

St
Martin
in
the
Fields



Time to Talk

A service of reflection for people affected by suicide

Saturday 27 February 2016

10.30am

St Martin-in-the-Fields, Trafalgar Square, London

Order of Service and Transcript of Words Spoken

Music: Eric Whitacre, *Hope, Faith, Life, Love* (based on a poem by E.E. Cummings) St Martin's Voices

Welcome: Rev. Dr Sam Wells

Opening Address: David Mosse

This is the second special service held at St Martin's for those affected by suicide. Thank you all for being here.

Since one utterly devastating afternoon 6 years ago when I learned of my own son's death, this country has lost more than 37,000 people to suicide.

We who are gathered here are just a few among the hundreds of thousands whose lives have been shaken to the core by suicide. We are weighed with the sorrow, the grief and the inner turmoil that suicide and its contemplation brings;

And we are here for the solace that togetherness can provide when we face tragedy that's not just unfathomable, but unspeakable and greatly stigmatised in our society.

We've just heard the beautifully sung words Hope, Faith, Life, Love; but each of us affected by suicide — parents, children, sisters, brothers, friends, colleagues and those facing a darkness within — knows what it means for these pillars of survival to be ripped away.

After my beloved Jake killed himself I had to face the truth that the love of a father was not enough to recover self-worth stripped by depressive illness; that inner pain could overwhelm the impulse for life itself; that faith or trust in the world or the future could be radically undermined; and that there exists a dreadful state of hopelessness — changeless despair, moving from 'pain to pain' in a world 'airless and without exits' (Al Alvarez)— a state of mind that makes positive thought or reaching out simply impossible.

What shocks many is that the thoughts of death that this brought to those like Jake were hidden— how many of us would say, 'we had no idea', 'we didn't understand the desperation', 'he was getting better?'

The wish to die is revealed to the bereaved as a terrible secret, hidden within from family and friends, perhaps by extraordinary effort, itself contributing to suicidal exhaustion. Nothing is more haunting than the later realisation that the person we loved had already disengaged from the world of the living.

Perhaps like others here, my own love and hope in life, and trust that things would improve meant that I simply couldn't understand the darkness and danger into which my dear Jake had fallen; I didn't know how to read the signs that there were; signs that did not warn. And that's why love brings unbearable guilt to the bereaved by suicide. Or sometimes just deep sadness.

But for many, knowing that the worst can happen also brings a new vigilance; a sensitivity and openness to others, an awareness of the fragility of life which is always lived with hidden layers.

And so we understand now that there is no way to know the risk facing another except by breaking through the concealment and daring to ask someone if they have thoughts of suicide.

We have all learned bitterly from suicide about the destructiveness of the human mind; but also that those who are intensely suicidal may be in that state for a short period of time; and many who have been pulled back from the edge are unbelievably grateful for the second chance they have been given.

Often those who are suicidal do not want to die; but rather experience emotional pain beyond the threshold of what is tolerable; they want to feel better but do not know how; and see no means to rebuild selves that have fallen apart; and cannot ask for help.

As survivors we ask the guilt-drenched ‘what-ifs’, ‘if onlys’, and ‘what could I have done’?— perhaps at some level trying to undo what cannot be undone — but herein is also hope that comes from knowledge that suicide is not inevitable.

Other lives can be saved. There are no easy solutions, but we can re-organise the way we think and listen, arrange education, health services and crisis support to make our families, our communities, our country and our world safer from suicide.

So during this short service we stand together to acknowledge the bewilderment of suicide and its painful aftermath and to remember how crucial we are to each other. The service has the shape of a journey in three parts.

The first part ‘Lost’ recalls the lostness that leads to suicide and the terrible loss of bereavement; the second part ‘The Valley’ recalls the obstacles placed before those who suffer a loss of self or the loss of loved ones: stigma, guilt, self-blame; and the third part ‘Found’ points to the recovery of self through connection to others, and by allowing our grief to become part of our living, our loving, healing and hopefulness.

We are all on our own journeys. Some are at the raw beginning – and our hearts go out to those recently bereaved, including the Morrissey family here today who lost their kind and loving 14-year old Ella at the end of November — for others, the pain of loss to suicide breaks through after years or decades.

May the words and music and fellowship that follow bring some comfort whatever your journey.

