

MY BROTHER, BOBBY

ON APRIL 20, 1998, my youngest brother, Bobby, died. He killed himself. It did not come as a surprise to any of us who loved him, but it came as a shock—as if an arm or a leg had been suddenly ripped out, torn off. One second here; one second gone. Irretrievably. One second changed everything about the life lived thereafter.

It did not come as a surprise—each of his siblings had been aware of the strong possibility of his suicide. When the sheriff first walked into one of my brothers' office, that brother knew, without being told, what the message was. When that brother pulled into my driveway a few hours later, I knew the first second I saw the red of his car what the visit was about. When we called each of my other brothers, they knew the moment they heard the anguish in our voices when we said hello. It did not come as a surprise. Each of us had spent many hours, days, months, years praying for Bobby in our four different voices, worrying about him, trying desperately in four different ways to grab onto him and pull him out of the darkness in which he had lived many of forty-three years.

We couldn't do it. We loved him, we delighted in his presence, and we lit up when we saw him approach. As much as we deeply and desperately wanted him to know for himself some of the joy and lightness which he bestowed so easily on others, which he used for the currency of love, we couldn't do it. He would not (or *could* not) let us, and we could find no way to reach in far enough.

I am not sure which was the greater tragedy—his suicide or his life, a life that was lived in the despair and loneliness of grief unresolved. He was wounded as a nine-year-old boy by great loss. It was the ethos of our family at the time that he not express his pain, that he never speak about the death of the proud father with whom he had always taken daily walks, hand in hand, in their brief and precious time together. I think that any new situation any of us encounters in pain, in unresolved grief, we encounter crippled, without the full panoply of human resources. So, understandably, we do not handle the situation as effectively as we might have without the pain, and more pain is added to the bundle we carry around, and so on, with the next situation and the next.

AFTER A SUICIDE, there is the dark time of trying to imagine the depth of despair a loved one must be in to carefully and with dignity prepare to take his or her own life, as my brother Bobby

clearly did. There is the pain of imagining what his last few days and hours and moments were like, stretching the imaginative faculty to try to get a taste of, a glimpse of, those outer limits of pain. The sky was a beautiful pale and flawless blue the morning Bobby killed himself. Did he see it? Did he feel its beauty? Or was it just too empty? Was the sky the last thing he saw on this earth? There is a litany of awful and unanswerable questions.

Such grief, this grief after a suicide, also holds the pure and excruciating pain of the loss itself. And this loss *was* great. This was the death of a strong, giving, intelligent, handsome man and the single funniest human being I ever met. Such deep loss brings deep grief. And grief, especially the excruciating new grief of the first few months, stops you in your tracks, making the thirty-foot walk to the mailbox take an hour. It hangs your heart out raw in the wind and grabs hold of much of your mind's abilities, making creative or even clear thought impossible. The mind stops. The heart bleeds. There is nothing for a human being to do in such sadness but cry. Lord Marpa, the revered teacher of the great Buddhist teacher, Milarepa, taught nonattachment. His teachings were of the unity of life and death in the birthless, deathless Self that lies beyond this world of appearances. The story is told; that when Lord Marpa's son died, Lord Marpa cried. His disciples came to him and said: "But, Master, you have taught nonattachment. You have taught that there *is* no death. Why do you cry?" And Lord Marpa answered simply, "Because *this* death is the death of my son." There is nothing for a human being to *do* but cry.

Grief is such a powerful pain that, like a strong magnet, it pulls up with it all sorts of remaining and unresolved other pains, messily clinging like nails and sharp bits and pieces of metal, compounding the anguish until, at times, your experience of self is nothing *but* anguish. Such anguish subsides and diminishes to more manageable levels as the months go by. It is subject, however, to erupting again at any moment, even months later (and I know, from other sources of grief, even *years* later) by disparate and unexpected cues: a favorite song, a sunset, an empty chair at a family gathering, people laughing, people crying.

"Life goes on," as the cheerier of the consolation cards reminded us, but it is not the same life that goes on. There is, slowly, awareness that vast and positive transformation is not only possible, but—if we will allow it—*probable* for our future. But the cost. Who would ever agree to the price?

