

LEAVING THE HALL LIGHT ON

*A mother's memoir of living with her son's bipolar disorder
and surviving his suicide*

MADELINE SHARPLES



Athens, Ohio

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*For the loves of my life
Bob, Ben, and Marissa*

I could not have gotten through this without you.

*And in memory of
Paul Ian Sharples*

December 31, 1971 to September 23, 1999



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Mania—Survivor Chronicles (2010)

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My Jazzman—Survivor Chronicles (2010)

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NOTE: THE AUTHOR HAS CHANGED
THE NAMES OF MANY CHARACTERS IN
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LEAVING THE HALL LIGHT ON





May 1973, at Grandma and Grandpa's piano



When I held Sam alone for the first time..., I was nursing him and feeling really spiritual, thinking, please, please God, help him be someone who feels compassion, who feels God's presence loose in the world, who doesn't give up on peace and justice and mercy for everyone. And then a second later I was begging. Okay, skip all that shit, forget it—just please let him outlive me.

Anne Lamott, *Operating Instructions*
Anchor Books, 1995

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February 1997, playing piano at his dad's sixtieth birthday party

CHAPTER ONE

.....HOW IT ALL BEGINS



Sometime during the night or early morning of September 23, 1999, my twenty-seven-year old son Paul walked out of his dark bedroom in his bare feet, entered his bathroom, and closed and locked the door behind him. Still wearing the white, long-sleeved shirt and khaki pants he had worn to work the day before, he went to the far side of the room, stepped into the bathtub, closed the sliding glass shower door, and sat down in the tub. Using a box cutter, he slashed both of his wrists. Then he slashed his throat and bled out into the tub.

That seemingly painless and swift act—it took approximately thirty to forty seconds for Paul to die—brought our tight, average suburban family to the depths of despair. My husband, Bob, age sixty-two at the time and a successful aerospace engineer for most of his professional life, had to touch the cold, lifeless body of the child he deeply loved. Our second son Ben, age twenty-five, two and a half years younger than Paul, was in San Francisco performing with his fellow classmates on the main stage of the American Conservatory Theater and almost ready to

receive his masters degree in fine arts in acting. His brother's death was almost the end of his dream. Though I had struggled through the years of Paul's bipolar disorder highs and lows, I, then age fifty-nine and retired from the aerospace industry as a proposal expert, was writing grant proposals for non-profits, active in my community, and enjoying life with my friends, my gym, my book clubs, and walks along the beach. I was also an avid journal writer and beginning to take an interest in creative writing. Though I was healthy, the stress of Paul's illness kept me thin.

Because writing was a constant in my life I felt compelled to write the story of my oldest son's life-and-death struggle with his bipolar illness (also called manic depression) before the memory faded. I could never forget those few months in the Spring and Summer of 1993 when Paul had his first mental breakdown—or crackup as he called it—and the years of worry, weight loss, rescue attempts, and grief ever since. And, I don't ever want to forget. I want to remember everything about him—how his fingers trickled up and down the keyboard as he played the piano; his dark blond hair cut close to his head in a buzz; his passion for second-hand plaid shirts, washed out jeans, and Doc Martin oxfords, his appetite for burgers and steaks, pizza, and ice cream, his brilliance with all things related to computers, his wonderful ability to write and draw, and his obsession for order and regimen in the way he treated his belongings.

Even after all these years reminders are everywhere—his room in our home that I've turned into my office; his piano that no one ever plays, still up in the family room; our living room where he used to wrestle with his dad and brother before it was furnished; the downtown Manhattan Beach Starbucks where he liked to sit outside; the Manhattan Beach pier, the hundreds of photos either on display in our home or scanned into our computer, his books and records packed away in

boxes in our garage, and things I couldn't possibly part with—his black bomber jacket, his poems and short stories, his photos, anything in his handwriting, his CD collection, and, of course, recordings of his original compositions, now on CD and in my iPod courtesy of his best friend from high school.

The doctors told me it wasn't my fault when my son was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. They said this disorder, caused by a chemical imbalance in the brain and triggered by stress, usually hits young people in their late teens or early twenties, like Paul who had just turned twenty-one. One day he was perfectly fine, playing the piano at his grandmother's eighty-fifth birthday party. Two weeks later he was calling us up every few minutes, writing all over his walls with a blue felt-tipped marker, saying people were lurking in doorways out to get him and poisoning his food and cigarettes.

He was no longer able to sit still long enough at the piano to play a song through from the beginning to end. Was he acting like a crazy person or someone high on drugs? At first we didn't know which.

But deep down I felt guilty. Why hadn't I seen the signs? Why didn't I take better care of him? He was my son. I should have known how to protect him from the danger he was in. I didn't know then that I had no control over what happened to him. I could only care for him the best I could. I couldn't spoon-feed him like a child anymore. He didn't allow it. He was an adult, and he controlled the outcome. Even so, my feelings of guilt have never gone away.

From the time he was born—in fact even before he was born—Paul was special. He presented himself feet first. All the Lamaze classes my husband and I attended went by the wayside when the doctor kicked Bob out of the delivery room and performed a Cesarean section. Paul was stubborn even in utero—he wouldn't come out the natural way.

When I finally was allowed to see and hold him twenty-four hours



September 1972, nine months old

after the delivery, I was the first to notice that both of his hands were deformed—the middle and ring fingers of both his hands were stuck together. I was in so much shock as I held him and peered into his face that I couldn't keep it in focus. His face seemed to recede and disappear as I held him in my arms. My worst fears and bad dreams had materialized. My child was born with a deformity. What had I done to cause that? As was the hospital's custom with Cesarean deliveries, he had been thoroughly examined by a pediatrician and observed in an isolette around the clock for the first twenty-four hours of his life. Yet no one who had given him his initial exam noticed. When I looked at his fingers, I started screaming, and Bob took off down the hall to get the doctors to reexamine him. If they had missed something so obvious as his webbed fingers, what else did they miss?

Throughout my pregnancy we had never let up on our fears about how our child would turn out. I would be over thirty at the time of the birth and in the early 1970s that was considered old to have a first child. I had already had two miscarriages, and Bob was the father of a Down's Syndrome child born from his first marriage. I was also under a lot of stress, mostly caused by my mother's jealousy. She couldn't stand that Bob and I were happy; she couldn't stand the attention I was getting while I was pregnant, she couldn't stand that I didn't need her anymore, and she couldn't stand that she had no control over me anymore. Whenever we spoke on the phone, she picked a fight. One time when I was about six months pregnant with Paul, I called my parents from a pay phone to check in during our return trip from a weekend at Big Sur. I was happy and relaxed from our trip, and we wanted to drive through to our home in Riverside rather than stop and see them in Beverly Hills. I stood in the phone booth at a gas station for at least half an hour with Bob waiting in the car while she told me how disrespectful and inattentive I was. "You left us all alone while you were away having

a good time,” she yelled. I finally yelled back, “If something is wrong with my baby it will be your fault.” As a result she, too, was very worried about how Paul would turn out. She had a vested interest in him being born perfect. He was except for the “funny finger thing”—as we began to call his deformity.

