



Time to Talk

A service of reflection for people affected by suicide

Saturday 28th February 2015, 10:30am

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

Order of Service and Transcript of Words Spoken

Music: Purcell, *Chancony in G Minor*, St Martin's Voices and Brandenburg Sinfonia

Welcome: Rev.Dr Sam Wells

Opening Address: David Mosse

We've come together this morning in a beautiful church in the heart of a great city to acknowledge how we've been touched by the deepest of human tragedies – suicide. Thank you for being here.

Let me first just explain the structure of the service. The words and music to follow will accompany a shared journey in three parts.

First, the experience of *lostness*: the tragic loss of self, loss of worth, of hope, of trust, of human connectedness that precedes suicide; and the terrible loss of those bereaved by suicide.

Second, the experience of exhaustion, depletion and isolation that can impede the road to recovery, or lead to unresolved grief. In this imagined high-sided *valley*, guilt, stigma and self-blame are among the obstacles placed before those who suffer a loss of self or the loss of loved ones, making it hard to reach out for help.

The final part of the journey in this service, is about being *found*- the recovery of self through connection to others, paths to healing and places of sanctuary; living with loss, but remembering with gratitude.

We will all I'm sure have different stories to weave into this shared journey.

Today, five years ago my beloved son, Jake was, I now realise, planning his own imminent end. Neither I nor any of his closest of friends, nor his brother who was so dear to him, could have imagined that this loving, talented young man would contemplate his own death.

Jake is not with us to explain why he felt there was no other choice available to him (when we can see so many); and even now his suicide has an unreality about it. Those here who've experienced this terrible bereavement will understand what I mean when I say that for me, one reality ended that day; and another reality began.

Suicide tore through and ruptured the story of my life and of my family, as it has for so many. For a moment, I imagined that I experienced a shadow of the pain that made Jake himself think of oblivion. We will listen to beautiful music in this service, but there is absolutely nothing beautiful about suicide.

Like others, I not only face the deep sadness of the loss of my darling son, but have a second — sometimes overpowering — grief for the manner in which he died: his suicide. Out of the trauma and confusion of suicide comes the repeated question, why?

How could this have happened? Why was he not stopped? We may ask whether we truly knew the person who is gone? How could distress so deep as to lead to suicide be invisible? We look back painfully to try to name the 'warning signs' that hindsight offers, we ruminate

on the 'if only's'; suicide leaves us unbearably powerless. But there are no reliable signs of impending suicide; every suicide comes as a shock. If we are not careful, as we strain to explain, suicide can colour the memory of those we loved, robbing us of their past as well as their future.

Like others, I've begun a life-long search for understanding?

I've learned about the distorting mental processes of severe depression; the fragility of male strength; the dangers of perfectionism, or self-worth conditional on achievements; the perils of isolation, entrapment, and fear of humiliation.

I've learned that humans are moved to self-harm both by passing impulsiveness and by deeper drum beats of the psyche of which we are hardly aware. I'm no expert, but I've also learned some things that suicide probably is not:

It's not a choice as we normally understand choice, but comes out of a state of mind simply unable to think of alternatives; incapable of imagining a positive future, or reaching out to those most loved.

Suicide is not a wish to be dead or to abandon us. The end that those who are suicidal seek is not of life itself, but of torturous emotional pain — in many cases the result of severe depression. When I and others look back on the lead-up to the death we grieve, we see clear signs of the desire for life.

Today, I know what I didn't know then, which is that asking someone you're worried about directly about suicidal thoughts or plans - the thing we might most fear asking - is the safest thing to do.

I know for many here, out of grief and the struggle to understand comes the conviction that suicide is not inevitable; that lives can be saved, that individually and collectively we can be attentive to the needs of those in pain; the many who suffer grievous emotional injury but who are unable to see their suffering as treatable, and do everything in their power to avoid a stigmatising diagnosis of mental illness, and so cannot or will not seek the help they desperately need.

Many touched by suicide are now working with hope to make our communities and institutions more alert to those who are vulnerable.

And I think many living with loss know of nothing more powerful, as a force for healing, both for those who are vulnerable and for those who are bereaved than to share with others and to know that we are not alone. And that is the purpose of this service.

