

OUT OF THE DARKNESS

by Diana Raab, Ph.D.



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Healing and Writing about Loss

September is Suicide Prevention Awareness Month, and hundreds of Santa Barbarians will participate in the annual Out of the Darkness walk to be held at Leadbetter Beach on Sunday, September 9, starting at 9 am.

Lately, suicide has been an increasingly worrisome national health concern, and the recent suicides of Kate Spade and Anthony Bourdain have touched many of us at a deep level. Each year, more than 1 million Americans will attempt suicide, and approximately 45,000 will succeed. In fact, suicide is the 10th-leading cause of death in the United States. Over the past few years, the suicide rate has skyrocketed among youth and those between the ages of 45 and 54.

I've been interested in the stigma and trauma surrounding this issue for more than five decades, beginning with my grandmother's suicide when I was 10 years old. We were living in the New York suburbs, and it was Labor Day weekend. My parents were at work at their store, and my grandmother was taking care of me. Innocently, I walked into her room asking to go to a friend's house, but she was unresponsive. In a panic, I phoned my parents, and the last image I remember is watching my grandmother being taken down the stairs on a stretcher by two ambulance attendants.

My mother was dealing with her own grief and didn't quite know how to comfort me – her only child. After speaking with our family physician, she decided to buy me a Kahlil

Gibran journal and suggested that I pour my heart onto its pages. I suppose my mother's simple gesture set the stage for my life as a writer and my long-term passion for inspiring others to write.

Whether fighting demons of addiction or loss, writing can help us navigate through the healing process and can lead to significant transformation on many levels. *Transformation* may be defined as a dramatic change in someone's physical or psychological well-being. It's about becoming aware of, facing, and becoming responsible for one's thoughts and feelings. This process can lead to self-realization, which can occur over a long or short period of time, but most often it is initiated by a pivotal event, such as the suicide of a loved one.

Engaging in a spiritual practice allows us to search for truth as a way to happiness. In addition to helping us heal from the trauma of losing a loved one, it can encourage us to focus on what's important to us, and help us determine our reason for being – which can ultimately lead to a profound sense of contentment.

When considering writing as a transformative and spiritual exercise, it's important to recognize that in order to receive the maximum benefits, you must write on a regular basis. Also, the deeper you delve into your thoughts, the more transformative the exercise will be. Like everything else, you get out of it what you put into it.

Needless to say, writing provides an excellent way to work through

feelings. It can also help clarify thoughts, putting them in a form that helps identify our authentic selves, leading to feelings of harmony and peace of mind.

When writing about the loss of a loved one to suicide, begin by writing down what you know or remember about this individual. The life-changing event of losing someone to suicide can be something that confirms your identity or who you might become in subsequent years. I truly believe that if my grandmother had not taken her life, I might not have become a writer.

Humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow wrote about peak experiences as valuable, life-changing revelations. Losing loved ones can be considered peak experiences, as are the evolution of relationships, becoming a parent, sexual encounters, and meaningful conversations with others. These are all areas that can be explored in writing or journaling.

When writing for both healing and for transformation, it's important to be aware of the synchronistic events, situations, and seemingly random experiences that add to awareness, knowledge, and self-growth. By being cognizant of what the universe is saying, we find that many of our questions about why a loved one took his or her life may not be answered; but, we might attain clarity on how

we can be more grateful, joyous, and self-realized, and the importance of reaching out to others in the years to come.

Walk with Others

The Santa Barbara County Out of the Darkness Walk is one of hundreds that occurs annually nationwide from September to December. The walks are expected to unite more than a quarter of a million walkers nationally.

The Santa Barbara County community event will begin at 9 am at Shoreline Drive and Loma Alta and end at approximately 11:30 am. Speakers will include local leaders and mental health specialists, as well as suicide survivors sharing their stories. The corporate sponsors for the event are the American Association for Suicide Prevention (AFSP), the Glendon Association, and the Santa Barbara Response Network (SBRN).

If you or someone you know needs help, call National Suicide Lifeline 1-800-273 TALK (8255) or locally call C.A.R.E.S Mobile crisis response at 1-888-868-1649.

For youth under the age of 20, call SAFTY at 1-888-334-2777.

For more information on the walk: **Jina Carvalho** at jina@glendon.org, call 1-805-681-0415 x232 or visit afsp.org/santabarbara.

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