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by Brian Cahill

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This is about John Cahill, my police officer son who lost his way and took his life in December 2008. This is about LeAnn Cahill, my daughter who struggled most of her adult life with mental illness, and took her life in August 2016. This is about a father who lost two of his children to suicide. This is about a father who has to fight against the feeling that he is a freak and a total failure. This is about a father who has tried and is still trying to figure out how to pray after his life turned upside down — twice.

It's not that I don't have meaningful, loving support — support from my wife, Donna, John and LeAnn's stepmother, whose love has kept me breathing through both these nightmares. I have been blessed with two wise and compassionate counselors who have kept me sane — Janet Childs, with the Centre for Living With Dying in San Jose, California, and Patrick Arbore, who leads a grief support group at the at the Institute on Aging in San Francisco.

I have been blessed with an equally wise and compassionate spiritual adviser in Jesuit Fr. Bernie Bush, an 80-year-young retreat master at the Jesuit Retreat Center in Los Altos, California.

I'm also blessed with a core group of close friends who let me talk about it if I want, and know the difference between sympathy (ugh!) and empathy (I'll take all I can get).

A few years after John died, I wrote about what happened to him, about cops and depression and suicide. I did it to honor my son and help other cops. I was even able to write about the grace that unexpectedly came out of this horrible pain. It didn't make the pain go away, but it made things livable.

A few months before LeAnn died, I was in a spiritually dark period. I went to see Bernie and told him I couldn't pray. He told me that sometimes when we pray there is no resulting lightness or comfort, or sense of grace or sense of God's presence. I looked at him and said, "Yeah, that's me most of the time."

He smiled and said, "You're not the only one. It happens to me on a regular basis. Sometimes, all we can do is say the words, and the words count. That is still praying with integrity."

After LeAnn took her life, I'm back with Bernie, back in the horror and nightmare time, only this time also feeling like a freak, feeling like I want to climb into a hole, feeling that I don't want to let the world know I lost a second child, and feeling so empty, so not able to pray, so sure there is no faith left in the tank.

He sits there and lets me get it all out. Then he looks at me and says, "You are living whatever faith you have by the suicide prevention work you are doing with cops and by your prison ministry work. The issue isn't faith."

And then he nails me: "And enough with the guilt! Feeling like a freak is another way to bury yourself in guilt. We went over this when John died. You did the best you could. And I told you before — guilt is not just unwarranted but it is a last, futile effort to remain in control, and you should know by now you are not in control!"

He passes me the Kleenex and quietly reminds me what he said a few months ago: "And as for praying, just say the words. Sometimes that's all we have are words."

Just say the words. That's pretty much all I do these days. Donna and I pray morning and evening prayers together and I do my own brief prayers. One is a prayer I got from a friend who died recently: "I take the entire mess and all the good and place it in the wounded hands of the Risen One."

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Ron Rolheiser, in his brief but powerful *Bruised and Wounded: Struggling to Understand Suicide*, writes about John of the Cross and the dark night of the soul, and Mother Teresa's 50-year spiritual dry spell, but I can't relate. First of all, those guys are saints and I'm not. Second, I'm the father of two children who committed suicide, and they're not.

But I hold on to Rolheiser's assurance: "God's love, unlike ours, can go through locked doors and touch what will not allow itself to be touched by us."

Rolheiser's words remind me that my son and my daughter, though gone from me in this life, are in God's loving presence in their new life. And therefore I'll keep praying, keep saying the words, especially on the days when I struggle to have even a tiny hint of God's presence and God's place in this fragile, chaotic world.

And in a time of heightened awareness of suicide because of the deaths of Kate Spade and Anthony Bourdain, I'll begin to write about LeAnn, not just because I need to climb out of my hole, but also because suicide has to be talked about, because the myths and false impressions about suicide have to be combated, because the stigma about suicide has to be eliminated, and because I need to honor my daughter as I have honored my son. And I will try to wait for and remember those times of feeling that sense of lightness and comfort — even after John died — that sense of God's grace.

In the meantime, I'll keep saying the words.

[Brian Cahill retired in late 2008 as the executive director of San Francisco Catholic Charities after 40 years in social services. Since 2011, he has been a volunteer suicide prevention trainer for the San Francisco and San Jose police departments. He is also a volunteer in prison ministry at San Quentin.]