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Mothering After Suicide

The Poetry of Susan J. Woitas

*Susan Woitas wrote the first poem in her collection, *Lost Lives*, after losing her 17-year-old son James to suicide in November, 1997, and the last poem in December, 2005, three years after the death of her second son, who also died by suicide at the age of 17. In addition to presenting Susan's poetry, this paper offers some reflections on how Susan survived the death of her sons in a societal context that simultaneously places impossibly high standards of caring on mothers and stigmatizes death by suicide.*

Whatever will I do?
2 lost voices.
2 empty places.
2 sons locked in at 17.
Lost hopes for all you could have been.
—Susan Woitas (2005: 58)

From hope to despair

Susan Woitas wrote the first poem in her collection, *Lost Lives* (2005), after losing her 17-year-old son James to suicide in November, 1997, and the last poem in December, 2005, three years after the death of her second son, who also died by suicide at the age of 17. The boys' self-inflicted deaths left their parents and young sister, who was seven years old at the time of James' death, huddled together in unspeakable pain.

Richard Kearney (2002) proposed that we become full agents of our history only when haphazard happenings are transformed into stories and made memorable. He argued that such narratives provide us with our most viable form of individual and communal identity. If storytelling was invented to assuage our fears and dread and to try to answer great unanswerable questions,

what happens when storytelling is denied? What happens when no one listens to the story of a grieving mother who lost her sons to suicide? What opportunity does Susan have to express her experiences of chaos and confusion? How might a grief-stricken mother recreate a viable self-identity from the one that was shattered by the deaths of her sons?

Lost Lives consists of 193 chronologically-ordered poems spanning five years. In a societal context that not only tends to silence mothers, but also disregards the pain of grief after suicide, the book is a conscious articulation of a mother's grief. It draws readers into the abyss where Woitas existed for six years. The subjective, symbolized world of Woitas's poetry bears witness to her pain, whereby readers can gain an understanding of her grief, and observe the resiliency of the human spirit. And Susan herself expresses gratitude for the outlet that her poetry provides: "Thank you God / For the gift of words / When nothing else will do" (177).

Context

I first met Susan Woitas after my public presentation on the early findings of an ongoing study entitled "Family Responses to Suicide" (Barlow and Coleman, 2003). Several months later, I visited at her home in a rural Alberta community where she told the story of her loss in a calm and steady voice that left me marvelling at her composure. I wondered whether this self-control was a sign of her adjustment to her loss, or an indication that her spirit was at the breaking point and any display of her feelings would cause it to crumble. Before we parted, she offered me a copy of her poetry collection, a book steeped in intense emotion. After this meeting, I felt compelled to delve into her work and soon discovered that *Lost Lives* contains many answers to questions about how Woitas learned to live with and give voice to her losses. Additionally, it offers a raw and vivid portrait of the mother's grief that can serve others who are facing a similar traumatic loss.

Besides presenting Woitas's poetry, this paper offers some reflections on how Woitas survived the death of her sons in a societal context that simultaneously places impossibly high standards of caring on mothers and stigmatizes death by suicide. Although I risk sustaining the historic tradition of maternal muteness, which is characterized by writing about mothers while effectively silencing the writing-mother (Suleiman, 1985), I hope to preserve the integrity of Woitas's work by an accurate presentation of her poetry and conscious attention to preserving her voice.

Discourses on mothering and suicide—"someone else's words"

Susan Woitas, a mother grieving the death of two children, does so amid societal discourses whose varying influences on individuals have been well articulated by Mikhail Bakhtin (1984): "Someone else's words introduced in our own speech inevitably assume a new (our own) interpretation and become subject to our own evaluation of them; that is, they become double-voiced"

(195). Bakhtin argued that our everyday speech is filled with other people's words, some that are merged completely into our own voices, others that we use as authoritative to reinforce our own words, and still others that are populated with our own ideas that challenge the other voices. This paper considers Susan's experience within the double-voiced context that includes societal discourses on mothering and on suicide, as well as her responses to them.

Discourses on mothering

Western cultural discourses on mothering offer a backdrop to understanding Woitas's grief. A commonly held assumption within these discourses is that mothers are considered responsible for caring and ensuring the physical and mental well-being of their children, even in the face of adverse social circumstances (Swift, 1995). Susan Maushart (1999) pointed out that, historically, there has been more interest in apprehending mothers than in comprehending them, and in scapegoating and mother-blaming, as illustrated by the interest in criminal mothers and criminals: "The mother of the serial killer invariably rates a page-one interview. The mother of a Nobel laureate, on the other hand, remains (like everyone else's mother) discreetly offstage" (18).