Music: Brahms, *Geistliches Lied*, Op. 30, St Martin's Voices and Brandenburg Sinfonia

1.Lost

Testimony

I have always thought that I could become anything I wanted in life; indeed, in many ways I have achieved everything I wished for. I am a neuroscience researcher, an author, a poet. I have a loving husband and a supportive family. Why would anyone willingly throw them all away? Yet, I tried on several occasions to end my existence - which, to many others, was full of promise and potential.

There was no sadness, no misery, no pain or despair. No tears, no moods or grudges. It was already a state of pure nothingness in my mind and the only thing left for me to do was to reflect such nothingness via my physical absence. An eternal absence, where there would be no self, no volition or will. Then there came the ambivalence and the confusion. Something - someone – was forcing me to do it. I do not believe that anyone was in full control of themselves when they ended their own life; I do not believe anyone's sense of reality was intact when they took that final step.

Sadly, this is the reality of suicide. The only reality which engulfed my entire being, the only reality where I could finally be at peace with my own mind which seemed anything *but* my own. So please don't say that I was selfish; there was no self of mine left. Please don't say I was a coward; it required immense strength to override the life instinct. I could be a thought in someone else's head whose termination would have no real-life consequences. I could be a dream within a dream. And all I wanted was to wake up.

If possible, please remember that even in a world of thoughts, you will still need to be alive in order to think; if possible, please remember that even in a state of pure nothingness, you can still hold on to the reality where your true self resides. And that, perhaps, is one of the reasons why I am here today.

Poem: *Counterbalance*

I see the brilliance in a passionate life
I see my future ahead of me
I must continue living
To reach the final destination

I hear the voices of logic and reason
I hear the noises of my cells withering
I must die again and again
To prove that life is infinite

An incomplete paradox

I saw the trails of a crimson tide
I saw the amorphous clouds in the sky
Should I keep flying,
Or should I descend?

I heard the thunders underneath my skin
I heard the painful songs of my brain
Can I sign a full stop,
Or can I win the fight?

A subconscious dichotomy

I will see the nightmares of a child
I will see the wings of time and space
Maybe they are not my own thoughts
Maybe I am just one step away

I will hear the melody of the ending
I will hear the isolated laughter from my psyche
Only if I was closer to the edge
Only if I wasn't denied reality

A perfect counterbalance

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

Testimony: James Withey

My name is James Withey. It's an honour to be here today.

I've lost friends to suicide and I almost lost myself.

I am going to talk for a few minutes about what led me to try and take my own life, my experience of staying at the Maytree Sanctuary and how I manage my ongoing recovery.

I have brought a stick with me, I'll explain why in a little later.

I went from delivering suicide prevention training to being on 5 minute suicide watch in a psychiatric hospital. In 2010 I moved from Scotland to Brighton with my partner, a stressful move in itself but then things started to unravel, I couldn't find work, we couldn't get a mortgage again, my partner was made redundant and had to take a job in Ireland only coming back every other weekend. When I did find work it was teaching part time in health and social care at a further education college (my background is in addiction and training).

A few months after starting the job I was teaching another class and had to discipline a female student who was breaking college rules, a few days later I was told she had accused me of sexual misconduct, I was shattered. My sleep started to be affected, I couldn't concentrate, found it hard to cope, I kept crying, had panic attacks and felt displaced. When a new full time job turned out to be a huge mistake I had constant thoughts of suicide, I made plans to kill myself the following week and I broke. (Break the stick)

Suicidal thoughts happen when pain exceeds resources, all I could feel was pain and I needed a way for it to stop, nothing else mattered. I started walking in front of cars, getting dangerously close to passing trains and eventually taking an overdose of sleeping pills. I went to A and E where the initial Doctor I saw couldn't look me in the eyes when I told her I wanted to kill myself and after a six hour wait the mental health nurse I saw told me I was too sensitive and I was sent home. The following day I went to my GP who sighed as if I was wasting his time when I said I was still suicidal, he called the crisis team and told me to sit in the corridor to wait for them.