Otherwise, Paul was diagnosed as a healthy baby, and we immediately fell in love with him. He was so easy. He nursed well and slept well in between feedings. From the beginning he was the love of Bob’s life. He would hold Paul in his arms and constantly talk to him. He’d hold him close to the pictures on the wall and tell him their stories as he described the books, the chairs, the kitchen items, his parents, his grandparents, and the wonderful future we wanted him to have. This child was loved, and the doctors reassured us his fingers could be easily fixed—a simple surgery, they said, when he was older.

The word “simple” was the understatement of the century—at least to us. At age two Paul was in surgery for over eight hours to separate the two fingers with perfectly normal bone structure on both hands and remove skin from his groin area to build the webs in between his fingers. He was barely conscious when he was rolled away in his hospital crib with the high bars all around. I wanted to go with him, to be there with him at least up to the surgery room, but there was no way. In those days, hospital rules were so insensitive that they didn’t allow for the needs of the little patients or their parents. Then we sat all those hours in the waiting room—my dad was with us—and we didn’t move until we knew he was safe and in recovery. And still we weren’t allowed to see him until after he was out of recovery and fully conscious. Unfortunately, it was during the four-hour recovery time that all the damage was done.

“Mommy, I can’t move my fingers,” were the first words I heard when Paul was brought out of the recovery area. I was devastated to see

him this way. I had only done what I had thought best for him in the long run, but at the moment I felt I had made a terrible mistake. And, maybe so. The happy-go-lucky little boy was now gone. Still beautiful, still bright, and immediately agile with all his little fingers once his casts were finally removed, but he was never the same again.

The happy, smiley boy who had embarked on that surgery with full trust in us and confidence that his adored Dr. Lane (he said, Dr. Yane) would separate his fingers just like we fixed his broken toys—in an instant—just like that, awoke to find both his hands and arms up to his elbows in heavy casts so he wouldn't do any damage to the one hundred stitches the doctor had sewn in each hand. Before the surgery he was able to suck those fingers. Now he was cut off from that security “blanket” cold turkey. Before the surgery he went to anyone. He was a child full of trust and love. Afterward he had a list of fears: pictures of clowns, people with masks on Halloween, Santa Claus, and old men with beards. These things would trigger hysteria. Fortunately, those fears were finally allayed once he started watching Sesame Street. He would shriek with laughter at the fuzzy monster puppets that spoke to him in a language he could understand and learn from.

The only explanation for his fears that we could think of was his half-conscious state during the recovery and that the doctors and nurses all wore surgical masks in the cold, sterile atmosphere of the recovery room. I wasn't allowed in. I wasn't allowed to help him. For the first time I wasn't in control—except that I had allowed the surgery. I knew we had to get his fingers separated, but maybe we should have waited until he was older when he could better understand the procedure and the aftermath. Had I known how long the surgery would take, had I known beforehand he would have to wear such debilitating casts for so long, I might have decided to wait. Even the doctor had misgivings. He said that had he known the procedure on both hands would take eight hours, he would have done one hand at a time.



February 1974, with casts after finger surgery

I, at least, was allowed to stay with him the night of the surgery, though both of us hardly slept. He would not allow anyone but me to touch him. “Mommy will do it,” he said, whenever a nurse came to change a dressing or give him a sip of something to drink. I sat up with him on my lap through the night.

That incident was the first of many traumas that Paul suffered during his terrible twos, perhaps precursors to his bipolar diagnosis nineteen years later. Very shortly after the surgery we moved to a house we purchased in Manhattan Beach, California. Later that year his brother Benjamin was born. The first time Paul saw Ben, he quickly remarked, “He’s already had his surgery,” thinking that all little babies are born with funny fingers. And soon after, one of his favorite people, my father, was diagnosed with cancer of the bile duct system. From the time Paul was a baby, my dad loved to take care of him whenever he got the chance. He would feed him juice or water from a bottle (not milk since I breastfed Paul until he was fifteen months old), take him for buggy rides, readily change his diapers, and proudly hold him on his lap as Paul, with an adoring look on his face, gazed up at him.

My dad had encouraged us to have Paul’s hand surgery sooner rather than later. He would lie down with Paul for their afternoon naps and he could see Paul trying to pull his fingers apart. He worried that he would try to separate them himself. Once Paul asked for a screwdriver (he said “foogiver”) so he could open his fingers. We were all worried that he would harm himself unless we acted quickly.

After my dad had bypass surgery, he couldn’t be Paul’s playmate and caretaker again. “Why doesn’t Grandpa play with me anymore?” Paul asked when we would visit, and by the time Paul was three and a half, his grandpa was gone. Paul missed him and he never forgot him. They were alike in many ways. My dad was short; so was Paul—not quite five foot nine inches. My dad was small boned; so was Paul. Otherwise they didn’t look alike. My dad had dark skin and dark hair and big

brown eyes. Paul was pale with dark blonde hair and amazing blue eyes rimmed with dark lashes. But like my dad, Paul was gentle with little children. They were both quiet and inward. They both loved to read and listen to music. And Paul walked fast like him.

Looking back, I think a couple of other events in Paul's life were warning signals about how he would turn out. One was his strong reaction to Bob's possible job transfer to the East Coast. Paul was so adamant about not wanting to go, about not wanting to leave his high school, jazz ensemble, and his life in Manhattan Beach, that we went to family therapy for help. The rest of us were okay with the move—including Ben—but Paul couldn't be placated. While in therapy the doctor recommended that Paul take a series of psychological tests. These showed he was slightly depressed, but both Bob and I and the doctor didn't see that as a major problem. Maybe we were sticking our heads in the sand, but we chalked the depression up to his being a fifteen-year old who wasn't getting what he wanted. The job transfer never happened, and although Paul was elated at the news, he continued with the psychologist for about a year on his own.

The second event started when Paul was seventeen. He met a thirty-two-year old divorced woman at a party given by his high-school jazz teacher and began a full-fledged love affair that lasted about two years. Instead of crying rape, we tried to end the affair by urging him to attend college in New York City at the New School jazz program in place of one of the California schools that had offered him admission. And in enthusiastic agreement, he entered as a freshman in August 1989. By the summer after his sophomore year the affair was over, but not without a lot of pain for him. He acted like an adult while he was inside the relationship, but when she decided to end it he was like a hurt little child. And I could do nothing to help him through it.

It is so hard for a parent to say what impact a first love has on a child. It appears that Paul matured greatly with respect to the opposite

sex, but the effect of that love affair on Paul's later approach to and choice of women stayed with him for the rest of his life. He really didn't know how to behave in a give-and-take relationship with women. I always thought the affair was a major stressor and trigger to the onset of his first manic episode in 1993 when he was living in New York City.

Still, I was shocked that Paul had bipolar disorder. When the doctors asked me if my family had any history of mental illness, I said no. But, after thinking about it, I realized that he had the family curse. He would have to live a life faced with the mood swings I had seen in my mother and uncles. And I felt guilty because I kept thinking Paul went crazy because of my genes. I couldn't get that out of my mind.

Paul's bipolar disorder diagnosis was based on a combination of my family history, his age and artistic bent, lab tests to rule out drugs, brain scans, and his response to the antipsychotic and mood-stabilizing drugs the doctors prescribed. The cruelty of this illness is that he, like other manic-depressives, liked the highs so much he refused to stay on his meds once he was stabilized. Consequently, it took more episodes, the breakup of his last long-term love affair (not the older woman he fell in love with when he was seventeen), the loss of all his friends in New York, and the inability to stay focused enough to play the piano for more than a few minutes at a time before he finally understood what havoc his mania caused in his life and in the lives of those around them. But that didn't deter him. From the beginning of his illness he was edging toward his destiny.

