

The Compassionate Friends, National Gathering 2016

'Loss and a journey of the heart' by David Mosse

I am honoured to be invited to speak here at this very special gathering; a gathering to which we have all come bearing the treasure of love and of grief, for the children who will always be a part of us.

There are so many different experiences of pain and loss, and we are gathered here knowing, learning, or perhaps being surprised by, the power of sharing with others as a force for strength and healing.

I stand before you now as a father grieving his dearly, dearly loved son; but also as a survivor of a terrible trauma. First, I will talk about the shock and confusion of loss; second, about the journey of bereavement; and third, about sources of strength, especially the fellowship of the bereaved.

Loss and its pain

Six years ago I lost my 23-year old son Jacob –Jake -- to suicide. He was a postgraduate student at the Manchester Business School. He'd just achieved a first class degree in Politics, Philosophy and Economics (PPE). He was talented, ambitious, the most admired among his friends... I know that I am not alone in this room to bear the burden of this terrible bereavement, and that some of you have the indescribable pain and confusion of recent bereavement. My heart goes out to you.

Like so many young men who die by suicide, Jake had no known history of mental health problems. The time from when he first told me he had been to see his GP and was taking anti-depression medication to his death was just 5 weeks. Jake suffered a grave depressive illness that was inadequately diagnosed. He was unable to get the help that he needed, unable, in fact, to think of his crisis as a treatable condition; indeed he did everything in his power to avoid a stigmatizing diagnosis.

Neither I nor any of his closest of friends, nor his brother who was so dear to him, could have imagined that this loving, talented young man would contemplate his own death. Jake is not with us to explain why he felt there was no other choice available to him (when we can see so many); and even now his suicide has an unreality about it.

Those here who've experienced this terrible bereavement will understand what I mean when I say that for me, one reality ended that day; and another reality began. Suicide tore through and ruptured the story of my life and that of my family, as it has for so many. The time before his death is another continent.

For a moment, I imagined that I experienced a shadow of the pain that made Jake himself think of oblivion.

Like others, I not only face the deep sadness of the loss of my darling son, but have a second — sometimes overpowering — grief for the manner in which he died: his suicide. Out of the trauma and confusion of suicide comes the repeated question, *why?* I do not know anyone who has been bereaved by suicide for whom this is not an urgent, overwhelming -- and, we discover, ultimately unanswerable -- question.

How could this have happened? Why was he not stopped? We may ask whether we truly knew the person who is gone? How could distress so deep as to lead to suicide be invisible? We look back painfully to try to name the 'warning signs' that hindsight offers, we ruminate on the 'if onlys'.

Suicide leaves us unbearably powerless.

But there are no reliable signs of impending suicide; every suicide comes as a shock. Our loved one's wish to die is revealed as a terrible secret hidden from family and friends, perhaps by extraordinary effort, itself contributing to suicidal exhaustion. Nothing is more haunting than the later realization that the person we so loved had already disengaged from the world of the living.

If we are not careful, as we strain to explain, suicide can colour the memory of those we love, robbing us of their past as well as their future. It seeps into and taints our memories, as we ask of each childhood photograph, was there something unknown behind that face.

Like others who grieve, I've begun a life-long search for understanding.

I've learned about the distorting mental processes of severe depression; the fragility of male strength (over three-quarters of suicides are male, and suicide is the most common cause of death under 30); the dangers of perfectionism, or self-worth conditional on achievements; the perils of isolation, entrapment, and fear of humiliation.

I've learned that humans are moved to self-harm both by passing impulsiveness and by deeper drum beats of the psyche of which we are hardly aware. Those who die may be no better predictors of their suicide than anyone else.

I'm no expert, but I've also learned some things that suicide probably is not: it's not a choice as we normally understand choice, but comes out of a state of mind simply unable to think of alternatives; incapable of imagining a positive future, or reaching out to those most loved.

Suicide is probably not a wish to be dead or to abandon us. The end that those who are suicidal seek is not of life itself, but of torturous emotional pain, in many cases the result of severe depression. When I and others look back on the lead-up to the death we grieve, we see clear signs of the desire for life.

Bereavement's journey

For me and I think many bereaved by suicide, the compulsion to try to understand what happened is where grief begins. As I mentioned, we “have two griefs to resolve. We grieve for the fact that a loved one has died and we grieve the cause of that death ... the fact of suicide, and all suicide means and all society perceives it to mean.”¹ It is this that at first overwhelms.

With the struggle to make sense of the senseless comes an overpowering guilt and responsibility, and self-blame. I ask why did my child die; but also why was he not stopped; why did I not know or realise? An intense rumination on events was I think, for me, a way of trying -- with the mind -- to undo what cannot be undone; to recover control amid the experience of utter powerlessness, that the death of a child brings.

Sometimes we want to blame others – the health service, doctors, work colleagues, the university, a stigmatising society; this at least gives the possibility of action, of prevention for the sons of other parents.

Not uncommonly we (who lost children to suicide) feel judged, or perhaps we too readily project our self-judgement onto others: “what sort of a father, a family...?”

