

Emerging by Jennifer Karey

Phone calls at three a.m. rarely bring good news. One call shattered my world and changed my life forever. Reality blurred. My emotions took a violent grip on my mind, body, and ultimately my spirit. I began my sophomore year of high school standing at the very edge of my reality. I saw my life crumble around me and seemed to plummet into a dark abyss of disbelief. Suicide. After only 35 short years of life, my Aunt Sue took her own life. My rational, upper-middle class reality vanished. The idea that everything happens for a reason, and that things always had an answer no longer held true. All the truths, all the certainty, all the normality, all the security embellished in my family and my reality were destroyed. Things like this aren't supposed to happen to me. This happens to other people. My emotions rushed through me as though on a race track, each trying to dominate. Yet, ultimately they were on a collision course. They exploded and blurred into a fiery inferno. Why did this happen? How am I supposed to feel now? How do I begin to piece together and construct a new reality? All I had were questions, and the world I had searched for answers in so many times before no longer existed for me. My search for answers led me inward as I was forced to construct a new reality.

"Oh my God, oh my God," the words rang through my ears and seemed to shake my very soul. After an already sleepless night, I was jolted from bed by Dad's horrified cry. The sheer terror that seemed to strangle his words seemed to pierce my heart with each syllable. Even from three rooms away, it echoed. A small beam of light crept under my door as the light in my parents' room was turned on. Even as I reached to open my door and investigate the commotion, I felt a heavy horror fall over me. Something was terribly wrong, and my heart raced as my sweaty palm turned the door knob. The scene in my parents' room was one I had never seen before. The expressions, the actions, were foreign and frightening. They both sat erect in their bed. Mom leaned close to Dad and held his arm tight, waiting herself to hear the terrible news. Dad was a ghostly white and his always steady hand was shaking as a few words found their way through his trembling lips and into the receiver. Then he said it: "My sister committed suicide."

The first phase of grief is one filled with shock and numbness. Family members find it difficult to believe the death; they feel stunned and numb. This is a very common feeling among those who are impacted by the self-destruction of a loved one. (*Cancer*)

The words seemed to pull me to the floor as though weights had just been thrown upon me. The surroundings vanished. The room, my parents, everything disappeared. There was no more sound. The world spun around me like some sort of hellish carnival ride. I crumbled. The words wrapped around my brain and squeezed out all other thoughts. My emotions could not be labeled. I didn't know what I felt. My body began to shake uncontrollably, and the tears ran down my cheeks. I couldn't speak. It felt as though I couldn't breathe. The sound that I tried to make couldn't be heard. I was drowning. I was being sucked down beneath the surface, unable to reach the air.

Hours passed and the sun began to creep out from behind the tall pine trees in our backyard. A warm August breeze filtered in through the patio door and seemed to dance around me as I sat curled in the big red easy-chair in the living room. The tears still poured out of me, but I did not know from where. After hours of crying I no longer felt their wetness on my face.

I no longer felt my body tremble. I felt dry inside; there was nothing within me. I was numb. The only sensation I could describe was my lack of feeling. I sat dazed as the events of earlier that morning played out in my head.

The bereaved often experience a sense of yearning and searching during the second phase of grief. Survivors experience separation anxiety and cannot accept the reality of the loss. They try to find and bring back the lost person and feel ongoing frustration and disappointment when this is not possible. (*Cancer*)

She wasn't gone. She couldn't be gone. The days often were a blur. The image of my father's face, his trembling hand, played over and over again in my mind. Yet, nothing seemed true. Nothing sank in. She wasn't gone; she couldn't be.

A short week later, Dad returned home from visiting with his parents and taking care of Sue's estate. He returned this time, not on a plane, but in a car. He had driven all the way from Arizona in the red 1989 Nissan Pathfinder Sue had left him. Piled on the backseat were boxes filled with things from her home. He came into the house silent. Not a word was spoken until we were all seated in the living room. My parents sat on the large burgundy couch while my brother and I sat on the floor facing them with our backs against the wall. The support that the wall provided would soon be needed as my dad revealed the horrid details of how Sue chose to end her life. I was sick to my stomach. I left the room.

For weeks the boxes sat untouched on my floor. Her clothes, her shoes, her CDs, her things lay piled. The lacey white cardigan that she wore on her wedding day lay neatly folded at the top of one box. Her life was in those boxes. They were hers, but now I was somehow expected to take full ownership of them. As I sat there on my bed staring down at the cardigan, it sank in. She was gone.

The third phase of grief involves the individuals affected by the death to feel a sense of disorganization and despair. Family members feel depressed and find it difficult to plan for the future. They are easily distracted and have difficulty concentrating and focusing. (*Cancer*)

School was scheduled to start in a few days, though I hadn't noticed. I was still pondering, still searching for answers that it seemed no one could provide. The questions pounded in my head, begging to be answered. I was bombarded with one thought over and over. We were so similar. I realized that just as I was now expected to take ownership of her belongings, I had taken ownership of many of her qualities long before without ever realizing it. Ever since I was very young, I was told how much we were alike. I had taken on her personality, her perspective, her goals; everything that defined her was either part of me or something that I wanted attributed to me. Aspects of her were imbedded in my soul and my spirit. She was exactly what I wanted to be. She was the successful doctor that I wanted to be. She had a beautiful house built on the side of a mountain with a breathtaking view that I wanted to have. She had the money-making job that I wanted to possess. She had everything that I wanted to characterize myself as having. She was me. I was her. Our minds seemed fused together as one, each wanting the same things, each aspiring to be the same person. Why would she end it, why would she leave behind not only her family and friends, but everything she had worked so hard for? Why would I feel the need to end it? I couldn't. I couldn't conceive of it. Everything was right, everything was perfect. Or was it?