People ask if I am angry at my brother. A little, not much. Who am I to judge whether or not he could have endured any more of a pain that I cannot even imagine? Selfishly, I wish he had not done it. I would give anything to see him at my door. The predominant feeling is a sadness that colors all other feelings, not anger. People ask if I think he made a tragic mistake. I don't know. What could I possibly know about his soul's connection with Spirit?

I AM NO STRANGER to death, having come to know and love many hundreds of people as they died. In all my years of hospice work, I have come to see that the time of dying is a time of great peace, universally a time of profound movement into depths of Spirit we usually can experience in the midst of life only through a stable and committed spiritual practice. In these years of deep intimacy with death, I had come to see, long ago, the process of dying as a movement from perceived tragedy to experienced grace.

I speak and write about this new understanding of the spiritual dimensions of dying often and with conviction. In fact, at the time of Bobby's death, I was completing a book that proclaims the process of dying as the richest and most powerful spiritual opportunity of a lifetime.

I have been surprised that so many people have asked if my brother's death has changed my view of dying. The answer is negative, an emphatic and resounding "No!" A few days after he died, I sat in the chair in which he had been sitting when he killed himself. I sat there for a long time. All I felt, all around me, in every direction, in every dimension, was peace.

I see the nearing-death experience as a time marked by the dissolution of the physical body and the separate sense of self and the deepened experience of grace, of Spirit. I am still convinced that, whether we die slowly from a tumor or instantly from a bullet, nearing death we enter deeply and naturally into sacred dimensions. In the process of dying, we all remerge with the Ground of Being from which we once emerged.

On the continuum of perceived tragedy to experienced grace, I have hung suspended since his death, experiencing every point along that taut line. I know each inch of the continuum, the vantage point from each of those inches, the perspective on my brother Bobby's suicide from many different places. I have watched the members of my family hang suspended on different points of the continuum as well, often changing places with each other.

Each perspective is arguable and argued.

I have come to the conclusion that apparently contradictory perspectives are not mutually exclusive. There are many truths that I can pronounce. I can say his suicide was a horrible mistake, and if we could just have prevented him from taking action that one morning, we quite possibly could have seen him through the ensuing weeks into greater happiness. He had been, we thought and hoped, beginning to emerge and glimpse the possibility of light. I can say that it was thoughtless of him to inflict so much pain on the people who loved him. On the other hand, I can say that perhaps he held out as long as he could, so as *not* to inflict pain on the people who loved him. I can say that all he saw of his own inner landscape was too relentlessly dark and empty to bear. He simply couldn't take it for a second longer. I can also imagine he finally felt some kind of permission, some indication from the universe it was okay to take that action then. In fact, in answer to those who have asked if I am angry, I quite often answer, and

feel, that I am grateful he felt that permission. I have found enough humility and mercy in myself to see that this may have been the last and only way he knew to reach God.

ON THIS LEVEL of bodies and words, all these perspectives seem mutually exclusive, but beyond this level of bodies and words, there are dimensions of greater depth and subtlety—the birthless, deathless realm of Spirit to which Lord Marpa referred, the unborn and undying “I am That” of the Vedas, the “eternal life” of which Jesus Christ so lovingly reassures us in our lost and separate state—where it can be seen that each perspective has its own valid truth within its own dimension and that each truth exists simultaneously within the multidimensionality of Spirit.

One of the things I have always noticed about the moment of death is the powerful presence of deeper and more expansive dimensions than those we experience typically in our ordinary waking consciousness. The quality of light is different and the quality of being is different in that special moment. It is as if a veil parts to reveal the profound and subtle depth of the sacred, normally not known, although always underlying. I have come to see also, in this present grief, that when I am deep in grief (as I am at the moment of someone’s death), I am also aware of a greater dimensionality to life. This may explain my growing ability to live comfortably with seemingly contradictory perspectives on my brother’s suicide. Perhaps it is simply that love, the wellspring of my grief, also opens me to the source of love, Spirit, everflowing in all dimensions.

I trust that Bobby, in his own beautiful, essential nature, has entered the eternal life—always underlying, always present—which, with great love, awaits us all.