I couldn't help feeling guilty, and I know I shouldn't have, for his illness and its effects. But seeing what had happened to my beautiful boy, hearing his constant babbling about how his food and drinks were poisoned and that the Mafia was out to get him, seeing his vacant, glazed-over eyes, I couldn't help it. My stomach was in turmoil. I couldn't eat. I couldn't sleep. I couldn't think about anything else. Every few

minutes I would break down in tears. Even with a new discovery by scientists at the University of California at Irvine that two genes on chromosome eighteen are involved in manic depression—one gene helps the brain cells receive chemical messages, and the other has to do with the body’s hormonal response to stress—I still blamed myself and my family’s history for our misery.

When Bob and I decided to have children we never imagined that a mental illness could appear in one of our children—our son Ben shows no signs of it—and had we known would we have done anything differently? I doubt it. We didn’t connect my grandmother and uncles’ mental health to anything our family had to worry about. We didn’t even know what manic depression meant in those days.

The doctors didn’t seem to know enough about it to treat Paul properly when he was diagnosed. Most of the drugs he took were hit or miss, experimental. The recurring theme was: “Let’s try this and see if it works.” He had side affects from Lithium, the usual drug of choice for his illness, so he was prescribed Depacote. And as he still had side affects and delusions and hallucinations, he was given new medications that we now know can cause teenagers and young adults to have suicidal thoughts. Who knows if those drugs caused Paul to commit suicide? I do know he abused his drugs. He took them, he stopped taking them, he took them sporadically. He never was consistent. Could that abuse of his medication have caused his suicide? We’ll never know.

I do know one does not have control over manic depression or of someone who has it. One does not get it because one is bad or selfish or their mother didn’t raise him or her right. One gets it when some chemical in the brain goes out of balance—most often when a person is just approaching adulthood—and as a result that person and the persons around him are never the same again.

And now the literature says that heredity is definitely the cause of bipolar disorder with researchers getting closer to the genes that cause it.

I know all of that rationally, and still I look at the fat smiling Buddha on my office shelf and think about Karma and the guilt I have always felt about my role in the breakup of Bob's marriage. (His former wife had just had a beautiful little boy badly damaged with Down's syndrome, and Bob was intent on seeing me and being with me.) He had wanted to leave her before she got pregnant, but stuck it out throughout her pregnancy. I was attracted to him as soon as we met. He was extremely articulate about almost anything, and he was so sexy. We had lunch together several times and then went out on our first date the night of March 11, 1967. We fell in love that night. We still think of it as our real anniversary. We married three years later. But at what cost? In my mind, guilt and bad Karma.

In my least rational moments I believe the bad Karma took away my son in exchange for me taking Bob away from his former wife. I tell myself over and over that he would have left her anyway. But that doesn't assuage my guilt. It doesn't absolve me of what happened. It doesn't bring Bob back to his former wife or Paul back to me. Losing Paul was our punishment; I irrationally think that when I am down in the deepest doldrums. Women have stolen husbands away in the past but didn't lose their sons as a result, but I bet they lost something else. Something else very dear to them. And that doesn't matter to me at all. I lost Paul. That's what matters. I lost Paul.

And then I bring myself back to my rational self and my work on healing, getting over it, and really living a complete life without him. Someone recently said, "There is no healing from a loss of this kind, there is only getting used to it." Parade Magazine recently reported cancer patients saying, "Patients won't go back to normal after cancer. But they can find a best new normal." Both statements are true for me. I'm getting used to living a life without Paul, living a life after my loss. I am moving on in so many ways, such as in the poem I wrote just one year after his death:

One Year

*It's a year, they say,
time to stop mourning for your dead son,
get on with your life.
Okay, I will, I reply.
Look—I work, I work out, I write, I travel,
I read, I go to movies, I make love, I eat out,
I enjoy the company of friends.
And—I nurture myself with new hairdos,
makeup, massages, and manicures.*

*After all, Paul took his own life a year ago
He didn't take mine
At least not completely.*

*What they don't know is
my life now is just playacting
meant to fool others as well as myself
into believing that I can move on
and begin to live my life again.*

I'm fully aware that my life is filled with diversions—going to the theater, the opera, the movies; reading one book after the other, traveling on weekends and for weeks at a time, and having dinners out with friends. Playacting meant to fool others as well as myself into believing that I can move on and begin to live my life again? Maybe. But, this playacting is doing the trick. I used to spend a lot of time wondering what would happen if I let it all hang out and finally quit work, and lived without all the crutches I've set up for myself? I hung on to the crutches for a long, long time—over ten years—and I've finally let the biggest one go. I retired from my job in aerospace in April 2010, and I'm doing very well working on my own now. I've made a life for myself as a writer. But more about that later.

Before I move on, I want to explain the title of this book, *Leaving the Hall Light On*.

At first I believed—my magical thinking—that if I left the hall light on, if we didn't move away from our house, if we didn't change our telephone number, Paul would know how to make his way back. Paul would know we were still here waiting for him. For a long time I waited for that familiar sound of his Volvo coming into the garage, the sound of the door from the garage slamming as he entered the house and went down the hall to his room, the sound of him walking around the house at night, the sound of the door opening and closing as he went in and out of the house. In fact, for a while I thought I heard those sounds. And for a long time I left most of the things in his room and closet alone for fear of removing his presence there. For a long time I refused to give away his things in case he would need them when he came back.

Once those sounds in my imagination and my magical thinking fell away, my need to keep the hall light on became another one of the

things that helped me get through it. We left the hall light on for him when he was home. I just couldn't break that routine.

And while that was all going on Bob and I had a push-me, pull-you interaction about it. Bob always had a habit of turning off all the lights before he went to bed. Since he usually went to bed after me, I would wait until he got into bed. Then I'd get up and turn on the hall light again. And mind you that was a trek across the living room and down the steps of our tri-level house to the garage entry hall on the ground floor where the office that Bob and I originally shared, the guestroom, and Paul's room (that became my private office) were. Sometimes we'd go back and forth on this several times in one night. If he forgot his glass of water he'd get up and turn the light off again. If he needed a certain vitamin from the kitchen cabinet, he'd get up, go into the kitchen to get what he needed, and then go down and turn the light off again on his way back to bed. And, if I fell asleep before him, I'd wake in the middle of the night and go back down to turn the light on once more.

Once in a while I'd ask him to leave it on. If he asked why I'd give him the lame excuse that I needed a light on to guide me through the house when I left to go to the gym in the dark of the early morning. Sometimes he'd buy that. Most of the time he'd forget and turn off the light.

Gradually though, say in the last two, three years, leaving the hall light on became less and less important. That I could leave it off night after night meant I was healing. And it also meant that I was over the magical thinking stage of my grieving process.

