The 5 Year Plan

The day I decided to kill myself, I thought of my mother.

As a child, I was raised to believe suicide was the “easy way out”, a coward’s strategy for weak people. I have heard this stigma echoed hundreds of times since, and it still makes my skin crawl.

Perhaps it is not surprising this perspective was born from a family of “roughnecks”; men and women who worked oil rigs, risking their lives daily to the machinery and the height. Many died on those fields, so maybe a certain bravado bolstered their courage. Or maybe they were afraid.

Stigma has always existed around suicide. Earlier generations often met troubles inside the home with silence and my family was cut from that cloth. We came from generations of extreme poverty and abuse, but we did not share our troubles with strangers. Was this unforgiving view of suicide simply callous, or a fear of thoughts they could not admit to?

Whether any of them ever considered suicide or not, I can’t say, but I did. Often.

I am still ashamed to admit this cold, unsympathetic perspective may have saved my life more than once. My childhood was filled with trauma that scattered our family across the country. We moved endlessly, abuse and poverty leaving me convinced life was an exercise in survival. Surviving is not a lifestyle, but an instinct. Living this way means carrying the fight or flight instinct like a backpack, always anticipating the next conflict or the next escape. I remember choosing, at nine years old, to stop making friends because I was tired of saying goodbye - a promise I kept for many years.

Despite that, a few people managed to get close and I quickly discovered the ugliness this world is capable of, as abuse and trauma blossomed in their lives. Maybe that should have made me feel less alone. Instead, it left me with a grim view of humanity, and severe depression.

A Christian kid, struggling with this as members of the church committed atrocities on their own family members, I found little refuge in faith. The Bible and the pastors promised hell as the only trophy for anyone who “murdered” themselves. Even after disowning them, I carried the idea of my family thinking me weak if I ended my life. Alone most of the time, I never felt I belonged.

The loneliness exploded within me, in starbursts of tears or irrational anger, and thoughts of suicide would cautiously approach. A coyote skirting the camp for fear of the fire, the idea was easier to scare away with this uncompromising view of suicide.

Maybe ignorance saved my life in those days, but it also made me angry at anyone who ended theirs. On the streets more often than not, I watched friends lose family members to suicide, and
lost my own. As I sank into alcoholism and addiction, the number of people dying around me increased. I witnessed the hurt left behind and found them selfish for taking the easy way out.

Suicide is not easy. Ask anyone who has attempted suicide without completing. In my home state of New Mexico, suicide is the second leading cause of death between ages 15 and 44. This pales in comparison to the uncompleted attempts, and the number of people who experience ideation but never make the attempt.

Coming to a place where you stare down the barrel of your own life and decide pulling that trigger is the best, or only solution, is one of the most difficult decisions you can ever make. Once made, it changes you as a person, forever.

When you are wounded, drowning in isolation, and desperate, facts make little difference.

I have contemplated suicide dozens of times. Sometimes the thought would pass like the breeze into a dark night. More often, the idea brought a sense of peace that is hard to define.

Imagine it is 3 a.m. You have been up all night, unable to escape how alone you are in your bed. How long it's been since someone touched your arm or said your name across the room. The wind is screaming at your window, ice forming on the glass and the television is you pretending someone is there. Imagine that moment stretching out the rest of your life, and you with the absolute belief your light will never touch the darkness. Now imagine a knock at the door. A friend stands there smiling, and asks if you would like to lie down.

The scariest part of the decision to die is the moment it stops being scary.

As a teenager, I worked through these feelings with poetry. Poems often began with the desire to jump from a cliff nearby. The writing would help me resolve to live, be strong. To survive. It was all I knew. Maybe I was strong. Or maybe I was not broken enough to make that ultimate decision yet. But I would.

For me, the decision to die came with my divorce. As I type this, there is a place within that flinches and I realize how deeply the taboo of suicide is embedded. Still. Even after making the choice.

The end of my marriage came like a train, hurtling through the darkness to tear everything loose within me. At the dawn of 13 years together, I had not only grown, but become a new man. Literally. Nine years sober, I had quit smoking, gone back to college and stayed home to raise our children as my wife built her career. And I was happier than I ever believed possible.

All of that ended with a 3 a.m. declaration that she was in love with another man. A decision to share the same bed for one more month, until after Christmas, so the children could have one last happy memory of the holidays.
Thoughts of suicide came immediately, flooding my thoughts endlessly. They impacted my ability to work, and the kids I began to mentor saw me cry more than once. As hard as I pushed it away, the desire settled heavily in my chest - a bird of prey, there to pick at me daily. Eventually, dying began to seem like a promise of peace. The taboo faded. The consequences lost their gravity. I learned I could hurt more than I did in the deepest abscess of my addictions. I had tasted the bliss that seemed fated only for others. I had been happy, without drugs, and known what it was to have a family. Now, all I wanted was to stop hurting.

My ex-wife began spinning into her own drug dependency and I was adrift between shores. The past and the future like two shores, equally far from my sight, and me without the strength to swim either direction. I was not willing to surrender my sobriety, but once more I had no hope for the future.

