



## Full Circle

*Written by B.L.*

My son is nine years old and still so young and innocent. He struggles to spread the peanut butter on his bread, doesn't really know how to clean up a spill, and manages to "brush" his teeth in less than seven seconds. He's not prepared for much more than the 4<sup>th</sup> grade.

It is surreal to look at him and think back to myself as a 4<sup>th</sup> grader, the last year I had with my mom. She took her own life just two weeks after my 10<sup>th</sup> birthday and on the morning of her funeral, I told my aunt I didn't know how to curl or braid my own hair because my mom had styled it for me every single day. But here I was, all dressed up, and unable to work the curling iron on my own.

My mom's funeral was the first one I ever attended and still, to this day, each time I hear Bette Midler's "Wind Beneath my Wings," I am immediately brought back to that crowded church sanctuary. I wore my favorite purple and black dress that day and then never again.

The year was 1991 and suicide was a topic we didn't understand or discuss. There were no support groups for survivors and no internet to find resources. Instead, there were ruminating thoughts in the mind of a little girl traumatized by finding her mom's lifeless body. We moved houses immediately and I started at a new school. Nobody knew about my mom's suicide and, too ashamed to mention it, I never told anyone.

Many survivors disclose feeling an overwhelming sense of guilt for somehow not preventing their loved one's death. They blame themselves for not seeing the signs, not picking up the phone that day when their loved one called, and for not better protecting the one they loved. I, on the other hand, never once felt a bit of guilt. Instead, I carried a lot of shame.

I internalized my mom's suicide as a personal act against me. The rest of my family was out of town that day and I would be the only one home to find her lifeless body. She knew this. In fact, she coaxed me out of the house that afternoon and told me I could return from playing at 3:30pm. She was intentional enough to get me out of the house and thorough enough to know she would already be dead upon my return. Her meticulous planning felt like I was specifically targeted, abandoned, and betrayed.

Was I not valuable enough to protect from such a traumatic scene? Did she not love me? How could her note goodbye be so brief? How was she okay with knowing I would find her? These questions ran wild in my mind for decades. As an adult, I can answer some of them with logic and empathy. A ten-year-old girl is not afforded such luxury. These questions could only fester internally. When left unspoken, festering turns into resentment and resentment grows into hate. Hate towards the one who caused the

pain. Hate towards the weak one who feels hurt. I was mad for allowing myself to be so impacted. If she didn't care, then why should I?

Those defenses worked...but only for so long. At some point, in my 30's, I was forced to look at her suicide for what it really was. A woman, "Hopeless and in pain. Too scared and anxious to go on living, too ashamed to ask for help." Those were her written words goodbye, not my interpretation. It was not a personal attack on me as I had believed for decades, she was a broken and wounded woman, desperate for relief. When I allowed myself to look at the pain she was in, it reduced the boiling anger within.

As life often works, I find myself, today, a licensed therapist who works specifically with suicide-loss survivors. I meet with family members immediately after a suicide loss, facilitate support groups, offer individual therapy, and host events. I am afforded the unique opportunity of walking new survivors through their darkest days. In my meeting with them, I get to hear their most sincere and raw feelings of guilt, blame, and shame in addition to the debilitating grief they are experiencing. A gift to every surviving soul is to learn that you are not alone in your thoughts and regrets. Being able to normalize their feelings and reactions is to allow them to feel known and validated. It is healing for them, albeit a long and slow process.

It is also healing for me. It has been 28 years since my mom passed and to provide for new survivors what I never had is a gift. A gift to them and to myself. To them, I represent hope. Hope that they will make it through this incredible pain and loss. Hope that they, too, will smile and laugh again someday. These individuals give to me as well. They remind me how difficult those early days were and I get to see how much healing and growth I have had.

There's a profound healing that occurs when people can support one another in similar pain. Brene Brown writes, "The two most powerful words when we're in struggle: Me too." I couldn't agree more.

