

WALKING TOWARDS HOME

As we travel this faith journey we sense that even in the darkness we are walking home.
There is no light on our path save for the lamp of God's word.
But our feet seem to know the way.
We walk with hearts wide open until the evening's setting sun.
Turning at a familiar street we make our way to the Door.
Sensing the presence of someone we love who left too soon
we throw it open and behold our child,
now whole and complete, in the fullness of who he was created to be.
He opens wide his arms to welcome us home.

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We survivors of suicide may never arrive at a place where we can say, "It's all over." Grief has left a scar and taken on a life of its own. Deborah Morris Coryell, a grief counselor writes, "It has a rhythm. Sometimes it is present in its absence and sometimes it is absence that makes our grief present." Life goes on, but Ryan remains missing from our lives. Our task is to learn how to live with this permanent change, not just get over a temporary disruption.

Facing Ryan's death was possible only in small pieces. The jagged edges of this kind of learning seemed so hard, so cruel. In order to push through the darkness of death, my husband Gary and I worked to rebuild the bonds with our absent son. As we became accustomed to the pain, we began to frame Ryan's life into stories that satisfied our spirits and created gratitude to have had him for 24 years.

Through stories we keep him with us always. In our mind's eye, we see our five-year old, tow-headed, sweet baby boy afraid to go up to the counter at McDonald's and ask for a packet of catsup. We encouraged him to be brave.

He never liked to stay in the nursery at church, so we explained, "Ryan, it's only for one hour," and on his first day of kindergarten, when he cried and didn't want to leave his mom home alone, we promised he'd have fun. He didn't believe it, but at the end of the morning when school let out, he ran towards us calling, "Hi, Mom. Hi Dad. I had a great day!" He felt safe.

Closing our eyes we can still visualize him running and twirling around the park with his sister. They tumble to the ground giggling and hugging one another. The sibling bond was wrapped tightly around their hearts.

We cherish a memory from his elementary years when he built a tree house with his friend Ben. He borrowed a hammer and saw from his dad and bundled them together to hoist up

the giant hundred-year-old cottonwood nearby. Passersby heard the sounds of two would-be contractors giving orders, but interspersed with peals of laughter.

If we allow ourselves, we can hear his twenty-something man's voice discussing politics, religion, or cars. Ryan loved to talk cars. "I'm going to the auction on Saturday and hope to get a couple of cars to work on," he would say every few months. It gave him pleasure to take an old broken-down car, fix it up and make it new. It makes us proud to think of the many people he helped by working on their cars, putting in stereos or changing their oil. One of his journal entries says, "It makes me feel good to use my gifts to help others in the area I'm good in. I loved helping people." He struggled with not being able to help anyone the last year of his life.

Life is full of stories, simple ordinary stories that make up the essence of our days. But life is not just happy memories.

Shadows began to obscure the best parts of our son as an unknown illness was set in motion. An illness that now, I can see more clearly because my eyes are wide open. Slowly, seductively, it was stealing Ryan's self-confidence and reason. But, we insisted, "He'll grow out of it." We did know something was troubling him... were very aware that something was wrong. But, we hadn't recognized that mental illness was real a real illness, and so he suffered in silence....

The National Alliance on Mental Illness defines mental illnesses as: "Disorders of the brain that can often profoundly disrupt a person's thinking, feeling, mood, and ability to relate to others. Mental illnesses include such disorders as bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, major depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, anxiety disorders including Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and other severe and persistent mental illnesses."

Doctors said his illness was schizophrenia. But, even for trained mental health professionals a unified agreement on a diagnosis can be difficult. Our brains are not fixed, but fluid. Thoughts flow in and out, and at times we can all have abnormal thinking. Analyzing one's own thinking takes place all the time. But when one suffers under the influence of a powerful delusion this does not happen.

The hospital did the best they could to find a treatment for Ryan's overpowering delusion of going deaf. There was never any evidence of hearing loss. At first, the medications worked, and he entertained the idea that perhaps his brain was tricking him into believing a lie. When the medications were no longer effective, Ryan never allowed the doctors to try any others for fear they would make his ears worse.

