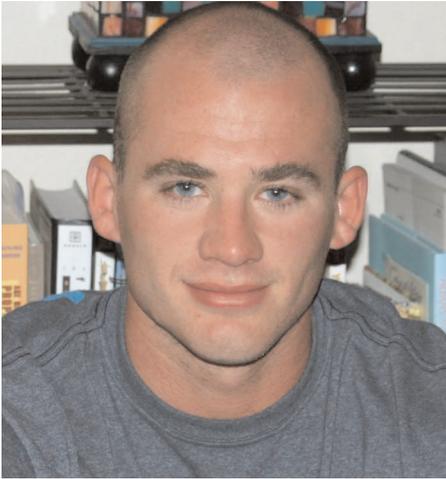


Grief as Transformation

by Lisa Potter

Volunteer with NAMI Suicide Survivors Advisory Group



Landon Gregory Hatch
July 2, 1983 – April 20, 2008

“Tell me how it happened,
how, without warning on a typical day,
when the morning
was filled with possibility,
everything you ever loved
shattered like glass.

Tell me how you refused
to let the world unravel.
How you began, slowly, methodically,
to gather the scattered pieces,
to order the rubble, to build anew.”

(Author unknown)



My world shattered at 3:00 a.m. on a Sunday when I was awakened by my daughter with the unimaginable words, “Mom, Landon died.” There is no space in my brain where those words fit. They made no sense to me then, they still don’t today. My strong, handsome, talented son vanished with those three words, 25 years of my life and love suddenly, joltingly gone. And I was certain that I, too, would die from the pain.

Landon, my smart, witty, big-hearted and curly-haired boy became afflicted by the family gene of mental illness when he was in high school. I began a long and fruitless journey of taking him to oh so many doctors, when I could get him to cooperate. Some gave him drugs which were incapacitating. Others said he was fine but that I was the problem. He became difficult for me to understand and he seemed to have an equally hard time understanding me and my constant worries for him. A journal entry read, “Wow, what happened to me? Is it alcohol dependence, bipolar disorder, or just plain irresponsibility?”

In 2008, after one of many suicide attempts, he quit his job, moved back home, and was willing to see a psychiatrist. I was so relieved that he had *finally* hit rock bottom and was ready to cooperate. Certainly things couldn’t get any worse. The psychiatrist found just the right cocktail to treat bi-polar, OCD, and anxiety. Within a short time, my sweet, happy son was back! He was engaging and funny. His eyes were clear and bright and he began to make plans for his future. All was well! And this lasted for about five hope-filled weeks ... then his expression began to change. His eyes dimmed, his face tightened and his world quickly grew dark again. Helicopters were chasing him, reporters and camera crews were camped outside his two-story window, activities with his girl friend were broadcast on every web site. He was sure that my husband and I were intent on replacing him, and took a knife from the kitchen to defend himself. He tried to buy a gun, but ran from the store when the clerk asked for ID. He finally became argumentative and combative with me which was really frightening. I called and emailed his psychiatrist several times asking

for help, but there was not a single response. And I had no idea what we were facing.

Under a full April moon, this wonderful, tormented man swallowed enough Aspirin to stop his heart and then wrote each of us a heart-wrenching good-bye letter. Mine read, in part, “I’m sorry for everything. I love you so much and I’m sorry about the way things worked out. I wish I could have made you happier, but I will always bring myself down. I feel guilty for this but I just don’t see myself ever changing. I think it will be better for the family this way. I will watch over you guys. I’ll love you forever. Your son.”



There are myriad ways in which we experience loss: divorce, unemployment, illness, or death. When these huge losses occur, we leave our cozy comfort zones and tumble headlong into limbo where we can’t see what’s ahead. Life as we know it crumbles into a heap, creating feelings of anger, despair, guilt, fear, and uncertainty, a frightening black gap between where we’ve been and where we are going. It’s a dark, confusing place in the middle of who we were and who we will become. And in this blackness, despair can become greater than hope. Depression easily obscures all viable options, and tragically, for some, the only choice left is suicide.

