

Ask Me ... 30 things I Want You to Know

*How to be a friend to a survivor of suicide *

By Nan Zastrow

A review Richard B. Gilbert, PhD, CT

“Divide and conquer” may be a suitable method of operation in some contexts, but not in response to loss. Whether it be your loss, or the loss felt by someone near and dear to you, grief batters and bruises, isolates to thwart attempts at community, and leaves us feeling crushed underfoot when all we wanted to do was to crawl a few inches, a few feelings, at a time. All loss experiences carry this risk of battering and bruising, but to grieve for someone after death by suicide takes all of these risks and pummels them, and those bearing, deeper into the abyss of sorrow. By its nature, a suicidal death challenges the griever and the surrounding folk at the highest of intensity. For most of us called upon to be with a grieving friend, it isn’t the big stuff (a death denying society, etc.) that gets in our way, but the basics. “What do I say?” “How can I help?” “Why did this happen?” “Can we find some common ground?” Oftentimes those basics become the barriers that make easier to either say little or much too much, and, at times, simply just to back away. It hurts less (at least hurts us less). When one is grieving after a suicide, often wrestling with terrifying levels of despair, guilt and rage (long ago having passed anger), I want people to surround me without meaningless chatter, so I can chatter. I want people who make sure I have meals, but don’t demean me by practically shoving a forkful of the latest casserole and shove it down my throat. I want people who don’t rush into my anger, sideswiping the guilt that follows. I want you to listen! Don’t judge! Don’t coerce! Don’t avoid me! Just BE!

Nan Zastrow has done some extraordinary work in the field of bereavement, none more touching than this book, her story, her testimony to her son, Chad. I won’t say that Nan never backs down

from a fight, but she never wavers from her commitment as an advocate and friend for the bereaved. Chad died by suicide. He was 21 years old. Nan already knew first hand the hiding thrust upon her by others, the needed hand or word left behind, and spoke up. She believed that the people who, like her, loved Chad would be the same people who now grieved for him. No one understood. No one had clear answers. No one even understood the questions. It was all too easy to follow the command, "Each one go to your separate corner." That's a tough way to grieve! Zastrow writes, "Because I love him, I remember. Because I remember, he will never die." It is the tough ahead for anyone grieving after a suicide. By the way, it is the tough road ahead for anyone grieving the loss of a loved one. In the introduction we catch the author being herself, and being, not different, but healthy in this strange, isolating walk. Citing several phone calls, she writes, "All four of these incidents happened in the same week – and all were unrelated. But, the word has gotten out ... 'She's not afraid to talk about being a survivor of suicide.'" Suicide has been battered by centuries of suspicion, superstition, abusive religion, legal innuendo and interference. "Today, I'm comfortable with being recognized as someone who is willing to talk about suicide and share information based on my own experience." Everyone deserves care and support on the grief journey. Zastrow experienced the hopes and hurts, and invested in and through all of it because of the son she loved, and loves! Chad. The book bring her story to print with words that leap of the page. "That's me!" It is there for the griever closest to the deceased and to all on the circles that gather in and around at the time of death. Zastrow speaks frankly, not with bitterness or despair, but with hope. Each day is another day that she remembers Chad and shares him with anyone and everyone. That is the hope she sees for you or through you to others. She starts with where it always starts. The storm within us. She says of herself, "I am most vulnerable." "I may need you to make notes about all the 'important things' I am being told – because minutes from now I will not remember what was said or

who told it to me.” “I am a ‘shell’ of the person you once knew. My heart is broken, my spirit weak and my life is shattered. I have no desire to put the pieces back.” “In reality, there may be little you can do to help me. But there is great value in your sustained presence. When I am most vulnerable, here is what I want you to know...” What follows are her, “30 things I want you to know.” I will cite just a few because you MUST read this book. Comfort me with your silent presence not with empty words. Don’t judge the act of suicide. Be patient as I struggle to answer the inevitable questions. Stay connected. I need your help long after the funeral. Yes, you MUST read this book. If your loss is not due to suicide, and you are trying to reach out to someone who is grieving, read this book. It will guide you on the right path. The reviewer is Richard B. Gilbert, PhD, CT, executive director, The World Pastoral Care