

# Re-authoring Teaching

## CREATING A COLLABORATORY

### Suzanne's Story

#### **To hold the Light for Others: Sharing our Heartsongs:**

Suzanne's young adult son, Jamie, died four years ago of a heroin overdose. Jamie is Suzanne's "sole/soul child;" they are – and always will be very close, both in life and since his death. Together with Patty, the director of the local Hospice organization, Suzanne started a "bereaved parents" group." They call it "Sharing our Heart Songs.

Suzanne put together a book she calls "Jamie's book." Here she has put together parts of her journey and things that helped her survive this profound loss. She put everything together in a book. Knowing that she would probably get to know other people who face loss in their life, she decided to bring together favorite photos, quotes, sayings and readings that have helped her. "So sure enough, I've had many opportunities to use it, and some with other parents that have lost children."

Suzanne continues to make "Jamie Heart-art." She makes collages with favorite poems, sayings, and photos. On the special dates of his birth day and his "Angel day," she sends cards to Jamie's loved ones.

Jamie's old bedroom has now become "Jamie's Room" – where she brings together all sorts of memories and artifacts. Everything in this room has a meaning and significance. "There are stones that Jamie and I collected on the beach that very last visit I had with him." She has a candle that she made for everybody in the family on his birth and his angel day; "We burn it every year on those anniversaries; none of us want it to burn out but we have realized we put tea-light in it once it burns down, so we are safe."

Being in Jamie's Room just fills Suzanne up. "Every time I walk in this room its like I'm in a place of peace." This is also the room where Suzanne cried for the first year after Jamie died. She "I sat in my crying chair for a year and just cried and cried and cried. I liked it that I had this one place that I came to cry and it was by the window; the window was open practically year round that first year. Because then I needed to bring in the outside I just needed that the vibration from outside in this room with me. Suzanne still come here to cry sometimes when the feeling hits her.

Recently, Suzanne realized about losing a child, "When Jamie was still alive, and he wasn't with me, I missed him. I missed the 23 year old him. Now that he has moved on, I miss all of the ages. I just keep having all these memories of Jamie at three, Jamie at five, all these things that we did. I miss all of that." When he was still alive, she didn't really think of it in terms of "I miss the little Jamie and I miss all this." But now it's like she misses it all. "I just miss all the ages that he was here. "

Suzanne realizes now that the “missing” is not likely to go away. “The first year I told myself, oh, some day I won’t miss him. It won’t hurt. Some day I’ll get through this and I’ll be totally healed. And, um, and I had to tell myself that for that first year I think to survive, ‘cause I was just in shock that he was really the reality of forever hadn’t really struck yet. “ Now, when she misses him, she says, “I just allow those feelings to-to, uh, to come in waves when I feel them...When I need to cry, I cry. I don’t make any judgments about where I’m at in my process. And I know that it’s a lot of the loss I have integrated into who I am today. But there’s-there’s the missing that doesn’t stop, that doesn’t go away.”

Besides, Suzanne experiences Jamie as usually right by her side. “And, uh, he’s awesome. He still makes me laugh almost every day. I’ll hear something he’s saying. ...” While Suzanne wishes that for all parents, she knows that all parents don’t have that experience. “It’s ...so real for me. It’s not ... a theory. It’s not something that I say ‘maybe this is how it happens.’ No, this is ... how it happened for me.

Suzanne feels blessed that she was able to spend the last three days of Jamie’s life with him while he was in a coma. “There were times that I even knew he wasn’t in the room. You know, his body was there, but there were hundreds of people gathered around.” Hundreds of people came out to say goodbye to him, to comfort Suzanne, to love her, and to share stories. At one point, there were 70 people in the waiting room outside of his door, “Eating Mexican food, eating pizza, laughing, crying, laying on the floor draped.

So over the chair. I mean, it was just such a scene. I wished I had had the presence of mind to have my camera there.”

Suzanne had to make the decision to take Jamie off of life support. “You know, that’s not something that every parent is faced with. And that was hard. But I knew that, if he was meant to not leave, he wouldn’t. And that his dying wasn’t the worst thing that could happen. I knew that even before he died. I knew when I walked into that room three days before he left that he was done. I knew that. So as a mother to go walk in there and say, he’s done. He’s done with this life. You know, God and I am saying enough. It’s time for him to be free from his suffering. So my story I know is different than so many others. “

When Suzanne realized Jamie was addicted to heroin, her grieving began.. “That’s when I started going to Peggy, because my life was taken over by this massive grief. There was no room for anything else.” She says it was very powerful to be able to come to talk. After Jamie died, Suzanne tried to come in a couple times, but ‘I didn’t need it anymore, because her fear was that he was going to die. Suzanne thought, “Okay, I can figure this out now, because he’s not suffering anymore. You know, the day he died, not only did he get saved that day, I was saved that day from watching that spiral of-of suffering that he was in. And he didn’t have the tools in his toolbox for this lifetime to really have changed the course. And I knew that. I-I know that.”

Suzanne says she thought she created her world. “I’m happy. I do what I do and I know that I’m in charge here. I really thought I was in charge. I thought I had everything under control. And then Jamie’s disease and, uh, subsequent death and it was like, uh, I’m not in control of anything anymore. So that was so hard. That’s what I needed “counseling” for. “

### **Finding her way to Patty**

When Jamie died, the first thing Suzanne did was read every book she could get in her hands on death and dying. “I needed to learn about death ‘cause my son had gone there. So I needed to learn.” She borrowed books from her counselor. She found books online that she ordered through her local book store. She had her local the library. One day somebody told her that Hospice has a lending library. “I walked in the door of Hospice and all these books that I haven’t been able to find were sitting on the shelf.” Soon afterward, she became the hospice librarian.

