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Finding Your Way after the Suicide of Someone You Love
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A Thousand Whys

I look into the Father's eyes
And wrestle with a thousand whys
Why this? Why now? Why him, not I?
The hurt, the rage, unbridled pain
Erupting from my soul, again.
If that's the way it's going to be
Then build Your Kingdom without me.

But then, again, where could I go
To hear a word of hope, and know
The promise that beyond the pain
The ballad has a glad refrain?
But what for now? And how can one
Still vocalize "Thy will be done"?

And soon I hear a song begin,
Celestial, but from deep within,
A new yet ancient melody
Of joy *and* pain, disharmony.
Or do the strains combine somehow,
A lovely paradox of sound?

—DAVID B. BIEBEL¹

Why? Why? Why?

What do you mean, she's dead?

The words echoed through the chasms of my quickly numbing mind, but I (Sue) couldn't make them come out of my mouth as I struggled to make sense of what the woman on the phone was saying.

How can you know she's dead when you aren't even here?

We had called 911 because we couldn't get nineteen-year-old Shannon to wake up. Steve, her brother, was trying to do CPR. It was all very strange. She had a smile on her face. Her body was warm. But her color was wrong, very wrong.

She's my daughter. She can't be dead. She can't be dead.

"Hello," the voice said. "Are you still there?"

"Yes," I mumbled.

"A team is on the way, ma'am. But let me ask again. Can you find a pulse?"

I looked at Steve. He shook his head, with tears in his eyes. "No. We can't."

"Then the girl is dead," the voice said again. "There's nothing you can do."

How can you pronounce her dead as calmly and callously as you might announce the time or the weather? I wondered. My voice said, "Thank you," my hand hung up the phone, and part of me disconnected from the rest of myself.

By the time the medical personnel arrived, I felt like I was hovering somewhere near the ceiling, a spectator at some kind of macabre dramatic performance in which my intuition said I had a lead part, only I didn't know the script. *What are all these people doing here?* I wondered. *Why does the phone keep ringing? Why is everyone so sad . . . especially Steve?*

And Shannon, my dear, beautiful Shannon.

I watched as they wrapped her up and whisked her away, without even giving me a chance to say goodbye. Didn't they know that I needed to touch her, to look at her, to remember her, to say goodbye?

And my mind cried out: *Who could have done such a horrible thing to her— five days before Christmas? Why, we haven't finished decorating the tree. And the shopping isn't done. I haven't bought Shannon her special ornament yet. This is just a bad dream, and I'm going to wake up soon.*

"Ma'am, excuse me," a policeman's voice interrupted my nightmare. "We found these by her bed."

He showed me all the empty bottles—Shannon had taken all the prescription medication in the house, plus a half bottle of aspirin—and that was when it finally dawned on me that Shannon had done this horrible thing . . . to herself.

Many Questions, Few Answers

But why? What could have been so painful for her that death seemed better than life?

My last words to Shannon the night before had been harsh and unkind. She had come in late from a date with her boyfriend and was making a lot of noise, which woke me up. "Can you please keep the noise down?" I had yelled. "I'm trying to sleep."

And her last words to me were, "It's okay, Mom. It will be all right now."

Of course, I hadn't known what she was thinking. But for months afterward, I imagined myself responsible, somehow, for her death.

Steve and I both wondered for a long time, since we were both in the house when she took the pills, *Why didn't we hear her? Why didn't we know? Why didn't God alert us in some way to what was about to happen?*

The last question was perhaps harder than the others, even though none of the questions had answers. After all, we were believers—all three of us. Surely a good God wouldn't allow such a thing to happen. How could he? Children don't die before their parents; it's not right. Didn't he know that Shannon was to graduate from college, get married, give me grandchildren, and bury me at a ripe old age? This was senseless. *You knew, God, before time began that this*

was going to happen. Why her? Why us? Why me? Why did you give me this child, only to take her away?

