No Way to Behave at a Funeral: A Tale of Personal Loss Through Suicide
By: Noel Braun (Port Campbell Press, 2011)
Reviewed by: Ginny Sparrow

No Way to Behave at a Funeral is one of the most, honest, revealing stories I’ve read about loss by suicide. Everyone’s story is unique, but the survivor can hardly help but omit or exaggerate some details every time they tell it. We’ve all done it. I believe the body and soul can only take so much stress, guilt, or regret. So when we tell our story, we often gloss over some things. This book, however, does not.

Braun’s courage was impressive in the face of his wife’s suicide, which occurred only days before their son’s wedding. Her warning signs could not have been more obvious. His feelings of guilt leap from the first several pages, leaving the reader with a knowing kind of dread; the old Hindsight is 20/20 adage. Braun’s wife, Maris, was a survivor of suicide herself; her two sisters suffered the same fate. She had been treated for depression for years and she had a plan, which she casually mentioned to her husband just prior to her death. I had tears in my eyes as I read the accounts of her last days. I could see how the author had analyzed and agonized over every last clue and beat himself up with guilt. He described it as “an awful battle that began to rage beneath.” As the shock immediately, sadly, wore off, his mind went straight to the guilt stage. He asks himself, “Which was worse, guilt or grief? I’m not sure. Take one serving of regret mixed with a heavy dose of guilt and you get the bleakest cocktail of mental pain guaranteed to blight the strongest.” Well said.

How do you survive this type of loss? Literally, how do you get up in the morning? Braun tells us. He chronicles every day of the first couple years after his loss and spares no detail. He muses on his future; he reflects on his past. He mourns squeezing fresh orange juice for only himself after Maris’s death. It’s the little pains, the little details and remembrances that he puts on paper that truly resonate with other suicide survivors. He tells the horror of picking up his wife’s car when the police say they are through with it. He can’t even bear to trim a tree his wife planted. He knows he will be able to face these minutiae of life later, but not immediately after his loss. He takes good care of himself and he leans on his children when he needs to. He serves as a wonderful role model for us all.

Besides his soul-baring struggle with guilt, he touches on a subject rarely spoken of in spousal loss; sex! What do you do with those memories, that loss, that need? He describes his personal pain in this area and decides not to pursue dating, at least not for a long while.

Braun does not allow the rest of his life to go to waste. He summons up the energy to unearth his forgotten writing projects and amazingly finishes them. He has his first novel published. He does more than survive; he accomplishes things again. This is the primary message of the book; your life isn’t over after a suicide loss. You can smile again and you are still meaningful to this world.

At the risk of stereotyping, Braun’s candor might seem uncommon coming from a man. I would have loved to have had this book for my father after my mother’s suicide, which is one reason why this book is so needed.