Leaving the Hall Light On

*I lose my keys or sunglasses
and find them in my hand all along.
I lose my little boy in the department store
and he pops out squealing with laughter
from under the clothes display,
I lose important papers
and find them
in the stack of other papers on my desk.*

*I didn't lose my son, Paul.
Paul is dead.
Death is forever.
There's not a chance of finding him.*

*The light I've left on in the hall for him
every night since he died
doesn't show him the way back home.
There are no more piano gigs out there for him.
The Sunday paper entertainment guide
doesn't list his name at any jazz club.
He can't join the young guys at the Apple Genius Bar
and help people solve their computer problems.
Paul would have loved that job.
He was made for that job,
but he checked out too early.
The new meds and surgery for manic depression,
the new information about mental illness
are not for him.*

*Why do people refer to death as loss?
Maybe just to encourage
people like me.
Maybe just to keep me looking for him.
Maybe so I can pretend he's still out there.*

*Maybe that's why I long to mother
the strong young men at the gym
who hardly notice me
and the bright ones at work.
They are the right age.
They have the same look.
They have the same appeal.*

*Every time I see a young man
with close-buzzed hair,
well-worn jeans,
a white t-shirt, and a black jacket,
sitting outside of Starbucks,
sucking on a cigarette,
every time I see a skinny guy
walking fast across the street
carrying a brown leather bag over his shoulder,
I look to make sure.*

CHAPTER TEN

.....SURVIVING MENTALLY AND SPIRITUALLY



So many people have asked if I found comfort in God after Paul's death. And the answer is a flat "no." Paul's death has not brought me closer to God. For me, there is no God. I can't relate to a God that would take away my son. I look for a spiritual connection but can't seem to find one. I've tried praying. But to whom and for what? Paul's death has brought me closer to myself. I've become more in touch with my feelings and ways to cope by myself. These are the things that comfort me. Going to Esalen Institute and Big Sur helps, but that is not turning to God. That is getting away from my regular life and giving myself space to reflect and write and be with people who have the same writing interests as mine. My writing has become my therapy and the way I get in touch with my feelings and myself. I've found my own way.

So I've turned further away from God. And it's not only about Paul. It's about the disasters in the world and in our nation. I never really believed in God—even before Paul died. I've always been an agnostic with a strong leaning toward atheism.

September 23, 2002

*The phone rang once
startling me awake from a deep sleep.
I jumped out of bed to answer it,
knocking over the Waterford
crystal perfume bottle
on the way.
And all for naught—
no one was on the line.
I looked over at the clock—
only 5 A.M. but I was up for
this day, September 23, 2002,
the third anniversary of Paul's death,
a day that I dreaded for so long.
And all I could think was
Paul was calling to check in,
letting us know he was still around
somewhere. And somehow
that one ring was a comfort rather
than a wake up call.*

The scare tactics of religion turned me off as a teenager. Live a good life and you'll have a good afterlife. To me, once you're dead, you're dead. You're gone. That's it. There's nothing after that. There's no God, no heaven, no nothing. No matter how much magical thinking comforted me, I knew leaving the hall light on for him wouldn't bring Paul back.

Even with these feelings, I joined a religious synagogue after Paul died because the rabbi who came to our house almost immediately and then officiated at his memorial service was so helpful and compassionate. I wanted to support him. I also thought at first that it might help me. But, no, belonging to the synagogue hasn't helped. Having the rabbi as a good friend does.

I also still show up in synagogue for Jewish high holidays—the New Year and Day of Atonement. I've always enjoyed the Jewish traditions—family Passover dinners and break-the-fasts, the socialization of being in the synagogue with my family. I use the time to sit quietly, think, meditate, but not to pray. I wouldn't know how to pray. I've never done it. But I like the music, the feeling of belonging, and having my family surrounding me.

I also don't believe that Paul is with God. Even though I wrote a poem about my vision of him in a heaven of some sort—I called it Buddha because he was a Buddha kind of character—I don't really picture him in heaven. I don't picture him anywhere but back here with us on earth among the living. That's where a young guy like him should be.

Although it may be completely nuts, I do believe that if I dream about him he is close by or with me. It's interesting that when September rolls around, I dream about him more. That's the month he died. One year—on his death day—the phone rang very early in the morning. As I reached for the phone, I knocked over a crystal perfume bottle off my dresser, and picked up after one ring. No one was on the line,

but I couldn't help but think it was Paul checking in. I even mentioned it to a friend who also lost a son to suicide, and he said he had experienced the same kind of thing, that that kind of magical thinking is not unusual.

Over the years I've been told that I needed to go into therapy. Even my husband has suggested it more than a time or two. But I've steadfastly refused. I just didn't think a therapist could help me if he/she hadn't been through my kind of loss.

And of course, the most truthful reason why I didn't seek help early on was because I didn't want to stop feeling the pain. I didn't want to heal. I didn't want to forget. I couldn't take a chance that a therapist would help me. I refused to face the fact that I could possibly get over this death. I refused to believe that would even be possible. In my mind it wasn't. So I wouldn't read the self-help books, I wouldn't see a therapist, I wouldn't do anymore "how to deal with the grief" workshops. I refused to give up on the grief because I didn't want to stop grieving for him. I didn't want to ever forget the pain. I didn't want to ever even come close to forgetting him or anything about him. I was afraid of forgetting him because if I forgot him who else is there to remember all the things I know about him?

It was obvious that Bob and I both needed help. We had a hard time just being together because our coping mechanisms were so different. He would keep saying that only I needed therapy. To spite him, I wouldn't go. That is the truth of it. He was afraid I was having a breakdown; I was afraid he was drowning his pain and anger in alcohol.

In the end, I've found that it just takes time. I'm glad I did it my way. I came out of it alive, happy, and thriving. Sure, I have bad days, but nothing I can't get through.

Prickly

*“You’re prickly,” my husband said.
hard to get along with,
and snappish.”*

*I just stood there, surprised.
“I’m sorry for being prickly,”
was all I could think of to say.*

*I am never so blunt
when critical of him.
He would retort as he’s done
so many times before,
“I guess I’m just not good enough.
You should just find someone else,”
he’d say. And, of course,
I would quickly shut up,*

*I wonder what prickly means.
Do I hurt to the touch
like little pin pricks?
Do cacti envy my prowess?
Do the cats that roam the streets
and sleep under cars hiss
and scatter when they see me coming?
Do the few stars
that burn through the haze
look down at me in wonder?*

What keeps me in balance and helps me feel better and experience joy is my spiritual regime of writing, working out, going to Esalen at Big Sur for workshops, meditating, and experiencing some far-out cathartic work like visiting a sweat lodge and getting a tattoo. I've also found ways to assuage and comfort my anger, sorrow, and fears that arose from Paul's death.

Though writing has been a part of my life for a long time and a huge help during the height of my worries and grief about Paul, poems just started coming out during one of the first Writing About Our Lives workshops I took with Ellen Bass at Esalen. Poetry seemed to be the only way I could really express my emotions. For a while my poems were all about Paul. Now I find poems going on everywhere, any time. I like to say: "now there's a poem," and off I go to write. Poetry is still a great part of my writing life. I've produced four chapbooks, and I've co-edited two volumes of the poetry anthology, *The Great American Poetry Show*. I've also written the poems for a book of photographs, *The Emerging Goddess*—one of the first projects that helped get me out of my writing dark hole. I was thrilled when the photographer asked me to write the poems, giving me another subject to write about instead of the dark, death-related work about grief and Paul I had been doing. I've also had many poems published both on-line and in print magazines. Now I challenge myself to write a poem every day while I travel. I enter April and November poem-a-day challenges, and I've recently challenged myself to write a poem a week about people I see and have imaginings about, but whom I don't know. I look outward, not inward, for a change. And, I've branched out and started a novel.