Feminist writers (De Beauvoir, 1952; Freidan, 1962) charged that traditional psychology not only defines women's development in reductionistic ways, but also engages in what Paula Caplan (1989) called "mother blame," which was paradoxically bound to the idealization of motherhood and the subordination of the mothering role (Caplan, 1989; Swiggart, 1991). Whereas Jean Baker Miller (1976) observed, at a broader level, that the less a group is valued, the easier it is to target its members as scapegoats, Caplan was more specific. She believed that scapegoating perpetuates the unequal distribution of power between men and women by keeping women ashamed, frightened, and judged. Jessie Bernard (1974) noted that, because of the impossibly high standards of motherhood, guilt is bred into the very fabric of a woman's character; consequently, she invests vast amounts of energy into mothering in an effort to circumvent her fear of blame and failure.

Discourses on suicide

Discourses on suicide in our western culture can be extrapolated from research derived from large community-based samples. These discourses serve as the "other voices" that were likely inadvertently internalized by Susan. Research on social support for people grieving death by suicide, often called "survivors of suicide," documents tensions between the survivors and the community. These tensions are related, in part, to the historical view of suicide and negative labelling. Social stigma attached to suicide has an oppressive history (Jobes, Luoma, Hustead, and Mann, 2000) with documented evidence, over many centuries, of retaliation against the victims and their families. In medieval societies, corpses of suicide victims were subjected to acts of abuse to prevent their ghosts from wandering around; they were refused burial in Christian

cemeteries, and often, because the deceased victims were out of harm's reach, punishment devolved to the survivors. The distinct shadow cast onto victims' families necessitated their disguising suicides and remaining silent.

Negative social labelling of survivors is also well documented. Multiple studies demonstrate that survivors are perceived to bear greater responsibility for the death than the deceased, and be more psychologically disturbed, less likeable, more blameworthy, and more ashamed than others (Worden, 2002). Additionally, survivors are often perceived as neglectful of their responsibilities to help the victims and to prevent the suicides (Cvinar, 2005). In the societal context that holds mothers responsible for the emotional well-being of their families and accountable when things go wrong, and, in addition, silences the expression of pain and grief, how does a mother whose two children died by suicide negotiate her grief?

From despair to hope

On the front cover of *Lost Lives*, a brief description of the book's subject matter is communicated in the language of despair: "A graphic, heartbreaking journey through suicide survival. There are no winners; everyone has lost." The book's back cover displays an affirmation: "Behind the door of despair is hope; always there is hope—open the door and let hope in. Hope is waiting; I know this to be so."

Between these covers lies Woitas's story of her journey from despair to hope, constrained by discourses on mothering and grief after suicide. Key themes emerging from the book suggest that her survival is linked to three elements: resisting forces such as apathy, despair, and pretence; saying good-bye; and becoming socially active.

Protest as resistance

Recent studies in the area of interpersonal violence can be used to better understand Susan Woitas's poetry. Nick Todd and Alan Wade (2004) described how the "language of effects misrepresents victims' responses to violence, conceals victims' resistance, and portrays victims as passive recipients of abuse" (151). While noting that a focus on effects defines victims as being passively affected by, rather than actively responding to violence, they observed, "a response is a volitional act that demonstrates judgment, imagination, and will; an effect is the strictly determined outcome of a previous event/cause" (151). The language of effects is well documented in the literature on grief after suicide with the bereaved portrayed as vulnerable to a particular sequence of effects: depression, social withdrawal, shame, guilt, and anger (Reed, 1998). However, when the sequence is framed as understandable for someone who has experienced terrible losses, and not as a psychological disorder, individuals are empowered. Reframing the language of effects to a language of response invites one to notice Susan's resiliency and resourcefulness and how she resisted the weight of her grief.

Wade (1997) has defined resistance as “any mental or behavioural act through which a person attempts to expose, withstand, repel, stop, prevent, abstain from, strive against, impede, refuse to comply with, or oppose any form of violence or oppression (including any type of disrespect), or the conditions that make such acts possible” (25).

Resisting apathy

As she clings to the life raft that is hope, Susan resists alienation and disconnection. Even as she writes of hope when completing her final poems in 2005, she continues to seek contact with her sons: “James, are you there?” she calls. “Brett, are you there, / Do you hear our prayers?” (190).

Sometimes Woitas’s struggle toward hope moves her to anger:

The real me is wounded,
Bleeding hard, probably wrecked;
Agitated, violated...
Are my sons in Heaven yet? (189)

Intense emotions surface, subside, and resurface randomly. In her grief, Susan rails against the societal discourses that disenfranchise her expression. In western society, it is expected that grief has an endpoint, and the bereaved will recover after an appropriate time. Bereaved individuals who take “too long” are often negatively assessed and then labelled to be in “pathological mourning” (Rando, 1984). Susan challenges the social codes of mourning that did not allow her to cry, “as another year is rolling by” (136). In one poem, she enquires, “Who decides what’s right and what’s wrong,” then answers, “Not those who are weak, But those who / Are strong” (136). In pointing out that terms such as “resolution” and “recovery” imply time limits and closure that typically do not occur, Theresa Rando’s (1984) work supports Susan’s outrage.

