

Still Grieving After All These Years:

I wrote the above title five years ago, in 2011, and got no further with this story about the loss of our son, Jon, in 1985. I went back to this story several times and could find no words to put on the page.

Today, while spending the winter in Arizona, and after finishing the book, **Between the World and Me**, I decided to try once more.

In that book, the author describes the losses he has suffered in being black in America...how his youth

was dictated by fear...of the streets, of the schools, of his father, and how these losses have scarred him and gave direction to his life. I resonated to that message as I believe

that Jon's death has scarred me...and gave me new direction in my life.



happened to what had been a relatively successful and stress free life for Ruth and me.

Jon's death has been the worst thing that has ever



Ruth and I grew up on farms exactly one mile apart and I have known her ever since I was seven years old. Our farms were in different school districts but our paths crossed regularly as Ruth's brother, Ardyn, was my 4-H leader and we would hold our meetings at their home. Ruth and her sister, Mary, would bake, and serve, us cookies...so I knew her a long time before we started dating. Once, during a hospital stay for hand surgery, Ruth and Mary brought me Kraft caramels, and my roommate said that Ruth was cute. I lied and said that she was my girlfriend. Just a dream of this eighth grade boy.

Ruth and I started dating when I was a senior in high school and she was an immediate hit with my parents (and me). My parents had never commented about any of the girls I had dated, but after my first date with Ruth, my father looked up after we had finished loading a trailer full of dirt, and said, "That Ruthie Weaver sure is a fine young woman." I said, "Yes, she is." My father then said, "But she drives too fast!" My father was a fine judge of character... Ruth is a fine woman...and she still drives too fast. That first date ended my dating exploration and I never dated another girl. Ruth was the one for me, although we had to wait five years to get married, because otherwise both of us would have been dismissed from our respective college programs, Ruth in Nursing and me in Naval ROTC. We were married two days after graduation from college.

While on active duty in Norfolk, Pensacola, Long Beach and Coronado, we had two children, Jeff (1957) and Jay (1959). After the service, I took a teaching position, and Ruth and a nursing position, in North Central Ohio and and after two years, we moved to Columbus, Ohio where I pursued a doctorate in psychology, while Ruth worked to support us. It was during this time, while living in a two bedroom student apartment, that Jon was born (1963).



In 1966, we moved to Kent, Ohio for my new position at Kent State University. Ruth worked part time. We decided that we should not try again for a daughter, so in 1968, we adopted Jill, much to the chagrin of her brothers, who wanted another brother. They accepted her immediately and now we had “completed” our family.

Jeff had a normal childhood, got good grades and was active in sports and out door activities. Jay, who didn't breath at birth, attended special schools and struggled in school. Jon, did well in school, until his more rebellious teen age years, and although successful, fought school authority. He was an outstanding tennis player, winning a state tennis tournament, but did not want to go out for high school tennis. He leaned toward the arts and made many nice paintings and sculptures.

If there was a turning point in Jon's life, I think it may have been when he started skipping classes and spending time in the art department. We had a meeting with the school authorities and Jon was told that if he cut any more classes he would be reported to juvenile authorities. He seemed to accept their admonitions, but skipped a class the following week, was reported to juvenile authorities and in what we believe was a huge over reaction by the school and the courts, was sentenced to two weeks in the juvenile detention center. When we responded that this seemed to be an over reach, we were told that this strong response usually cured truants. It did not cure Jon as he insisted on quitting school and asked to join the Marines, one of the suggestions of the court. As a father, educator and Naval Officer, I was not in favor of this impulsive course of action, nor was Ruth, but we finally agreed that this might work as this was something Jon, really wanted to do. The

early results were very promising. Jon loved basic training (I said he was very athletic) and Being a Marine. When I asked him what he might do after he was no longer a Marine, he said, “Dad, once you are a Marine, you will always be a Marine...not a former Marine.” I remember thinking the he had “swallowed the cool aid.”



At his first assignment, he started having girlfriend problems with the girl back home, and came home, without permission, to “get things settled.” Jon just wanted to get things settled but in so doing was AWOL (Absent With Out Leave) and getting calls from the Marines. I talked with him and he said he was going to talk with her, settle things and return to base. I called his commanding Officer and said what was happening. The CO said the this was not uncommon, but that Jon would be disciplined when he returned. I knew the drill.

That evening, Jon went to his girlfriend’s home and found a party in progress, consisting of mainly friends from her summer job...and her new boyfriend. All we have ever been able to find out, is that Jon went to the basement of the home, drank a bottle of wine and shot himself with the girl’s fathers shot gun which had been lying on a table being cleaned...as the father was out of town and did not

know that a party would be going on that night. This was the information the we received from the sheriff's department. The report said the gun belonged to me (I didn't own a gun) and they had not named any of the folks present at the party. When we went to the funeral home, we discovered that the body had been embalmed and that no autopsy had been performed, which is/was required by state law. The next few days were a blur as we planned for the funeral and tried to keep our family together.

