



### A FAITH-BASED PERSPECTIVE ON SUICIDE

*Fierce Goodbye: Living in the Shadow of Suicide* aired on Hallmark Channel, NBC and ABC, produced by Mennonite Media in cooperation with Faith & Values Media. The title came from a Herald Press book, *Fierce Goodbye*, by G. Lloyd Carr, 2004.

We invite you to meet and hear from some courageous, beautiful people who have allowed us into their deepest moments of despair, grief, pain and finally hope as they cope with the aftermath of suicide. Included are insights from Protestant, Catholic, Jewish and Greek Orthodox theologians, and scholars and people working in the mental health field.

If you are a family survivor of suicide, you will find helpful information and comfort in knowing that others have walked a similar journey. We encourage you to check out If You Are a Survivor on this site.

If you (or someone you know) are having thoughts about suicide, call 1-800-273-TALK (8255). You will be connected to a certified crisis center nearest your location. Calls are answered 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

If you are a suicide survivor and would like to find a support group near you, the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention lists support groups by state.

If you are a pastor, counselor, friend or family member interested in knowing more about surviving suicide, we hope that the stories and information in this web site will enable you to relate in helpful ways to persons experiencing the grief of suicide.

### WHY THIS DOCUMENTARY?

**On an average day in the U.S., one person ends their life every 13 minutes.\*** Suicide takes the lives of about 41,000 each year. **(Centers for Disease Control, 2013) Each suicide intimately affects at least 6 other people (estimated).**

Those numbers do not begin to reflect the real effects of suicide, for such a death tragically and profoundly affects entire communities of people.

Religious communities experience particular pain because of faith issues and have traditionally condemned the act of suicide whether Protestant, Catholic, Jewish or Greek Orthodox. Survivors are often ignored and ostracized. Frequently the church has failed in leading survivors of suicide back to wholeness.

In the *Fierce Goodbye* documentary we delve into these and other issues. We focus on stories from people who have experienced suicide in their families or among their loved ones, and how they have found hope amid terrible pain.

The families and friends of those who die by suicide pass through one of life's darkest shadows, facing the hardest, most unanswerable questions asked by humans. Survivors not only deal with grief, but live with troubled ongoing emotions.

In producing this documentary we hope to facilitate more open conversation in the church and society about the once-taboo topic of suicide, and thereby help survivors move towards healing. --  
The Mennonite Media Production Team: Burton Buller, Wayne Gehman, Melodie Davis, Sheri Hartzler

### MEET THE HOST: JUDY COLLINS

Legendary folk singer Judy Collins hosts the *Fierce Goodbye: Living in the Shadow of Suicide* documentary. In 1992, her 33-year-old son DIED by suicide. Judy wrote a memoir, *Sanity and Grace* (J.P. Tarcher, 2003) which chronicles her journey from the acute pain of the aftermath of suicide, to finding hope and healing.

Judy is perhaps best known for her clear, a cappella renditions of "Amazing Grace," as well as the Grammy Hall of Fame song, "Both Sides Now" (written by Joni Mitchell). Her version of "Send in the Clowns," the ballad written by Stephen Sondheim for the Broadway Musical, "A Little Night Music" won "Song of the Year" at the 1975 Grammy's.

"The origins for the book were inside the journals I've been keeping for probably 35 years," Collins said in a November 2003 interview for NPR. "When Clark died, I wrote in my journal to make sense of his death. It took years for me to recover. And in one sense, you never get over it."

In subsequent years, Judy has become an advocate for suicide survivors, using her own pain as a way to help others. In 2000 she received the Survivor Award given by the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP).

Judy is a member of St. John the Divine Cathedral in New York City and serves as an artist in residence at the Cathedral and on the church's Board of Regents.

### STORIES IN THE DOCUMENTARY

**Jon Borntrager** was a creative, strong-willed, athletic, "winsome" child. He was a challenge to raise but also a great joy for Jonas and Barbara Borntrager, parents of three sons. Then Jon was diagnosed with

Tourette syndrome. In his teenage years he began drinking and using other drugs. Through several suicide attempts and hospitalizations, he was faithfully mentored by friends and family. But at the age of 21, Jon was found dead in his apartment of a drug overdose.

**Gloria Jean Akinduro** was an American who married a Nigerian; they had a son, Stephen. Because of the father's job, the family was transferred several times and in Nigeria, Stephen's mother became depressed, due in part to cultural adjustments. Stephen was only nine when his mother ended her life. His Aunt Brenda brings wider family insight to the documentary.

**Jamie Marks** was an active, outspoken, fun-loving older sister to three younger brothers. She was also exploring the next stages in her dream of becoming a holistic healer. She went to a botanical school in Colorado, on a spiritual trek to Nepal, and was living by herself in a tent on an organic farm in Hawaii when she became very depressed. After being home for only a week, at the age of 21, she took her life.