All day and into the night, people came in and went. My boss drove all the way from Palm Springs straight to my house (near San Diego) when he heard the news. He had loved Shannon like a daughter and was devastated. I felt loved and cared for by so many people who came and tried to make sense out of something so senseless. I was numb, in shock, and just let people take care of me. I needed to talk and appreciated those who just listened. I ignored the ones who didn't know what to say or who tried to comfort me with comments like, "She's with the Lord; it must have been God's will," "Thank God you still have Steve because he will really need you now," and, "God works all things together for good."

I wanted to scream back, "This is not God's will, and there is nothing good about this." The words lay formless in my mouth.

At one point my pastor said, as gently as he could, that we needed to think about funeral arrangements. *Oh no. No funeral arrangements, because if I make funeral arrangements, it must mean she is really dead, and, God, if I go to sleep and wake up, you will make everything all right, won't you? I mean, if I'm really good, you will make this story end the way I want it to, right?*

I wanted to die. I couldn't imagine feeling any more pain than I was already feeling. "All of you leave and just let me go to sleep and not wake up" was what I wanted to say. Others must have known this, because I was not left alone. Someone was with me around the clock for the next four days, taking care of my every need—except for my most desperate need: to have my broken world put back together again.

And the biggest heartbreak of all was to see the agony on my son's face and not be able to fix it. I was a mother, a lousy, horrible mother, with one child who had taken her own life and another in so much pain that I feared he might follow his sister, and there was *nothing* I could do about any of it. *What kind of mother would let these things happen to her children?*

I hoped that if I could just go to sleep that night, the demons would leave me alone, and just maybe, a merciful God would put everything back together the way it was. I was wrong. There was no peace with sleep. The demons haunted my dreams.

Implosion

I awoke the next morning feeling like I had been hit with a wrecking ball, convinced that I could not survive this. Someone had said the day before that time would heal this. Time? Didn't they know that *nothing* could heal this? I couldn't imagine surviving the next second, much less the next hour or the next day.

My pastor called to say that my ex-husband had started making arrangements for the funeral and that I needed to go to the funeral home to go over the details. *How was he, the father of my children, able to do this?* I wondered. *What special ability enabled him to do this again in the wake of the loss of his stepdaughter only months before?*

So I gathered up Shannon's favorite ring, her favorite outfit, and a few items that would be placed in her casket with her. I was so grateful that I didn't have to make any other decisions and that others had made the important ones for me.

The funeral would be on Monday afternoon, December 23, for family and a few close friends. My task was to plan a memorial service for that evening, which would be open to all those who knew her and us. Oh, this was something I could do all right, because I'm a planner. I just knew that if I kicked into high gear I could cover the agony I was feeling by planning a memorial service that would be remembered by all.

On Sunday morning, a dear friend took me out for breakfast at a lovely seaside restaurant in La Jolla. There was no way I could attend church and hear the announcement of her death. I couldn't cope with that or deal with the people afterward. I don't remember anything about that breakfast except that I couldn't bear to eat the food that was placed in front of me. For two days, I had walked and talked in a zombie-like trance, and day three was no different.

Monday threatened rain—weather to match the storm raging in my heart. My parents arrived, and once again, I went over all the details. *Would the telling never end?* We talked about Shannon, remembering things about her life, some long forgotten. Strangely, I found talking about her and hearing others share their memories of her very comforting. It kept her alive, if only in our hearts.

Before the funeral, I spent a couple of hours with my pastor and his wife, planning the memorial service. Some of Shannon's friends from church that

she had grown up with planned to sing Michael W. Smith's song "Friends," from the musical they had performed when they were all in high school. Shannon had had a lead part in the musical. I planned to talk about Shannon and asked some of her closest friends to do that also. Others planned to share their memories during an open time of sharing. I had selected music that I knew she and others liked. Various families in the church were providing food for out-of-town guests. It was a well-thought-out service, but one I really didn't want to attend.