One of the training courses I used to deliver was called ASIST which helps people intervene when someone is at risk of killing themselves, and this is how I heard about Maytree. In my darkest hour I called them and made plans to stay. I needed a place where I could talk about my suicidal thoughts, where I didn't feel ashamed of my thoughts and space to look at what had happened to me and maybe how I could keep living. Maytree is truly a sanctuary; I was cared for, meals prepared, a comfortable bed and support on tap but I also had my independence. I could cycle around London, see family and had my medication with me. This is contrasted with my time in a psychiatric hospital after a suicide attempt which felt like a necessary prison.

One night I felt very suicidal, I wanted to leave, I wanted to run in front of a car; a Maytree volunteer sat with me, he didn't barricade me in, he didn't phone the police, he just sat with me, he told me he wanted me to stay, he listened, he was beside me. I felt that I could never recover from depression or my experiences, but during a one to one session with a worker she told me she thought I had been crushed but not obliterated and some light started to seep through. These two events stand out to me during my time as catalysts for change but so did the empathy and care of every volunteer and staff member; the offer of a drink, a smile, giving me eye contact and seeing me as James, as a fellow human who was hurt but still here and valid. They saw me as having worth when I despised myself.

My life after Maytree has been up and down but it gave me crucial hope, it spoke to the life part of me as well as the part whose soul had been crushed, it gave me a foundation for recovery. I now work part time in a library, I write, I cycle, I try and remember who I am not the depression that I suffer from. I think about those who didn't make it.

We are all few steps away from suicidal thoughts and actions. We need more places like Maytree, we need spaces where people can go and talk about their trauma, we need to stop the shame of suicidal thoughts and suicide itself, we need to work together, support one another and remember those who have left us. We need to come together because suicide separates us from those that we love. We need to realise that stressful life events and mental health issues are life threatening illnesses. We need to make sure that when the stick breaks there are people and places to and help us start to mend it.

This talk is for Neil who really tried to make it and couldn't.

Music: Ryan Keen, *Aiming for the Sun*

II. The Valley

Reading: Hamish Elvidge, excerpt from *The Healing of Sorrow: Understanding and help for the bereaved* by Norman Vincent Peale. New York: Inspirational Book Service, 1966

'A few days ago, when a young man died by his own hand, a service for him was conducted by his pastor, the Rev. Warren Stevens. Here are some of his words:

"Our friend died on his own battlefield. He was killed in action fighting a civil war. He fought against adversaries that were as real to him as his casket is real to us. They were powerful adversaries. They took toll of his energies and endurance. They exhausted the last vestiges of his courage and strength. At last these adversaries overwhelmed him. And it appeared that he lost the war. But did he? I see a host of victories that he has won!

For one thing -- he has won our admiration -- because even if he lost the war, we give him credit for his bravery on the battlefield. And we give him credit for the courage and pride and hope that he used as his weapons as long as he could. We shall remember not his death, but his daily victories gained through his kindnesses and thoughtfulness, through his love for family and friends, for animals and books and music, for all things beautiful, lovely and honorable. We shall remember the many days that he was victorious over overwhelming odds. We shall remember not the years we thought he had left, but the intensity with which he lived the years he had!

Only God knows what this child of His suffered in the silent skirmishes that took place in his soul. But our consolation is that God does know and understands!"

Music: Purcell, *Dido's Lament from Dido and Aeneas*, St Martin's Voices 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 Part, *Da Pacem Domine*, St Martin's Voices and Brandenburg Sinfonia

Testimony: Shirley Smith

Suicide - prior to March 2005 it wasn't something I had ever had to give consideration to. A word that I possibly came across on the rare occasions I would attempt a crossword. It wasn't something that I knew a lot about, and why should I?

Our lives changed forever on 28 March 2005, when our eldest and much loved Son, Daniel took his life aged 19 years. There were no signs, no build up to that day. He was just a "normal" 19 year old.

For me personally as Dan's Mum, I felt responsible for his death; that I had missed so much and should have seen his inward struggle. Struggling to deal the intensity and complexity of the impact of Dan's death, it hit our family and whole community with the ferocity & fall out of an Atom bomb.