He wrote in his journal, "The only reason I have been trying so hard to be normal again is for you guys. I know how much it hurts you to see me nonfunctional, so I tried for as long as I could. I so much wanted to be normal again, but it just couldn't happen. Every day I

looked at normal people like I used to be and I'd just break down. I can't be the person I was because I'm in so much torture every day. It will never be the way it was." And so he suffered, until it became too great to bear, and he chose to end his suffering by suicide one month before his 25th birthday.

My heart aches that I wasn't able to understand earlier. I now have the education and vocabulary to talk about an illness that should not remain hidden. Too many people suffer in silence, afraid or ashamed to talk about their experiences. Fear or denial keep them from acknowledging mental illness, which in turn, prevents us from seeking early treatment. Mental illness is not a character flaw or weakness. The silence surrounding it is akin to shame and blame. One stereotypical image that causes fear in society is that of a violent person with mental illness. But the truth is the percentage of people with mental illnesses who are violent is no greater than the percentage of people without them.

Other myths abound regarding the causes: family dysfunction, trauma, and bad parenting. No doubt having a mental illness will be exacerbated when these additional conditions are present. At this time scientists do not have a complete understanding of the causes, but they do know that the biological processes that make the brain work are changed when a person has a mental illness. Genetics and environment also play a part in that process. Brains can get sick just like any other part of the body.

*Telling this part of Ryan's story makes me sad.
But, it is not the end of the story.*

The circumstances surrounding Ryan's death seemed irrational and tragic, and my husband and I needed reassurance that God had been with Ryan and was with us. We pored over books, digging deep for answers because God seemed so far away. Searching is part of the honest work of grief...hard, excruciatingly painful and often confusing.

We had been thrust into an unknown land without many answers and came face to face with mystery. Mystery accepts that God is God and we are not. We believed that creation and human intelligence offered evidence for faith in God, but darkness had obscured God's face, and so we had to learn to cultivate hope in the spiritual realm behind the known creation. Too much had happened in our world that we didn't understand, that demanded more than physical answers alone. Slowly we have come to embrace that 'not knowing' is okay.

Humanity needs grace in the face of suicide and mental illness. Paul says in Romans 8, "For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord." For too long there has been the prevailing attitude in society, both secular and religious, that suicide was an unforgivable sin. But, through Paul's words we are filled with hope and renewal- suicide does not separate us from the love of God.

Jerry Bridges, a Christian author, says it is only from Scriptures applied to our hearts by the Holy Spirit that we can receive grace to trust God in adversity. He says further, paraphrasing J.I. Packer, God's providence is His constant care for and His absolute rule over all His creation for His own glory and the good of His people. God never pursues His glory at the expense of the good of His people, nor does He ever seek out our good at the expense of His glory. The entire world is sustained by the word of God. Nothing exists without Him. Nothing can live without His will.

So, for Gary and I, the question changed from, "How can we still trust in God?" to "How can we not trust in Him?" By faith, we relinquished our son into the hands of a loving Creator. It is the story of God's love expressed in Jesus Christ that allows us to do the hard work of moving through the pain to a place of healing. Faith and belief in heaven have become the containers to hold our grief. We choose to look to the future, to honor Ryan's story, and rest in faith and anticipation of the day when our hope will be made sight.

There are many things parents cannot control or protect their children from. I cannot change the fact that my son developed mental illness. I cannot change the fact that his response was to take his life. I can only choose not to waste his suffering. Mental illness will touch one in four of us at some point in our lives, and the earlier we are educated, the earlier treatment can begin; the more education, the more compassion society will have.

As a faith community, many churches have answered a call to develop support for those with mental illness and their families using NAMI FAITH NET's (www.nami.org/namifaith-net/) model. 1. Facilitate the development of a supportive faith environment for those with mental illness and their families, 2. Recognize the value of one's spirituality in the recovery process and the need for spiritual strength for the caretakers, 3. Educate clergy and faith communities concerning mental illness and 4. Encourage advocacy of the faith community to bring about hope and help for all those affected by mental illness. I applaud you!

I want to leave you with a few final thoughts. As long as there is life, there is hope of finding a place of stability for our loved ones, and even if that place is not found speedily and the search continues, we still have the outrageous hope that our loved ones and we ourselves are loved mightily by God. He is acquainted with suffering, will not forsake us, and gives us the strength to endure.

*Take up your cross and go the thorn way.
And if a sponge of vinegar be offered you on a spear,
Take that too, souls are made of endurance.
God knows.*

-Carl Sandburg