Despite its somewhat opaque title, A suicide note of hope: More than a memoir by Hank McGovern (Peaceful Moon Press, 2016) offers suicide attempt survivors helpful advice and support for avoiding future suicide attempts. It is a daunting challenge for anyone suffering from the residues of a mental illness to be able to assemble a meaningful and cogent narrative for helping others avoid the overwhelming sense of painful despair that sets the stage for taking one’s life, but the author appears to have done this successfully. During the author’s 42 year life McGovern has endured more than his fair share of traumas. He contracted the polio-like illness of Guillain-Barre Syndrome at age 2; his mother died at age 3 from a lethal fall down a flight of stairs in the family’s home. His father, a tragic victim of alcoholism, was unable to parent Hank, setting him out to live with a succession of different relatives during his early years. When he was 11 his father died from complications related to his alcoholism. As a high school student Hank and a friend, highly intoxicated by alcohol, experienced a serious automobile accident, nearly claiming Hank’s life and leaving him with a need for numerous successive surgeries. At age 19 McGovern bottomed out and in a fit of sleeplessness, depression and reflecting upon his isolation from stable and enduring relationships, took 19 Sominex pills, hoping to kill himself.

As McGovern’s narrative proceeds he conveys to readers how his lingering suicidal thoughts eventually faded as he got older, wiser and eventually became more learned in the field of psychology. Unfortunately, I cannot say that Hank’s development of a healing, life sustaining narrative comes forth altogether fluidly and straightforwardly. There are far too many digressions in this book distracting readers such as the author’s contacts with B.F. Skinner, which may have been supportive for sustaining McGovern’s fragile psyche, but really was not all that necessary to the text. Nor was it necessary for the author to convey the complete exposition of his assertiveness training exercises; these and other digressions simply weigh down the text.

McGovern’s path toward embracing life emerged from several different sources, many of which were covered in separate chapters, where the author offered chapters on transcendental meditation, assertiveness training, cognitive therapy, and the self-hypnotic therapeutic approach of Milton Erickson. As McGovern interprets Erickson he says suicidal thoughts are good things and have value; (pg. 169) “They are signals that something in one’s life needs to die; it is not the person who needs to die. What needs to die is the clinging to some kind of loss or a craving for what is demanded. What also needs to die is an intolerance of pain including the “I can’t stand it” attitude. And with those deaths, new perspectives of acceptance, peace and tolerance can be born.” For McGovern the primary instigators to suicidal thinking are the unyielding and uncompromising moral absolutes driving people to utter despair and a sense of total ruin.

In two other later chapters McGovern emphasized the importance of exercise and physical
fitness, helping to advance one’s mental health. He also focused on religion, withdrawing from his childhood adherence to Catholicism, assuming a more tolerant, compassionate and wider acceptance of all religious faiths.

McGovern’s approach may not be appealing to all attempt survivors, and especially to those who may feel less inclined to intellectualize things and/or to seek psychologicist explanations for their woes. Yet, for McGovern, as one can stand it, one may accept reversals in their lives with a sense of equanimity, such as the author had to, when he was forced to accept the loss of his employment as a psychologist, and was driven to accept a job as a pizza delivery driver; as long as one has faith in oneself, one is able to survive and sustain themselves with optimism, hope and a conviction that better days will soon re-appear.