Buddy Knox (survivor of his son Nelson’s suicide) and I were asked to review *Years of the Elephant*, by Willy Lithout, and we found it to be both a unique and helpful way to tell the “father story.” In this review Buddy will compare and contrast his own father story as it relates to themes expressed by Charles, the father character in the book, and I will attempt to connect the themes (using the experience of supporting survivors for over twenty-five years) to my knowledge of suicide bereavement. Ultimately our hope is for you to read it and form your own opinion.

Over the years survivor literature has grown into a respectable international library for readers who have experienced the death of someone to suicide. *Years of the Elephant* is the illustrated autobiographical account of Willy Lithout and his journey following the suicide of Sam, his 21 year old son in 2004. Willy is represented in the book by Charles as the father whose son Jack takes his life. The book’s black and white illustrations convey the story of Charles and through his grief we learn much about how men grieve the suicide of their sons. Although this approach (illustration) to story telling is growing in the field of literature it is somewhat unique to suicide. It is also worth noting that the author is an award winning Belgium artist and we hope this book will open the door for additional illustrated grief literature in the future.

Because the book is in black and white it has the appearance of a frame by frame draft of a comic strip. The book opens with the parents going about their day while their son Jack jumps to his death from the apartment building roof, where they all lived. Jack’s death scene is represented by a chalk outline across the stoop and onto the sidewalk in front of the building. The father, Charles, has to cross the scene whenever he leaves or enters the building. The father becomes emotionally attached to the site where his son died and, at times, speaks to the (Jack) outline as if it is his son. When the city workers attempt to “clean” the sidewalk area he becomes angry at the suggestion this area should ever be changed or altered. He becomes obsessed with a need to maintain the site on which his son died and the chalk outline he now knows as “Jack.” This connection to the deceased is a strong parallel for Buddy and for many fathers. Charles has his fantasies with the outline of his son, and for me (Buddy) it was the car where my son Nelson was sitting when he shot himself. I wouldn’t think of doing so. A friend had the car cleaned for me and the only residue of the incident that remained was a bullet hole in the headliner and a small dent in the roof of the car. I kept the car for several years and would drive it exclusively on weekends even though I had my personal vehicle sitting in the driveway. When I was in the car I was almost constantly holding conversations with Nelson while also trying to imagine what he had been thinking just before he shot himself. I felt very close to Nelson when I was in the car. I had several opportunities to sell the car but wouldn’t do so. Finally after a couple of years, one of my granddaughters needed a car and I reluctantly let them have Nelson’s car.

In the beginning of the book Charles is surprised that he is not as upset as he should be and returns to work soon after his son’s death. His wife, Simone, is confused and taken aback by the mere consideration of such a quick return to the office. Many men, confronted with a desire to “hold it together” and return to a prior sense of “normalcy”, seek comfort in their role as “worker” and attempt to quickly return a setting where they can, to some degree, function on autopilot. Often, work is a way to feel normal when nothing else does. The goal in the beginning of complicated grief is surviving and only once the environment is perceived to be safe can the feelings of loss come forward for men. Buddy remembers thinking (the same thought as Charles) “I thought I’d be more upset than this” and thinking he was in control. “I had the
same thoughts. They lasted until I got home from the cemetery and then I fell apart.” Buddy also related closely to the observation Charles made that “the world seems to be going on as usual, and how could that possibly be? My son is dead!” These thoughts and feelings are common but speaking them out loud is not, which is why books that convey common themes are so vital to the newly bereaved for reducing their perceived isolation.

Charles like Buddy admits to having anger or envy about others being alive when his son is dead (common, but again hard to admit to others). In fact, Buddy remembered experiencing both of these themes as well as having “thoughts of my own death (although to a much lesser degree than Charles).” Buddy recalled several instances which are well depicted in the book, including sleeping excessively, being afraid of forgetting what Nelson looked like or the sound of his son’s voice. Another parallel for both Buddy and the character of Charles are moments when they are sure they are getting signals or messages from their sons. Many fathers report feelings of loneliness and emptiness accompanied by thoughts of what their sons are missing and of things that could have been. This leads to periods of feeling that life no longer has any meaning and opens the possibility for over identification with the deceased.

Insensitivity to suicide and those bereaved by suicide is captured in the book when Charles reflects on comments made to him on the train and recognizes he has “Experienced great anger at those idiots.” Buddy said that, for him, a change came when he finally realized that his mind was playing tricks on him and that things weren't exactly as he thought he saw them. Another turning point in the book is when Charles begins writing poems and for Buddy it was when he began journaling. Buddy said “I think this helped us both release some of our feelings.”

All of these themes are captured in the book as well as many others that this review will not be able to list. Buddy and I support your reading of this unique approach to telling the survivor story and hope you will let us know what you thought.