Music: Edward Elgar, *Sospiri op. 70* Brandenburg Sinfonia

I. Lost

Laying a rock: In these rocks we see brokenness, harshness, and pain. We see love crushed, a statue destroyed, a future shattered; but also the permanence of memory and of love.

Testimony: Sangeeta Mahajan

Four hundred and ninety-nine days.

That’s how long it’s been since our son Saagar left us. He was 20 years old. Apparently he left by choice. What sort of choice? I don’t know. I never will.

How did he get to that point?

How did we get through all these days and months without him?

I have no clue.

Life has been cleaved mercilessly into – ‘before’ and ‘after’. How can this unthinkable, unimaginable happening be for real?

That gorgeous naughty smile, that kind and generous heart – how can it just disappear?

The mind constantly goes back to 'before' and re-arranges events in order to eliminate the 'after'. But we are here - in the 'after' which feels like a tiny cage of barbed wire. Sitting here rudderless and alone, I am lost. I am not alone in the sense of being without people who love me but I am the only person who is his mother. I am lost without him. None of this makes any sense. This is not how it is supposed to be. It is not in the script.

Now what?

His drum kit, cricket bat, books, t-shirts, shorts and trainers are still here. I am still here.

In a way, he is here.

In our smiles and tears.

In the hearts of all those who love him.

Love.

Although my mind has doubted it, my heart knows it to be pure and eternal.

Like a river that starts as a glacier and ends as the ocean, love changes and flows.

When I want to see Saagar, I close my eyes and be with our love. The light of love comes through the barbed wire cage. In this light I can see the grief, guilt and anger as nothing but distortions of love. Just like white light is not a colour but the sum of all possible colours, love encompasses everything. If there were no love, there would be no sorrow. They are reflections of each other.

While engulfed in darkness, I see the light of love and hang on to it. It is my anchor in this choppy sea. I can depend on it. Like a night traveller navigating her way through the dark, love is my north star. I can trust it to always find me.

It is the light of love that has got us through the past 499 days.

As Rumi says - The wound is the place where the light enters you.

Music: Zoltán Kodály, *Kyrie from Missa Brevis*, St Martin's Voices and Brandenburg Sinfonia

Testimony: Jonny Benjamin

I was about 16 years old when I first began to contemplate suicide.

At the age of 10 I started hearing a voice in my head - I believed it was the voice of an angel and I liked the voice being there. It was something of a companion.

When I turned 16 though the voice changed from an angel to a devil and began to torment me. It challenged me to certain things, or else I would be punished.

Suddenly, living inside my head became rapidly unbearable.

Added to this was my increasingly low moods. They would come without warning and completely take over me. Sometimes I would feel overcome with so much emotion that I had no choice but to cry. Often there would be no reason, no trigger for it. And always I suffered secretly, in silence.

Simply put, I was embarrassed and ashamed. "You shouldn't be feeling like this," I kept telling myself. As a result everything was kept firmly locked inside.

It's amazing how much pain and suffering we can endure, and more than that, how much of it we can mask.

Not only was I hiding my mental turmoil, but I had begun to struggle with my sexuality too. Coming from a Jewish community where I was told that to be gay was a sin, I started to consider a way of escaping this existence I was living.

The first time I actually considered suicide, I was sitting in the back of my parents car, aged 16, driving to a family function. We passed by a graveyard. 'I want to be in there,' I said to myself. There was a sense of peace I saw in that graveyard that seemed so far removed from me as I sat in the car, full of hatred and anger and despair for myself.

But the worse was still to come.

During the next four years I passed my GCSEs, A-Levels, driving test and got a place at a prestigious drama school. Acting — particularly that transformation into other characters — proved a chance for me to escape from myself. Without it, I think I would have broken down much earlier.

But all the achievements my family and friends saw on the outside was a total contrast to what was happening to me internally.

I turned to self-harm and alcohol whilst trying various antidepressants. I spiralled gradually out of control.

By the first term of my third year, I could no longer contain the burden of everything I was holding onto and I broke down, going onto a dual carriageway near my student house and walking down the central reservation of it. I was psychotic, out of control and suicidal.

I was eventually taken to A&E and sometime after that admitted to a psychiatric hospital where I was diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder — a combination of schizophrenia and bipolar.

I spent a month in the hospital before I decided to run away and end my life.

There were lots of factors in my decision to do this— my sexuality, stigma, shame and embarrassment (yet again) but the prevailing factor was my belief that I would never ever recover.

