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A Message for Sibling Survivors of Suicide Loss

LEARN TO SHARE YOUR STORY

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This is a message about losing a sibling through suicide. Although my experience is unique to me, and my surviving siblings have their own stories, there is one common thread that we as Christians all share. Our identity as Christians is the key to finding joy even in the midst of pain after the loss of a loved one through suicide.

It was the first day of my eighth-grade year when we buried my brother Tom. I was thirteen years old. The parish church of St. Mary Magdalene was packed with family, friends, and many of my classmates from the School of the Madeleine. It was a day for prayer and grieving. My brother Tom Dolan died in Chino State Prison by his own hand. He hanged himself.

MY FAMILY AND MY BROTHER TOM

Tom and I grew up in a large family; he was number five of nine children, and I am number seven. We were a strong Catholic family living among equally large families in our neighborhood, and guided by our parents, we were all rooted in faith and community oriented.

Tom was a handsome, talented, cheerful young man. He seemed to be self-directed and showed evidence of success in his future. He excelled in sports, especially baseball, wrestling, bowling, and rock climbing. He was an artist. He loved art, playing guitar, and singing. Sadly, he also began to enjoy the party scene, which led him away from his first loves.

Soon after high school, Tom began to be more reclusive, hanging around with just a few of his drug friends. Even as a kid—I was in seventh grade when Tom was nineteen years old—I knew that he was hanging around with the wrong crowd. My parents were especially leery of one friend that Tom had invited to our house. It was clear that this friend, Scott, was going nowhere, and drugs seemed to be his only future path in life. For whatever reason, Tom seemed to lean in that direction as well. I had just returned from a Boy Scout trip when I learned that Tom and Scott were on the run from the law. My mom sat me down and explained what had occurred while I was away.

Apparently, Tom and Scott had been drinking and using drugs. Whether on impulse or by plan, they decided to rob the house of our next-door neighbor. That same evening, my parents learned of the incident and attempted to confront Tom and Scott. Unfortunately, Tom held a gun—which belonged to Scott—and urged my parents to step out of the way. Shocked, but grateful that Tom (not Scott)

was the one in possession of the gun, my parents stepped aside. My brother and his friend made a run for it and, along the way, managed to rob a store. After a few days, Tom and Scott were picked up, and after a few months Tom landed in Chino State Prison. I do not know what happened to Scott.

We are not entirely sure why Tom had taken such a turn for the worse in his later high school years. It could have been simply hanging around the wrong crowd. It could have been something else. In reality, my oldest brother, Steve, was being treated for mental health–related issues and had been just coming off a long series of drug use himself. Perhaps Tom was also beginning to show signs of mental illness.

After Tom landed in prison, our family went to Chino, California, to pay him a visit. I was elated to see my brother for the first time since before my Boy Scouts trip. He looked cleaned up. He showed true contrition, and he seemed to be mending his ways. My parents were especially happy to know that Tom had been visited by a Catholic priest chaplain. After our visit, Tom and I became pen pals. I looked up to him and truly loved him. I really believed he was on his way to becoming the brother that I once knew and admired.

TOM'S DEATH AND OUR DEVASTATION

But then the horrible news came that Tom had hanged himself in his cell. What devastation! It did not seem possible! Just prior to his suicide, we were all blessed with the news that Tom's sentence was going to be reduced to just a few years. How could it be that this

young man in his late teens could spiral so quickly? How was he able to show such signs of improvement and then allow this to occur?

A number of theories as to why Tom killed himself were floating in my mind. My first thought was that he was killed. But there was no evidence of foul play. Another thought was that he was abused in prison and he just couldn't take it. To this day, I still do not know why he hanged himself. All I know is that we were all devastated. I can still picture the pre-vigil, when my mother stared at Tom's body in the casket. My dad was staring at her as she gently touched Tom's body and began to weep. Then Dad began to cry. Soon all my siblings and I started up. That memory is deeply embedded in me.

