

You are receiving this email because you are one of so many people who have very kindly offered me condolences and/or support after the death of my partner Jan Pentland -- in person, by email, card or letter, by phone, or in some other way. For your condolences and/or support, I say thank you and "bless you" -- in a Jewish, agnostic, Buddhist-leaning kind of way.

My apologies for this group email, and my apologies, too, if you receive it more than once. It may mean that you have contacted me more than once -- in which case, thank you.

Many of you have asked me how I am coping after the loss of Jan by suicide. This email is an attempt to answer that question. I hope the email may also help you to understand a bit better how Jan came to take her own life, difficult as it is to comprehend that.

BRIEF SUMMARY

How am I coping after Jan's death? Understandably, I am in the "grief storm", which is characterised by "waves of emotion", in particular "waves of sadness". So I am OK one minute, in tears the next; surprisingly centred one minute, all-over-the-place the next. I have better and worse moments, better and worse days. Overall, even though the grieving process is very painful a lot of the time, I'd say that I am doing as well as can be expected in difficult circumstances.

If you do not have time to read long emails, read no further.
If you'd like to know more, please read on...

LIFE WITHOUT JAN

My partner, best friend, and soul-mate Jan Pentland died on 15 August 2009. The manner of her death was suicide. But Jan had everything to live for. She was at the peak of her magnificent professional career. She had three children, six grandchildren, and me, who loved her dearly and whom she loved dearly. Unfortunately, Jan's deep, dreadful bipolar depression was stronger than all of that. So although the "cause" of death was suicide, if Jan had not suffered from Bipolar Mood Disorder (a chemical imbalance of the brain), and the deep depression that accompanied it, she would still be with us today.

Recently, a friend of mine who is going through her own major physical traumas at this time wrote to me about her situation and mine: [In these difficult times], "living is about turning up and doing the best we can, with as much grace as possible, knowing that we are never, ever in control of outcomes, only what reactions we can muster." I agree entirely with that.

GUILT

As I mentioned in my speech at Jan's funeral (attached), most of the time I am not giving myself a hard time about Jan's death.

Early in our relationship, Jan said a number of times: "I can't understand people who commit suicide. If things got that bad, I'd change my name and go to Queensland." That was long before her bipolar had been diagnosed, and long before her periodic depressions became so severe.

More recently, at Jan's request, I accompanied her to what turned out to be her last two weekly visits to the psychiatrist who was managing her medication for bipolar and depression. The psychiatrist goes to the international conferences, and he is up with the latest on medication. He is also a lovely, warm, caring human being, a mensch. For example, he gave Jan his mobile phone number, and towards the end he asked her to call his mobile daily, as she did in the week before she died.

In Jan's last session with the psychiatrist, on the Wednesday just three days before she suicided, the psychiatrist and I were both very worried about her. The psychiatrist said to her: "I recommend that you go to hospital." Jan refused to go. He said to her: "I want a guarantee from you that you won't kill yourself." Jan said: "You have it". He said: "That's not enough -- I want a cast-iron guarantee." Jan said: "You have it." I said to Jan: "You wouldn't do that to your kids, would you?" Jan said: "No". Earlier that week, Jan had said to her kids: "I'll get through this."

A couple of weeks earlier, Jan said to her closest girlfriend: "It feels like I'm in a massive black hole, and I'm trying to climb out, but I can't get out of it, and the hole just keeps getting bigger and bigger." Jan also feared that her bouts of depression were getting worse as she got older -- and that was indeed the case. This was the lowest she had ever been. She felt she could barely survive this bout of depression, so how could she cope with the next one if it was likely to be even worse?

The wise material that the Coroner's office provides for survivors of suicide says: "It is extremely painful to accept that we were not able to prevent the death of a loved one or protect them ... But no-one is responsible for another person's decisions or actions." I agree strongly.

Jan was always a very strategic thinker. I suspect that she never talked about her suicidal thoughts because she wanted to keep suicide as an escape option in case the pain from the depression became too great. You can't keep watch over someone 24/7 -- you have to sleep some time. And as long as the person denies suicidal thoughts, you can't keep them in a psychiatric hospital either.

The loss of Jan by suicide is tough enough, without adding to it guilt: the fantasy or delusion that I had the power to stop Jan from taking her life. Given the pain and torment that Jan must have been suffering, I don't believe I had that power.

ASKING FOR HELP

I have been struggling to come up with some positives from Jan's death. One is that Jan is no longer suffering.

I'd like to try to create another positive. Like Jan, I have been good at helping others; but like Jan, I have not been good at asking for help for myself. I would like to use Jan's death as a marker to try to change that. So I am going to ask for some help. This puts me way out of my comfort zone!

What I'm asking is: in the weeks and months to come, if you find yourself thinking: "I'd love to send an email to David, or I'd like to contact him in some other way, but I don't want to intrude...", please know that you will NOT be intruding! On the contrary, the support that I have received from so many

of you, in so many ways, in these first 13 weeks, has warmed my heart, and continues to do so. It has been SO IMPORTANT in helping me to cope with the "grief storm". I may not be able to respond individually to your contacting me -- but you can be sure that, even if you do not hear from me in return, I will definitely appreciate hearing from you.

WHAT HAS BEEN HELPFUL SO FAR?

Some of the things that I have been finding helpful in the grief process so far are:

1. Reminding myself that Jan is no longer suffering now.

2. Spending time with family and friends whom I care about, and who care about me. These people are the most powerful support I have, and I feel so fortunate to have them in my life. (You know who you are!)

3. Familiarity with the 'grief storm' has been helpful:

(a) I have been through a major grief process before, 24 years ago, when my six-week-old son Michael died of cot death (Sudden Infant Death Syndrome). So I am familiar with the "grief storm" from personal experience. (The "grief storm" is described briefly in the second attachment to this email, pages 5-6).