Suzanne was so taken with the whole hospice experience that she wanted to take the training to become a Hospice volunteer. Patty, the director of Hospice, said, “It might be a little soon. Maybe wait till you’re a year out of the loss.”

When Suzanne walks through the Hospice door, she feels like it’s her home away from home. She says, she has three places. “I love my house. I love Hospice. And I love going Humane Society, which is the other place I spend lots of time because it’s just pure love over there. Those animals need that love and they make no judgments [LAUGH] and they just... That is the first place I went I think even before Hospice, I had started going over to the animals where nobody knew me as a bereaved Mom. And there was such a freedom of going into that place and nobody knew me, ‘cause I had never volunteered there before, so, um, I-I didn’t say anything. I would just go in with feathers on the sticks and play with the cats and slowly I started telling one of the cats and the kittens that I was a bereaved Mom. And one of the first cats I worked with had lost all her babies. So she was like a kindred Mom spirit.”

Suzanne says she feel so grateful to live in her community with these three places where she can give of herself.

Working with Patty is like working “with my best friend”.... Patty is also a mentor. “Patty and I can talk for days. So I have to be careful when I go to see her because I know she’s doesn’t have a lot of time. I know that she’ll sit down and give me all the time in the world. Unless she has somebody waiting outside the door, she’s gonna be there for me. She’s just she’s so generous.” What Patty gives of herself, “I don’t know how any other human could do it. ...She’s an angel. “She is always there for everybody. “And so you’re like one of my role models because I have this selfish side to me that I don’t like to be...not so much now, I mean more about before I became a bereaved mother. Suzanne says that’s an important change for her, “I do feel like I’m a giver now and I’m not always looking out for me. And, I love working with Patty.”

When Suzanne discovered a local branch of a national support group for bereaved parents, she thought to herself, “No brainer, I’m going to that.” Yet that particular model was very structured and not comfortable for her. “So I went to Patty and I said, “I want to do something different. I want to do it in a different way, because I think the need is out there. “ Suzanne knew other parents.

With the help of the Hospice organization, Suzanne started a bereavement parent group with David, an experienced bereavement counselor. “So I was like a facilitator in training.” David stayed with the group for about six months. Then Patty and Suzanne started working together. “The initial group that was so sacred to me because it was people that we had picked to be in this first group. Rather than being directed by a national organization, they could “let the parents direct it; It was like this was gonna be our hearts leading this group with, uh, Patty and I at the helm. And, um, and we did it for as long as we could.: They call the group “Sharing our Heartsongs.”

Suzanne says it’s a very powerful experience to be with other Moms. She feels very tenderhearted toward the Moms in their initial group. “And that’s why I didn’t wanna open up the circle.” But Patty kept saying, “You know, it’s probably time that we invite other people to the circle. At first, Suzanne was reluctant to open the group up to new members. “By the way, I have a long ways to go, but I’m learning.” Recently – when Patty couldn’t attend – she led an evening group by herself. ....” I was very empowered. Something that happened to me there not having you there, not having anyone else there...” There were a number of new people. “My old comfy ones weren’t there...” She decided, “Okay, I’m going to be empowered to lead this group. And we’re gonna start on time. And we’re going to do this brief introductions and make sure everybody has equal time to talk that wants to. And do a check-in. And so I kind of led it in a way that I hadn’t led it before.” Patty and she had always been pretty laid back; she realized it was time to tighten it up.

Suzanne and Patty continue to work on the group and what they want the model to look like. ‘Cause it is gonna change all the time. There were two new moms this time. “So at first, she worried, “What if they freak out and Patty’s not here?” But including these two new moms turned out to be a wonderful experience. Suzanne says she especially enjoys having new Moms there and feeling like they were “getting some hope for themselves that they didn’t have yet.” When her son died, it was so crucial that she met other Moms who had survived that loss and that they kind of held the light for me. “And that that was my idea for this group ...**to hold the light for others.**”

Even with new people coming into their group, Suzanne & Patty say, “We tend to go by the seat of our heart as we go through this.” As the group grows, they trust they will find opportunities to work more closely bringing together guidelines. One of the things Suzanne loves about their group, “Whether they know it or not, they’re gonna get a hug from the group. “ Any other Mom who’s lost a child... I just love the way we’re all so open with each other.” Suzanne’s favorite part of the group is when people bring photos and talk about their children.

When asked what it's like to connect with other moms, Suzanne says, "**A broken heart is a open heart.**" I just take in so much more now." When Suzanne is with another Mom who has lost a child, "I can't say I know how you feel, but I can say, I know how it feels to lose a child. And there's just some connection that we have with each other, because nobody else can even imagine." People say all the time. "I couldn't bear it. I would never be able to survive." In response, Suzanne says,, "Well, I hope you never have to know what it's like. But I would have said that too. And you know what? I found ways to live it.."

Recently, Suzanne and Patty organized a conference for bereaved parents. "That day at the conference, to be in this environment with all these Moms who had lost children was... like one of the most powerful days of my life. My feet didn't hit the floor all day. It was an amazing experience. And that night, I went home and I just crashed. I cried and I cried." Her husband asked, "Why are you crying?" Upon reflection, Suzanne responded, "I had taken in all that pain and I had kept it together all day long and, but it was so much, because there was so much of it there."