I knew that my parents were devastated. I would often hear comments—and sometimes still do—that “my parents are strong, but they must be devastated to lose their child.” Both are true. To lose a son is tragic. My parents never got over it. Even to this day, they rarely talk about Tom, unless they refer to happier days when our family was together camping, or singing around the piano, or gathered for evening supper.

BURYING OUR PAIN

My parents were born and raised in rural Iowa. They were unfamiliar with therapy and wary of psychology. They managed to move forward with trust in God and in each other. Outside of our common faith and family ties, counseling was not an option. And so my family buried our pain. We all tried to cope, but the pain would manifest itself in many ways. I witnessed among my siblings a loss of faith, hope, and love exhibited through excessive drinking, depression, and

even another suicide. Trying to bottle their pain and sorrow, their lives showed signs of unrest. We were affected each in our own way.

As a thirteen-year-old boy, I was affected deeply by Tom's suicide, and my life took a sudden turn. My coming-of-age years, in which I should have discovered my identity and purpose, were stunted. Because of Tom's suicide, I put finding my identity and purpose on hold as I witnessed the devastation in my family, especially in the lives of my parents. Rather than just being me, I began to hold claim to a super-persona that looked like this:

Tom was a rock climber, so I took up rock climbing. Tom was a wrestler, so I took up wrestling. Tom was in a bowling league, so I joined a bowling league. In each case, I tried to reach beyond his level. I tried to do everything that Tom did, but even better. Of course, I would not use drugs. My parents deserved better. In a nutshell, I needed to save my parents. I needed to be the defender and savior of my family. Even in my Confirmation year—the same year of my brother's suicide—I knew I needed to be a soldier for Christ. In fact, I selected St. Michael the Archangel—soldier and defender—for my Confirmation name.

During my high school years, as I lived this super-life, I recall my dad telling me more than a few times to just be myself. I brushed it off and continued on my journey to be more than Tom. Not me, John—just more than Tom.

After my junior year in high school, I blew out both of my shoulders in a summer wrestling league. This set me into depression. I was excelling in the sport and bonding wonderfully with my teammates. It meant everything to me. When I was told that I could no longer wrestle, I was lost. I thought, *Where do I go now?*

After sitting idle for a while, and without a sense of purpose, I too began to show signs of depression. In my senior year I was falling behind in my assignments and my grades began to slip. I

never attempted suicide, but I hoped for death. The only thing that kept me going was the knowledge that my parents did not deserve to lose another son.

Rather than living in this world of depression, I started getting involved in our parish youth group. There I found a new set of friends, and I seemed to show some signs of leadership in the group. Even the parish priests took notice of me and began to inquire if I would consider becoming a priest. Of course, becoming a priest would fit well with my need to be a savior for my family. At that time, I never outwardly expressed a desire to be my brother Tom or to be a savior of the family. But subconsciously, the intent was there.

After graduation from high school I entered St. Francis Seminary on the University of San Diego campus to begin studies for the priesthood. The first time I saw a psychologist was when I entered the seminary. It was a necessary part of the application process, and after only one follow-up meeting to a procedural battery of psychological tests, I was seen as fit to enter the seminary. I recall my review including a concern about Tom's suicide and what effect it had on me. That was the only time I met a psychologist individually during my entire college career at St. Francis.

SURVIVING A SECOND SUICIDE

When I was nineteen years old, tragedy hit our family again. We had gathered for Thanksgiving dinner, the table was set, and we were waiting for my sister Therese and her husband, Joe, to arrive. Instead, the police showed up and told us the horrible news that Therese had hanged herself in a local canyon just hours earlier. Then the news got worse. The police officers told us that Joe was expected

to tell my parents about my sister's death, but instead he died by suicide himself, having ended his life by asphyxiation in his car that same morning.

To this day, the particular reason for Therese's suicide is unclear to me. Apparently, there was marital hardship. That Joe killed himself hours after Therese died by suicide would seem to back that up. He left his own suicide note for my parents, but I never had the opportunity to read it.