Our minister came to our home to discuss the funeral. Although I had been the Administrative Chair of the church, no suggestion was made that we hold the service at the church, and since the funeral director had offered, we agreed that it should be held at the funeral home, a location much too small for the number of folks who would be attending. Interestingly, this subject was never discussed again with our minister, nor did he ever come to our home again as a follow up even though we never attended that church again. No one from our church seemed to wonder why we didn't attend services. Ruth and I decided that the discussion of suicide was just too troubling for others, even church leaders, to discuss.

Calling hours were painful but an exercise that I believe is needed for mourners to move forward. "Telling the story" over and over helped us come to grips with its horror. The first person, "through the line", a therapist, said that "Jon

was such a free spirit that he would be reincarnated as a bird by tomorrow morning.” Where did the come from? That comment from his frame of reference, certainly didn’t help us. If I hadn’t been is such shock I would probably have laughed. Another person said, “At least you have three other children.” As if losing only 1/4 of your children wasn’t as bad as say, “losing 1/2.” Many said, “Jon is now in Heaven,” which wasn’t helpful to us. Several, knowing that our son Jay was disabled, and falsely assumed that he was the one who had died, spoke about him and “how good a job we had done with him.” This just added pain to pain. Nearly all of the visitors were well-meaning and we knew how hard it was for them to say the “right thing.” Two visitors to our home bordered on evil! One, who Ruth met at the door the night of the funeral, said he knew me and wanted to talk to me. Ruth ushered him to the porch and left to get us coffee. He introduced himself as a fellow faculty member from the university and just want me to know that if we couldn't determine why Jon had taken his own life within twenty-four hours, Jon would be doomed to Purgatory for eternity. Just as Ruth arrived with our coffee, I said, that “John (fictitious) is leaving now and we won’t need the coffee.” He insisted and I said, “please leave right now.” He continued to insist all the way to the front door..and said he would call me the next day. I asked him not to and never heard from him or saw him again. On a more sinister note, an official of an evangelical church

came to our house a week later and said, “That he had read about Jon’s death, knew he was in the military, and assumed that the insurance money we were likely to receive would be tainted by his suicide, that the only way to “clear” this tainted money was to give it to “God” (this official’s church). I asked him to leave and said that he was a charlatan. I don’t think he knew what that word meant!

Most folks were great. The most helpful were not the church, nor my colleagues, nor the neighbors, but rather, my fellow Rotarians who reached out to us for months to help us recover. We even found food items in our garage freezer months later from the many Rotarian well-wishers. Most folks just couldn’t bring themselves to bring up the topic of Jon’s death.

Getting back into the swing of things tended to not give us as much time as we probably needed to grieve. Ruth went back to work...she didn’t dwell as much as she might of on her own grieving because of her occupation of helping other sick folks. I had just become Director of the Division of Basic Medical Sciences at the College of Medicine, Inspector General of Readiness Command Five (The Five State Naval Reserve District) and President of the Kent Rotary Club (All on July 1). I worked long hours and that helped me not think about Jon’s death every minute of the day. Folks were nice but rarely said anything about what our family had been/was experiencing. One particular

interchange happened on my second day back to work that will forever stay in my mind. A graduate student came to see me because she was depressed and needed to talk to someone. We spent thirty minutes talking about how she had lost her dog, long her best companion, to heart trouble a few days earlier. As she was about to depart, I thought I should mention our loss so that she would not find out about it later and be embarrassed that she had discussed the loss of her pet while we were recovering from the loss of a child. I said, "Loss can be very devastating...we lost our son last week." She said, "I heard about that." As I reflected on her response, I decided that everyone has a different reaction to loss...and in her case, the loss of her dog was more impactful than hearing about the loss of our son. She also said, "Thanks, talking to you was helpful." And, so it goes.

When loss first hits, there is a tendency to think only about one's own loss and not focus on how others are impacted. I think I was guilty of this myself...I worried about how Ruth could handle this devastating loss...but didn't think as much about how Jon's brothers and sister were handling his death. This point was brought home to me, when several weeks after the funeral, several friends told us that Jay had told them outside of the funeral home that he planned to join Jon in Heaven. They hadn't mentioned it to us, they said, because they didn't want to add an additional burden

to our lives. Luckily, Jay didn't do anything rash, but it raised the red flag about the suffering being experienced by our children. In talks with Jay, he said, "I don't know what I will do now...Jon was my best friend." Jon (and Jeff) had always looked out for Jay, but Jay looked up to Jon because of their closeness in age, Jon's many fiends and active lifestyle. Jeff felt guilty because he had introduced Jon to alcohol...which was part of the story. Jill grieved and I believe it had a lot to do with her acting out in the coming years. One of her immediate reactions was to get a tattoo of a yellow rose on her thigh...a yellow rose because that was Jon's favorite flower. She told her mother about it and said, "Dad will probably kill me." Ruth assuaged her fears and had her come to tell me what she had done. By this time, tattoos seemed like such a small thing that I was actually proud of her for what she had done. After a few minutes, Jill said, "Dad, why don't you get a tattoo too?" I said, "I'm not a tattoo kind of guy." She said, "When would you be willing to get one?" I said, "When I'm 58" (I was 45 at the time). Jill never forgot what I said and on my fifty-eighth birthday gave me a gift certificate for a tattoo! I now have an eagle inscribed on my right butt! (See my story, **Why I Got a Tattoo** on my web site.)

