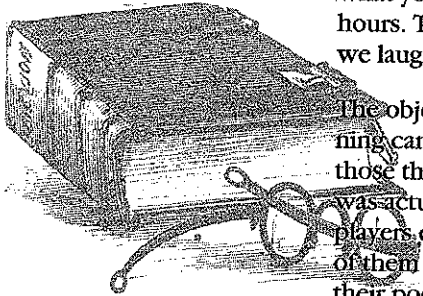


Editor's Journal

My journal entries about life during my journey with grief

Sometimes we don't get second chances

By Nan Zastrow,
Editor



At one time, our family enjoyed playing the board game of LIFE. It was exciting to see what you could do with your life in a few short hours. The obstacles along the way were ones we laughed about: Taxes, Debts, Insurance.

The object of the game was to "win" and winning came from making all the right choices . . . those that would affect the outcome of LIFE. It was actually fun to see the challenges our fellow-players encountered that might let us get ahead of them just a few squares or two. We laughed at their poor choices and were there to judge what it was that put them in the "mess" they were in at that time.

This was a game based on taking risks and the risks were easy because the consequences weren't real. We might "win." Or we could go for broke and lose the game. And if this game of LIFE didn't work to our advantage, we could laugh about it and play it again the next time with new consequences.

We've put the game away now. This game like MONOPOLY, BIG BUSINESS, and many others probably wasn't intended to teach us lessons. But now that I think about it, I confess that the game taught me more than I realized.

Life is about choices

Real LIFE is about choices that affect real outcomes. Sometimes we make good choices and sometimes we make bad choices. And when we look back on the choice we made, we're not always sure why we did it. Maybe it was a "gut" feeling. Maybe we had illusions of grandeur. Maybe we were pressured by circumstances. Or maybe we just plain didn't give a darn at the moment.

I think about that whole issue of choices when I think about my son's death by suicide. What was it that prompted that choice? I will never know for sure. And then again maybe it wasn't really a choice . . . maybe it was a thoughtless millisecond in time that resulted in a fatal error. Sometimes we don't get second chances.

It's been five years since his death. Chad died on April 16, 1993, in his apartment without the benefit of a second chance. I knew that someday I

would write this journal entry to share my pain and open the subject which is socially taboo. And I've always known what my message would be.

Suicide is an ugly word that conjures up images of a person who is emotionally, physically, spiritually, or mentally disturbed. While I admit that this may be an underlying cause in many cases, I am now the first to say that I will never judge the victim's actions.

Survivors of suicide bear the pain of this stigma and are often judged as contributors to the outcome. They carry with them the life-long pain of their loved one's choice. They live with questions that may never be answered. Their friends sometimes desert them at a time when friends are crucial to existence. Survivors feel the whispers, see the turned backs, and suffer the guilt of those "condemned." *Do I really have that "S" on a sign hanging around my neck?* Maybe I do. But the "S" no longer stands for Suicide to tip off my curious inquirers. It stands instead for S-U-R-V-I-V-O-R.

How do we measure our heroes?

Who are we to determine right from wrong? People have killed themselves since the beginning of recorded history. I don't believe that makes it right or wrong; but it does show how fickle we are. We change our attitudes to fit the circumstance. History shows that our attitudes have varied from age to age and from civilization to civilization¹. Here are a few examples of suicide that we have historically condoned.

History

Did you know that historically, some of these choices resulted in death by suicide? Suicide reached great numbers in Japan where it was embedded in religious and national tradition. Compulsory suicide was a form of punishment meted out only to offenders of noble birth. They could expiate their crimes and "save face" by dying at their own hands rather than by the sword of the public executioner. Elaborate cere-

(See *Second chances* on page 14)

¹ *Suicide: Prevention, Intervention, Postvention*, Earl Grollman, ©1988 Beacon Press

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monies attended these rites. Voluntary hara-kiri was committed for revenge and for other reasons. And in World War II, Japanese kamikaze pilots volunteered to fly their munitions-loaded planes into enemy battleships.

Heroic suicide is most prevalent in cultures that have strong group ties and loyalties to both country and religion.¹

Romance

We applaud stories of love and death, as long as they are stories. But how many times are similar "stories" acted out in modern life?

Romeo and Juliet is a classic drama written over 400 years ago by William Shakespeare about two young lovers caught between family rivalries and forces beyond their control. Out of love for each other and the desire to be together forever, both Romeo and Juliet take their own lives.

Euthanasia

And we demonstrate consideration for freedom of choice when it may suit our personal conviction or gain. Tremendous advances in medicine now make it possible to sustain life far beyond the time a person might ordinarily die. There are those who believe in active euthanasia—sometimes called "the right to suicide."¹ It is considered an issue of personal freedom.

Euthanasia means "a good death." Passive euthanasia consists of withdrawing extraordinary life-prolonging techniques such as intravenous feeding and resuscitation or in not initiating such treatment when a situation appears hopeless.