But it doesn't matter. Poetry, journaling, creative non-fiction, fiction, painting, singing, acting. And all of them are great outlets. I recommend some kind of creative outlet for anyone who's been through a loss like mine or any other grief experience. Do anything that will take you away from what's going on inside. My friend, Kitty, writes and

paints and sometimes combines the two.

Esalen continues to be my healing and writing place. I'm not daunted by the six-hour drive to get there. Once I pass Santa Barbara I feel like I'm on my way to heaven. The smell of pine and sulfur—Esalen has natural hot springs baths—the organic fresh food, the view of the ocean's waves hitting the rocks, the conversations, and the quality of the writing workshops I've attended provide the right amount of healing balm and writing inspiration I need. I try to go there at least twice a year. And once I've made my reservation, I'll let nothing stop me from showing up. I write there. I share there. I let it all hang out there which includes participating in the clothing-optional hot-springs tubs. Esalen is a place where I don't hide. The people I know there won't let me hide. I know because I've tried.

In my late twenties and early thirties, I began exercising regularly. At first three to four times a week, and then after Paul died, I upped my workouts to every day of the week. I couldn't get through a day without exercising. When I don't exercise, I'm sluggish, less energized, and more apt to be tearful. I just don't feel like myself. I have my own little routine. I use an elliptical cross trainer and treadmill for my cardio workout and weight machines or free weights for my upper and lower body areas on most days. Once in a while Bob and I will go for a long walk on the Strand near our beach. So I didn't give up this part of my life after Paul died. I actually got more compulsive about it.

I also exercise to keep my body in shape, ward off osteoporosis, and keep my weight down. There I've admitted it! No matter what I've gone through, I'm still a very vain person—maybe because taking care of my body and my hair and face is one of the ways I am able stay in control. I hold on to this control like a vise. If I let go, I feel everything about me will fall apart. Even on the day of Paul's funeral I had to have my hair and makeup just so.

Making It Hard

*The bright room is almost full.
All four walls of mirrors reflect women and men
in baggy shorts and sleek black tights.
The music is so loud
the woman in front of me stuffs earplugs in her ears.
Lisa G says, "work from the core;
your workout relates to your real life."
I want to get on with it.
I don't come here at 6 A.M. to listen to a lecture.
The neon sign on the wall says "sweat,"
and that's what I want to do.
The woman behind me complains.
I don't know her name, but here she is every week
always in the same spot, always complaining, always in black.
Black tights, black sports bra, black thong leotard,
black headband on her head of black hair.
Even her lipstick looks black.
A drill sergeant in baseball cap and high-top aerobic shoes,
Lisa begins her litany.
"If it were easy, everyone would be fit," she shouts,
"Don't come here and expect it to be easy."
She doesn't know my name. I like it that way.
I like the feeling of being anonymous here.
I don't know anyone and no one knows me.
No one knows about Paul, that he died
or any other thing about me either.
Being anonymous is a benefit.
It keeps me in shape, calms my mind,
gives me the space to be myself.
It's a mini-vacation from the horrors of my life.
So I thank Lisa G*

*for getting me moving,
for making it hard,
for making it hurt,
for showing me how to
trade one pain for another.*

A few times a week I add a yoga or Pilates class. I've found yoga and Pilates are wonderful ways to unwind and stay focused. I first started doing yoga when I was pregnant with Paul. I had no formal lessons and didn't attend any classes then—we were unable to afford them in those days, but I learned enough on my own to help in my recovery after his birth. I continued with yoga for a few years after that—especially during my pregnancy with Ben. Afterward I got into tennis and running, and yoga fell by the wayside for over twenty years. I picked it up again after Paul died, and I've found it incredibly hard. In my young days my body could twist like a pretzel. Now I'm like a stiff wooden board. Yet, yoga helps with all kinds of things. It calms my heart, it makes me concentrate on nothing else but the yoga position I'm trying to make my body do, it evens out my breathing, and it helps me work out the knots I get in my neck and shoulders from all the work I do at the computer. I'm perfectly comfortable holding the hardest poses. They soothe me, they stretch me, and they take me away from the inner conversations I have within myself. Pilates is more forgiving for me. It's less strenuous. And it helps me stay flexible. It just doesn't have yoga's calming effect.

I've found working out is also a great way to quell my anger.

One morning soon after Paul's death I attended a circuit-training exercise class where the instructor has different kinds of equipment at stations all around the room and the students go around and spend

forty-five seconds doing the moves required at each station. I got to the punching bag, put on the big red gloves that were still sweaty from the hands of the last person who wore them, and began punching. Normally, I hate boxing. I always destroy my inner arms when I attempt it. But I began and I didn't want to stop. Instead of the target I clearly saw Paul's face on the bag, and I began punching that face as hard as I could. I didn't know I was so angry with him. I thought it was only Bob who was angry with him. But, I found my anger at that class, and I knew I could go back to the gym and punch him in the face whenever I wanted. And it helped.

I first dabbled in meditation at the Shambhala Center when it was in West Hollywood. I also meditate at home where I've set up a little shrine that I sit before—though not as regularly as I should. Also many of my Buddhas sit with me in my office with their calming faces at my beck and call. Just the practice of Tonglen—the deep breathing in of pain and the breathing out of healing and compassion toward others—that I learned about from Pema Chodron's *When Things Fall Apart* makes me feel wonderful. If I could help create a world where no other mother would have to feel the pain I have felt in my life, then I would be wildly happy. I know this is impossible, yet Tonglen is a step in that direction.

I know meditation is good for me. It works. Just recently when I was stressing about an upcoming reading, I meditated several times and it calmed down my thoughts and heartbeat. And all my diversions—the work, the writing, the exercise, the yoga, the Pilates—are all like forms of meditation for me. Sometimes I meditate amidst crowds of people. I sit quietly, keep my hands on my lap, and concentrate. I don't fidget, I don't tap my foot. I didn't get the reputation for being a serene, calming influence at work and among my friends for nothing.

Meditation Practice

*I face the shrine,
place my palms together as in prayer,
bow, and walk into the room.
I choose a spot in the second row
and sit in the middle of a brilliant red cushion,
cross my legs, straighten my spine,
and take a quick look around
before I gaze ahead,
lowering my eyelids until
my eyes focus on the gold-leaf mandala
adorning the lacquered alter before me.
Soon the tang of incense sends
a trail of smoke, like a fine silk thread,
up toward the ceiling.
It disappears above my head.*

*I begin to settle down and listen to
my breath moving in and moving out.
It sounds like I'm in an echo chamber.
This is not my breath.
It's the sound of something far away.
I keep listening. The echo gets louder and louder,
enveloping me, swaddling me in its raspy arms.
I'm lost in this warmth until I startle.
My head lurches forward,
my eyes pop open, my body arches.
I lose concentration and barely catch myself
from keeling over, disrupting the meditative mood
pervading this room.*

*I fold my legs again.
I straighten my spine again.
I fix my gaze again.
Yeah, I'm ready this time.
I can do this
if only my right ankle will stop
distracting me, aching, giving me fits.
I count your breaths,
I cleanse your mind."
I must let my ankle hurt, let my nose itch
I must watch my breath move in and out
I must push invading thoughts aside.
Okay, take it easy,
Stay calm.
How hard is that?*

