Artful Grief: A Diary of Healing
By: Sharon Strouse (Balboa Press, 2013)
Reviewed by: William Feigelman, Ph.D.

Sharon Strouse’s Artful Grief: A Diary of Healing stands out as a very unique and inviting suicide survivor memoir. Chronologically, the author takes us along the first ten-years of her deeply torturous, but ultimately healing, grief journey. The book begins with the profoundly shocking revelation when Strouse’s family is informed that their youngest child, 17 year-old Kristin, took her life by jumping from the roof of her fifteen story college dormitory building, about a month after starting college. What sets this book apart from many survivor memoirs is the author’s unflinching and deep-reaching honesty. Readers follow along as the Strouse family’s grief journey traverses from the initial memorial service onto seasonal holidays, family vacation trips, weddings, family get-togethers, etc. As we travel along this grief journey with them, we learn of their sadness, anguish and confusion. We learn, for example, how difficult it is for a mother, years later, to attend the wedding of a deceased child’s peer, an event brimming with sadness, envy, scorn, ambivalence, love and admiration that survivors usually must suppress as they remain quietly seated at the ceremony.

With her daughter’s death, Sharon begins her own mental free-fall, obsessively reviewing the details of the death, posing the questions that all survivors inevitably put to themselves: “Why didn’t I see it coming and why didn’t I stop it from happening?” Each time-stamped section helps the reader arrive at a deeper understanding of the family’s history and the evolution of their loss: the warm close relationship of three children with their parents and to each other during early childhood years, the extremely strong bond between Sharon and Kristin. Despite a typical childhood, with adolescence Kristin suddenly becomes envious and hostile toward her older sister. During her last high school year, Kristin’s behavior changes drastically; she is apprehended for shoplifting, has outbursts of rage with family members, and shows signs of deep depression. She appears to improve with professional care and medication and experts counseled the family that their daughter’s suicidal musings were merely attention-seeking acts. Of course, all these factual details place Sharon within a morass of guilt after the death, blaming herself for failing to override the experts, perceiving her daughter’s dangerous state acutely only in hindsight.

There are many turning points to Strouse’s healing, perhaps, the most significant of which is her discovery that collage-making (from magazine pictures and other materials), can safely externalize the dreaded details of the death into powerful images that are simply cut and pasted together. As a career art therapist, Strouse finds this satisfying, and is subsequently encouraged to help other bereaved individuals make collages, helping them deal with their unbearable thoughts. Within the overlapping communities of the bereaved, Strouse meets and makes many new friends who help her to develop and pursue her new collage-making endeavors. In her search to find peace and harmony for her family and herself, Strouse utilizes almost every known mental health promoting aid: acupuncture, meditation, massage therapy, bibliotherapy, support groups, professional counselors, psychics, clergy help, and others. But, the things that stand out on her pathway to healing are telling her story and helping others use collage-making to alleviate their pangs of grief that lead her forward. Interested readers can view Strouse’s collages at www.artfulgrief.com, which she notes in her immensely informative and satisfying book.