A Mother’s Reckoning: Living in the Aftermath of Tragedy
By: Sue Klebold (Crown Publishing Group, NY, 2016)
Reviewed By: David N. Miller, Ph.D.

On April 20, 1999, Sue Klebold’s son Dylan, along with his friend and classmate Eric Harris, killed 13 people and injured 21 others before killing themselves at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. Following this tragedy, Sue Klebold’s life quickly became what must have seemed to be a never-ending nightmare. She understandably avoided the media, not wanting her words to be misconstrued or taken out of context, and legitimately feared for her and her family’s safety. In the days, weeks, months, and years after Columbine, she kept a low profile, living quietly with her husband Tom and son Byron. Her brief forays into the media spotlight were few and carefully selected; she and her husband consented to interviews with writers David Brooks and Andrew Solomon, and in 2009 she published a heart-wrenching article for Oprah Winfrey’s O magazine entitled “I Will Never Know Why.”

Now, 17 years after the Columbine tragedy, Sue Klebold has published a searing, powerful memoir entitled A Mother’s Reckoning: Living in the Aftermath of Tragedy. She describes that horrible day in 1999 that ended several lives and forever changed many others (including her own), the agonies of its aftermath, and her kaleidoscopic thoughts and emotions that emerged from it: a complicated and devastating mixture of anguish, confusion, fear, depression, guilt, and remorse. In a diary entry written soon after the tragedy, she writes that “the terror and total disbelief are overwhelming. The sorrow of losing my son, the shame of what he has done, the fear of the world’s hatred. There is no respite from the agony.”

That agony would begin almost immediately after the shootings, when Klebold describes a truly harrowing series of events. In addition to trying to cope with her son’s murders and his suicide, she felt ostracized from her community, received death threats, developed panic attacks, was sued by several parents of sons and daughters killed or injured in the massacre, and experienced high levels of stress, loss of sleep, constant grief and guilt, a cancer scare, and the eventual dissolution of her marriage. Her description of these events is often painful to read, let alone actually experience. Through it all, however, she never loses sight of the families that lost a loved one as a result of the shootings. As she notes, “a day does not pass that I do not feel a sense of overwhelming guilt – both for the myriad ways I failed Dylan and for the destruction he left in his wake” (p. 279). Fortunately, over time, and with the support of friends, colleagues, and noteworthy experts in the fields of suicidology and school shootings, she comes to the realization that it was not poor parenting on her part, or that of her husband, that led to Columbine. As she writes in the book, “The only thing I knew for sure was that Dylan had participated in the massacre in spite of the way he had been raised, not because of it. What I didn’t know was how I could possibly convey this to the families of the people he had killed. Even if I could, it would never alleviate the magnitude of their suffering. Nothing would” (p. 257).

The literature on surviving suicide loss includes several works by ordinary people attempting to articulate and describe the range of emotions they experienced after their loved one died by suicide, and that is certainly true of A Mother’s Reckoning. One of the aspects that makes this book unique, however, is that the anguish Sue Klebold experiences from her son’s suicide is compounded by the fact that he also killed other people (“If suicide is difficult to think and talk about,” she writes, “then murder–suicide is unthinkable. I hadn’t simply failed to protect Dylan from himself, but everyone he killed, too.”). We now have emerging evidence suggesting that in cases of murder–suicide it is suicide, not murder, that is the first and primary motivation (see Thomas Joiner’s excellent book The Perversion of
Virtue: Understanding Murder–Suicide for a detailed discussion of this phenomenon). Over time, Sue Klebold comes to this conclusion as well; she clearly and quite reasonably believes that suicide was the driving force behind her son’s actions at Columbine High School. While accepting that she will never know why Dylan killed others and then himself, and sensibly wary “of the many pat explanations that sprang up in the wake of the tragedy” (p. 151), she states that “there is one piece of the puzzle that reveals more for me of the overall picture than any other: that Dylan was experiencing depression or another brain health crisis that contributed to his desire to die by suicide, and his desire to die played an intrinsic role in his participation in the massacre.” (p. 152).

She comes to this understanding after reading what were referred to in the media as Dylan’s “journals,” but which were actually little more than “scattered pages, compiled by the investigators” (p. 158) after Dylan’s death. These writings were confiscated by law enforcement soon after the Columbine shootings, although Sue Klebold was not able to see them until two years after the tragedy. What she found in her son’s writings was a revelation, as described in one of her own journal entries: “[Dylan] was expressing depressed and suicidal thoughts a full 2 years before his death. I couldn’t believe it. We had all that time to help him and didn’t. I read his writings and cried and cried. This was like the suicide note we never got…”

Learning about Dylan’s suicidal behavior eventually led her to the suicide loss survivor movement and into the role of suicide prevention activist. A former boss, close friend, and fellow suicide loss survivor (who Klebold states “treated Dylan’s death as a suicide right from the start”) brought her “stacks” of books on suicide to read, and she began to attend, and eventually speak at, meetings and conferences designed to support people who had lost someone to suicide. Joining a small group of women who volunteered for the Suicide Prevention Coalition of Colorado, she soon realized that “there was no discrimination in that room – nothing but love, and compassion, and an all–to–recognizable grief...When I was with other survivors, Dylan was a boy who had died by suicide. Nobody was excusing what he had done, but they weren’t discounting my grief, either, or my right to miss the son I had lost” (p. 248). For the first time in a very long time, she “felt at home” (p. 251).

Andrew Solomon, who interviewed and profiled Sue and her (then) husband Tom for his book Far From the Tree: Parents, Children, and the Search for Identity, provides a thoughtful and sensitive introduction to Klebold’s book. Solomon describes her this way: “...In the wake of that tragedy, she found the strength to extract wisdom from her devastation. To sustain your love in these circumstances is an act of courage...Sue’s passion for her son is evident in every one of these grief–stricken pages, and her book is a testament to complexity” (p. xii). Sue Klebold openly expresses this complexity throughout her book. Near the end of it, after acknowledging that she cannot change the past no matter how much she would like to (and stating that she would gladly give up her own life to bring back even one of the people killed at Columbine), she maintains her commitment to helping others as best she can: “I do try to conduct my life so it will honor those whose lives were shattered or taken by my son. The work I do is in their memory. I work, too, to hold on to the love I still have for Dylan, who will always remain my child despite the horrors he perpetrated” (p. 280).

A Mother’s Reckoning: Living in the Aftermath of Tragedy is a courageous and extraordinary book by a courageous and extraordinary woman . There is nothing else like it, and it is an invaluable addition to the literature on surviving suicide loss. It is highly recommended, but don’t just read it – buy it; all author profits from the book will be donated to research and to charitable organizations focusing on mental health issues (AAS is one of those organizations). Buying this book will be money well spent, in more ways than one.