



The Face of Suicide

The face above is of my son, Scott. What I see in his face is intense sadness, despair, hopelessness and loneliness. This photo was taken 2 years and 3 months before he died by suicide. He had suffered with anxiety, depression and alcoholism. But only after his death did I understand the true meaning of the words sadness and despair. They are no longer merely words to me; they are the very real feelings of having your heart shattered into a million pieces and shards of glass piercing your soul.

His was the second suicide in my family I have survived. My brother died by suicide 12 years prior to Scott's. His story mirrors my son's in many ways. I feel as though my experiences qualify me to educate people about suicide.

In the years before Scott died, we rode the roller coaster of his anxiety, depression, and resulting alcoholism. There were the highs of finding a medication that gave him some relief from his depression. Other highs included Scott becoming sober, falling in love and developing a healthy lifestyle of yoga and meditation. The deep valley was fear, where we constantly held our breath wondering if he would fall again and never be able to climb out.

The day he died, he had lost all hope for a normal life. Why am I telling you this? Because my son did not take his life lightly. He suffered, and there was very little we could do to help him. The illness that affected the chemistry of his brain was no less real than one that affects the other parts of one's body. But somehow if you suffer from cancer or heart disease or any other physical illness, our community is

supportive and rallies around you. I have found that some people judge those with mental illness as being weak or lacking in willpower, and treat them with condemnation. My son fought hard. He was not weak or lacking in willpower. He had obtained his PhD in Wildlife Biology in half the time as most. That was no small feat.

The following quote is from Rev. Warren Stevens, who spoke at a young man's funeral who had died by suicide. His poignant words express this tragic form of death and the mental state of one who dies this way. It is as if he knew my son intimately and is speaking directly to me.

"Our friend died on his own battlefield. He was killed in action fighting a civil war. He fought against adversaries that were as real to him as his casket is real to us. They were powerful adversaries. They took a toll of all his energies and endurance. They exhausted the vestiges of his courage and strength. At last, these adversaries overwhelmed him. And it appeared that he lost the war. But did he? I see a host of victories that he has won!

For one thing - he has our admiration - because even if he lost the war, we give him credit for his bravery on the battlefield. And we give credit for the courage and pride, and hope that he used his weapons as long as he could. We shall remember not his death but his daily victories gained through his kindness and thoughtfulness, through his love for family and friends, for animals and books and music, for all things beautiful, lovely and honorable. We shall remember the many days that he was victorious over overwhelming odds. We shall remember not the years we thought he had left, but the intensity with which he lived the years he had!"

This is not the normal tone when someone speaks of suicide; rather it is often loaded with shame, stigma and judgement. The language we use when someone dies by suicide is tainted. I often hear the words they "committed" suicide when someone dies by suicide. The word "committed" still slips into my vocabulary because it is so ingrained in our vernacular. Saying someone committed suicide is inaccurate, insensitive and outdated and takes us back to the days when suicide was treated as a criminal act. Laws and doctrines have changed but our attitudes and language have not. We don't say when someone dies of cancer they committed cancer. If someone's chest pain goes untreated and they die, we don't say they committed heart disease. Then why do we say when someone succumbs to a mental health disease that they committed a criminal act? They did not choose to have this disease any more than one chooses to have a heart attack. Medicine and psychiatry view suicide as a public health issue - isn't it time we do, too? We need to be able to say the word "suicide" as openly as we do "cancer." We need to be able to talk about depression as readily as we do the flu.

Suicide is not about morals. Suicide is not about being selfish, either. Suicide happens out of desperation and when all hope that it will end has been eroded. That doesn't necessarily mean they want to die, but rather that they want to be released from their pain. I have heard it said that suicide happens when the pain of living is greater than the fear of dying. That concept haunts me when I realize how much my son suffered before arriving at his final decision. He felt he was a burden and had no way out of his black hole.

So the face of suicide for me is my handsome 34 year old son, Scott. He was married, had a PhD, was a published author, was a certified Yoga instructor, and he loved nature and all things wild. He was a husband, a son, a grandson, and a cousin to many. He was kind, he was loving, and he is with me every day. The face of suicide is my 39 year old brother, Beat. He was also handsome and a father to a sweet little girl. He was smart, he loved animals. They were both troubled, perhaps too sensitive for this world. Their lives should not be devalued because of the way they died. They should be honored and remembered for the final personal battle they fought and lost.

Heidi Crosbie - In remembrance of my beloved son, Scott Crosbie 8/29/78 – 12/2/12, and my baby brother Beat Jenni 5/21/63 – 10/17/2002.