Shaking Shame from Mental Illness  
By: Evonne Agnello (Book Publisher’s Network, 2012)  
Review by: Desiree Woodland

With the words, facing depression, and finding peace and hope, contained in the prologue, Evonne Agnello begins her story of survival following the trauma of two suicides in her family, even as she struggles with depression. She highlights the statistic that one in four Americans is affected by mental illness or has a family member or friend who are affected. Mental illness is more common than we talk about, and it is a contributing factor in suicide. Agnello poses the question, “What would our country be like if everyone who had a mental illness had access to full treatment?” Agnello embarks on a writing journey to explore that question and to shed light on the suicides of her father, who had been battling prostate cancer and her brother, Curt who had been battling mental illness for many years before his suicide.

Agnello was devastated by her father’s suicide, but, she said,” he lived a rich full life.” He was a prominent businessman and owner of a newspaper in Seward, Nebraska. She credits him with giving the love of language to his children. In this context, Agnello shares stories of growing up, which are interwoven with quotes from historical figures such as Galileo, “You cannot teach a man anything, you can only help him to find it within himself,” and Tolstoy, “Happy families are all alike: every unhappy family in unhappy in its own way.”

We are first introduced to Curt through his many letters and writings, as we get a glimpse into the life of this brilliant, man who was full of promise before mental illness changed him. The descriptions of shock and disbelief over Curt’s suicide will be familiar ground for many survivors. As Agnello wrestles with the reality of his death, a more burning quest for her is to understand his mental illness. She struggles with the guilt of his first hospitalization, his insistence that he was not ‘crazy,’ and her intense loyalty to him, as well as her longing to believe that he did not have a mental illness. She wanted to believe that maybe his allegations of being watched, as well as his grandiose predictions of working on secret scientific projects could possibly be true. As she is more and more convinced that he truly suffered from mental illness, she expresses doubt, that somehow she wasn’t educated enough or didn’t do enough to help him as he spiraled down into homelessness or the darkness of losing touch with his family, only to reappear months or even years later. Curt’s suicide intensified Agnello’s own search for equilibrium. She fears that she too, will follow her brother and father’s path.

Understanding doesn’t come for many years, as Agnello struggles with her depression. She is fortunate to be able to afford the necessary treatment that she laments is so lacking in our society. It was after her mother’s death when Agnello reached the elusive equilibrium that she had been seeking. She faces the challenges of grief, and gains understanding by reading, through communicating with the psychiatrist who had first treated Curt, and finding spiritual support and solace through writing and exploring her beliefs. This book will help others to understand the complexities of suicide and mental illness. There is no shame!