(b) As part of my work as a clinical and counselling psychologist in private practice, I am a grief counsellor, and in addition, I am a teacher of grief counselling. So I am familiar with the grief process from that perspective as well.

These prior experiences with grief and the grief process are helpful to some extent. They mean that I don't have to ask myself things like: "Should I be feeling this?" "Am I going crazy?" "Am I doing this right?" But do these experiences with grief diminish the loss of Jan? No, unfortunately, they do not.

4. One of my Buddhist-leaning beliefs that I find most helpful relates to acceptance. I believe that "acceptance" is one of the most under-rated words in the English language. I ACCEPT that Jan has died. I don't like it, I don't want it, if I have a choice, Jan does NOT DIE -- but I don't have a choice, so I accept that she has died. A side benefit of this is that I don't need to waste emotional energy on: "Jan shouldn't have died!" "It's not fair!" "Why, why, why?" Instead, I can focus on the heart of the matter: "My dear partner Jan has died, and I miss her so."

5. A second Buddhist-leaning belief that I find most helpful is "Experiencing the Moments", or in the words from the Sixties, "Be Here Now". I find that I enjoy my life more when I can "experience the moments", (or "be in the present"), instead of worrying about the future, or getting stuck in the past. "Experiencing the moments" does NOT preclude tears -- the waves of emotion and tears come naturally as something in the moment triggers memories of the past with Jan. That is painful, but it is OK, because it is part of the natural grieving process. "Experiencing the moments" is how I want to live my life, because this moment is the only one you are sure you have got.

6. Having time on my own is also helpful. I have always enjoyed my own company, and that continues to be the case, provided I am also spending enough time with the people who are important to me.

7. Thinking about people who are worse off (including people I know) is helpful at times, and there are so many people who are worse off than I am.

8. Deciding to do something for fun each day has helped heaps. So too has having a good laugh from time to time, and distracting or entertaining myself at times with sports, a movie or play, music, a TV program that I've recorded, or exercise.

9. When I can remember Jan with a smile or a chuckle, instead of with tears, that is helpful too. At present, the smile or chuckle comes less than 1% of the time, but for the first seven weeks it was 0%, so that is a move in the right direction.

10. Not being angry at Jan is helpful. I am not angry because I believe I understand why she took her life -- she was in unbearable pain.

11. Remembering that I feel fortunate to have had the 20 years we had together, instead of only feeling the loss, is helpful. As is remembering that there are some losses where you may or may not "get over it", but you can "learn to live with it". It is my goal to eventually "learn to live with" the loss of Jan.

12. Meeting with friends and work colleagues of Jan, and hearing their experience of her, has been helpful. So too has meeting with people who suffer from bipolar or depression, or who are survivors of suicide, who kindly offered to talk.

13. Seeing clients in my private practice in counselling psychology is helpful, because it gets me out of my own woes and into somebody else's. For their benefit and mine, I am currently not taking on new clients who have "depression" as their presenting problem.

14. Respecting the power of the "grief storm" is helpful too. A colleague said recently: "Just as you have to respect nature when it is wild, grief needs to be respected too." I am learning to remember this. It includes going with the feelings, trusting the process, and taking one moment and one day at a time.

15. Remembering that everyone grieves differently is helpful. A friend said to me recently: "We all have fingers, and most of them look pretty similar -- but each of us has a UNIQUE set of finger-prints. It's a bit like that with grief. We all have our losses, and some of them may look pretty similar -- but each of us has a UNIQUE way of grieving each loss." I agree strongly with that.

16. Getting my own counselling is super-helpful. So, too, is making the time to do the grieving. My experience as a grief counsellor tells me that if you don't do the grieving, it doesn't go away. The grief stays inside you, and it can block you from having happy feelings, the feelings that you need to make good decisions, etc. (For a classic example of this process, see the brief story of the woman with the stiff neck in the second attachment to this email, page 3).

SOCIAL JUSTICE FUND

A number of people have asked me whether I will continue with the work of the Social Justice Fund now that Jan has died. The answer is: definitely yes! I was passionate about social justice before I met Jan, and I am passionate about it still. What has changed is that: (a) I won't have Jan and her wonderful commonsense to help me evaluate project proposals -- a huge loss; and (b) I won't have Jan with me when I go to visit, assess and support projects -- a huge loss.

TALKING OPENLY ABOUT SUICIDE, DEATH AND GRIEVING

Please feel free to pass on this email to anyone you think might be interested. I think it would be good if we could talk more openly about suicide, and in particular about the fact that suicide can occur because of a chemical imbalance in the brain, even when everything else in the person's life is as good as it has ever been, or even better.

It would also be good if we could talk more openly about death and grieving. Death and grieving are a normal part of life -- albeit a painful part.

CONCLUSION: THE LEGLESS SWIMMER

I remember some years ago watching a Paralympic swimming race which was won by a young woman with no legs. The poolside interviewer said to her: "You are amazing! How do you do this? What can you teach us?" The young woman said that it was quite simple, really:

"You do the best you can with what you've got."

I believe that is a profound statement that refers to us all. It certainly describes what I am doing here in the wake of Jan's suicide: "I am doing the best I can with what I've got."

If you have read this far, THANK YOU! And thank you once again for your support. I cannot express in words how much the support I have been receiving means to me. I do not have the words that could say it.

If you have any reactions to any of this, I'd be very happy to hear from you.

Lots of love,

David

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For help or information, call Suicide Helpline (Victoria) 1300 651 251, or Lifeline (Australia-wide) 13 11 14, or visit www.depressionservices.org.au <<http://www.depressionservices.org.au>> or www.beyondblue.org.au <<http://www.beyondblue.org.au>>

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