Review of “My Living Will”
by John Trautwein
Reviewed by William Feigelman, Ph.D.

Survivor memoirs are often important resources in the bereaved-by-suicide’s toolkit. The memoir author is attempting "recovery" from the devastating, de-stabilizing and confidence shattering experience of a loved one’s suicide death. Some books, like Iris Bolton’s My Son, My Son, reach across the board, affecting nearly every reader, with their broad-based framing of the recovery issues. Other books, such as this review title, “My Living Will” by John Trautwein (Bloomington, IN, West Bow Press, 2014) have a more focused appeal to individuals in the bereaved-by-suicide community. It should be understood that there is ‘no-one-size-fits-all-formula’ for survivor healing after a suicide loss. What may work well for one bereaved person may seem antithetical to another’s healing.

With great anguish, the former professional baseball player John Trautwein describes the heartbreak and shock he experienced at discovering his 15-year-old son Will’s lifeless body. Will hung himself in his bedroom while the rest of the family slept in their Atlanta suburban home of Johns Creek, Georgia. At the time of the death the surviving members of the Trautwein family consisted of 48-year old John, now an information technology executive, his 43 year-old wife, Suzie, a stay-at-home mother, 13 year-old Tommy, 11 year-old Mike and 6 year-old daughter, Holyn. John Trautwein offers vivid descriptions of the immense difficulties he faced with local police/coroner, bank and phone company personnel in official transactions about his son following his death. The suicide death of a 15-year-old child inevitably places a huge burden of guilt upon any parent who incessantly wonders how much he may have caused his child’s death by his actions or inactions. This issue was conveyed with great clarity and poignancy by Trautwein.

Trautwein’s book should strike a most responsive chord among devout
Christians. While many suicide bereaved might be inclined to question their faith after a suicide loss, in contrast, the Trautwein family, right from the very beginning, found great comfort and support from their religion when their local pastor assured them that their Will was in God’s care. Thereafter, their strong Christian faith and close attachments to family, friends and community helped guide them through their new and extremely challenging life course.

John Trautwein, being a former professional athlete, and coach of local youth athletic teams, was able to utilize his role as a respected community leader to quickly become an advocate for suicide prevention. Within the first year of his son’s death he established a foundation honoring his son’s memory that engaged in fund-raising to support a wide variety of suicide prevention endeavors: the establishment of programs to help youth communicate more effectively with one another and with adults in relation to suicide prevention, scholarship awards to promising student athletes, and support for other worthy suicide prevention initiatives. The Will-to-Live Foundation emphasizes the principle of kids helping each other to deter youth suicide. Thus, John Trautwein has learned the value of giving back to his community and demonstrates the power of post-traumatic growth, learning that doing good for others often alleviates the pain of personal loss. While few bereaved by suicide might be able to advance as swiftly as John Trautwein has, his actions reinforce the role model for all survivors: honor your lost loved ones by doing good works in their behalf, carry their lives forward and make their lives count!