**Matthew Fox** was an active, capable guy, full of life and himself. His twin brother, Ben, has great memories of their growing up years as inseparable friends. Interested in pursuing a career in the environment/recycling, Matt was employed at a greenhouse after stints during college working at recycling in New Mexico and organic farming in Australia. When Matt was 24 he died of suicide.

**Darrel Brubaker** was a busy and compassionate pastor who was greatly troubled by the sexual abuse (and cover-up by church leaders) of some young men who had told him of their abuse. His parents, Merle and Ila Brubaker and his wife, Sheri, suffered with him through a two-year battle with depression.

## STUDY GUIDE

By Crystal Horning with Sheri Hartzler

Thank you for taking time to sit in the shadow of suicide. To be honest this is not a comfortable place to be. My own experience is that understanding the turmoil and grief a family goes through after a loved one dies by suicide is not easy, but is an important task for the faith community. I have lived in the shadow of suicide for many years with a sister who has attempted to take her life many times, living with the knowledge that she may likely do it again and she may likely succeed. This shadow brings many questions. Where is God? How do I pray for my sister, for myself? I think to myself, "How can you keep doing this to your family?" Leading a study around *Fierce Goodbye: Living in the Shadow of Suicide* is a gift you give to your faith community and to survivors. As you will soon learn, issues around suicide are usually kept secret. You are providing the community with a chance to share the secrets and to find freedom in living in the shadow of suicide. --Crystal Horning

**STRUCTURE.** There are four sessions outlined in this study guide. Each lesson begins with a quote. You are encouraged to begin each lesson by reading the quote. After reading, invite the group to reflect silently. Encourage them to focus on an aspect of the quote that has meaning to them. You may want to have the quote written on paper and placed on the wall or give as a handout. For your own preparation, we suggest you read the material found in the Background section before teaching the class.

If you only have one block of time, we encourage you to allow enough time after watching the 45-minute documentary to talk about the stories, the emotions, and the ideas that are experienced. You will probably find that many in the group will want to tell about people they have known who died by suicide. Allow enough time for this to happen, as it may be the first time an opportunity has been given.

PLEASE NOTE: This subject is sensitive and difficult to understand. Please ask all class participants to treat conversations around the subject of suicide with care and confidentiality.

### **Session I: Stories of Suicide Survivors**

#### INTRODUCTION

1. Begin with the question: What is your definition of suicide?
2. Invite the group to share their experience with suicide, whether it was a friend, family, co-worker or self-attempts. Remind the group that the sharing will be confidential, and held with respect and love.

Share this thought from Kay Jamison (psychologist from Johns Hopkins University): "Suicide is not a nice business. Suicide is not a kind business. It doesn't give you the kind of choices you'd like to have. You're not thinking at your best. All you're thinking about is there is nothing else that seems to work. You're a nightmare to your family, you're a nightmare to your friends, you're a nightmare to yourself, you don't recognize yourself and you are not who you think you used to be. It is a dreadful state . . ."

The term "suicide survivors" refers to families and friends who are left behind after a suicide has occurred. If you aren't a suicide survivor you may think this term means someone who has attempted suicide and survived. However, suicide survivors are indeed those who are left behind. The first video segment will introduce you to five courageous families who share their stories as suicide survivors.

WATCH VIDEO SEGMENT 00:00 to 15:50

#### INTRODUCTORY QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What is your immediate reaction to the stories you are hearing?
2. Review the stories of the individuals and their families who are represented on the video. You may want to ask which story touched you the most and why.

### **Session II: Aftermath of Suicide**

WATCH VIDEO SEGMENT 15:50 – 20:20

#### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Most of the survivors found their loved one's body. What would it be like to find your loved one and know they intentionally took their own life?
2. Jonas experienced a "sigh of relief" with Jon's death. Is this O.K.? Why would this have been a relief for Jonas?
3. Jill shared about the "rainbow" that appeared when she shared the news with her husband. Was this rainbow from God? How are our responses shaped by our own attitudes, faith and outlook?
4. Surviving a death by suicide is different from those left behind from terminal illness, accidental causes, homicide, sudden illness and natural causes. What were feelings the suicide survivors expressed?

5. It took three years for Gwen Carr to keep from constantly thinking about the suicide. Merle Brubaker stated that “I don’t expect to ever get over it” and it has been 12 years. What is your response to these time spans?

### Session III: Faith Communities

“The church often is very good during the acute grieving process, right during the funeral. And then right after that everyone goes back to business as usual, without realizing that for the family their life is never going to be the same again.” --SHERRY DAVIS MOLOCK

#### SUICIDE IN THE BIBLE

Suicide is not new to people of faith, as shown in scripture. Summarize these passages or have participants look them up and summarize for the group.

