



Preface

While one person can never shut out the world entirely, it can always shut out them.

—Patrick Wood
“Wanted or Unwanted,” 1999

Living with suicide is an oxymoron. You are living, but it’s a half-life. You are not living in the full sense of the word. You are living a distortion. Every decision is undecided. Small matters become big. You can’t put one foot in front of the other. Your breath is short. Your sight blurs. Your hearing dims. Your speech falters. You are like the spinning ball of death on your computer screen when it freezes. You stare at the screen, waiting for your software or your document to load. You plod away on the old operating system, the system you know, but it’s slow. It can’t get through the complex tasks you need, especially after you have been to a memorial service, a funeral, and a burial for your son, and when you look for his last emails, you can’t open them. They are nothing but asterisks and blank spaces on the screen. You stare at the messages that have disappeared along with your son. You call a technician, who tells you your email inbox is too full. You will have to buy more storage space for your email account, and then you will have to reopen nine hundred corrupted emails. One

by one. Nine hundred times. You break down on the phone. The technician waits for you to stop crying and says he's sorry.

And then there is Pat's email password sent by his friend Ryan and lost in the mass of corrupted emails. And then another password for a website with the last pictures Pat took of his friends, of Berlin, of his final Christmas tree, of treetops in the woods near his home pointing toward clouds in the sky as if he was contemplating his new place in the universe. You freeze. You cannot handle the files you are seeing. Your system crashes, and finally, there is nothing but a blinking question mark on your screen. Where is he? Where did he go? You are frozen in a time when he was here, when you could press the button on the back of your computer screen, the chime would ring, and the happy face would appear.

Instead, you restart your computer. You put the blinking question mark aside and turn back to the eulogies, the bills, the letters, the copies of death certificates, and an email dated two months before he died. You print it to make sure it doesn't disappear along with your failing operating system:

December 19, 2005

Hey Mom,

Can you do me one last favor and ask Dr. Danenhower how long he'd be willing to write the prescription for? Just so I can get an idea if I need to think about planning another visit in the spring or summer :-). Thanks!! Looking forward to seeing you really soon! I'll give you the details about the train trip as soon as I get them figured out (in the next couple of days).

Love, Pat

The cycle of shock, half-life, and crashing repeats itself. You try to break the pattern by studying his apartment, his books, his internships, his psychiatrist's notes. You travel to his cities and

talk to his friends. You talk to anyone who knows him or knows suicide. Where does this come from? Where does it go? You don't get answers, but you keep trying. You settle for asking questions. The answers don't make sense. They stare at you—his sadness, his crying, his rejections. They don't add up to suicide. They mostly jump up and smack you after the fact, after the suicide. They clobber you as if they're standing on his grave shouting, "DO YOU GET IT NOW?"

Not really. I get a simplified version: Depression makes you feel so bad that you put a gun to your head, a noose around your neck, or you light charcoal in an airtight bathroom as Pat did. I know that's what happened, but I don't know why. The answers lie in the grave with Pat, and even his answers might not be enough. The search for answers is more like an endless detour around his death. Resolution comes from exhaustion instead of comprehension. There aren't any answers. Only questions.

In one of our last conversations, I asked Pat about a quote from Elie Wiesel. I was teaching his memoir in my middle school English class. *Night* is about Wiesel's survival through four concentration camps during the Holocaust. In 1944, Wiesel and the Jewish community of his hometown of Sighet, Hungary, are forced into ghettos and transported in suffocating freight trains to Auschwitz concentration camp. Wiesel loses his mother and youngest sister to the Auschwitz gas chambers. His father dies at Buchenwald not long before American troops liberate the camp in 1945. Wiesel barely survives. He becomes a living corpse of his former self. But in the calm before the darkness of his long nightmare, as a young boy, Wiesel is religious. He studies the Talmud and prays in the synagogue of Sighet. A humble caretaker named Moshe the Beadle asks Wiesel why he prays. Wiesel can't answer. He knows that praying is like living and breathing, but he doesn't know why. Moshe explains that questions are the "true dialogue," that "man raises himself toward God by the questions he asks Him.... Man questions God and God answers. But we don't understand His

answers. We can't understand them. Because they come from the depths of the soul, and they stay there until death."¹

I didn't understand Moshe's meaning, and I wanted to explain it to my ninth-grade English class. They would want to know why Wiesel prays if God doesn't answer. I waited for the right moment to ask Pat what Moshe meant as he and I ran errands the day after Christmas in 2005. He was home from Germany and would return the next day. We picked up a prescription for antidepressants from Woody Danenhower, a doctor and neighbor who had treated Pat since he was seven months old. Woody advised him to "take good care of these. It's not a good idea to leave them lying around." Pat nodded and looked down as if he didn't want to think about it, and then we jumped back in the car for the fun part of the day—the annual return of Mom's presents to get something he really wanted. We took back clothes from T.J. Maxx and books in German from the Borders book store in Manchester, Connecticut. *The Sorrows of Young Werther* was one of them. I knew nothing about it. I had no idea that centuries ago, readers had dressed like Werther and committed suicide or that the book was banned in Leipzig in 1775. I only knew that Patrick loved classic literature and *The Sorrows* was a short favorite, easier for him to squeeze into his backpack and bring to Berlin. I didn't want to burden him with a thick German book. He needed to socialize in Berlin more than read by himself. But Pat already had a copy, and he didn't want me to pay the added charge of buying the other German books in the US. "They're cheaper in Germany," he said, and he explained the difference between euros and US dollars. "How did you learn to read them?" I asked. "You get the sense of it," he said, "and then it just comes. You absorb it."

