

The Wake of Suicide: A Synopsis

Franklin James Cook

My father, Joseph Hickman Cook, was among the millions of men in the 1940s and '50s who, after a stint in the military, went about their business getting a stable job, raising a family, and living in concert with the suburban values of owning a home, being a good neighbor, and following the rules.

In 1978, after 25 years of working on those tasks, that all ended for him when at the age of 49 he died by suicide. At the time, he was in the process of retiring medically from a career with the federal government. His physical health problem was not severe, but the transition to retirement triggered in him a major depressive episode intensified by paranoid delusions. He was plagued by seeing “evidence” everywhere that proved the government “knew” he had committed a crime. To (overly) simply answer the “why” question that is embedded in every instance of suicide, I would say this: If one takes the short view, he died because the depression that befell him was acute, horrible, and debilitating to the point where he actually lost his mind; and if one takes the long view, he died because he was a lifelong albeit highly functioning alcoholic who didn't effectively attend to his emotional health.

Whatever view one takes, he did not ever—during the entire course of his life—receive the help he needed for the problems that killed him, and that's a pity (it is also the answer to “Why?” that points not only to him as an individual but also to his community and our society).

Before he died, my mother, my three brothers, and I (who were young adults by then) had not a clue among us about the intricacies of mental illness and were bowled over by the severity and stubbornness of his condition. So—as our father and husband was being “pursued” by the FBI and refusing to come to the phone because it was “tapped”—we got the best medical advice we could, which wasn't much good at all, and tried to give him all of the love and understanding we could, but to no avail. His depression continuously and then precipitously worsened; four months after the depression began, he was admitted to a psychiatric hospital; two days after being admitted, he mortally wounded himself; and after 24 hours lying in a coma in intensive care, he was dead.

During the first dozen years after he died, I was living my life—as I had begun to do in my teenage years—as a drug addict; and although I'd like to tell that story, I am going to set it aside for now. In 1990, I got clean, a process that was propelled at least in part by my father's suicide (his death helped me *find my bottom*, to use the vernacular of addiction recovery). When I got clean, I was 36 and living in my mother's basement; had been divorced twice and estranged from my children; got by from paycheck to paycheck; and was pretty much just glad to be alive. Like my father, I was a highly functioning addict, so I had also accomplished a lot in those years, earning a master's degree, starting a career,

© 2014 Franklin James Cook. Reprinted by permission. First published in the *Grief after Suicide* blog at bit.ly/suicidegriefblog (contact franklin@personalgriefcoach.com). This story may be used without prior permission as long as (1) it is reproduced in its entirety and as is, including its title and author credit; (2) it is not used for commercial purposes or monetary gain; (3) immediately upon its publication, you send Franklin at the email address above access to a complete copy; and (4) this complete copyright notice and permissions instruction accompany the publication.

working toward repairing relations with my children, and almost always having a job and being able to “look good” on the outside.

I spent the early '90s “working on my issues” (which is the phrase we use to describe trying to fix whatever it is we believe is wrong with what makes us tick), and prominent among them was that I felt as angry with my father and as guilty about his suicide as I did the day he died. It is difficult for me to explain what I did to heal all that haunted me and tortured me about his act of self-destruction, but many things definitely helped me: My family's and friends' love helped me, as did counseling, compassion for my father, meditating, learning about suicide and mental illness, helping others, taking long walks, sitting with my pain instead of running from it, and not giving up—but no single thing by itself was more than a piece of the puzzle. All of it was necessary, and the explanation I would give for being where I am today is that I traversed enough ground to get here, step by step: I grieved by trial-and-error, and my healing turned out to be a holistic experience that I couldn't have caused using a linear strategy. Even at this moment, the path is unfolding as I travel it.

I could have written all of the above 15 years ago to describe my transformation from a person who wasn't surviving to a person who was—but that is only part of the story. My life has been transformed yet again since then, a process that began during a very dark and painful time for me. In the summer of 1999, I suffered from a major depressive episode of my own. During an eight-month period, I lost 25 pounds, woke up nightly in the wee hours steeped in anxiety, and could not shake almost constant suicidal thinking (though I did not want to kill myself). I was unspeakably frightened because my suicidal thoughts felt beyond my control, and I worried that I might lose my mind as my father had. Fortunately, I was able to get treatment for my depression and to join a peer-led suicide grief support group, and in the brief span of barely a year, my recovery and healing were renewed—and I was even led to a new career.

I began working as a volunteer in community-based suicide prevention and grief support in late 1999, and since shortly after that, I have been a full-time professional in the field. Today, I work with people bereaved by all means of traumatic loss, I lead an initiative addressing men's suicide prevention, and I collaborate with others who are taking action to help people cope with the pain and suffering that leads to suicide or follows it. I share meaningful time with hundreds of survivors, and although I will always be saddened by the reason we are all in this together, I do not think in terms of what should or shouldn't have been. My father is dead, he died horrifically, and his death nearly shattered his loved ones in its wake—and I cannot change that. Even so, his death helped me know that I could change my own life, and compelled me to do so. I was blessed to be able to see the need for deep change in my life, and I am blessed every day to have a chance to keep finding my way from here to there. My father lives on for me in the reality of those blessings.

© 2014 Franklin James Cook. Reprinted by permission. First published in the *Grief after Suicide* blog at bit.ly/suicidегriefblog (contact franklin@personalgriefcoach.com). This story may be used without prior permission as long as (1) it is reproduced in its entirety and as is, including its title and author credit; (2) it is not used for commercial purposes or monetary gain; (3) immediately upon its publication, you send Franklin at the email address above access to a complete copy; and (4) this complete copyright notice and permissions instruction accompany the publication.