In their literature survey on bereavement recovery, Camille Wortman and Roxane Sliver (2002) concluded that many bereaved individuals continue to experience impaired quality of life for years after their loss. Unlike those who thought she should be “over it,” Susan comes to realize that grief offers its own solace.

I’ll never get over
The loss of you two.
I won’t, I don’t want to,
I’ll keep aching for you. (176)

Woitas’s mourning, like that of most bereaved parents, encompasses protest.

If only I could reach you
If only I could touch you
If only I could make it right.

If only I could turn back time
And make it better. (2)

In her protest, she seeks her lost sons.

Where did you go to?
Oh boys of mine.
I keep my eyes wide open
Looking for a sign. (122)

Living in a society that constrains her grief, she gives up the idea that people can help her, and laments, “No one can mend my broken heart / No one knows, where to start” (169). In another poem, Woitas notes that many friends have deserted her.

It’s hard for their friends, & she tries to forgive
The calls that don’t come,
they have their own lives to live...
For they cannot imagine of a walk in her shoes
So staying away is the path that they choose... (75)

However, she finds solace in her belief in God, and her faith gives her hope for rebirth and a reunion with her sons:

But when we do meet again
You’ll be the one
To show us around, to lead us
.....
You’ll be the arms of an angel
For you’ve been reborn. (24)

Nevertheless, Woitas continues to vacillate between despair and hope, the italics in her poem adding emphasis.

I talk to James
I talk to Brett
But doubts get planted
And now I’m scared
Are they both in Heaven yet? (148)

Her resistance to the societal discourse that the dead are forever lost and gone gives her strength. In the context of western society, disconnection from the deceased was traditionally considered a sign of grief “resolution.” However, there is evolving evidence that the bereaved continue relationships in various

forms with the one who is lost. They maintain these bonds by sensing the presence of the deceased, having conversations with them, using them as moral guides, and talking about them (Klass and Walter, 2002). Resisting society's discourse to emotionally sever connections with her sons, Susan cries out against any suggestion of disconnection.

Gone? Don't say they're gone,
When I can still hear their lives being told
In the words of an old country song.
Why they're not gone, not gone at all,
They're here among the angels
Who watch over us all. (109)

Resistance to despair

Despair pervades many of Susan Woitas' poems. After seventeen years of mothering, struggling to accept that the relationships she nourished with her sons will never be restored, she cries out, "Gone. Forever. Gone. / I will never make sense of this" (72). Another poem has her "screaming" in boldfaced type:

Stop! Stop! Stop! the awful fears
That this will come again;
Stop time—pull in the rein,
The pills, the rope, the gun.
Stop time—just for my sons. (167)

"Why?" becomes the question that consumes Woitas's mind. A product of western society, Susan's ruminations turn to her misdeeds and guilt invades her consciousness. In desperation, she entreats God to forgive her transgressions, whatever they might be. "Was it something I did? / Was it something I didn't do?" (147). She longs for the return of her sons and pleads for them to "stay a while" (62). She implores them:

Give life a chance, and I promise you,
I'll try to make you smile.
I'll try real hard to give you hope,
I'll try real hard, for I can't stand
To live the pain of WHY? (62)

Sometimes Woitas worries about her own suicide: "It is slow, insidious and relentless—/ The murderer who killed our sons / Is stalking me" (127). At other times, she manages to resist despair by confronting Death.

Hey Death – don't think I'm afraid
Of you and your thieving ways.

Hey Death, why don't you go to hell?
Fry yourself in those flames. (57)

Resistance to pretence

The public performance of grieving often stands in contrast to the private feelings and thoughts of the bereaved. Woitas initially responds to what she believes is the correct performance of her grief by donning a “mask.”

Masks.
I hate them
I wear them
I hide behind them
I draw strength from them. (35)

Eventually, out of exhaustion she sheds the masks and in the process rejects societal prescriptions for grieving.

Each mask is a magician,
The face that others hope to see,
But the magician is exhausted now
So all you see is me. (43)

In doing so, she severs ties to those who do not support her.
There's no going back
Our friendship is gone
I couldn't trust you again
Too bad, so sad
That's it—gone—the end. (135)

Early in her writing, Woitas confronts the mask she put on, seeking clues to her identity in her mirror: “Mirror, mirror on the wall / Who has messed up most of all?” (27). Later, when she sees someone unrecognizable—an older woman with hollow eyes and cheeks—she rejects her mirror reflection:

So now the mirror and I are no longer friends
I can't cope with the miserable reflections she sends.
The pain and grief were all locked up inside
How did they escape to the outside? (111)

She ends the poem by rejecting the mirror: “The mirror does not now have my tale to tell. / I might come back, mirror, if I ever get well” (111). When Susan Woitas eventually returns to her looking-glass, she is able to recognize herself, but is still uncertain what her identity should be: “Half a mother—one third a mother?” (187).