Great stigma surrounds suicide, born of the worst of fears and anxieties. In our society today suicide is unspeakable; we look for its causes in the ‘otherness’ of its victims and their circumstances. And that can be terribly isolating for those affected by suicide.

At first I felt utterly depleted by Jake’s suicide. Hardly wanting to live. For months I felt exposed, perhaps ashamed, awkward; I wanted to hide away; I could not face going to work or meeting colleagues. I imagined I was being avoided. Being a good father was such a central part of my self-identity, and my son had killed himself.

The experience of Jake’s sudden death was as if a 40-foot container had crashed through the roof of my house. There it was; huge, shattering, leaving no space for living. At first, I imagined someone would take it away, there would be cranes and lifting gear. But none came. There this dark mass remained, overwhelming everything. Over the months and years this great block has not shrunk, but I have learned to live with it; learned to move around it, to find space to live with what is now part of my house, my life. It shapes new habits. New living things have seeded at its base, and grow up its sides; I am surprised that it supports artwork on the edges of its dark mass.

Very soon after Jake’s suicide I sought help, beginning with one-to-one psychotherapy. When the container crashed into my house, I was fearful for the stability of its foundations. I imagined psycho-analytic therapy as working with a structural engineer to look into my frame, by beams and joists. This was for me necessary and very helpful.

Very soon, I also joined a survivors of bereavement by suicide (SOBS) support group in London. Everyone who comes to the group finds a freedom to talk openly, to risk honest but difficult questions such as ‘did I love him enough?’, and be understood in a way denied

¹ LaRita Archbald’s letter to the newly bereaved.

them in their everyday life, even (sometimes especially) within families, or in certain cultures. Grief is a burden that is often hidden, grief is close to our hearts, and we often have to choose carefully with whom it is shared.

The healing and strength from being with others bereaved by suicide is an important part of my journey. We are, after all, social beings and we live our emotional lives through relationships. From that comes the great pain of loss, but also the extraordinary power of being with others who understand.

Early on, those of us who have lost our child to suicide, simply need to know from others if it is possible to live after such a terrible thing. For me, contact with parents who had survived provided evidence that I needed that life could be lived when overwhelmed by pain. I came across LaRita Archibald's 'Letter to the newly bereaved'² and knew that I needed to talk to someone who could write such a letter. Over the following weeks, I spent hours on the phone to this wise woman living in Colorado whose son had killed himself 30 years ago.

When together with others bereaved by suicide, we are able to tell our story, we find witnesses to our tragedy, and recognition for our inner pain or guilt. And because we are at different points in grief's journey, and have different circumstances, we learn things from each other and from what we share. Maybe about the feelings of dread around anniversaries, or particular places, how we handle our child's belongings, the fears we may have of loss of the memory of our child's touch, their voice, their smell; which thoughts bring solace, and which self-torture.

I discovered another thing too. I found myself speaking as Jake's representative; saying what he could not say; talking about his courage, his bravery, standing up for him as his advocate.

We don't just learn about others' experience, we find new ways of thinking or expressing our own tragedy so that we can live with it. We lend or find narratives, shared stories, that are necessary to order the confusion, the pain of guilt, and as protection against being re-traumatised.

We come to see a pattern and realise ours is not a singularity but a *kind* of experience. In a survivors' group, my individual, subjective and fragmentary experience – perhaps a trauma that has no words – acquires language and social recognition.

Perhaps most important for me: through compassion for others whose experience I share, I learned to be kinder to myself, and blame myself less.

Hope – finding a future

A few final words about finding a future.

Suicide changes the bereaved. In different ways we are transformed by this tragedy. For many, knowing that the worst can happen also brings a new vigilance, a sensitivity and an

² http://heartbeatsurvivorsaftersuicide.org/docs/letter_to_newly_bereaved.doc

openness to others, an awareness of the fragility of life which is always lived with hidden layers.

Many I know have discovered a deep concern for others, in family, work and society. As a university professor I am alive in a new way to the emotional experience of my students and have a different level of concern. I have deeper compassion for those suffering mental illness. I pay attention to extreme suffering – of the homeless, the refugees, those struggling with addiction, those suffering discrimination, as well as the suicidal. I'm not saying that I'm a good person or a selfless person, but these are palpable effects of my son's suicide.

The loss of a child changes the scale of what is important. It daily brings the question of what it means to be human, to have life, to care for others; but also the mystery that we are to each other.

I've learned bitterly from suicide about the destructiveness of the human mind; but also that those who are intensely suicidal may be in that state for a short period of time; and many who have been pulled back from the edge are deeply grateful for the second chance they've been given.

If those who are suicidal don't want to die, but rather experience emotional pain beyond the threshold of what is tolerable, and see no means to rebuild selves that have fallen apart, and cannot ask for help, then we need to, and can, intervene to save lives. Engaging with this hope has for me been a way to give meaning to a loss that threatens to be unbearable.

I know that everyone here is on a different inner and outer journey, living with a child who is no longer alive; but also that whatever that journey is, it gains strength from intersecting with that of others, which is why I am so grateful to be here today.

Thank you.