

Book Reviews

Darkness Visible – A Memoir of Madness by William Styron

One Friday in April – A story of Suicide and Survival by Donald Antrim

Some of the most common questions we hear from survivors that have lost a friend or loved one to suicide are “Why did this happen?” or “Didn’t they know how much we loved them?” or “How could they have been in so much pain without our knowing it?”. Suicide is incomprehensible and our bewilderment makes our grief even more unbearable.

The language available to describe mental illness and to grasp for understanding is limited. The medical and psychiatric professions use terminology that is, at best, opaque and unhelpful to the survivors tortured by grief, doubt, confusion, guilt, and anger over their loss. Having some slight understanding of what happened to explode their world may be helpful in the healing process.

The two authors above relate their own experiences of mental illness and nearly losing their lives to suicidal impulses. They are both highly skilled language artisans that use those skills to present vivid descriptions of the turmoil, despair and fear of mental illness and suicide. Writers and poets seem to be particularly vulnerable to suicide, or so it would seem, based on their frequent appearance on the rolls of suicide victims. Styron describes several prominent writers that were his contemporaries and friends that took their own lives.

William Styron (1925-2006) is a giant of American literature. Among his works are “Lie Down in Darkness”, the hauntingly tragic “Sophie’s Choice” and “The Confessions of Nat Turner” for which he was awarded the 1968 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. In 1986 his lifelong depression became so severe that he was hospitalized 7 weeks for treatment. *Darkness Visible* was published in 1990 and describes his “despair beyond despair” when, one December night, he decided to dispose of a personal notebook containing thoughts he preferred to remain private, and he realized that he was preparing for his own death.

Styron’s intricate writing style and complex constructions had the effect, for me, of distancing, or turning intellectual, the descriptions of the agony he endured as he spiraled downward toward self-destruction. He gives us a vivid picture of his madness but doesn’t quite pull us into it. This isn’t to say that “*Darkness Visible*” isn’t a worthwhile read – any well written first person account of going mad, facing suicide and eventual recovery must help us understand it more than we do now.

Donald Antrim (1958-) is, perhaps, not as well known as Styron but he is a highly regarded author of several novels and a frequent contributor to *The New Yorker* magazine. On a Friday afternoon in April 2006, he spent several hours on the roof of his Brooklyn apartment building, pacing, shivering and, periodically, dangling from the fire escape railing and trying either to let go (or not). Antrim describes his descent into madness, hospitalization, trial and error medication, multiple rounds of ECT, and, finally, recovery. His narrative is presented in a non-linear mix of flashbacks to his childhood and adolescence with wrenching descriptions of his deteriorating mind and treatment experiences. The writing style may be a mirror of the disorganized mind he lived with as his mental health declined.

Antrim had an unstable family life in early childhood with alcoholic, battling parents and frequent displacements to be raised by grandparents in only slightly less chaotic circumstances. In the middle of his description of his first stay in a locked hospital ward, we find this soliloquy:

“Had I always belonged among the sick – ever since the night I was born, when my grandmother took me from my mother, wasn’t fed her milk, wasn’t given touch? What happens to children who are neglected? We don’t understand, as children, that our loneliness and lack of care will become a fate – a loneliness that we will feel all our lives.”

Suicidologist Thomas Joiner lists a sense of alienation or “apartness” as one of three fundamental factors, common in most suicides. I think Antrim would agree.

Within a couple of pages, he switches to his feelings of exhaustion as he struggled to survive his illness:

“Maybe you’ve spent some time trying every day not to die, on your own somewhere, Maybe that effort became, or has become, your work in life. Perhaps there is help from family and friends, all the people who don’t quite understand that when you tell them that they will be better off with you dead, you are speaking a truth. Maybe you’re alone in a room, lying on a bed, and your chest is tight and your breathing shallow; you feel afraid to move, and sleep two or three hours each night, and then wake up in fear. Maybe you pace. Maybe you keep pills in a jar or a drawer, or hidden behind a box in the closet.”

I might never fully understand what my father endured before he took his life in 1959, but I have some sense of the desperation he was drowning in after reading that paragraph.

Nothing that I can write can truly describe the visceral impact of reading “One Friday in April” for a survivor of suicide. I highly recommend this book.