More than three hundred people attended the memorial service that evening. Some had traveled great distances to be there. I so appreciated their thoughtfulness. I remember thinking: *How did they all know about this? How did they find out?*

I survived the funeral and the memorial service as if in a trance. Except for the grace of God and the support of some very dear friends, I could not have endured it.

My family stayed to be with Steve and me through Christmas. We somehow managed to open the gifts under the tree, though each gift from Shannon brought more tears.

Friends came by, bringing what comfort and help they could. But nothing eased the horrible ache in my heart for a long, long time.

Survivors

A survivor of suicide is anyone who has been affected by the loss of someone to suicide—parent, spouse, child, sibling, or friend. "It's an exclusive club I joined without wanting to," one survivor told us. "But I passed the initiation, so I guess I'm a member."

Following a loved one's suicide, many questions haunt the survivors, the most common of which start with why, such as: Why did my loved one choose death over life? Why didn't I see it coming? Similar questions are common to other losses, as expressed by Dave's poem "A Thousand Whys," written after his three-year-old son died from an undiagnosed illness. When a loved one's death was self-inflicted, however, some of the questions that linger the longest relate to the one who has died.

I (Sue) asked the why question over and over in the days, weeks, and months following Shannon's death: Why would a beautiful, intelligent, well-liked young woman take her own life? Those of us who were closest to her discussed this endlessly, trying to come up with answers. While there didn't appear to be one specific predisposing factor, except that she had been severely depressed, which led to hopelessness and despair, just talking about it helped each of us to deal with her death, and ultimately to heal. As her brother, Steve, told me after her death, she had lost all hope and her will to live.

While some survivors can answer the why questions with some certainty, many cannot. For who really knows what goes on in the minds of those who end their pain in this way? For some of them, it may be family issues, financial problems, difficulties in school or work, relationship issues, gender-identity issues, addictive behaviors, or physical disabilities, all of which may be intensified by depression and/or other mental or emotional disorders. As many survivors have told us, they needed to talk through the why questions with trusted others in the early stages after the loss.

Many survivors eventually come to a point in their healing when the why questions become less important and "Where do we go from here?" becomes the focus. Linda Flatt, who lost her twenty-five-year-old son to suicide, wrote, "The only person (except for God) with the answers to my questions is unavailable to hear them. And it occurs to me that he might not know the answers himself." She added that after so many years, perhaps it was time to stop asking the questions, realizing that she really didn't want answers as much as she wanted a chance to challenge the answers and to change the outcome.²

Over time, the questions change from inquiries that begin with "why" to questions that begin with "what," "who," and "how." Ultimately your questions may begin to focus on how your experience may be able to help others: "What do you want me to do with what I've learned, God?" or "Who needs a word of hope today?" or "How can I best walk alongside that hurting person I met the other day?" This change takes awhile. It may take a long while. Though you may feel your progress is slow, it's best to remember that healing from a loss like yours is an inside-out process, overseen by the ultimate heart-mender, God.

FINDING YOUR WAY

What to Expect during the First Few Days

Note: If you've already survived this period, we trust it will encourage you to know that your emotions and reactions were normal.

You will experience shock. Emotional numbness is a normal reaction to trauma, the mind and body's way of protecting you from the full force of the trauma. People in shock feel like they are in a fog, disconnected from themselves and the world around them—as if they're in a trance or having a bad dream.

People in shock should delay making decisions that will have lifelong consequences, such as liquidating or giving away assets, as these matters will look different in time.

You will experience severe emotional and/or physical reactions. You may experience anxiety, anger, confusion, flashbacks, fear, chest pains, breathing problems, sleep disturbances, and other disturbances in your normal day-to-day functioning. Such reactions are common after a loved one's suicide but may be intensified depending on the circumstances surrounding the death, such as witnessing the suicide or finding the body.

Tell a close friend or counselor about your symptoms. Seek qualified medical assistance, as there are good medications that can help you without causing long-term dependence.