- In 2006, there were 33,300 suicides in the U.S. 91 suicides per day; 1 suicide every 16 minutes.
- Suicide is the eleventh leading cause of death.
- The elderly have rates close to 50% higher than that of the nation as a whole.
- Suicide ranks third as a cause of death among young Americans.

- Suicide rates are the highest among the divorced, separated, and widowed and lowest among the married.
- It is estimated that there are 25 attempts for each death by suicide.
- The risk of suicide is increased by more than 50% in depressed individuals.
- Psychological autopsy studies reflect that more than 90% of completed suicides had one or more mental disorders.
- Feelings of hopelessness are more predictive of suicide risk than a diagnosis of depression.

For those who are strong enough to reassemble the broken pieces and rebuild, the work of grief begins.



Grief's passage is solitary and its symptoms roll through us in turbulent, erratic waves. The stages of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance never follow a tidy, linear trail.

Grieving a suicide is even more intense and confusing than lamenting a death from natural causes. It may add a sense of guilt, anger, and possibly shame from perceived stigma. As survivors, we might even feel suicidal when our pain becomes too overwhelming.

Actively grieving can be so exhausting that even the slightest effort feels Herculean. We become forgetful, overwhelmed, and physically and mentally incapacitated. We might experience chest pain, illness, weight loss and weight gain. We may lose interest in things we used to enjoy, feel self-focused and believe *no one could possibly understand*, but are still hurt when friends really *don't* understand and ask what feel like stupid questions, or worse, don't ask at all. We ride

a roller coaster of emotions, pleading for the pain to end and fearing that it never will.

Grieving also expresses the very same symptoms of post-psychotic relapse:

- Exhaustion with a desire to be left alone and sleep.
- Depression with feelings of hopelessness and isolation.
- Delayed stabilization, which is the time it takes to restore work and social relationships, being extremely susceptible to stress, to change, or to having too many demands placed upon the person.

Grief is work. The work of allowing every intense emotion to have its voice. The work of paying attention to our feelings, and not avoiding them with staying busy. Choking back our emotions and avoiding the pain, guilt, anger, or shame will only prolong the pain and keep us stuck in its symptoms.

Grief offers an emotional, psychological, and spiritual journey to healing. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross writes, *"Grief transforms the broken, wounded soul, a soul that no longer wants to get up in the morning, a soul that can find no reason for living, a soul that has suffered an unbelievable loss. Grief alone has the power to heal."* If healing doesn't take place, it's most likely because we haven't allowed ourselves to grieve.

Grief takes us to the place of mourning, which is the lifelong effect of loss, and we will mourn our loss forever. We won't get over it, but we'll learn to live with it. We will heal and rebuild ourselves around the loss. We *can* be whole again, but we will never be the same. *Nor should we want to be.*

This work allows us to *transition*, rather than to simply *change*. It isn't the changes that do us in, it's the transitions. Change is situational: the new house, the new job, the new baby. Transition is the psychological process

we go through to come to terms with the new situation. Change is external, transition is internal. And unless transition occurs, change will not work. Transition starts with an ending, with letting go.

In letting go, we accept the work of slowly picking through the chaotic rubble to discover that the dark, confusing place is actually fertile with possibility and growth. It is the path that not only returns us to wholeness, but to greater capacity, complexity and compassion.



Since Landon passed, my world is different in every way. The landscape has changed and the texture is dramatically altered. Grieving his loss is the hardest, most gut-wrenching work I never imagined I could do. Now I feel everything more deeply and I feel connected to a broader dose of reality. My own experience with depression and occasional thoughts of giving up give me compassion and understanding for those who look into the grim, hopeless face of suicide. I respect his decision to end his pain, and incredibly, he is closer to me now than ever before.

Accept that the hardest experiences in our lives have the greatest power to transform us into stronger, broader, deeper, more powerful and ever more beautiful beings. The things that bring us to our knees can also bring us closer to Love.

The poet Kahlil Gibran says it best:

*"Your joy is your sorrow unmasked.
And the selfsame well
from which your laughter rises
was oftentimes filled with your tears.
And how else can it be?
The deeper that sorrow
carves into your being,
the more joy you can contain."*