I found myself cataloguing all the ways I would never be happy again. Thirty-six, with four kids, I felt overweight and broken. Who would want a relationship with me? If they did, could I take the risk again? My employment options were limited after raising kids at home for several years, not working. My credit was ruined by the divorce. When people asked how I was doing, all I could answer was; tired, I'm just so tired. I was facing homelessness and the prospect of spending the rest of my life alone.

I never have imagined how much it would hurt. I had lost the ability to smile or feel joy, even when my kids were with me. Though I had no idea what lay on the other side, with no anchor here, adrift between shores and more utterly alone than ever, the idea of slipping beneath the waves was a welcome stillness..

As I began planning my death, I realized I was lying to myself in one sense. I still had an anchor in this world. Four, actually. I was newly single, but still a dad. My children needed me here. In this world. No one else might care about my passing, but them - how could I explain not being there? Once gone, I could never explain or apologize, and the thought of attempting to explain why I was planning to take my own life was incomprehensible. With my past trauma, I knew intimately the lifelong impact those experiences have.

How could I justify leaving them with these wounds? What if this brought one of them to this place? I was comfortable with my own death, but the thought of that leading them to experience even a fraction of the pain I had endured was not something I could live with. Even more, it was not something I could die with.

I decided to wait. Not live, just wait. I found a certain logic in thinking if I died once they were adults, it would ease the transition for them. I would wait until my youngest son, 10 at that time, reached 18.
My suicide became a terminal disease. I knew I was going to die. I knew when and how, but somehow, in the time left, I had to find the strength to be the best father I could for them. I had to leave them with no doubt how deeply loved they are. At this time, my ex-wife, in the depths of her own addiction, took them to Idaho in the middle of the night, packing no clothes or supplies. That night, she called with a gun in her hand, tearful and threatening to shoot herself.

The irony is not lost on me. Here I was planning my suicide, while talking her down, identifying her reasons to live. We made it through the night, and she brought our kids home that week, but I knew I would have to become stable for them. Awash in experiences and feelings they could not understand, they needed me more than ever.

Although balancing their needs with my desire to rest seemed unbearable, my love for them always meant more to me than life. I walked through the doors of the treatment center for them. As I worked my program and learned to live in recovery, I developed a desire to do it for myself. To live and be well for me. To be here now, needing to be ok for them but unable to be ok for me, I began to develop resentments. Towards them, towards life, towards myself. All of these deepened my desire to no longer be here.

Somewhere inside, I began to remember. I had changed my life once before, learned to live for myself and found happiness. Where had that gone?

I continued writing poetry, and became a prominent member of the arts community, despite the urge to isolate. As deeply as I felt that need, the desire to tell my story, to make people understand and to be seen was stronger. I was not receiving professional help at the time, but these experiences made me feel less invisible. There was a selfishness at play, but it helped, even if I did sink back into the depression at home. These brief intervals helped remind me there were others in the world hurting as badly as I was.

I can’t point to an exact moment when things changed. I didn’t wake up one day suddenly eager to live. As I spent more time with my children, writing and performing, I began to recover some sense of who I was. I had always been an artist, and the reason I began to publish and perform my work was to let them see me try. Even if I failed, never achieved any particular success, I wanted, I needed, to leave them this legacy: the belief anything is possible. To prove it, I had to do it.

I had the tools for living sober that I learned in twelve step meetings and realized I could apply them to the suicidal ideation as well. It wasn’t an exact fit, but the basic idea of living one day at a time, trying to do the next right thing pulled me through. My life in recovery had taught service work as a positive outlet, a reminder of where I had come from and how far that journey had brought me. I threw myself into volunteerism. Non-profits, schools, I organized events for the benefit of my community and continued sharing my story.
Each time I performed, someone would approach me to say how much they valued my strength, or to tell me their story. The sense of isolation began to fade. I began to understand that I was doing it. I was living.

And I was making a difference. Though I didn’t have a name for it at the time, I was providing peer support.

Planning my death had given me a certain boldness. Life holds few fears greater than death. Coming to a place of peace with ending my own life left me unafraid, so I channeled that into mentoring new poets and youth, teaching ways to tell their stories. In the process we connected with the world in a deeper way. We helped people give themselves permission to be afraid, to be lonely, to experience mental illness and not be defined by those experiences. We were surviving and showing others how they could too.

Making a plan for suicide seemed to open a door. I became involved with the Semicolon Tattoo Project, encouraging people of all walks of life to get a semi-colon tattoo in support of mental health and suicide prevention. I received my first tattoo in front of the media, reciting a poem about my plan to die. It was a very tense moment, but once the cameras stopped rolling, two of the cameramen told me their own stories. After, we hugged, because we survived.

In 2013 I published a collection of memoir and poems called Trigger Warning: Poetry Saved My Life. So many people had uttered that phrase, and poetry had played a huge role in saving my own life. Working with contributors from around the world further opened my eyes to the fact I not alone, but part of a community. A community of people who had learned to live. To embrace life because we faced the dark mirror and won, even when winning was not our intention.

I spent five years planning my death and in the process, I learned to live. There was nothing easy about it, and in no way am I weaker for it. If anything, the experience has made me stronger. Today I offer peer support professionally, and when a human being shares with me they are thinking about dying, I think of my mother. My children. And I tell them, I understand. Now, how can we help you live today?