You will have to deal with the police, medical professionals, the coroner, and others who must be involved after a suicide. Some of these professionals have had training in dealing with suicide and its survivors; many have not. Some may seem insensitive and less than helpful, but it is good to remember that their first responsibility is to deal with the suicide on a factual basis. The police will sometimes be accompanied by a crisis counselor,

whose job is to help you deal with the immediate trauma and to give you resources that will help you as you grieve.

Involve your lawyer, pastor, counselor, and other supporters in this process as much as possible since your ability to recall some details may be impaired, and others may be able to help you remember what's been discussed already and what hasn't.

The media may become involved, depending on the circumstances surrounding the death. This seems intrusive, and it may create internal conflict or conflict with others whose opinions about how to handle the media may differ from yours.

Remember that you have no obligation to speak to any member of the media. Some survivors have told us, however, that they were glad they consented to an interview or wrote something for publication, usually done in the hope of preventing other suicides.

You will have to make funeral arrangements if the one who died is a spouse, child, parent, or other person for whom you were responsible.

Ask a friend, pastor, counselor, or someone else whom you trust to help you make decisions about funeral arrangements. One issue you will have to decide is whether you want an open casket, closed casket, or no casket present at all—for example, when cremation or burial has already occurred and the focus of the service is solely to memorialize the one who has died. Research shows that of the survivors who held typical funerals, most of those who chose an open casket felt that this approach brought a sense of reality to what had happened and allowed loved ones to say a final goodbye. In cases of gunshot wounds or other disfiguring methods of suicide, however, a closed casket certainly makes sense.

When making funeral arrangements, the advice of trusted friends can help you avoid choosing options (caskets and other

details related to the funeral) that you can't really afford. While your feeling of responsibility for what happened might skew your judgment, consulting with others will bolster your confidence, looking back, that you made the best decisions you could make at the time.

You will have to decide what to tell people about how your loved one died. Survivors who chose to be open about the circumstances surrounding their loved one's death were glad (in retrospect) that they were. Their openness allowed others to minister to them in helpful and appropriate ways. It also helped the survivors in their grieving and healing process to be able to speak truthfully about what happened.

You will find that some people will allow you to talk openly about the suicide of your loved one and will respond in a supportive way, which increases your ability to comfortably share the circumstances surrounding the death.

Others, however, even close friends, will not be able to deal with any aspect of the situation and won't want to let you talk about it, thus piling pain on top of pain. You have to learn who is safe and who isn't, who you can talk to and who won't listen. In any event, talking about it is an important part of healing, and we strongly recommend finding someone who will let you honestly express what you are feeling.

The truth about your loved one's suicide will most likely become known. All the energy and anxiety that a cover-up would require would be better invested in pursuing your own healing.

It may be difficult to accept others' help, perhaps because you want to be "strong," you desire privacy, or you're already depleted and don't want to feel obligated to repay the kindness of others later.

Let others do those "have to" things, such as preparing meals, running errands, or canceling appointments. Let others

take care of you in nurturing and comforting ways. It's okay to talk about the loss and to cry until you don't think you can cry anymore. Good friends who love you will understand, and they will not expect their kindness to be repaid.

You will be strongly tempted to try to escape the pain or to dull it in some way. It might start with something as innocuous as a glass of wine to calm your nerves or help you relax. But soon you'll need more and more wine, or even harder stuff, to achieve the same result. This is how addiction begins.

You may even wish you could die to end the pain or to go and be with the one who has died.

If you find yourself longing to escape, tell someone. Start with your physician and/or your counselor, both of whom will understand that these longings are common and are likely symptoms of depression, for which excellent treatments are available. If you had a broken leg, you wouldn't feel guilty accepting medical care. Since you have a broken heart, you need not feel guilty seeking medical, psychological, and spiritual help. By asking for help, you are acknowledging your pain and taking the first steps toward healing.