A Mother’s Reckoning: Living in the Aftermath of Tragedy
By Sue Klebold
Reviewed by William Feigelman, Ph.D.

A Mother’s Reckoning: Living in the Aftermath of Tragedy by Sue Klebold (NY: Crown Publishers, 2016), deserves widespread attention and readership among the suicide bereaved and suicidiologists. In this work Klebold approaches the heavy guilt inducing question: why her son (and his friend Eric Harris) came to take their own lives and the lives of 13 others on an April day in 1999 at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. This event not only cast blame upon the family’s parental competence for not being able to successfully avert the tragedy, but also became the inspirational source for a long series of similar school shootings. Sixteen years since that disastrous day, Klebold has lived in the shadows, with a heavy heart and a deep sense of guilt and remorse, possessing a strong desire to show compassion and support for the other victims’ families (insofar as she would be permitted to do so), and to share her story of loss with the world so that others would be better able to avoid her family’s catastrophe.

It took a tremendous amount of courage and determination to write this unflinchingly honest appraisal of her own family and her son’s life and death. Ever since childhood Klebold had been inclined to journaling, was an advanced degree holder in social science and worked at providing social services to people with disabilities, offering her the skillset to assume this daunting task. Her diligent study and unceasing curiosity led her to eventually approach some of the most eminent scholars in suicidology and violence studies to help understand her unique tragedy and to distill important lessons from it. Among the many experts she relied on were Andrew Solomon (who wrote the forward for this book), Thomas Joiner, Matthew Nock, Katherine Newman, Peter Larkin, Adam Langford, Victoria Arango and many others. It should be noted that all author profits from this book will be donated to mental health and suicide prevention causes.

Klebold’s riveting book begins with that familiar alarming phone call that suicide survivors can readily remember when a family is rapidly assembled to learn that an unexpected death has occurred. At first she prays for her son’s safety, but as she soon learns that her son is said to be one of the gunman in the killing of so many his fellow students and a teacher, she prays for his death. Initially Klebold remains in a state of shock and bewilderment, desperately trying to comprehend
her son’s suicidal actions that seemed so out of character to her own sense of knowing him. She cannot even begin to grasp the murderous aspects to his conduct until a month later when, in a meeting with local police, she is presented with photographic and videotape evidence of his violence, bringing her to gasp again in utter horror and bewilderment. Her informational quest led her to eventually understand that Dylan and Eric synergistically inspired each other along their diabolical trajectory. School bullying, which was never clearly understood and appropriately dealt with until after the Columbine incident, became another important precipitant to this causal chain. Lest it be thought that Klebold casts blame on agents beyond her own family, she meticulously scours over her family’s history and interactions with her son to uncover any subtle or concealed signs of her son’s brain illness. Although Klebold had some occasional concerns about her son’s mental health, her son, like many suicide decedents did a masterful job of hiding his depression, and was averse to getting counseling help, despite parental urgings. Klebold is careful to suggest that the overwhelming majority of people afflicted with brain illnesses like her son’s are non-violently inclined.

Suicide survivors and prevention workers will find much value in this work. Klebold, herself, found great comfort and compassion from the bereavement community. Her recommendations for news coverage of suicides and murder/suicides follow all essential recommendations for avoiding copycat conduct.

Looking back at the Columbine tragedy 16 years later, unfortunately, most of the unlearned lessons about better control over firearms availability still remain: assault weapons are still readily available, gun show purchases are still insufficiently regulated and people with criminal or mental health problems histories still find it relatively easy to buy guns.