My sister Therese was a few years older than Tom. She was a kind person who had a beautiful smile. She was introverted and talented. Like Tom, she played guitar and was an up-and-coming graphic artist. I used to enjoy spending time in her room drawing and painting alongside her. She would give me tips on drawing faces. I remember her saying, "Begin with the eyes. The eyes express everything!" She excelled in her talents, earning a master's degree from the University of California San Diego and becoming an art instructor at a Catholic school.

Our family knew that Therese's marriage seemed strained from the beginning. I remember thinking that she seemed to be in a rush to have a wedding, but it was her life and she seemed happy. The family never quite took to Joe, and I believe Therese knew that. Joe was in his forties, and Therese was still in her twenties. It was revealed later that Joe had been in prison, but Therese had only found out about his past after the wedding. I had heard from my parents that he was abusive toward my sister; I do not know how far the abuse went.

Though the specific motive for Therese's death is unclear, Therese was clearly distraught, and after Tom's suicide, she and others in our family had struggled with depression and suicidal thoughts.

TURNING AWAY HELP, COMPOUNDING MY PAIN

While this moment was obviously tragic for me, I managed to get through the Thanksgiving weekend and return to St. Francis the following Monday. Counseling was offered but not required. I turned down the offer and just pushed forward. Of course, I had managed to bottle up my pain. In fact, before the funeral of my sister and brother-in-law, I was already back in school. I hardly talked about her death with my friends at the seminary.

On the Monday following Thanksgiving, while walking to philosophy class, a fellow University of San Diego student reported to me how angry he was. He said his friend had been jogging in our canyon that weekend when he came upon a woman who had hanged herself. He said that his friend had suffered great trauma after seeing the sight and that he was “pissed” at the woman for making his friend suffer.

That was my sister he was talking about. Of course, I didn't have the courage to tell him. All I know is that I found myself staring at a statue of our Blessed Mother resting on top of the Immaculata church there on campus. I remember feeling a sense of peace as I let him express his feelings. It was as if Mary was saying, “Even in your pain, just be there for him.” It was one of the most surreal yet profound moments in my life.

After a few months, I was in the running for the seminary's senior-class president. When I lost the election, I was told by a few seminarians that their decision not to elect me was based on my siblings' suicides. Needless to say, I was furious. I was mad at them; I was mad at the newly elected president; I was mad at Tom, Therese,

and Joe; and I was mad at God. I stormed out of the seminary and to the end of a field at the University of San Diego where I could be by myself. There, I tore into God. I let loose! I asked God to just end my life then and there.

After a good cry, I went back to the seminary and went to bed. I wasn't sure what I was going to do the next day. I was still mad, embarrassed, and ashamed to be a victim of sibling suicide. I hated the fact that I was labeled as different. It hurt.

Somehow, the next morning, I managed to thank God for taking my anger. I justified my outburst by saying that God was big enough to take it, and he would probably rather have me yell at him than curse my friends. Once again, I pushed on.

Even after the suicides of Therese and Joe, I went without counseling. The rector of St. Francis Seminary suggested some therapy, but I passed on the offer. He never pursued it again.

I was later accepted to St. Patrick's Seminary in Menlo Park, California, for theological studies. Again I went through the necessary battery of tests for entrance, but the suicidal trend in my family did not come up as an issue. I continued on until my senior year, when one faculty member saw my psychological report and urged the faculty to confront me on my family's history. After their numerous requests for me to see their counselor, the faculty finally insisted on a psychological review. I was ready for ordination to the diaconate, and they wanted assurance that I would be ready to accept the challenges of ministry in the Church. Seeing no alternative, I begrudgingly went for counseling, and after six sessions I was given the green light to continue toward ordination. I was ordained to the diaconate and then to the priesthood on July 1, 1989, for the Diocese of San Diego.