Susan Woitas's search for identity is a recurring theme in her poetry: "I don't know 'me' anymore, / I'm a stranger to myself (182). She ultimately realizes,

...there's no going back to the beginning —
Just the pain of a sorrowful ending.
That's why it's hard to look in the mirror —
To myself, there is no pretending. (182)

Farewells

Susan Woitas's resistance opens the door to her healing, although she still finds herself oscillating between grief and hope. In one poem, written in the third person, the question, "Where can I find hope?" (116), is answered in this way:

Why hope is in her little girl.
Reassure her, help her see
There's hope for her, and you,
And me. (116)

Eventually abandoning her yearning for the miraculous return of her sons or the turning back of time, she writes,

So I've amended my wish.
I wish that you both are safe
In God's house
In Heaven. (129)

Woitas's acknowledgements at the beginning of the book and in several of her poems are indicators of her commitment to family, including extended family; sense of indebtedness to her psychiatrist, and new friendships. In her expressions of empathy for others – her husband, her daughter, and her sons' friends—she hopes that they are soothed. However, she knows that the loss of her sons has changed her and she will carry her burden forever.

Yet there is nothing soothing
This side of Heaven
For the mothers who
Cannot find calm. (159)

In order to emerge from the shadowland of her grief, Woitas bids her former self farewell:

I cannot do the things I did

Before you passed away
I am not the person I once was –
That person's gone away. (134)

And she assumes a new identity:

Okay I admit
I am a frantic
Haunted
Grieving
Terrified
Demolished
Leper.
You may meet me
And think, "I want to forget her".

But I am a beacon.
I intend to be
A hope for the nights
When there is no light to see. (193)

In one of the final poems in her collection, Woitas is able to express her gratitude for being able to experience motherhood, if only for a limited time (in her sons' case). She thanks God "For the gift of kids / If just for a moment or two" (177).

Social activism

Having begun to create meaning from her sons' untimely deaths, Woitas feels compelled to make their short lives meaningful for others as well. In one of her later poems, she points out the emerging need to speak to others about suicide.

It's only words,
It's all I have,
But I'll do this.
Now has come the time,
The courage.
Let me speak to
Elementary and junior high,
.....
To teachers and professors . . . (193)

So it was that she approached me, a university professor.

As an exemplar of how a mother grieves the loss of her children, Susan

Woitas' poetic response has much to offer. Writing engaged Woitas's emotions and offered a pathway through the horror of losing two children to suicide. It enabled her to escape the silence imposed upon her by society and to create a conscious articulation of her emotional pain and loss. "WARNING: This book does not avoid the total devastation that the act of suicide brings to the lives of those who survive," is emblazoned on the front cover of *Lost Lives*. Woitas's honest and heartfelt expression of her feelings began as a means of self-preservation and became a lasting memorial to her sons.

Woitas's poetry challenges the dominant discourse that mothering occurs in the midst of happy lives and the societal response to death that seeks to silence the bereaved. Her poems bring the agony of a mother's grief into the public sphere, where a mourning script is often absent. They can teach others that intense mourning when bereaved is acceptable.

Her poems also demonstrate that grief has no endpoint; rather, it remains in the background of the consciousness of the bereaved for years and possibly for a lifetime. Susan's motivation for writing was survival, not the challenge of social discourse on mothering; nevertheless, her poetry demonstrates resistance to social conventions that dictates that grieving is a private, silent, internalized experience that marginalizes mothers whose children die by suicide.

Grieving and mothering in our society occur under conditions where there is a disjuncture between the reality of the experience and the image to which many attempt to conform. Susan's poems, while hinting at a public performance of grief and the subsequent need to wear a mask, primarily served as a vehicle for the externalization of her emotions and thoughts, which were unavailable to her in publicly sanctioned forums. Her public grieving was the mask she wore.

The poems are a gesture or invitation to renegotiate and redraw the severed boundaries between herself and others and to become a participant in dialogues about suicide, grief, mothering and saving lives.

Somehow
I'm going to deal with this.
I won't let your lives
Be for nothing.
I refuse to be labelled
A grieving, gnashing, wailing mother
(although I am).
I'm going to rise above this;
I'm going to fight to get my memory back.
I'm going to battle my mind
When it wants to give in.
I'm going to find a life
That I can safely live in.
.....

I need my boys' lives
To be publicized
To symbolize
The loss to our world. (191)

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