others. I talked before about how pain can obliterate our boundaries. Sending your pain out into the world as anger can *never* have a happy ending. You hurt others, causing them pain, their pain has to go somewhere so they lash out. If the shyest, meekest person you know is in enough pain they will lash out. So they hurt someone, etc... etc... Pain is the gift that keeps on taking. The people that tend to bear the brunt of a person's anger are those around them, often family and friends. It seems almost impossible not to have some of our pain coming out and hurting those around us. I know I did, I regret so

much that I hurt those around me. I know firsthand how hard it can be on you and everyone around you. I don't see this path leading to anywhere that I would want to go. I hope this is not the path you choose for yourself.

The second path I've seen people take is directing their anger at God. Not to thump the pulpit, but I do feel bad for people who don't believe in God, if for no other reason than that they have one less place to distribute their pain. It's hard to be mad at something if you don't believe it exists. For those of us who are believers, my question is this. Have you ever heard a story of someone who was furious with God, and spent their strength raging against him, and the story ended well for them? I know of people who have found religion when they lost a loved one and those who have lost it afterwards. I can understand how someone would make either choice. I know my faith has been a source of great comfort for me, take from that what you will. I don't see the upside to taking this path.

The third path leads to a lifetime of misery. It is the most dangerous path in part because it is the easiest and shortest path. This path is turning all that anger inward. Just because it is the easiest path to take, that doesn't mean that it's the easiest one for you. In fact, if I had stayed on this path I wouldn't have survived, just like so many others that have died horrible deaths on this path. Too much pain is toxic, we can only survive so much of it. Too much physical pain will land you in the morgue.

Emotional pain may not put you in the ground but that doesn't mean that a part of you doesn't die. I've known people that lost a loved one and were like a husk of their former selves. They may be walking around and breathing but they were dead on the inside. The shock of losing a loved one can steal any joy or pleasure that we could possibly feel. Shock is where most of us start our journey. The good thing is that, as we begin to heal, we start to come back to life. If we don't find an outlet for our pain it can, and likely will, consume us. This path is a nightmare.

To be honest, I only found one path that ever worked for me, and I tried them all. The only thing that ever helped me was to channel my pain into something positive. The fourth path is finding a purpose for your pain. Having an outlet for your pain means that you don't have to hold it all inside and also that you don't have to harm others when you let it out. Your purpose is not something that someone can choose for you, everyone must decide for themselves what outlet they choose for their pain. I've known many people that have done extravagant things to honor their loved ones and others that did more personal things like a memory garden or scrapbook. For some survivors it may be as simple as being kinder to those around them or changing their behavior in some other way. People may start organizations dedicated to a particular cause or volunteer at such an organization, it feels good to help others and

doing so in your loved one's memory seems like a fitting tribute. My wife and I are in the process of starting an organization but I don't want this to seem like some kind of infomercial, so I won't get into it. If you want to know, the contact information for our group will be listed in the "Resources" section at the end of this book along with everyone else.

Sometimes art is a good release, I know people that paint or sculpt beautiful things in memory of their loved one. I personally make mobiles and wind chimes. Michelle made beautiful crafts and making crafts in her memory made me feel closer to her somehow, even if mine aren't nearly as beautiful. My point is that it doesn't have to be one thing or another. Your outlet or purpose doesn't have to make sense to anyone else but you. It doesn't matter if someone else finds value in it or not, your healing should be valuable to you, even if it isn't to them.

Light in the darkness

This was the last entry in my grief journal. I don't know if I should've quit or not, but I did. It has helped me to make sense of my grief as I was trying to process things, but I don't feel that I need it so much at this point. To tell you the truth I'm sometimes kind of lazy about writing. I get so busy that it slips my mind. It used to be the only outlet I had, but once I found my

purpose, my purpose became my outlet. Working to fulfill what I see as my purpose is what brings me comfort, I firmly believe working on a purpose would help you as well.

Finding my purpose has made such a difference in my life. Like I said before, pain with a purpose is easier to bear. Something positive coming out of her death takes just a little bit of the sting out of her loss. If sharing my story helps save just one person, then at least something good has come from all the pain I had to re-live while writing it, let alone living it in the first place.

In conclusion

I guess that is about all I can think of at the moment, but I expect to keep learning and striving to stay on the right path. There will be more to my story, just like there will be more to yours. I hope my story has helped you feel less alone and showed you that it is possible to heal. Your life will never be what it was before the death of your loved one, but that doesn't mean that life can't be beautiful. One final reminder as I close. It is okay for you to be happy, it's what your loved one would want for you.

I want to remind you that I've never called this a 'self-help' book or claimed any special credentials or divine inspiration. It is simply the reflections of someone who has struggled through a hellish experience that you might be able to relate to. I would once again encourage you to tell your own story once you feel strong enough. Sharing mine has been almost like an exorcism, like drawing poison from a wound. I would also like to encourage you to check out the organizations listed as resources. I'm sure any one of them would love to hear from you.

I am going to wrap it up now. It is 11:58 p.m. on July 8, 2022. It is the tenth anniversary of her death for 2 more minutes. Somehow it seems right to finish this today so please forgive the abrupt ending. I wish you nothing but the best, peace and comfort on your journey.

God Bless,

Bob

Resources



Suicide Prevention Lifeline

For immediate crisis counseling, call 988 or 1-800-273-8255

suicidepreventionlifeline.org

Alliance of Hope

Online support groups

allianceofhope.com

TAPS - Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors

Founded for Military Suicide Loss 1-800-859-TAPS (8277)

taps.org

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP)

1-800-273-8255

Text TALK to 741741

afsp.org

National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH)

nihm.nih.gov



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