

My brother: a eulogy

4.30pm. Friday 8 June. I was in a café near Angel, north London. A text came through: “Are you free for a call in 5 minutes? Bad news I’m afraid.” I guessed what could have happened. Stepping outside the café, I had that conversation. News of an abrupt and sudden death. A shocking and tragic story about my brother, James. He had hung himself.

I feel devastated that he was so despairing that he took his own life. I feel immense compassion for his considerable suffering. I feel deeply sad that he is gone. He was three years older than me. He was a great cyclist, a mountaineer of many peaks, an environmentalist who loved this natural world.

Four days before his death, he was out with a walking group. He was making plans for the future. He said afterwards that he enjoyed the walk. Yet, at the same time, he was searching online for ways of killing himself.

The day after his death, James’ adult children, their stepmother, my partner and I went to his home where he had hung himself. We took the chair that he had stepped off of. Back at their stepmother’s home, his children and I smashed the chair to pieces. We then burnt the pieces on a fire. That was a powerful ceremony.

Two days after James’ death, I was formally identifying my brother’s body. Beforehand, I was feeling very apprehensive. I felt battered and bruised. As though the stuffing had been knocked out of me. Seeing my brother’s body was deeply healing. I told him that I loved him and I cared for him. My partner chanted the Amitabha (the buddha of infinite love) mantra over his body.

All sudden death feels harsh. There is something about suicide – that act of taking one’s own life – that feels even more harsh. More emotionally entangled. The wonderings of why. A bigger bomb with all its repercussions and consequences. In the weeks after James’ death, I experienced many emotions. Anger, frustration and despair were amongst them.

TAKING THAT STEP...

The statistics for suicide are shocking. In 2016 alone, 5,668 people killed themselves in the UK. 75% were men. In the period 2007-2013, suicides for women remained static while there was a significant increase for men. Suicide is the most common cause of death for children aged 5–19. According to recent research, one person in fifteen has made a suicide attempt at some point in their life. Suicidal ideation – thoughts that you want to cease the challenges of life – is fairly common. Taking that step – the actual act of ceasing – is much less common.

James struggled for many years with anxiety and depression. Recently, he was wondering if he had Bipolar Disorder (what used to be called manic depression). His behaviour could be erratic and he certainly experienced mental distress. He wrote to me: “It’s as if I didn’t exist.” James chose to end this despair by ending his life.

He took an overdose in March this year and was found by a friend. On Wednesday 6 June, he overdosed again and was taken to hospital. I briefly spoke to him when he was going to hospital. I assumed that he would be kept in, perhaps sectioned. In fact, he was discharged from hospital early Thursday morning. The next morning he stepped off that chair.

James described his difficulties to me: “overthink and anxiety, emotionally unstable, too hard on myself.” The weight of worries was becoming increasing heavy upon his shoulders. He frequently said to me: “my mind is racing.” Mental illness is far from straightforward. Much better to have something as simple as a broken leg than to be mentally unwell.

James was – as one of his friends said to me – “a very complex man”. A man of many different faces. He was incredibly intelligent and highly driven. His knowledge about the natural world was considerable. He had a passion for the outdoors. Joy for James could be up at windswept mountain summits.

He had an acute eye for his beloved nature. He wrote: “A Kingfisher had just flown by and was perched on a bush near the hide, and I had rested my head on my folded arms and was gazing peacefully across the lake to the hills behind and I thought ‘I am in love with nature’ and it was a very genuine and true feeling.” He said that he saw himself as nature’s child.

For him, cycling was a place of safety in both childhood and adulthood. He cycled widely across this country and elsewhere. He wrote: “yes cycling up long mountain roads with a lot of old cleared snow is for me fun.”

PRAISE AND POTENTIAL

Someone told me: “James did an awful lot of good for a lot of people.” A friend said: “a lot of people thought very highly of him.” Unfortunately, James found it difficult to hear such praise. He often told me that his life was pointless. That he was purposeless. He felt demotivated and flat. He was searching for something that might help him to live a more peaceful life. Myself and others kept reminding him of his many potentials and the possibilities of this life. Sadly, he did not hear our reminders of the gold that he had within himself.

He wrote to me: “being very harsh on myself for mistakes I am making.” A month later, he was writing: “By heck can I get myself in a mess.”

James welcomed different expressions of life. Like this Sufi poem from Hafiz:

I wish I could show you
When you are lonely or in darkness
The astonishing light
Of your own being

James himself liked to write poetry and pieces of prose. He wrote: “On the long low swell of the hill Nature’s seasons meet... The bluebells are this years’ new awakening of growth, set against the old dead bracken from last year... for now time stands still and set against a clear blue Spring sky what we see is what it is.” But James’ love for the natural world was not enough to keep him alive. His delight in finding a secluded spot was not enough to keep him appreciative of that “is what it is”.

In recent years, James had made efforts to rebuild his relationships. He acknowledged mistakes that had been made in the past: “I have said and done bad things and I am sorry.” James and I certainly had complications in our relationship. We had very limited contact as adults. Our experience was described well in the ancient Jewish text *Mishle Shlomoh*: “an offended brother is more unyielding than a fortified city.”

RECONNECTING

We reconnected in January 2017. For the next 18 months we exchanged many emails, swapped our stories, talked a lot on the phone, spent time together. I feel joy that we became loving brothers. We hugged, heard and held each other. But tragically, this was not enough. These songs of ‘not enough’ are common for many of us. The not good enough. The not successful enough. The not liked enough.

Like all of us, James had his wounds, his frailties, his vulnerabilities. He found it difficult to love himself. He was very good at inner criticism. Those voices bought him much misery and unhappiness. He knew that he was not alone in this – yet he felt incredibly lonely. Mental illness can be devastating – terribly isolating, undermining and frightening. Being mentally unwell is extremely challenging in many different ways.