*The leader, sitting slightly elevated in front,
strikes the copper gong once, twice,
and then produces several more short bursts of sound,
letting the prolonged vibrations permeate the air.
It's time for walking meditation,
and am I ready for that.
I know I can do that.
My legs feel like a couple of stiff rails.
But wait a minute.
Is this supposed to be a walk in the park?
No way. Of course not.
If it were easy, everyone would do it.*

*I enter the circle of my fellow-meditators
and walk the perimeter of the room.
I tuck my left thumb into my left fist
and cover it with my right hand,*

*holding my spooned hands close to my belly.
 I become aware of my feet
 as I take slow step after slow step
 around the room.
 As I walk, my arches rise
 my toes curl like a ballerina's,
 my feet are like wings made to propel me,
 elevate me into a perfect pirouette. And,
 I am there, walking, breathing, getting it,
 one step, one in breath, one out breath at a time.*

I also had a cleansing and inspiring experience at a sweat lodge out in the Los Angeles San Fernando Valley. All I was asked to bring was a robe and some food to share. About twenty women attended. First we sat in a circle in the leader's living room and ate and shared our reasons for being there. My sharing, of course, was about Paul's death. That was my only reason for being there. After we took off all our clothes and put on our robes, we filed out into the leader's back yard to the sweat lodge. It was dark and cold out there. Only a small light on at the back of the house guided our steps.

We must have been in the lodge for almost two hours—though I had no idea so much time had passed. We went through four rounds of heat, with each round getting progressively hotter as we kept adding more and more hot coals to the pile in the center of the lodge. In between rounds we opened the door, drank some water, and walked outside. We sat or lay naked against the walls of the lodge while inside.

During the second round we were asked to pray for others. As I don't believe in prayer, I wished that no other mother would experience the pain I went through during the years of Paul's mental illness and the horribleness of his death. I also wished that we would someday find

a cure for mental illness so the many people who had the disease could live a long good life. This was the first time I had ever articulated my hopes for others.

The leader asked us to throw something away into the fire during the third round. I threw away my worry, fear, and guilt. Then my vanity, then my tears. The fourth round was the shortest and the hottest. Instead of being asked to pray, we chanted and sang. We acknowledged our seven chakras with a different sound for each—ee, ah, oh ... going up and down the chakra scale a few times. We ended by singing “Amazing Grace.” By then I was ready to stop. The hut was so steamy from the wet heat that I couldn’t even see my way out.

Afterward, we dried off, dressed, and sat in our original circle again. Our leader asked us to share again. Then she asked me to do a special wish with a pipe full of tobacco. She asked me to go out into her well-lit front yard and give the tobacco to any tree outside and make my wish. I wished for peace for Paul and that I would someday, somehow see him again. I don’t really believe I will, but I wished for that all the same. I cried. The experience was cleansing. But because the twenty-five-mile drive from Manhattan Beach to the San Fernando Valley in traffic at night is too daunting, I never went back.

I sat spread-eagled facing the back of the narrow black leather chair-like contraption, wondering what the hell I was doing there. My bra strap was pulled down and I had one arm out of my white t-shirt to expose my right shoulder. Dan-O, the tattoo artist, had already checked the size and shape of the design he had prepared for me. “A little smaller,” I kept telling him until the five-pointed star was the size of a nickel, and he and I agreed exactly where he would place the tattoo on my shoulder. We had also picked the color. I looked over at his right

arm covered with flowers and leaves in bright colors like out of a Disney cartoon, and I pointed to an electric blue. “That color,” I said, just because I liked it.

I had put myself into that seat because two years before, I had announced to my long-time friends Wendy and Carole that I wanted to get a tattoo for my sixtieth birthday. They were both discussing theirs. Wendy has a little butterfly on her ankle and Carole wears a tiny red heart high on her right shoulder. Since, I’ve always been a me-too kind of person, I didn’t want to be left out.

But two years is a long time. If I had never mentioned it again, they wouldn’t have held me to my spontaneous proclamation. Only I—the mom who had spent many hours dissuading both of my sons from doing something to their bodies that they could be sorry for once they grew up—needed to follow through with it.

When I reminded Carole just before my sixtieth birthday—mind you this was my first birthday after Paul’s death and who knew if I was in my right mind—she decided to take over. Natural-born producer that she is, she found the tattoo parlor, the Black Wave on La Brea Avenue in Los Angeles, and the artist. And she arranged the afternoon.

On the Wednesday just after my birthday, she first took me to the eyebrow lady who plucked my eyebrows so thin I looked like I belonged in a silent movie. Then we had one of our usual calorie-conscious lunches at a favorite Italian restaurant a few doors away from the tattoo parlor. Leaving our cars parked in the restaurant’s parking lot, we walked to the Black Wave, carefully stepping around an old man sleeping so peacefully on the sidewalk he could have been in a bed at the Waldorf Astoria.

A young girl greeted us. Her smile emphasized her tongue, chin, and eyebrow jewelry. Her white skin perfectly offset the tattoos around her upper arms and ankles and on her lower back. Dan-O, a thirty-something blonde guy appeared. His bare arms were covered with tat-

toed drawings—his left arm not yet colored in. He said it would take about another year to finish the work on his body—or “canvas” as he liked to call it.

He was patient, gentle—like he had been through this kind of scene before.

“Have you ever tattooed a sixty-year-old woman before?” I had to ask.

“That’s about half my business,” he said.

I was amazed to hear this, but I pressed on.

“Does it hurt?”

“Not a lot,” he assured me.

“More than a bikini wax?”

He gazed at me and put his hand on his hip, “Well, I’ve never had one, but not from what I hear,” he said.

So, there I sat with my eyes tightly shut, clutching the chair back, and clenching my teeth together, and waited for the first jolt from his tattoo needle so I could finally find out for myself. Guess what? It hurt. It hurt a lot—like the rat-tat-tat of needles being shot from a Tommy gun. Fortunately, the hurt didn’t last very long.

When all is said and done I can say I got the tattoo because I wanted to prove I still had some life and adventure in me in the first few months after Paul died. I wanted to prove that I wasn’t dead, that Paul hadn’t killed every last drop of life left in me.

Most days I don’t remember that the tattoo is there. But I show it off proudly when I get a chance.

“Awesome,” a friend said when he saw it and found out I did it to celebrate my sixtieth.

Yeah! That’s right. It is awesome. Getting a tattoo, despite the pain brought me joy. And when Bob comes up behind me and kisses the blue star on my right shoulder, I know it was worth it.

I still have my fears. The greatest is that something bad will happen to Ben and Bob, and I'll be left alone. Bob has had health issues, which he keeps pretty much in check with medication, diet, and now with exercise. Yet, when he starts talking about getting his affairs in order and stopping to smell the flowers more, I worry about him. So it's a good thing that he's now working a little less, playing some golf once in a while, and ready to travel more.

My fears for Ben have always been irrational. I worry about losing him for any and every reason—driving on the freeway, flying, getting sick. He's my only son now—my only child. And I know if anything were to happen to him, it would be the end of me. That's a place I don't want to go. It's a place I mustn't go. And I don't know how to let go of that fear.