These are the words of a poem I wrote to describe how this felt:

I wish that I could tell you,
I'm longing to explain,
Because the day to day would be easier,
If I could share a little of this pain.
It's not the words I'm looking for,
I have them all right here.
It's the courage I need to say them,
That is buried deep within my fear.

The fear of what you'll think,
The fear of what might change,
Or, maybe, it's the fear in me,
That I'll never find what I've lost again.

And that was exactly it— I convinced myself I was broken, unrepairable and past the point of no return.

So on 14th January 2008, just before my 21st birthday, I ran away from the hospital and came to a bridge near here to jump from the edge of it. But while on the edge I met a young man who tried to talk me down. Through his empathy, kindness, patience and compassion, and through his constant repetition of the simple statement, "Mate, I really believe you'll get better," he changed my mind about what I was about to do. Someone, a stranger, believed so strongly in me at a point when I had absolutely no faith left in myself.

That was the moment I found hope and the point my recovery started.

The last eight years have been tough at times. I've relapsed, been hospitalised and become suicidal again.

But I've also been able to achieve things too along the way. I led a successful campaign to find the stranger on the bridge which went viral and reunited me with the good Samaritan, Neil Laybourn, and recently I launched a new mental health workshops in schools which is going down really well. I now go into places like hospitals, prisons and businesses to share my experiences and encourage others to talk.

I want to do all I can to break the shame and silence around mental health, and especially suicide.

I wanted to finish off by saying that on the way up to the bridge that day, I prayed desperately for my family. I prayed the whole way there. I said, "God, I don't want them to feel guilty or responsible in any way." I just felt I really wanted to share that with all of you here today.

And to finally end, I later added a final verse to the poem you heard earlier:

What if it has gone,
Never to come back?
Not all things return once apart.
Well then we'll just create a new beginning.
There's no limit to the infinite times we can restart.

Thank you.

Music: Ryan Keen, *Aiming for the Sun*

II. The Valley

Lighting a candle: In this candle flame we see fragility, possibility; the shadow of what is half-known, half-understood, still mourned.

Testimony: Angela Samata

The Early Days

The early days may have been over a dozen years ago now, but how easily my mind slips back to that time.

In the early days after you'd gone, we pulled together and tried to navigate our way through the strange, new, misty land that we found ourselves unexpectedly inhabiting. It was a world of little sleep and many, many unanswered questions.

Those early days of numbness of shock; days of wondering where you were, half expecting you to walk through the door, wondering why everyone one had descended on our house, the living room, crammed with faces from our past and long, restless nights of wishing that the morning would bring an end to this worst of nightmares.

The early days of painful phone calls, breaking the news to unsuspecting family and friends – their voices lifting as they heard mine, then dropping as my tone revealed the terrible message I had to deliver. I spent the remainder of most of those calls managing their grief and reassuring them, and then falling apart a little after the receiver went down.

The early days when I held our children as they cried for you, wondered if my tears would ever come, and once they did, I wondered if they would ever stop. Our babies have grown since those early days into handsome towering men, but it was in the valley of my grief that my mind turned to them and the legacy of your parting; a legacy that stays with me even today.

The early days when I discovered the kindness of strangers and friends and my previously unknown ability to drink vast quantities of tea while surviving on a diet of toast!

The early days when it felt like you belonged to everyone else-to the people in suits and uniforms who'd never heard your voice or witnessed your beautiful smile.

In the early days I'd often catch a glimpse of you, just the side of your profile as I went about my daily business. My heart would quicken as I saw you just turn a corner ahead of me, but of course it wasn't you. It was my wishful thinking.

As the shock of the early days turned into the slow, painful realisation that I'd never speak to my lover again, so the pain in my chest lowered into my stomach and stayed there until those early days turned into years. And, although I could feel a change, the end of the early days, I still couldn't be the last person to close our front door.

To be added: Writer Matt Haig "I have a thin skin. I think it comes from the fact that I suffer from depression from time to time. I had a breakdown years ago. And if the stone falls hard enough the ripples last a lifetime. The bottom of the valley never provides the clearest view."

Music: Henry Purcell, *Dido's Lament* from *Dido and Aeneas*, Helen Stanley (mezzo soprano) and Brandenburg Sinfonia

When I am laid, am laid in earth, May my wrongs create
No trouble, no trouble in thy breast;
Remember me, remember me, but ah! forget my fate.
Remember me, but ah! forget my fate.

