When Suicide Comes Home: A Father’s Diary and Comments
By: Paul Cox (Bolton Press Atlanta, 2002)
Reviewed By: David N. Miller, Ph.D.

In May of 2000, truck driver Paul Cox drove his eighteen-wheeler from his home in Utah to Atlanta, Georgia to meet with Iris Bolton, author of My Son...My Son..., the seminal book that is frequently cited as a classic in the literature of suicide loss. After the suicide of Paul’s teenage son Heber a year and half earlier, Paul read Iris’ book and felt compelled to meet her. Iris happened to be in her office at the Link Counseling Center when Paul arrived and the two met for several hours. Noting how impressed she was by Paul’s sensitivity and his ability to articulate his grief, she encouraged him to write a book of his own, providing a father’s perspective on surviving suicide loss. After returning to his home in Utah, Paul did just that, and his book When Suicide Comes Home: A Father’s Diary and Comments was published by Bolton Press Atlanta in 2002 (a second printing occurred in 2011).

Most of the book is written in the form of a diary, covering the period from Heber’s death by suicide in November of 1998 through May of 2001. Paul Cox describes his complex and often conflicting emotions, thoughts, and reactions to the tragic death of his son, one of four children he had with his wife Peggy. He is not a mental health professional and does not claim to be; in the Author’s Note and Dedication he states “I am not a psychologist, therapist, social worker, etc. I am only a moderately educated truck driver.” Paul has experiential knowledge about suicide, however, and writes candidly and courageously about his experiences in the aftermath of his son’s suicide. As he notes, his book is an attempt to provide “an account of my grieving over, and my attempts to cope with, the suicide of my beloved son, Heber.”

In his diary entries, Cox articulates the wide and often confusing range of emotions he has about Heber’s death by suicide, including intense feelings of sadness, grief, and guilt. For example, in his diary entry from Thursday, November 26, 1998 Cox writes: “Thanksgiving Day. We had dinner with my parents. Much of my family is still here, staying on from the funeral. I enjoyed the day despite it all. Every time I start to feel somewhat good, I remember and immediately feel guilty for feeling good. How can I feel good?” A few days later, he writes: “Heber, and how I found him, is the only thing on my mind. I am full of sad and strange emotions that I cannot describe.”

At the one-year anniversary of Heber’s death, Cox writes poignantly of the loss of his son: “I long to see him, to be with him, to hold him. His death has profoundly changed my life. Grief has been my constant companion.” Later, he notes that “pain and grief are a part of me” and that he actually treasures these feelings because it keeps the memory of Heber alive. Indeed, over time Cox comes to believe that he has gained “many precious things” from his grief, among them “a greatly increased compassion for others, and the ability to weep.” In working through his grief, and assisting others in that process, Cox discovers that “helping others cope with their pain gives meaning to Heber’s life and death, thus helping me cope with mine.”

Mr. Cox dedicates this concise (143 pages), frequently heartbreaking, emotionally honest memoir to his son’s memory, “in the hope that it may help others experiencing a similar trial.” In this reviewer’s opinion, Paul Cox has succeeded admirably in that worthy goal. Survivors of suicide loss should find When Suicide Comes Home: A Father’s Diary and Comments to be a highly useful resource in their own grieving and healing process.