The rollercoaster of thoughts in my head churned over and over revolving from sadness to anger, longing to desperation, and an overwhelming need to know WHY? WHY? WHY?

I too felt suicidal and then the pangs of guilt would smash through my head, how could I feel that way, when my other two boys and Husband, needed me now more than ever. Daniel consumed every minute of every hour of every day and on the rare occasions I became distracted from these thoughts, I felt guilty for not feeling "the pain."

In 2005 shortly after Dan's death His two brothers Matthew aged 10 & Ben 5 Years along with Niece Sarah aged 12, were supported by a family friend, Suzanne, who was a Samaritan. The Children wanted to try and prevent others experiencing a similar loss and started a campaign to raise awareness of the charity and encourage people to talk about their feelings - if U Care Share. They truly believed that Dan's death had been preventable and had he spoke of how he was feeling, that the outcome could and would have been different.

In 2010 the If U Care Share Foundation was founded with 3 aims prevention & intervention of suicide through training and support for those bereaved by a suicide.

To date 11,000 young people under the age of 21 years have taken part in our Emotional and Mental Health workshops. We truly believe that often people don't want to die, but for seconds they forget how or why they should live. Our message is

There is always a way!

We provide now provide training in schools in County Durham and League Football Education and the Premier league in Clubs throughout the country.

We have supported 48 people at risk of suicide; We have equipped over 500 adults with Emotional Mental health awareness skills & launch our suicide prevention & postvention training in May 2015. We have provided practical and emotional support to people 380 touched by suicide and are providing services on behalf of Public Health in our area working with Police to provide support directly after a suspected suicide to offer support within 48 hours..

We now work alongside other families who are members of a very special group called TASC, most of those involved in TASC have suffered a similar loss many of whom are here today, and although we are all different and the relationships we shared with those we lost are unique, we are united today not only to remember those that we loved but United in our strength to change the outcome for others. To show that suicide is not inevitable, that it is indeed preventable.

A decade after Dan's death having worked with hundreds of people touched by suicide I now know that the myriad of feelings, given the enormity of our loss were and still are, understandable!

Time was not a great healer, however time allowed me to cope differently. Time allowed hope to enter into my life again and whether it was hope that the pain would one day be bearable, or that I would just have hope and nothing else, hope entered back into our lives like a long lost friend.

Einstein said that we should "learn from yesterday, live for today and hope for tomorrow."

We do not want Daniel's life to be defined by the way in which he died but how he lived. He was witty intelligent with an infectious presence, his manners and strength and warmth for people made him a very popular young man and his 19 years on this earth were special years, and with his love surrounding us I now have learned to live with hope in my heart & hope that we continue our journey united in our determination to make suicide preventable.

II. Found

Reading: Siobhan Stamp, *Snowdrops* by Louise Glück in *The Wild Iris*. Manchester: Carcanet. 1992

Do you know what I was, how I lived? You know
what despair is; then
winter should have meaning for you.

I did not expect to survive,
earth suppressing me. I didn't expect
to waken again, to feel
in damp earth my body
able to respond again, remembering
after so long how to open again
in the cold light
of earliest spring—

afraid, yes, but among you again
crying yes risk joy

in the raw wind of the new world.

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

Closing address: Revd Dr Sam Wells

Gentleness is an old-fashioned word. It used to be a way of talking about class and refinement, shrouded in terms like genteel, gentleman, and gentility. But gentleness isn't an outdated virtue. Gentleness is perhaps the most important thing we're talking about today. I want to describe what gentleness means and why it's so important.

To be affected by suicide is to be surrounded by enemies. The enemy of memory, sometimes; the enemy of fears; the enemy of isolation, and shame, and guilt and regret; the enemy of loss, failure, doubt – the unknown. It's not hard to feel powerless and out of control when it feels like there are so many enemies.

One of the most paradoxical of all the sayings in the Bible is, 'My strength is made perfect in weakness.' It's not the kind of thing alpha males say. But what it shows us is that the way to address our vulnerability, our fear, and our self-destructiveness is not with some great show of strength. It's through making friends with our weakness. And the name for that is gentleness.

