

I Still Believe

mental illness and suicide
in light of the Christian faith

Desiree Woodland

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Foreword

2 Corinthians 6:10 “. . . as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing . . .”

“Matt, you have to go your sister Desiree’s house right now,” my wife Renee’s voice quaked. “Renee, what’s wrong? What happened?” She choked out the words, “Your nephew Ryan took his life.” I ended the call and began the drive to her house on Indian Farm Lane; it was the longest twenty minute drive of my life.

The violent death of my nephew Ryan brought unimaginable grief to the Woodland family. Though time has changed the intensity of their grief, it is clear that in this lifetime it will linger. Yet, in the midst of Desiree’s sorrow there has been and there remains joy. And by *joy* I don’t mean the absence of sadness, or tears, or groaning. I don’t mean some type of cheap, frivolous, *praise God anyhow* type of cheerfulness that betrays reality. This joy is hard to describe but I believe you will see glimpses of it in this book. The title, “I Still Believe,” perhaps says it best. When people are chest deep in the temporal blessings that this life offers and say, “God is good,” I don’t think this impresses anyone. But when people suffer unbearable loss, when they are severely afflicted and still they say, “God is good, He remains my hope, I still believe,” it makes God look precious—more precious than all that we love in this world. My sister has made God look more precious in my sight.

In this quote from the *Screwtape Letters* by C. S. Lewis we hear the voice of the devilish imp Screwtape speaking about God and man’s relationship to Him in suffering, “He wants them to learn to walk and must therefore take away His hand, and if only the will to walk is really there He is pleased even with their stumbles. Do not be deceived Wormwood. Our cause is never more in danger, than when a human, no longer desiring, but intending, to do our Enemy’s will, looks round upon a universe from which every trace

Chapter One

SUICIDE

When a person says or thinks ‘I don’t want to live anymore’ he may actually be saying I am weary of dying every day. It is not life I am tired of, but death.

The day Ryan died, Monday May 1, 2006, began like a million other days. Getting ready for work, having coffee, reading my Bible, saying my prayers, and saying goodbye to my family were my regular routine. Since our daughter Michelle had left home many years before—and our son had moved back in—my family consisted of myself, my husband Gary and Ryan. Lately, a brief feeling of foreboding came over me each time I said goodbye to Ryan. There was an almost palpable sense of impending doom about the way he was not getting better. But summer vacation would be coming, and for a teacher, a bit more time to devote to life outside the classroom, so I made a mental note that I would talk to his doctor then. We mumbled our goodbyes as usual and as I rushed out the door, I wondered what Ryan would find to occupy his time.

Soon, my mind filled with thoughts of the day’s lessons. Teaching was rewarding, but demanded my full attention. So, after a busy day with students, I couldn’t wait to get to the gym for my work out. It was my way of unwinding before making dinner and grading papers. When I got home I threw my schoolbooks on the chair and sank into the couch. Bailey, one of our two dogs ran over and sat on my lap. I don’t remember if he seemed overly anxious or not. I noticed the phone blinking with a message—it was my husband asking me to call him at the hospital. His mom had gone for surgery earlier that day, but was still in the operating room six hours later.

“Don’t come to visit yet,” he explained. “They’ll call us when she gets out.” I immediately went to tell Ryan of the change of plans because he had agreed the day before to go with me to visit his grandmother in the hospital.

Walking outside towards the self-contained room we had recently built for him, I thought of our conversation from the day before. Surprisingly, he had offered to join me and my 6th grade class at a park for some hands-on medieval activities with the Society for Creative Anachronism. The society engages in activities that demonstrate life in the Middle Ages. I was delighted because since his diagnosis he had retreated into almost constant seclusion. It was rare that he went anywhere that might be too loud for his ears. He had been acting strangely since he became convinced he was losing his hearing.

I remembered arriving at the park where my students, filled with excitement, raced up to the car. “Mrs. Woodland, is this your son?” and then questions for Ryan tumbled out of their mouths. “How old are you?”, “Do you skateboard?” He nodded and the faintest hint of a smile crossed his face. I felt happy. Maybe this outing was a sign that he was going to get better. Maybe he would start interacting with the world again. I hoped.

I had given him a quick hug as we got out of the car, just before a sweet girl from my third period class grabbed my hand and pulled me towards a group dance lesson where people in medieval costume were ready to begin. “Ryan, would you like to join us?” He shook his head and said he’d just go sit down by one of the giant cottonwoods and take it in from a distance. Satisfied, I continued towards the melodic sounds of flutes and drums.

In my mind’s eye I still see him as he wandered across the park where another group of students were testing their abilities as knights. Dull metal swords clanked against hard leather shields. I remember being surprised that Ryan wanted to be so close to that kind of noise. But, no matter, it was a gift. I had no idea that it was the gift of spending his last day with me.

Rounding the corner to his room, I was shocked out of my reverie. What was wrong with Ryan? No, this cannot be. Primal sounds I did not recognize came from some deep place within me. I couldn’t catch my breath, my throat caught and I couldn’t seem to keep down the bitter taste of some dark unknown emotion, and yet I could not stop the sounds. Uncertain of what lay before me, my body quivered with raw fear. My mind rebelled—fighting to understand, my brain told me he had fallen. Is that a pipe? Maybe he fell on the pipe. Maybe that’s how he got the hole in his head. No, I don’t want to see this. This cannot be. But, there he was. Ryan stretched out on the threshold of his room, not moving. What to

do? Call 911, or call Gary . . . 911 busy, Oh God! What do I do? Take his pulse again—surely HE CAN'T BE DEAD! Nauseating waves of anguish threatened to strangle me as I frantically ran from his room, to the front yard, to the kitchen, unable to take in reality.

I could only see the upper part of him because he lay on the threshold and I could not enter his room. I am sure this saved me from the sickening results of a gun exploding at close range. Nothing seemed real; it could not be Ryan lying there, nor was I standing over him in this surreal slice of time. Not wanting to believe, but somehow knowing it was true. He was gone.

“Oh, my God, Gary, it’s Ryan, I think he’s dead. Ryan’s dead.” I barely heard his confused reply, “What did you say?” I screamed again, “Ryan is dead, Ryan is dead.” I repeated the same mangled conversation when I called my daughter and then my dad. This awful thing had to be a mistake. In recent months he had told me many times that he would never kill himself, so I allowed myself to pretend that any moment he would wake up. “Please wake up, Ryan.” I stared at my beautiful child’s crumpled form lifeless on the ground.

Within minutes of those phone calls neighbors and friends appeared at the door, questioning why an ambulance was in front of our house. They must have let themselves in because I was only aware that darkness had enveloped me and that the air that had become thick and suffocating.

“It was the illness,” my friend who understood mental illness boldly spoke to me through the numb reality. Seconds later my husband, parents, sisters and brother arrived. I hugged them all screaming, “Oh my God, oh my God, over and over.” It was a blur of medical examiners and paramedics. I told them, “He left us a note; I know he left us a note. Did you find the note?”

I watched as they wheeled his lifeless body out to the emergency vehicle with the clothes on his back, his wallet in his pants pocket, and the shattered glasses still on his face. They found a blue covered notebook with Ryan’s easily identifiable handwriting, but with words I did not want to accept.

I held the precious book that contained his last words and kissed it, clutching it to my heart willing him to come back. I tried to read the words which had been written with a steady, not erratic hand, but I could not. My brother, Matthew, continued reading. I listened to words that seemed too well thought out, too planned, too intentional.

“I am Ryan Woodland. Born June 2, 1981. An artist, musician, mechanic, wanna’be engineer, car and stereo fanatic, thinker, skater,

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