In between errands, we yakked about the difference between German and French, and then there was a discussion of calculus, which I tried to understand. Mostly I listened and enjoyed the far-off look on Pat's face as he soared above me in abstractions. He floated on air currents, free from the pull of antidepressants and Dr. Danenhower's advice, and when he came back down to Earth,

I asked him what Moshe meant by settling for questions rather than answers. Pat thought about it for a minute, but the weighty subject of Nazi death camps threatened our mood. We danced on to other things—German authors, programming at Siemens, grad school, clubbing in Berlin. We giggled through stories of friends and schools and jobs.

On the way home, we stopped at a pizza restaurant for dinner, and there was a moment when Pat got serious. He said he needed my advice, which he had never said before, so I knew it was important. “You remember that boy I wanted to be with last summer?” he asked. “But then he reconnected with his roommate? I want to ask him one more time on New Year’s Eve. What do you think?” And then Pat looked down and pushed food around his plate.

I said if he really wanted to be with that boy, then give it his best shot. Ask him again, and if it doesn’t work, then at least he will have tried his best. He’ll know one way or the other for sure.

“But what if he doesn’t want to be with me? Then what?” Pat said.

I wanted to blurt out, “Of course he wants to be with you. Everyone wants to be with you.” Instead, I waited a moment, and then I leaned over the table. “You have the strength,” I answered. “You have the strength for whatever happens.”

“I don’t know . . .” Pat said, and his voice got tense as if he was already paralyzed with fear.

“You won’t know,” I said. “You’ll know when you’re eighty-nine. That’s when you’ll know.” It was the only answer I could think of to give him perspective, to help him understand that disappointment would pass.

He shook his head as if he didn’t want to know, and we moved on to other topics—his friends in Berlin, the picnics in the Tiergarten, classes at Humboldt University in the spring. Five weeks later, I would be cleaning out Pat’s apartment in Berlin. I would find his copy of *The Sorrows* on his coffee table. It was open to the passage where Werther kills himself. I had given him a book that would convince him to die.

Moshe explains to Wiesel that questions have a power that does not lie in answers—that we pray, not for answers, but for the strength to ask the right questions. We are drawn into an eternity where question and answer become one. Years after Pat's death, Moshe's meaning was clear. Questions were all I had. Suicide? How was that possible? How could he want to die?

I hated big questions. I liked the small—how to teach dependent clauses, how to paint the bathroom, what to cook for dinner. My husband Bob and I were putting three children through college. I was close to paying off the mortgage on our home. That was about as big as I got. I had no idea about “depths of the soul” or why people kill themselves.

It's true there was suicide on both sides of our family. My mother and Bob's father, two of Pat's grandparents, had killed themselves. But that was decades before Pat's death. Those grandparents were not a big part of his life. Colin was one year old when my mother died in 1980. He was six when Bob's father died. Patrick and Libby were three. Bob and I had to keep going after both suicides. Two times. There was too much future at stake with young children, but we were guided by the past.

My mother had blamed her drinking on a strict family upbringing. Bob and I would not make that mistake. We would overpower the Wood and Rimer family adversities. We would give our children the best home possible. We would nurture. There would be no rigid discipline and none of the alcoholism we grew up with. And beyond nurturing, we would be open about the suicide in our family. Our children would know the truth when they asked what happened to two of their grandparents. Knowledge would guide them. It would warn them about the alcohol involved in both deaths. It would make them immune to suicide, and that fantasy, that disregard for the immutable patterns of family lineage was now front and center.

Patrick's last sign of life was checking his phone at 9:00, Tuesday night, January 31, 2006. That was 3:00, Tuesday afternoon

my time. I was in school, probably in the computer room helping students finish stories for the school newspaper. Or I could have been writing lesson plans at the large oval table in my classroom. I could have been grading homework or writing news stories or planning a pizza party for my eighth-grade class. I don't remember exactly because I had no idea that the stories my class was reading would become my stories. I had no idea that I would become Edgar Allan Poe's madman imagining the heartbeat of a dead person in "The Tell-Tale Heart" or that Pat would perish like the family in Ray Bradbury's "There Will Come Soft Rains." Their silhouettes on a wall of their house are all that remain after a nuclear bomb destroys a city in California. Their house burns to a pile of ash much like the charcoal in Pat's apartment.

I had no idea that after the pizza party on Friday and a weekend trip to a tack shop in Massachusetts and a day of school on Monday, the question of why people kill themselves would become my question.

Why?

I asked that question everywhere—from Pomfret, Connecticut, where Pat grew up, to Palo Alto, California, where he went to college, to Berlin, where he studied and worked abroad. I asked Pat's friends. I asked therapists. I asked books on suicide. I asked that question for fifteen years. The more I asked, the more questions I had. Power came, as Moshe said, not from answers but from the strength to ask the right questions. I was drawn into Moshe's eternity where question and answer become one, where they come from the depths of the soul, and they stay there until death.

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October 19, 2022