Even so, I've figured out a way to move on. I realize that I have a lot of giving left in me. I've worked in non-profit organizations for a long time—writing grant proposals, managing special events and capital campaigns, running development programs, and sitting on boards. That is extremely value-added work. And it helps my mental attitude. It feels good to volunteer. I get so much more from doing that than what I put in. I look forward to volunteering again possibly at Didi Hirsch. Working to overcome the stigma of mental illness and suicide is how I want to use my volunteer hours. I think I have a lot of experience along those lines. And I think that turning all my anger, sorrow, and fear into good works, is just what I need to stay healthy myself.

Tonglen Practice

It's the mothers and fathers I care about.

*When my son died, I grieved for him
and all mothers and fathers
who ever lost a child.*

*I breathed in pain
and with each exhalation asked
that no parent
would have to feel
the pain of such a loss again.*

But I can't do it alone.

*The mothers
and fathers
over all the world
must practice Tonglen with me.*

*We must take the pain into our bodies,
into our souls, into our hearts,
and cleanse it with our healing breath.
Then with our collective breathing out
give this world a chance
to be safe for all our children—
all our sons and daughters.*

*Breathe in, breathe out
now, forever,
breathe.*

EPILOGUE

.....WEDDING IN THE GARDEN



On a cool Saturday evening in August, 2010, Bob and I each held one of Ben’s hands in ours as we walked with him down the white rose petal-lined gravel path in our garden. Marissa and her mother and father followed. Debussy’s “Claire de Lune” played quietly in the background.

Tom, a teacher Ben and Marissa have known since their ninth grade at Crossroads School, waited for them under the tall palm trees to perform their marriage ceremony. Family and friends stood close in tight looking on.

The garden looked magical that night. The lush greenery accented with red, pink, and yellow flowering plants and the simple round gurgling water fountain twinkled with overhead lights and dangling crystals. And, after a day of gray skies, the sun shone bright and warm over the bridal couple—Ben in a black suit with white shirt and cream-col-

ored tie to match the off-white shade of Marissa's strapless gown. Ben had a white rose in his lapel, and Marissa wore a single jeweled feather in her pulled back dark hair. She carried a bouquet of white roses and peonies. A Buddha stood laughing in the background as if to make sure everything went without a hitch.

The ceremony was short and simple yet touching with symbolism. At the beginning, Tom lit a white candle anchored in a round, glass bowl to create a sacred space and signify the oneness of all gathered together for the event. The bridal couple sipped from the same bowl of water, a symbol of connection and sharing of the fundamental essence of life together, while Tom spoke the words of Tao Te Ching:

Your love is a great mystery. It is like an eternal lake whose waters are always still and clear like glass. Looking into it you can see the truth about your life. It is like a deep well whose waters are cool and pure. Drinking from it you can be reborn. You do not have to stir the waters or dig the well. Merely see yourself clearly and drink deeply.

Tom later wrapped a blanket around the couple to typify the union of two lives through cuddling.

Before Ben and Marissa exchanged rings, Tom asked every one of the guests to hold them in their fist and bless them. And at the end Ben broke the glass, a ritual typical in Jewish weddings. Tom told us a broken glass is forever changed into a new form, as is the newly married couple. The breaking of the glass also reminds us that the marriage should last beyond the time it would take to put the shards of glass together again.

Even though our loved ones both living and dead were honored in the ceremony Paul's presence was virtually non-existent that night—at

least for me. I had worried that I would miss having him there so much that it would ruin the evening for me, but that didn't happen. This was truly Ben and Marissa's night. I had lost my oldest son one month short of eleven years before Ben's wedding date, and his memory did not interfere with the happiness I felt at the prospect of a new daughter in my life.

I also marveled at the decisions we made along the way that allowed us to make this evening possible. That we decided not to sell our house was foremost. After all it was the place where Ben had grown up, and that he and his bride wanted to have their wedding in his family home meant so much to me. He had avoided being in our house for so long because of the bad memories. His choice to be married there showed how much recovered he is.

I also created the setting from whole cloth when I decided to transform Paul's room into my office. The laughing Buddha and the gurgling pond and plant assortments that I can see outside the office bay window were integral to the wedding ceremony. And whenever I sit at my desk writing now, I can look out and remember this happy time. It's as though I've made no space in my life for the bad memories. It's as though with the breaking of the glass my life and that of my family have forever changed as well.

Wedding in the Garden

*I never would have suspected
that the gravel path
weaving its way through our narrow garden
would become the wedding aisle.
Nor did I think the palm trees that grew
from babies would serve
as the backdrop for the ceremony.*

*And when all was said and done
every inch of our home
inside and out
the place where our sons grew up
the place of good memories
and bad
served as the perfect wedding venue.*

*Food displayed in the dining room
eating in the family and living rooms
and out on the deck,
dancing on the patio.
I am so glad I didn't listen
to the folks who said
you have to move
after Paul died.*

*I knew our house had more
joy to give.
After all,
it's the welcoming family home
where we've all come to grieve,
to laugh, to cry,
and to wipe our tears of happiness
after Ben and Marissa's beautiful wedding
in the garden.*



August 2010, Ben and Marissa's wedding (Guru Thapar photo)

RESOURCES

.....BOOKS, MAGAZINE, ORGANIZATIONS

BOOKS

Anne Brener: *Mourning & Mitzvah—A Guided Journal for Walking the Mourner's Path Through Grief to Healing*, Jewish Lights Publishing (1993)

Pema Chodron, *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times*, Shambala Publications (2000)

Joan Didion: *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Alfred A. Knopf (2005)

Marya Hornbacher: *Madness—A Bipolar Life*, Houghton Mifflin Co. (2008)

Kay Redfield Jamison: *An Unquiet Mind—A Memoir of Moods and Madness*, Alfred A. Knopf (1995)

Kay Redfield Jamison: *Night Falls Fast—Understanding Suicide*, Alfred A. Knopf (1999)

Susanna Kaysen: *Girl Interrupted*, Vintage Books (A Division of Random House, Inc.) (1993)

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MAGAZINE

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716-614-4673

ORGANIZATIONS

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention—national not-for-profit organization exclusively dedicated to understanding and preventing suicide through research, education and advocacy, and to reaching out to people with mental disorders and those impacted by suicide

<http://www.afsp.org>

800-273-TALK

Didi Hirsch Mental Health Services—transforms lives by providing quality mental health and substance abuse services in communities where stigma or poverty limits access

<http://www.didihirsch.org>

4760 S. Sepulveda Boulevard

Culver City, CA 90230

310-390-6612

Esalen Institute—a center for experimental education

<http://www.esalen.org/>

55000 Highway 1

Big Sur, CA 93920

831-667-3000

National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)—dedicated to improving the lives of individuals and families affected by mental illness

<http://www.nami.org>

3803 N. Fairfax Drive, Suite 100, Arlington VA 22203

Our House Grief Support Center—believes that grieving children and adults deserve the opportunity to begin the healing process in a safe, warm, nurturing environment

<http://www.ourhouse-grief.org/>

1663 Sawtelle Blvd., Suite 300

Los Angeles, CA 90025

310-473-1511

21860 Burbank Blvd., Suite 195

Woodland Hills, CA 91367

818-222-3344

The Compassionate Friends—for bereaved families and the people who care about them, following the death of a child

<http://www.compassionatefriends.org>

900 Jorie Boulevard

P.O. Box 3696

Oak Brook, IL 60522-3696

877-969-0010

Valley Village—Residential and day programs that protect, foster, develop, and advance the rights and interests of people with developmental disabilities.