It's all very well to say, 'Be gentle with yourself.' But what does that mean? I'm going to suggest three things, more or less in order.

The first is silence. Silence can feel like a great enemy, because if you stop moving, or talking, or tuning in to some kind of gadget, then your mind can go into overdrive. But silence can become a friend if it turns from being a place of absence to a theatre of presence. Silence is for listening to the abundance of what's out there, birds that sing and tweet, breezes that stir and swing, a tiny, busy world of insects and creatures. Silence is for watching, paying attention to texture, depth, hidden beauty and delicate detail, wispy cloud, distant blue sky and intricate snowflake. Time, instead of being a threat or a diminishing commodity, becomes irrelevant. In silence a minute or an hour are the same. In short, silence heals and reconnects because it takes you out of yourself, places you in a much larger, more wonderful and more elaborate universe. Silence stops being the interval between distraction and starts being the place of exhilarating, infinite discovery. It's a fruit of gentleness.

The second thing gentleness means is touch. Many of the feelings associated with suicide are violent, sudden ones. Gentleness embraces those feelings but issues in tender touch. Holding a person's hand says, 'I am here. This is good. You can trust me. I'm not going to run away. I'm not in any hurry. Your body, your life (whatever you might be feeling), your presence, your hand – it's good. I'm not going to grab it. I'm going to cherish it. Holding your hand I can feel the mystery of your flesh, the blood coruscating in your veins, the warmth and softness and creativity of your fingers. These are mysterious and wondrous things. We were made for solidarity. We were made to stand by each other in times of distress and sorrow. No one is an island. Together we are a continent. Those are the tender things touch teaches. They are the fruit of gentleness.

And then when you've made a foundation of silence and touch, then you can begin to try words. In the absence of silence and touch, words can seem disembodied, arbitrary, meaningless. But if you have made friends with silence and trusted yourself to find good ways to touch, words don't have to do too much work. Actions have already spoken. Understanding is already there. Words can be the icing, and not the cake. They may be things you've never said before, things you think may shock the listener, or even yourself, things you're not proud of, things that may not make a lot of sense. Words are faltering attempts to give feelings, and images and ideas a name. If they're surrounded by silence and touch, those words usually come out very gently. Harsh words hurt. Gentle words heal.

Suicide is overwhelming because it brings together so many of the terrifying things about existence. If you've considered it, worried about a loved one who seems close to it, or have been hurt by bereavement through it, it may seem that happiness is way out of reach. Perhaps it is. But the truth is, happiness is seldom found by people who go looking for it. It's only discovered on the way by people who are seeking something more important. Silence, touch and words are that something more important. They're the way God loves us. They're the way to show solidarity to one another. They're the way to dismantle the enemies that sometimes seem to surround us. They're the way to be gentle with ourselves. They're the way, slowly, carefully, cautiously, to learn to live again.

Hymn: *Lord of All Hopefulness*

Music: Gabriel Faure, *Pavane*, St Martin's Voices and Brandenburg Sinfonia

Please join us for refreshments after the service

With thanks

This service has been made possible because of the generous support of members of the Alliance of Suicide Prevention Charities.

For information about the work of the Alliance please visit www.tasc-uk.org Thanks also to St-Martin-in-the-Field for hosting Time to Talk.

Support organisations

After the service there is an opportunity to speak with representatives from the following organisations:

CALM (Campaign Against Living Miserably)

www.thecalmzone.net

Helpline 0800 58 58 58

Cruse Bereavement Care

www.cruse.org.uk

Helpline 0844 477 9400

Maytree (sanctuary for the suicidal)

www.maytree.org.uk

020 7263 7070

Papyrus (prevention of young suicide)

www.papyrus-uk.org Helpline

0800 068 41 41

Samaritans

www.samaritans.org

Helpline 08457 90 90 90

Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide

www.uk-sobs.org.uk

Helpline 0300 111 5065

Winston's Wish (for bereaved children and young people) www.winstonswish.org.uk

Helpline 08452 030405

The contact details of a wide number of bereavement support organisations, along with guidance and resources, are available at: www.suicidebereavementsupport.com

If you are experiencing mental distress please speak with your GP.