Silent reflection

Music: Arvo Pärt, *Da Pacem Domine*, St Martin's Voices

Testimony: Clare Milford Haven

The day after my 21 year old son James died, on a bleak and cold December evening 10 years ago, I went up to his bedroom just to sit, just to smell his familiar smell, and to start the lengthy process of coming to terms with the fact that I would never see my eldest son again.

Bizarrely, our family dog was also sitting in his room. She knew something was up, something bad, and she too had gone up there perhaps to try and make some sense of the whole thing. And we sat there together. Just Purdey and me.

It was a very sad and difficult moment for us both.

My other son, Harry, came into James's bedroom and I asked him if he was ok? He said he was ok but he was worried about me. He said that he was worried that James's death would destroy me and if it did, it would destroy everything.

It was at that moment that I realised what a huge responsibility I had as the mother and mainstay of the family. That I had to keep the show on the road, in particular, for my remaining children, Harry and Louisa, but also for my extensive, close family, and dearest friends.

Things had to be as *normal* as possible. But I asked myself, how on earth was I going to do this when a child I had given birth to had died and my heart had been shattered into a million pieces?

By chance, I had been given a book by a friend of mine who had also lost a child - Victor Frankl's famous account of his harrowing years as a prisoner of war in Auschwitz, '*Man's Search for a Meaning*'. It was within this book that I found the answer in one short paragraph:

"Forces beyond your control can take away everything you possess, except for one thing, your freedom to choose how you will respond to the situation. You cannot control what happens to you in life, but you can always control what you will feel and do about what happens to you."

You can always control what you will feel and do about what happens to you....

I turned this sentence over and over in my head. It made sense but how achievable was it when, at the time, everything seemed so out of control and nothing seemed to make sense anymore. James's death was not a part of my life plan. Why had it happened to us? Why, why, why???

And it became very apparent, very early on, that when someone you love dies by suicide, it is a different kind of grief altogether. It is a grief compounded by an overriding painful emotion, *guilt*. Guilt about the fact that you didn't realise what was about to unfold. Guilt about the fact that you couldn't save someone you love more than life itself in their darkest hour.

And you carry this sack of guilt with you everywhere – to bed, when you wake up, to the supermarket, to your office, on holiday, on a lovely walk with the dogs, to your friend's party when someone says something funny and you wonder if it's ok to laugh again...

And it's heavy as hell. So heavy, you feel that it might crush you.

And you feel that you may never see the joy in life again because you are so weighed down.

But then gradually, as the days, weeks, months and years pass, the load suddenly starts to become lighter, you stop beating yourself up on a daily basis and you slowly start to feel more 'normal'.

Like today, you meet other parents and families who are going through a similar process and you begin to feel less isolated, less alone.

You start to give back to others.

You start to find moments of peace again.

You start to feel the joy in life again.

You never ‘*get over it*’, you ‘*get on with it*’ and you never ‘*move on*’ but you ‘*move forward*’ and you start to absorb the intense pain that such a loss brings in its wake and you begin, very, very slowly to accept.

And as you accept, you realise that although life as you knew it will never be the same again, like a butterfly emerging from its chrysalis, you come out of the darkness into the light, a little weary, but this time, God has given you wings.

Grief by Gwen Flowers

I had my own notion of grief
I thought it was a sad time
That followed the death of someone you love
And you had to push through it
To get to the other side.
But I’m learning there is no other side.
There is no pushing through.
But rather,
There is absorption.
Adjustment.
Acceptance.

And grief is not something that you must complete.
But rather you endure.
Grief is not a task to finish,
And move on,
But an element of yourself –
An alteration of being.
A new way of seeing.
A new definition of self.

III. Found

Placing a rose: In this rose we see gentle beauty, still with thorns that pierce; yet deep tenderness, hopefulness, deeper truth.

Reading: Siobhan Stamp

In Blackwater Woods by Mary Oliver

Look, the trees
are turning
their own bodies
into pillars

of light,
are giving off the rich
fragrance of cinnamon

and fulfillment,
the long tapers
of cattails
are bursting and floating away over
the blue shoulders

of the ponds,
and every pond,
no matter what its
name is, is

nameless now.
Every year
everything
I have ever learned

in my lifetime
leads back to this: the fires
and the black river of loss
whose other side

is salvation,
whose meaning
none of us will ever know.
To live in this world

you must be able
to do three things:
to love what is mortal;
to hold it

against your bones knowing
your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it
go,
to let it go.