I did what I could. I looked in books (such as *Loving Someone With Bipolar Disorder*). I asked for advice. I recommended a psychotherapist to James. I showed him techniques for helping to manage anxiety. Like sitting in a chair, both feet flat on floor, steady breathing, drinking a glass of water. He went to mindfulness classes. He made attempts to socially connect. Even though it was a bitter pill for me to personally swallow, I encouraged him to take medication – those “multisyllabic names in packets with go-faster stripes”. I helped him to get support from the mental health system. My hopes were that these approaches would break the despairing spirals. To give James respite.

James asked me on numerous occasions if I believed in “spiritual awakening”. I said that I did – and that I also believed in mental breakdown. James said that he was progressing spiritually in a few months what might take others many years. In January this year, he sent me a piece called *Divine Suicide: Depressive Breakdown As A Call To Awakening* by Jeff Foster. I kept suggesting that as best as possible, he stayed grounded. This moment here and now. Present. That he practise gratitude (being grateful for all that he had) and appreciation for all that is around.

LIMITS...

James’ suicide was a stark reminder of my limits. The fact that I cannot control it all. That unfortunately I do not have a magic wand. We can pour endless care into a person but sometimes that cannot change the course of the river that is taking them out to sea. I know this intellectually – but emotionally, James’ suicide was a sharp, sudden slap. My attempts to cultivate his appreciation of life and to soften the depths of his despair had not worked.

Of course, there are ‘what ifs’ and ‘if onlys’. If only James had been kept in at hospital on that Thursday. James had asked me if he could live with me and my partner. I said no. What if I had said yes? These are questions without answers. Though they do not bring James back to life, they can help us to learn from such tragedies. Learning the importance of connection and support and community. Of limits and boundaries. That we all need helping and holding hands. That deeply embedded patterns can take many years to shift. That self-development is often a very incremental process. That having modest ambitions can be more constructive than grandiose plans. The tragedy of James’ suicide teaches me about the importance of good friendships. Of self-care. Eating well, walks in the woods, maintaining practises that ground and nourish.

James’ commemoration was a celebration. We sat in a circle and talked about James and his life. An acknowledging of the sorrows and of the joys. We placed items in his coffin. A compass as a reminder of all the days he spent outdoors. A bicycle cog engraved by his son as a reminder of the thousands of miles that he had cycled. A beautifully rounded rose quartz crystal that was held by everyone at the commemoration.

MANY REASONS

Many are the reasons for James' decision to take his own life. His personal circumstances. His brain chemistry. The ending of a relationship. These reasons might be termed 'individual'. And there is what might be termed the 'institutional' reasons. The number of NHS beds for people with mental health issues has fallen by nearly 30% from 2009 to 2018 (26,448 in 2009 to 18,082 in first quarter of 2018). The number of mental health nurses in the NHS has fallen by more than 10% in the same 10 years – from 46,155 in 2009 to 38,358 in first quarter of 2018.

According to *The Economist* (23 June 2018): “The number of mentally ill adults has grown steadily over the past 25 years but there are 12% fewer mental health nurses now than there were in 2010.”

There are definite connections between economic uncertainties and mental distress. James' death is not just an individual and isolated incident. Society and environment play very significant parts in mental distress and suicide. So encouraging connection and community is essential to avoid or at least soften heartbreaks such as James' sudden death. Opening doors so that we can feel more comfortable in expressing ourselves. The knowing that we can positively change self-views. That we can break moulds of past patterns. That we can soften chains of conditioning and circumstances.

James was my brother. I am deeply grateful that we reconnected. I have been visualising James being greeted by loving beings on his journey. Holding him. Appreciating him. For all his many difficulties, he had much brilliance and he was a sensitive and kind person at heart.

My brother was a good teacher for me. Death itself is a great teaching. The preciousness of this life: “difficult to find, easy to lose.” Embracing mortality – dying and death – can be a path towards fully embracing this life. Waking up to is what is. Life in all its shades, in all its colours. Anything does happen. A car turns the corner. That cancer diagnosis. A sudden slip at the top of stairs. And just as possible: a long life of happiness, joyful friendships, contentment and equanimity. The bitter sweetness of this dancing. Of course, each moment beings are stepping out of the stream of life – as much as other beings are at the same time stepping into this same stream.

Words are in many ways insufficient to deal with the abruptness of James' death. Perhaps the bird song that he loved, the nature photographs that he took are a better testimony to my brother. But words are all I have right now. Here are some words that James wrote while staying in Anglesey last year.

“So much to do, so much to see, so much to love,
so much to gain, so much to lose.
It's called life.”

Norman Blair

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Feel free to contact me at yogawithnorman@gmail.com

Further Resources

I highly recommend the excellent *Help Is At Hand* booklet – available from Public Health England and the National Suicide Prevention Alliance.

Notes

Statistics on suicide from Mental Health Foundation (2016) – available at www.mentalhealth.org.uk/statistics/mental-health-statistics-suicide;

“Suicide is the most common cause of death for children aged 5–19” – Office of National Statistics *Deaths Registered in England and Wales* October 2017;

“According to one researcher, one person in fifteen...” McManus S, Bebbington P, Jenkins R, Brugha T (eds) *Mental health and wellbeing in England* 2016 available at <http://digital.nhs.uk/catalogue/PUB21748>;

“the ancient Jewish text *Mishle Shlomoh*: ‘an offended brother is more unyielding than a fortified city’ – Book of Proverbs 18:19;

“multisyllabic names in packets with go-faster stripes” – from Hannah Jane Parkinson, *The Guardian* 30 June 2018.