

Legacy

By Greg Mahr

Virginia Woolf's suicide note to her husband is unusually generous. "You have given me the greatest possible happiness . . . If anybody could have saved me it would have been you."

Most people who kill themselves die emotionally intestate. Families and friends are left not only grieving but wondering "Why?" The people who loved them fill in the answers and usually blame themselves.

Those who do leave notes, or nowadays, videos, are rarely as gracious as Ms. Woolf. As the controversial show "Thirteen Reasons Why" depicts, those who leave suicide notes often use them as a tool to blame others. Blinded by their anger and sorrow, they leave a legacy of pain.

My son Steven is a psychologist; he spends his workdays doing therapy. I'm a psychiatrist. Therapy is something I do only reluctantly at this point in my career, preferring the safety of my electronic script pad or my academic role as a teacher.

Steven rarely talks to me about his work. It may be uncomfortable for him to have chosen a field so similar to mine. He is following in my footsteps, but walking a separate path. He realizes I am muddled and jaded by decades of painful experience. His work is his own; he is enthusiastic and alive with fresh knowledge.

Perhaps he also senses I don't really like to talk about my work. Now that he's a therapist, he understands how painful the work of therapy can be. He knows that two of my patients killed themselves; he knows many others think about it every day and might kill themselves at any moment. He knows that no matter how skillfully he or I do our work, our patients might commit suicide.

Maybe he wonders if I've gotten over those suicides, or, for that matter, if I've gotten over my heart attack, my divorce, my regrets. I don't talk about the sadness I battle every day—not always successfully. I try to pass on a legacy of joy, recovery and resilience, not defeat.

I despised my wife for many years before the divorce. We could never talk. Words became weapons, and I learned to not trust them. Maybe I shouldn't have stayed on. Maybe it was cruel to my ex, though she had such contempt for me I don't think she noticed my despair. Maybe I was being cruel to myself, but I didn't pay attention to that. I was, perhaps misguidedly, trying to protect Steven from the nightmare of shared custody and weekends alone with his mother. I waited till he was grown, and I felt like a sick old man.

After the divorce I felt better. I took up tennis again; I had been pretty good once. It felt like therapy, but it was cheaper and more fun.

Steven and I liked to play. The game lends itself to brief comments and questions: “Nice shot.” “Good backhand.” “How’s work?” We love the game too much to slow it down with chatter. The back and forth of the game is like dialogue, tennis let us communicate without talking.

Today was different. During a water break Steven started to tell me about work, though carefully and in general terms, without violating patient confidentiality. One of his clients had shown Steven the suicide note his father had written. The note was very “Woolfian” in tone. But this client’s father was more practical than Virginia, including many details about where files were stored and how to get discounts on car insurance and cell phone plans now that he would be on his own; surprising details to be considering at the time of death.

The note ended with a reminder to his son that life was worth living. “Though I have decided to end my life, that’s not how I feel about life in general, especially your life.”

Steven then asked me the kind of question one would ask a clinical supervisor rather than a dad. “I found myself with tears in my eyes, right in the middle of the session,” he told me. “Is that okay?”

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