

FROM GRIEF TO GRACE

FINDING HEALING AND REDEMPTION AFTER SURVIVING SUICIDE

By Sipho Simelane

It was early morning and I was sitting with my wife after dropping the kids at school. The phone rang and it was my older sister on the other side saying, "Dad is gone, he hung himself at home." Immediately the phone went silent. I knew my sister was not playing because of her tone and the brief message. Usually she'd ask about the weather, the kids and life when calling, but not today. I called her back a few seconds later and she confirmed that indeed our father had successfully taken his life by hanging himself in the kitchen at home.

That started my endless free fall through grief. That morning, my father Enoch Mzikayifani Simelane died not a natural death but a "shameful death" at the ripe age of 73 years through suicide. A shock wave went through our entire family and community. And as loved ones we struggled to understand what had happened, with everyone asking the question: How could something like this happen? How could a 73 year old man hang himself?

That was a question I didn't need to ask, though. Because a few years earlier, I too, had attempted suicide over a four day period when I was about 40 years and survived.

This didn't make my grief any less painful. I still had numerous moments of confusion, self-blame and loss of hope and faith in God. But it wasn't difficult to understand as it was to everyone else, because

it was a struggle I knew only too well.

My experience on 'both sides' then became a curse and a blessing in disguise. When my family, those who had the guts to ask how a suicide attempt could happen, I was able to answer. And when I answered their questions, I saw something wonderful happen - we both could heal and empathise with our family just a little bit more. We were even able as a family to openly disclose the nature of our father's death without shame or stigma, but sadly not all the family and community felt that way.

I can't speak for every person who has struggled with suicidal thoughts but I've spoken to enough survivors to know there are commonalities in how we felt about the experience. I even wrote about it in my book 'A Killer in My Head.'

If your loved one could reach you now, these could be some of the things they would want you to know, and you might be able to find some comfort in hearing from someone who's been there.

- Suicide is more complex than a decision.

People who attempt suicide aren't always convinced it's the only option. It's more often that they have exhausted their emotional reserves to continue pursuing those options. It is, in many ways, the ultimate burnout. That state of burnout doesn't happen overnight either. In order to attempt suicide, a person has to be in a mental

state where they can override their own survival instincts.

A person like my father, had to have reached a point when they felt their capacity for emotional pain outweighed the amount of time they're able to wait for relief, at the same moment when they have access to the means to end their life.

The fact that someone can progress that far is a much stronger reflection of the state of mental health in our communities and families. We didn't fail, and neither did you. There is a time when someone in crisis has to expend the most energy in order to keep themselves alive. To ignore the internal thoughts, the impulses, and the despair, is often when they have the very last and least available to do so.

Suicide is a tragic, lonely and painful outcome of extraordinary circumstances that, in reality, few of us have control over.

- Suicide is rarely that simple. Being suicidal is such a confusing state to be in. I tried and survived three times. It's a window of opportunity that disrupts the delicate balance that allows us to survive. That to and fro is exhausting, and it clouds our judgment.

Suicidal thoughts, once they snowball, can become an avalanche that drowns out the part of us that would otherwise choose differently.

This might also be a reason

why some of us suicide survivors sabotage our own attempts. We might choose a method that isn't reliable. We might drop hints about our mental state that are almost undetectable to others. We might choose a time or place when it's possible we'll be discovered in time. The longer we take to plan our suicide mission, the more we leave open the possibility of a slipup or an intervention. A suicide attempt doesn't reflect how we felt about our potential, our life, or about you.

- **Suicide is not about hurting you.** When I attempted suicide, there were multiple moments when I thought about my family and loved ones. In our minds, we lessen our loved ones suffering and pain. When I speak to other attempt survivors, many of us share the same feeling. In those

moments we are so far removed and have such tunnel vision that everything else is blacked out. And that singular vision can override our judgment.

A suicide attempt doesn't necessary mean someone didn't believe they were loved. It doesn't mean your loved one didn't know you cared or believed they wouldn't get unconditional acceptance and care.

Love alone is not enough to keep someone alive.

If love were enough, we would see much fewer deaths by suicide. My father's death by suicide at the age of 73 years says nothing about how much we loved him, or how much he loved us as his family.

I have blamed myself many times over the years for my father's suicide, but I have accepted that

it was not my fault. Wouldn't the world feel so much safer if it were possible to save everyone we loved?

Every day since my father took his life and that day I received the call that he was gone, I've found myself wondering, "Why did he die, and yet I'm still here?"

Grief is a powerful teacher; I've learned to live alongside my grief, to let it transform me positively. I find the strength to do what's right, to be relentless and brave.

You're still here and you still have a chance to be extraordinary.

Both as a survivor of loss and of an attempt, life is without doubt precious and worth fighting for.

Fight for your life the way you wish you could've fought for your loved one.

References available on request. **MHM**