- In the Old Testament, King Saul (2 Sam. 1:1-16) falls upon his sword rather than being taken captive by the Philistines.
- Samson, (Judges 16:6-31) the blind giant, pulls down the columns of the Temple killing himself and others.
- Ahithophel, (2 Sam. 17:23) counselor to David and Absalom, hung himself after his advice was rejected.
- Zimri, (1 Kings 16:18-19) king of Israel for seven days was afraid of falling into enemy hands, so he burned his palace down around him.
- Abimelech, (Judges 9:52-54) son of Gideon, commanded his aide to kill him after a woman mortally wounded him.

The only direct account of suicide in the New Testament is the story of Judas (Matthew 27:3-5). When Judas saw what happened to Jesus as a result of his betrayal he went and hanged himself. As Lloyd Carr points out in the video and his book, *Fierce Goodbye: Living in the Shadow of Suicide*, Judas is condemned in the Bible for his betrayal, but not for his act of suicide.

The act of suicide is wrong but the Christian who commits suicide is not condemned to hell because he/she is saved by grace. Christians are sinners and commit acts of sin. They overeat, overwork, cheat, exceed the speed limit, wish harm to someone, gossip, etc. But most Christians believe if a Christian died today with a sinful act having just been committed, this individual would not be condemned to hell. The Christian life is a series of steps forward and slips back. The ideal is complete and perfect deliverance from sin. The reality is “scales on the eyes and thorns in the flesh.” Only Christ’s sufficient grace sees us through. The sufficient grace is evident in John 10:27-29 which states: “My sheep listen to my voice, I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one shall snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand.”

WATCH VIDEO SEGMENT 20:20 – 27:20

#### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What were the reactions by family members regarding God as a result of the suicide?
2. How do you think you would respond to the family of a loved one who took his/her life?

3. Do you believe suicide is a sin? Is the person with a mental illness responsible for their act? Do you believe God would accept the loved one? Is the loved one forgiven?
4. Do you believe that the family is condemned as much as the loved one?
5. How can healing occur after suicide?
6. Was suicide an answer to a survivor's prayer that their child be healed?
7. Louise Wirick says, "The stronger a survivor's faith, the harder it is to seek counsel in a Christian community ([www.survivorsroad2healing.com](http://www.survivorsroad2healing.com)). Are our faith communities closed to survivors? What experiences support your answer?
8. Sherry Davis Molock says, "God's grace covers a multitude of sin — even suicide." Would you agree? Why or why not?
9. Imagine yourself in the survivor's shoes. What would you need from those around you?
10. Have the group brainstorm (and put on chalkboard or newsprint) a list of what the survivors from the video said they needed from the faith community.

### Session IV: Survivor Support

"People that seem to be most resilient are the ones that reach out to help other people. They go to survivor groups, and are first helped by other people, and then try and do something to help educate the community, their churches, friends, and advocate at a national level ... I don't think any of them would say they've gotten over it. But I think they would say they have used that pain to help them move on." --KAY REDFIELD JAMISON - BACKGROUND

INTRODUCTION. Ask the group for experiences they have had relating to suicide survivors. If no one knows a suicide survivor, have the group discuss how they think they would respond to someone in this situation. In this segment of the video we will hear how survivors have found support for themselves and how they have moved on in many cases, to help others.

WATCH VIDEO SEGMENT 27:20 – 42:30

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How did the families work through their grief?
2. "We're not doing enough in our faith community for long-term mourning." Rabbi Roberts made this statement. Do you agree? Disagree? Why or why not?
3. How would you talk about God with survivors?
4. How could you make yourself available to survivors?
5. What one thing have you learned that you did not know before you began this study?
6. How can your congregation respond to the issue of suicide within its walls or community?

### RESOURCES

#### WEBSITES

[www.suicidology.org](http://www.suicidology.org) - American Association of Suicidology. 202-237-2280.

[www.afsp.org](http://www.afsp.org) - American Foundation for Suicide Prevention. 888-333-AFSP

[www.hopeline.com](http://www.hopeline.com) - Kristin Brooks Hope Center, and home of the 800-SUICIDE hotline.

<http://suicide.mentalhelp.net> - Mental Health Net. 614-764-0143.

[www.save.org](http://www.save.org) - Suicide Awareness Voices of Education. 612-946-7998.

[www.survivingsuicide.com](http://www.survivingsuicide.com) - Surviving Suicide. [www.survivorsofsuicide.com](http://www.survivorsofsuicide.com) - Survivors of Suicide

[www.road2healing.com](http://www.road2healing.com) - Survivors Road2Healing

[www.yellowribbon.org](http://www.yellowribbon.org) - Yellow Ribbon Suicide Prevention Program. 303-429-3530

## BOOK

Available from MennoMedia/Herald Press [www.MennoMedia.org](http://www.MennoMedia.org) 800-245-7894

*Fierce Goodbye: Living in the Shadow of Suicide*: a personal account of the aftermath of suicide in the family. The author offers guidance for those who worry about the eternal fate of one who has taken his/her life. G. Lloyd Carr and Gwendolyn C. Carr.