In the case of suicide, it has been argued that finding meaning in the loss is extremely difficult. It appears that the reasons for the suicide to occur were often retrospectively quite clearly detected by the bereaved. Two historical backgrounds of suicide were prevalent in these realizations. The first was extreme psychological suffering with a long history of severe depression. The second was the prospect or presence of extreme physical suffering. (Canetto and Lester 23-24)

She was happy and healthy. She had the kind of personality that everyone was drawn to and entranced by. She had large sparkly brown eyes that looked like deep pools of melting chocolate. Her smile was captivating. Her intoxicating laugh and enthralling sincerity and concern were unmatched. Her astuteness in her field was astounding, and her presence could not be ignored. She was always the optimist, finding the bright side of almost anything. She was me. I was her. We shared the same unusual height, the same thick brown hair, and the same thin frame. We shared all of these features, and family members were always reinforcing that fact. What happened? What changed her perception? Why couldn't she find the bright side this time? I couldn't understand. There must have been some part of her life that was not so complete, that was not so perfect. There had to have been something that money and success could not provide her, and which ultimately she could not live without. If that was true, what was that one thing?

The final phase of grief sends the bereaved on a search for organization. Family members try to reorganize their lives, often reflecting upon the suicide and making changes within their own lives in order to better cope. (*Cancer*)

I began to shift my attention away from the suicide itself and to reassess my own life. We were so similar, in every way. I realized that I did not want to feel what she felt. I did not want to ultimately find myself embracing death as a method of filling a vacant place deep within me. I was struck by what I held important and what is viewed as being the "perfect life." The success, the job, the house, the money, the car, everything that people work so hard to attain throughout their lives, is not what is important. It was not enough. It wasn't what I truly wanted at all.

Ever since I can remember, I have been motivated to work hard and get top grades. That was what was important. Goals that I set for myself depended upon getting those top grades. Without them, I wouldn't be accepted to the college of my choice, I wouldn't get into medical school, and I wouldn't be able to make my dream job a reality. I wouldn't have any of it. In the wake of Sue's death, I forced myself to look inside and pull out what was really important to me. What I found were things that were deeply buried beneath layers of aspirations and academic success. I was ashamed to see how little emphasis I had placed on my family and friends. They had been almost completely encased in a chrysalis of academic aspirations. I was disgusted and frightened with the trend I saw as I dug deep beneath my surface. I was doing what she did. She never had time for family or friends. She never had time for anything. They were secondary to what she sought personally and professionally. The conclusion I was drawing brought chills rippling down my spine. No. No. I didn't want to do this. I did not want to come to a dead end where I had nothing but material and professional success to support me. I needed to reorganize what I sought in life. I reoriented my thinking. My family and friends finally began to break out of their cocoon and reemerge into the new environment I had created. The butterfly had emerged and found new life in its reborn environment.

One evening, I came into my parents' room and found Dad sitting on the bed attempting to write his monthly report. When he looked up, I could see the frustration and his own lack of concentration. He smiled and I sunk in next to him on the plush comforter. "Dad, can I talk to you about something?" With that, our three hour conversation began. I told him everything I had realized about myself. I no longer wanted to follow in her footsteps. I didn't want to be her. I explained that I wanted to focus on my family. I told him that I had grown up. I wasn't stuck within the small confines of my childhood reality. Our family had experienced a great loss, the first of its kind, and I had overcome. I had grown from it. The reality that I created no longer contained the childish belief that everything happens for a reason and everything ends with flowers and sunshine. I no longer tried to ascribe meaning to what was happening around me on the basis of this knowledge (Mishara 20). My naive outlook was replaced with an entirely new one. I told him everything. He had listened attentively to every word, and when I finished, he didn't say a word. Our conversation ended with both of us in tears. His reaction stunned me while bringing to me a great sense of peace. He leaned over, crushing his paperwork, and gave me a hug. I could feel the tears seep into my blue pajama shirt, leaving behind small dark circles scattered across my back. He understood. He understood what I had newly created for myself. I had built a more distinguished image of the world and a clearer concept of how things work, what is important, and who is important (Mishara 20). The abyss was gone. The chasm was closed and sealed. I stepped back from the jagged ledge. I wasn't going to fall.

All my questions did not find their answers. I don't think they ever will. However, the agony of those questions is no longer a burden. I have come to accept her decision, whatever the reason for it might have been. In the devastating aftermath of that decision, I learned from her. She taught me a lesson that will stay with me forever. Though her intent was never to set an example or teach a lesson, she drastically changed my perception of what is important. I can't take what I have for granted. I cannot allow myself to become distracted by my goals. They are important, but should not be so consuming that they have the ability to thrust me into a fog, stumbling and groping for what is truly significant.

There are more important things in life than success. I have come to realize that. The realizations that have appeared to me have been incredible and life-changing. I have come to recognize what is truly significant and how that world, that reality, can be shattered at any moment. Life cannot be taken for granted and cannot be wasted. We cannot afford to live within a world that doesn't exist. I had lived so long coiled within my cocoon, tangled in the interweaving silk strands of academic goals. The world where goals and success are of sole importance is not a reality, it is an illusion. My eyes have been opened to a new world where life tears apart the soft silk strands and reaches towards the beams of sunlight that filter through in the form of family and the future. While some of my questions remain unanswered, the internal questions that had scratched at and wounded my spirit began to heal. I just wish similar sunlit beams could have penetrated Sue's thick-layered shell before the dark chasm closed on her forever.

Works Cited

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