Active euthanasia consists of administering increasing doses of pain-relieving drugs such as morphine until the dosage reaches a lethal level, or in injecting air into the patient's veins, thereby actively contributing to the person's death.

How do we evaluate those choices? Who's right is it to evaluate these choices?

Religion and clergy

And finally, as humans, we pass the evaluation back to religion leaders asking them to be the judge on the issue of suicide. Religion, too, has wavered hot and cold on the issue perhaps proving that this is a spiritual issue set only for the Higher Courts.

When Christianity came into being, suicide was very common in Greece and Rome. It was even encouraged. The early Christians apparently

accepted the prevailing attitudes of their era, particularly when persecution made life unbearable. Many early Christians submitted to Roman torture and allowed themselves to be killed as martyrs.¹

Today, religion and clergy have attempted to clarify their position on suicide. Many years ago a person who died from suicide was not allowed burial in the church. Today, as we understand more about suicide, that position is changing. Clergy view the question of suicide on both the theology level and consider the deep psychic causes and sociological implications.

As humans we have attempted to impose sanctions on others. We give ourselves authority to determine right from wrong. We judge others' actions by the standards we've set. We measure peoples' lives by the choices they've made. We consider right choices those that result in happy relationships, contentment, profound success, miraculous discoveries, wealth, fame, and heroism. I question: who are we to judge?

How to play the "Game of Life"

Playing the real game of LIFE requires planting both feet firmly on the ground—and moving them forward one step at a time. It requires focusing on goals both short-termed and long-termed. It requires making decisions with conscious thought. One must focus forward and never look back.

The real game of life means building new relationships all the time. Ones that are meaningful—from the heart. Not just those that are self-serving. And the game of life means nurturing the spirit to be healthy, forgiving and loving based on a balance of body, mind and spirit. An investment in faith—and in God reaps the greatest rewards.

The real game of life has ever-changing foundations and bumpy roads requiring us to rise up to meet each new challenge through self awareness, continued learning, and lasting memories.

The real game of life is composed of risks, decisions, and opportunities. To "win" we must be open-minded, less judgmental, and critical of others.

Never accept a situation at face value

Chad's death taught me to never accept a situation at face value. There are stories and emotions that run far deeper than we can imagine. Unless I've lived a person's pain, I cannot know their inner turmoil. While suicide harms lives other than the person who made the choice, that person only sees his/her decision as one that may also alleviate other people's pain.

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Second chances *(Continued from page 14)*

We, as a family, enjoyed the fruits of God's love. We had many beautiful years together that will always be cherished. We laughed. We cried together. We hugged. And we prayed. Chad believed in Jesus Christ and took him as his Savior. And I know, undoubtedly that God welcomed him home.

I didn't have to forgive Chad because, in my eyes, he didn't do anything wrong. Only Chad knew the depth of his pain. Apparently, his pain was so great that there was no alternative. I accept that I could not alter his choice. And the mystery of his death—questions with no answers—has taught me to show sympathy in all situations. Because I do not know why people make the choices they do. I value the real game of life.

Tallying the score

When the Game of Life is over, it doesn't really matter how much money we made, how well-known we've become, or how many "toys" we've accumulated. The investment in intangible things is far greater than any other.

These are other lessons I've learned from my son's death.

While I don't condone suicide, I will not condemn those who made the choice whether willingly, planned, or from their unbearable pain. I look twice at every situation now and wonder, "What would I have done if I walked in their shoes?"

I honor the victim's pain. I respect their thoughtless decision knowing that I will not judge. I tremble in the wake of the survivors who wear a cloak of shame knowing I wore one too. It is only now that I can cast my cloak aside and challenge those who silently judge me "to cast the first stone."

I am where I am in the Game of Life today, because I refuse to lose! I am humbled by the bumps in the road. I am weathered by the storms of change. I pray for strength and perseverance for all of my days. I pray that I may have choices and choose wisely.

I am spiritually lifted by small moments of triumph and God's small miracles everyday. I play more seriously. I invest more wisely in relationships, people, and moments. I depend upon prayer. I hold onto family values. I value friends. I savor each day knowing that life is short. This Game is one "for keeps". It's real! And sometimes you don't get second chances.

**“Judgement
means
that you view
the world
as you are,
rather than
as it is.”**

Your troubled soul traveled on a river
blessed,

a journey made with much unrest.

The path it chose to wind and sway,
gathered our hearts along the way.

We held you close with love, indeed,
but we failed to reach you in a time
of need.

Forgive our selfishness for our love
is true,

but you couldn't feel how much we
needed you.

I hope your long journey has ended
at last,

a peaceful beginning from a
troubled past.

A soul of unrest is finally free,

fall into God's embrace for an
eternity.

From the river of life onto the banks
of nevermore,

good-bye to you Jeremy, may your
spirit soar.

Fly with the angels and sing with the
birds,

I will remember your hugs and your
loving words.

Rest peacefully, my nephew, our loss
is deep and true,

go swiftly to our maker as my love
goes with you.

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