We talked about Jon at nearly every meal...and the tears turned to laughter as we recounted stories of all the good times we had had with Jon. His straight, ginger hair, which

I coveted curly, only to find permed. He member of the males wished Jon. His never seemed seemed to equally. He paint and was



because my hair was come home one he had got his hair was the tallest family...all of the they were taller like constant smile...he sad. The way he love each of us loved to draw and

very close to his art teacher. He had gotten permission to have me review the troops at his graduation from boot camp...a real honor.



Ruth and I consoled our children, and each other, and vowed to not let this tragedy tear us apart. We did not bury the topic and read all we could about teenage suicide. We discovered that most teenage suicides involve alcohol/drugs and a breakup of an important relationship. After losing a love, teens (and others) sometimes believe that their life is over, and their mind misshaped by chemicals, sometimes make poor choices...extremely poor choices. Their suffering is over but the suffering of those who love them is just beginning and can never be completely erased. As I mentioned, Ruth

returned to work and so did I. Hardly an hour passed that I did not think of Jon. Over time, hardly a day passed that I did not think of Jon...and now, thirty-six years later, hardly several days pass without me thinking about him...and what might have been. I think of the kids he didn't have, the career he didn't find, but mostly about him as a person...a wonderful son who made our lives so much more complete. Ruth and I also vowed to do our best to attend calling ours and funerals of our friends, and even acquaintances, as we now realized how much support we felt by those who took the time to give us their condolences and support. I try to tell the grieving family members something I admired about the deceased...their husband, their Dad. I say, "Your Dad always had such wonderful things to say about you." Or, "Sam was always there to help when we needed someone at the church. I loved working with him." To one grieving wife, I mistakenly said, "I'm sorry for what you have had to go through the past six months," knowing that her husband had suffered greatly from cancer. She responded, "Don't feel sorry...it was the a wonderful time for us to share our love...and I wouldn't trade a minute for those last days we had together." She and I have had several positive exchanges about that conversation in the past few years. Ruth and I have always tried to help others, but this loss of Jon, has renewed these efforts. I remember reading in Graduate School that altruistic acts were the best way to erase

sadness and other debilitating issues. One can't do good things for others **to** feel good, but when one does good things for others, in love, they will feel good. We don't say, "Let's take a pie to Mrs. Jones so we will feel better" but when you take a pie to Mrs. Jones and see how much it means to her to be remembered, you do feel good. My mother always said, "Glenn, some people talk about baking you a pie when you are sick and others actually bake that pie...always be a pie baker." I have always tried to follow what my wonderful Mother taught me...and it has served me well. Ruth is twice as good at altruistic acts as me, always doing it in love and without any need for recognition. Ruth is a saint, and I have a good role model.

The days and weeks following Jon's death didn't find us depressed in the clinical sense, but rather, we now think we were just numb. We didn't cry a lot, or blame anyone, except for God occasionally, (We stopped going to church for two years! God probably noticed but no one else seemed to!) One acquaintance, five weeks after Jon's death, called to ask us out to dinner. I said I didn't think we were ready for that yet, and he said, " We're coming over in half and hour, bringing our daughter (who our kids loved) to babysit and we are taking you two to dinner. It was an important breakthrough in our recovery, and one we reciprocated years later when the husband had open heart surgery. That acquaintance, and his wife, became a life long

friends. Reaching out to others nearly always pays off. It did for us and has worked in our relationships with others. When you don't know what to do, or say, reach out...it almost always helps everyone concerned.

Recently, I read a book by Katie Roiphe, entitled, **The Violet Hours**, in which she describes the final hours of a few famous people. She calls the hours surrounding their deaths the Violet Hours. It got me to thinking about Jon's Violet Hours, and feel certain that his were very unsettling. He was visiting what had become an ex-girlfriend, who was partying with new friends and a new boyfriend. Jon was drinking lots of wine according to the police report and had isolated himself in the basement recreation room of her parent's home...where a gun (being cleaned by her father who was away and not expecting guests) was laying on a table. I'm guessing that Jon, in a desperate and wine-addled fog, made his LIFE ALTERING decision to take his own life as a way to "solve" his problems. In "solving" his problems, he, I believe, didn't realize how many problems the act would generate in the lives of those who loved him. His possible, "I'll show you!" to an ex-girlfriend has negatively impacted the lives of so many others. Broken hearts are very hard to mend...and even the best healing reveals scars of the trauma.

This June will make 36 years since Jon died...twice as many years as he lived. He would be fifty-four...almost a

senior citizen...maybe on a second career after retiring from the Marines...maybe a grandfather of ginger boys and girls...still making us laugh...maybe doing our leaves. We will never know. That is part of the grief...not getting to see his potential realized. Not getting to love him in person.

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