

Letter to my suicidal clients

to the Warriors

Lately, as you and I have sat in a room together, I've felt the breath of Death on the backs of our necks, so close I could have blinked and lost you. In my fear I've thought, *someone else should be here with you. I don't know enough of the right thing to be the one across from you*, as your life hangs on a razor's edge in the balance between us. It happens without you knowing it, unless you see the flash of terror in my eyes. I breathe, try to let you go, and give all I know to offer: me. It doesn't feel like enough. It feels like I ought to give you more. I want to set you free.

We see things so differently, you and I. We're on opposite ends of an experience. It seems like I should be able to hand you what I know, all I learned, and save you the hurt of having to find it for yourself. It's unfair that we should have to suffer twice and just as much. But I'm learning that I can't keep you from your own version of this hell. There's no short cut. The path has to be walked and only you can walk it. What I can do is keep meeting you along the way and maybe give you something to hold onto as you go.

I was 10 or 12 when I started seriously contemplating suicide. I decided if I couldn't kill myself, 25 would be a good age to die. I couldn't fathom life beyond then. It all felt too impossible to me. I was in and out of suicidal depression for over 20 years. There were stretches in there when it was bad, bad, bad. Every day for months or years at a time I thought about my own death. I hoped for it. Wished for it. Squeezed my eyes tightly against the never-ending crash of pain inside me, and prayed for it. I resented waking up in the morning, hated my body for continuing to breathe on its own. Out of desperation I tried to will myself into nonexistence, imagined breaking up into particles of dust and ash, spreading out into the ether, free. I don't have to tell you, none of it worked. I kept waking up. I kept breathing. I hated everything about all of it.

I also fought. Hard. I got my ass out of bed sometimes by sheer force of will—clenched jaw and held breath—brushed my teeth, showered, dressed, walked the dog, and went to work like I'd just scaled the side of Everest. I forced my body through each moment of every day and counted time to make it bearable. I did lots and lots of work on myself. I got sober at 21. I became Buddhist for a while. I spent about 10 years on a various cocktail of meds under the headings of different diagnoses. I saw therapist after therapist.

I wanted something else. I didn't know if it was possible for me, but I wanted it. I sought love for myself like a starving person scrounging for scraps of food in garbage bins. I hunted for the something that was going to make me like everyone else. I dragged my sodden, weighted body around to art stores, graduate schools, meditation retreats, intensive therapy groups, psychiatric appointments and the offices of my therapists. Something, somewhere was going to fucking change me.

There were times when it felt like it was working. When life felt *right*, and I was exactly where I needed to be when I needed to be there. I had beautiful moments of insight, unraveling, and reclamation. I had times soaked in self-compassion and acceptance, where I could have wrung myself out and dripped love.

I had and lost hope more times than I can count. On the heels of each stretch of good time was a fall, down and deep and terrible, made worse by having hoped maybe this time it wouldn't come. I came to despise hope.

I was 33 years old the last time I fell. I lost the will to fight. I couldn't keep coming back to this place over and over for the rest of my life. But I wasn't prepared to die. Not yet. So, I did the only thing I could think to do differently; I stopped fighting. I sank all the way to the bottom to see where the darkness took me.

Thanks to a dear friend who met me where I was, I had a series of significant moments that lead me to the desert of Central California, far away from everyone I knew. Under the shooting stars, I continued unveiling what I knew to be true about me. In a made up experiment, I posted on a blog a truth about myself every day for 365 days. I didn't know I was shedding my many layers of shame until after I was done.

I cried a lot, but that wasn't new for me. I laid on the ground a lot, but it's where I'd always been most comfortable. I hurt in ways I didn't think I'd come back from without being totally mad. That too was well-trodden ground for me. In the end what I found, what I'd never fully accepted before, was that the problem wasn't me. There wasn't and had never been anything wrong with me. I was who I was always meant to be, and it was okay that I wasn't like everyone else. It was okay that my life had been what it was, exactly as it was. I hadn't failed.

I understood depression differently. It wasn't an illness I had. It was a symptom of rejecting myself. It was the natural and destructive aftermath of believing there was something inherently wrong with me. If I am the problem, the only way to fix it is to stop *me*. To die. To no longer have to be anything.

Now I sit on the other side of the room, in the therapist's chair, across from you, from people who are actively or chronically suicidal, and I see so much beauty, power, and strength in you. You are the bravest warriors I know, and you are utterly blind to it, as I was when the spot on the couch was mine. You get up day after day and you continue—if only by breathing—a crushing heaviness bearing down on you, making every movement of your body feel impossible, and you call yourself *lazy*. You feel and think so deeply and profoundly that sometimes you lose yourself in the maze of it, and you call yourself *weak*. You live among shadows, dancing always between lightness and darkness, fighting within and outside yourself to make space in the world for something different, and you call yourself *failure*. Where you see a loser, I see Goddesses and Gods.

I don't think you came to believe these things about yourself entirely on your own. The ideas about who you ought to be, what is acceptable and lovable, come from many places and point to all the things you aren't, but they didn't start in you. They come at you from the outside, burrow beneath your skin, find a home between flesh and bone, and you mistake them as part of you. They become as true to you as air. *But they are all of them lies.*

I want you to stay long enough to learn what I now know to be true: You belong here. You belong here with me and the hundreds of thousands of people just like us. We have a purpose here. We have a place. I think you might be part of changing the world. If we lose you, we lose part of our collective soul.

I wish for you a chance to Live. I believe it is coming. I don't know when. I know how awful hope can be, so I don't say this lightly: I believe you are some number of turns in the road away from experiencing all of it so differently. I believe it's inevitable, as long as you stay. I know how much hurt I am asking you to endure. I believe someday even you will say it was worth it.

I didn't tell you where my story went next. I left the desert with the man who would become my husband. I have a daughter now. I'll be 39 next month and she is 6 months old today. My normally abnormal life started when I was 34 years old. I haven't thought about suicide in almost 5 years. If I experience depression it's fleeting and temporary, how I imagine everyone who isn't us experiences it. For a day. Or a morning. Or when it's really bad, a week. My life is far from perfect. I have moments of rage, grief, or paralyzing anxiety. I'm still riddled with insecurity and am picking my way through a briar patch of old beliefs. But it's not like it was. It's nothing like what it was. No matter what I'm experiencing, I am also okay in a way I didn't know was possible. I don't come apart. I'm not destroyed. I'm enough. This life I'm living is enough. I am all of it—the good, the bad, the ugly and the brave—and I know this is what it means to be alive.

I'm holding out my hand, hoping one day you'll reach out from the dark and take it. Hoping you'll stay. That you'll listen. That you'll keep breathing. Until the day the light breaks through just enough, and you see the hand that's been waiting for you all this time. It's mine. It's yours. It's here, even when you can't see around the beast of your pain. In those loneliest of times. It's here. It's open. And waiting in the palm of it is love.

My heart,
Stacey