<http://www.valleyvillage.org/>

20830 Sherman Way, Winnetka, CA 91306

818-587-9451

ADDENDUM

.....TERMS AND RECENT FACTS

TERMS USED IN THIS BOOK

Bipolar Disorder—a person with bipolar disorder experiences mood swings between mania and depression that are sometimes very rapid and that sometimes occur over weeks and months

Bipolar I—a person with bipolar I experiences debilitating manic episodes often accompanied by feelings of paranoia and psychotic hallucinations. This person cannot function fully on a daily basis. Long-term treatment is rarely successful and those with bipolar I are at risk of suicide.

Bipolar II—a person with bipolar II experiences mild mania and is able to function relatively well on a daily basis. Bipolar II is often characterized by impaired social behaviors and occupational challenges.

Schizoaffective Disorder—a person with schizoaffective disorder has the psychotic loss of contact with reality and the mood swings typical of those with bipolar I. However, this person can be expected to go back to their normal life with treatment.

Hypomania—an altered mood state with mild to severe symptoms of mania that may last from a few days to many months. Mania typically causes obvious problems in daily functioning and often leads to serious problems with a person’s relationships or ability to function at work. However, hypomania does not cause problems to such an extent.

RECENT FACTS ABOUT SUICIDE AND BIPOLAR DISORDER

1) *Rise in Suicide Rates in the Armed Forces*

In 2009*:

- ★ Three hundred thirty-four suicides in the armed forces, more than killed in Afghanistan or in Iraq.
- ★ Two hundred twenty-one suicides in the Army, National Guard and Army Reserve.
- ★ Forty-seven suicides of active duty personnel in the Navy, thirty-four in the Air Force, and thirty-four in the Marine Corp.
- ★ For every military death by suicide five military personnel are hospitalized for attempting suicide.
- ★ Twenty to thirty percent of veterans suffer some degree of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).
- ★ Hundreds of veterans die each year in auto accidents from fast driving or driving under the influence of alcohol.
- ★ Three hundred sixty thousand veterans have had some brain injuries because of bomb blasts while in Iraq or Afghanistan.
- ★ Rate of suicide doubled in the military between the years 2004 and 2009.
- ★ Sixty-four percent increase in military discharges because of mental disorders from 2005 to 2009.
- ★ One hundred twenty suicide deaths by September 2010 in the U.S. Army; thirty-two committed in the month of June.

Eighty-six non-active-duty Guard soldiers killed themselves in the first ten months of 2010 compared to forty-eight suicide deaths total in 2009.

In December 2010 the *Psychiatric Services* journal published results of the first large-scale study of suicide among female veterans. In comparing the rate of suicide among female civilians to the rate of suicide among female veterans, Mark Kaplan,

a Portland State University researcher, says, “Female veterans—age eighteen to thirty-four—are three times as likely as their civilian peers to die by suicide.” As a result, Kaplan wants people to take suicide among female vets more seriously. Because more women will work on the frontlines of war, an increase in female suicides is likely to follow.

*2) Rise in Suicide Rates in the General U.S. Population Aged Eighteen or Older***

- In 2009, 45,132 took their lives—a number greater than a normal population increase for the year; 29,350 people committed suicide in 1999 (the year Paul died).
- In the twenty to twenty-nine age group (Paul committed suicide at age twenty-seven), 5,028 took their lives in 2004 (last data available for that age group), and 4,684 people committed suicide in 1999.
- Suicide was the eleventh leading cause of death in the United States in 1999. It was also the eleventh leading cause of death in 1999.
- A person dies by suicide about every fifteen minutes in the United States.
- Every day, approximately ninety Americans take their own life.
- Ninety percent of all people who die by suicide have a diagnosable psychiatric disorder at the time of their death.
- Four male suicides are successful for every female suicide, but three times as many females as males attempt suicide.
- Eight million people had serious thoughts of suicide and one million attempted it in 2009.
- An estimated eight to twenty-five suicides are attempted for every suicide death.

*3) Recent Bipolar Facts****

- Approximately three percent of adults in the population have bipolar disorder. In the United States alone, approximately ten million people have bipolar disorder.
- Bipolar disorder can occur at any time, but usually begins before age thirty-five. People between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five years have the highest risk of developing this disorder. The median age of onset for bipolar disorders is twenty-five years. (Paul was twenty-one when he was diagnosed as bipolar I.)
- Bipolar disorder results in an over nine-year reduction in expected life span, and as many as one in five patients with bipolar disorder completes suicide.
- Thirty percent of people with untreated bipolar disorder commit suicide.

4) Change in Mental Health Insurance Coverage

The Paul Wellstone and Pete Domenici Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act was passed in 2008. This act declared that patients being treated for mental illnesses cannot be charged more out of pocket than they would be for general medical care. It also declared that mentally ill patients could not have their benefits limited for mental health and substance abuse services. The act protects consumers from insurance discrimination to the greatest extent possible.

5) Warning labels on Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitor (SSRI) Prescription Labels

After a study of children, adolescents, and young adults age eighteen to twenty-four (Paul was twenty-one when his doctors started prescribing these drugs) warning labels indicated “Clinical Worsening and Suicide Risk” in a Black Box on the label. Medication guides underneath the Black Box lists the following risks of these drugs:

- Thoughts about suicide or dying
- Attempts to commit suicide
- New or worse depression
- New or worse anxiety
- Feeling very agitated or restless
- Panic attacks
- Trouble sleeping (insomnia)
- New or worse irritability
- Acting aggressive, being angry, or violent
- Acting on dangerous impulses
- An extreme increase in activity and talking (mania)
- Other unusual changes in behavior or mood.
- In particular, the drugs that Paul took (although it is unknown about how much or for how long he took them) with these risks are:
 - Fluoxetine (Prozac)
 - Citalopram (Celexa)
 - Escitalopram (Lexapro)
 - Venlafaxine (Effexor)
 - Bupropion (Wellbutrin or Zyban).

* “Suicide claims more US military lives than Afghan war,” by James Cogan, 06 January 2010

** Sources: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, National Vital Statistics Reports

***National Institute of Mental Health



Madeline Sharples

Photograph by Paul Blieden

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Although Madeline Sharples worked most of her professional life as a technical writer and editor, grant writer, and proposal manager, she fell in love with poetry and creative writing in grade school. She pursued her writing interests to high school while studying journalism and writing for the high school newspaper, and she studied journalism in college. However, she only began to fulfill her dream to be a professional writer late in her life.

She co-authored a book about women in nontraditional professions called *Blue-Collar Women: Trailblazing Women Take on Men-Only Jobs* (New Horizon Press, 1994) and co-edited the poetry anthology, *The Great American Poetry Show*, Volumes 1 (Muse Media, 2004) and 2 (August 2010). She wrote the poems for two photography books, *The Emerging Goddess* and *Intimacy* (Paul Blieden, photographer). She is pleased that many of her poems have appeared online and in print magazines in the last few years.

Madeline and her husband of forty years live in Manhattan Beach, California, a small beach community south of Los Angeles. Her younger son Ben lives in Santa Monica, California with his bride Marissa.