Music: Ennio Morricone arr. Craig Stella John, *Gabriel's Oboe*, St Martin's Voices and Brandenburg Sinfonia

Closing address: Revd Dr Sam Wells

What Hasn't Changed

The experience of losing a loved one to suicide is a kind of trauma. It can be years, decades maybe before the wound becomes less raw, before you regain the trust that today won't bring such horror, before you can breathe without feeling your lungs incapable of taking in the air the world has to give you. And for those who've come close to taking their own life, there remains a lingering wound about what it's like to get into a place where suicide seems the only, even the right, step.

Such trauma reduces most of us to silence. And so today is a day for coming together and saying, perhaps in just a few words, those things we still know to be true, even when so much else feels so fragile and tentative.

What things do we still know to be true? If you pick up a Bible, and open it around about the middle, you won't find yourself amid the parables and stories of Jesus. You'll land in the middle section of the book of Isaiah. You'll find yourself amid the realities of what the people of Israel were experiencing in exile. They'd been invaded, Jerusalem destroyed, and they'd been carried off a thousand miles east to Babylon. They'd been through profound trauma. And in the forty-third chapter of Isaiah comes a moment of rock bottom, when they look at one another and look at God, and work out what they can know for certain.

And what they settle on are what for me are some of the most tender and cherished words, not just in the Bible, but anywhere. The people ponder their story, how they were created and liberated, how God walked with them and made sacrifices to be with them. And then come the vital words. It's the moment when you discover what's at the very heart of everything – why the Bible was written. It's the discovery that offers a gentle, tender way out of trauma, and a purpose to our existence. It's these twelve words: 'You are precious in my sight, and honoured, and I love you.'

Precious; honoured; and loved. Everything we want to say to our loved ones who've been taken away from us. Everything we need to hear when we're in the slough of despond. Precious, honoured, and loved. See how all three words count. On its own 'precious' sounds fragile, like a china doll: it says don't come too close, I can break. But with the second word, precious means much more. It says, 'I am of infinite value, I am unique, I am without compare.' And on its own 'honoured' sounds dry, dutiful, obligatory, somewhat soulless. But with the first word it says, 'I deserve respect, I have my own integrity, there's more to me than simply my relationship with you.'

But then we add the third word, 'loved.' Now on its own love may not be such a great word. It can be a word of superficiality, manipulation, exaggeration, cliché – a word easily dismissed through over-familiarity. To be loved without being regarded as precious and without being honoured isn't actually all that nice. But when you are all three – precious, honoured, and loved – then you've found the secret at the heart of all things. It's everything we want to say to those we miss so terribly. It's everything we need to hear when we're shrouded in a blanket of despair. Precious, honoured, and loved.

I've never forgotten the night my father put the phone down and came upstairs ashen-faced, after getting the news that the man he'd been brought up with the man he thought of as a brother had gone into the woods with a shotgun and not come back. I'd never seen him so sad. 'Philip' he said, and shook his head, and no more words came out – but his face told the rest. And then he did something I never remember him doing before or after: he turned me towards him, and put his hands on each of my shoulders, and looked straight at me. We were male and British, and I was just a child, and words were not the way we expressed what lay between us. But what he was saying, I now realise, was 'You are precious, honoured, and loved. Never forget it. I'm telling you now, because I never found a way to tell Philip. Make sure you tell those you need to tell, while you still can.'

My father bore the scar of that day for the rest of his life. Many, perhaps most, people here today know what such a scar feels like. Today is a day in the silence of your hearts, for saying gently, quietly, to those who chose to end their lives, 'You are precious, honoured and loved.' It's never too late to say it, to realise again how deeply you mean it, and to write those words into the eternal memory of the one you have lost.

But it could be those words of Isaiah aren't so much the words you need to say as the words you need to hear. You've been through profound trauma. But three things haven't changed: You are precious. You are honoured. You are loved. Now. And forever.

Hymn: Abide With Me

Music: Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, *Laudate Dominum* from *Vespers* Hilary Cronin (soprano), St Martin's Voices and Brandenburg Sinfonia