

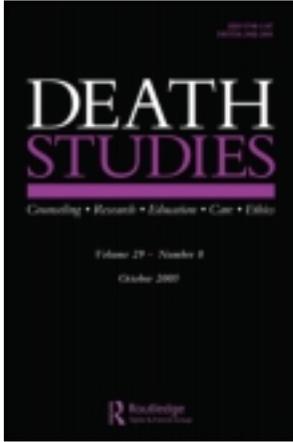
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On: 10 January 2012, At: 15:18

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954

Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## Death Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/udst20>

### Suicide: A Daughter's Perspective

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Available online: 05 Jan 2012

**To cite this article:** Ethan S. Burke & Laurie A. Burke (2012): Suicide: A Daughter's Perspective, *Death Studies*, 36:2, 190-194

**To link to this article:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2011.610181>

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## DVD REVIEW

### **Suicide: A Daughter's Perspective**

A review of *Daughter of Suicide* by Dempsey Rice. USA: Home Box Office, 1999. 72 min total run time. Reviewed by Ethan S. Burke and Laurie A. Burke.

Dempsey Rice is a documentary filmmaker and artist based in Brooklyn, New York. Her films are the avenues through which she explores the core issues that compel her to create: family, personal history, story, connection, loss, legacy, memory, and ideas of home. In addition to her own creative work, Dempsey's company Start Up Media creates videos for artists, authors, and technology start-ups. As a survivor of suicide, Dempsey is committed to advocating for a proven, effective suicide prevention plan in the United States.

Ethan S. Burke, BFA, is a freelance cinematographer and a Media Production Specialist at George Fox University (GFU) in Newberg, Oregon. His latest film work includes music videos, promotional spots (Mountain Pacific Association for Colleges and Employers Conference), and promotional videos (GFU's Career Services). He also has cinematography credits on short films dealing with topics such as grief and bereavement, pediatrician smoking-intervention training, embryonic stem cell research, and other topics.

Laurie A. Burke, MS, is a clinical psychology PhD candidate at The University of Memphis, where she is a bereavement researcher studying loss and grief. Her recent publications stem from her study of correlates of complicated grief, including negative social interactions, risk factors of complicated grief, and complicated spiritual grief—a spiritual crisis following loss. Her recent projects include an ongoing, thorough examination of the African American grief experience, violent death bereavement, a meta-analysis of risk factors of complicated grief, and measuring and developing an intervention for complicated spiritual grief.

*Daughter of Suicide* is a film that documents one woman's journey to discover who her mother was and to uncover the events surrounding her mother's suicide. The filmmaker, Dempsey Rice, was 18 years old when her mother killed herself. And yet, rather than

being a comprehensive, statistic-filled documentary about suicide in general, this film is an intensely personal account of Rice's revisitiation of her mother's death, 10 years later. As a documentary of discovery, this film acts both as a memorial of the life and death of Bonnie Rice and as a tool to help others cope with the painful loss of a friend or family member to suicide.

Through use of a visual chronicle, Rice takes a hard look at the multitude of emotions that arise when a loved one commits suicide. Examples of this include the oft-felt sense that something the survivor said or did may have pushed the suicide victim over the edge, or the gnawing feeling that there was something more that could have been said or done to prevent the person from taking his or her life. Rice's own exploration into her mother's life helped her to understand that Bonnie had long been on a self-destructive path that likely no one could have diverted.

The film opens in present day, at a memorial gathering of friends and family members of suicide victims. We see Rice among the group of people, all remembering the lives and mourning the deaths of their loved ones. Immediately, Rice begins to narrate the film, setting it up as a nonfictional account of her own journey—a deep-going inspection of the triumph and tragedy that made up her mother's life and, ultimately, its impact on her own.

In *Daughter of Suicide*, Rice unpacks Bonnie's life one photograph at a time, one narrative at a time. She starts at the very beginning in her attempt to piece together who her mother was. Instead of separating herself from the memories, the process of integrating the loss of her mother's life into her own required that she get closer to her mother by learning as much as she could about her. In doing so, Rice struggled to come to grips with the fact that her mother may not have been the strong, carefree woman that she and others believed. Interviews with family and friends uncovered more than she expected, as she soon discovered that she herself carried some of the same secret insecurities and fears as did her mother many years prior. For the viewers, this discovery is translated into a palpable weight—Rice's burden that comes from her sensing that she, too, might have the same tendency to suicide. Although such self-realization was frightening, exposing those parts of herself helped Rice to work through her fear of following the same path as her mother. This, in turn, was a key component of the film, as the lessons she learned similarly might help others.

That this documentary was made a decade after Bonnie's suicide serves to reinforce the notion that grief is an ongoing process rather than an easily settled emotion. Rice made the film to chronicle her own courageous healing journey, but by engaging the narratives of her closest family members she offered them the unique opportunity to join her in a shared soul-searching pilgrimage.

Rice's documentary is honest and vulnerable in a way that makes the viewer feel intimately connected to the filmmaker's journey. However, this is both good and bad. On one hand, it is good in that it welcomes the viewer—especially a viewer who has experienced a similar loss—to join with Rice as she works through her mother's life and death. Nevertheless, at one point, about two thirds of the way through the film, the story completely and abruptly switches from a focus on Bonnie's depression and suicide to a concentration on Dempsey's own residual psychological struggles a decade later. Although Rice's battle to forgive her mother is a seemingly natural part of the grieving process, in this case, its tendency might be to turn an engaged audience into her therapist. However, one might argue that such criticism is invalid because the film does form a necessary arc by moving systematically through Bonnie's life and death before finally touching down in a present day world where Rice continues to deal with deep-rooted guilt and pain. Still, were it possible for this necessary piece of the commentary to be included without being quite so unsettling for the viewer, it should be.

Coupling the documented narratives of Bonnie's loved ones with forgotten photographs and writings, Rice pieced together the fragments of her mother's life. The strongly visual aspect of Rice's process of remembrance is what makes her decision to tell the story using this medium a strong one. Filmmaking, perhaps more so than writing, lends itself to Rice's desire to visually and auditorily represent her journey. By making a factual film, Rice could share with her audience not only photographs of her mother and family, but also the true emotions captured through interviews, something that the pages of a book likely could not adequately present. Rice descriptively acknowledged that one reason she chose to chronicle her mother's life and death was in an attempt to find closure—an attempt met, instead, by the integration of Bonnie's life into her own through the use of memories and memorabilia. In the period of her life between losing her mother and making *Daughter of*

*Suicide*, Rice struggled with myriad unanswered questions. Thus, the resultant answers stemming from intimate accounts by family and friends deserved to be represented exactly as they were—in a swirl of confusion, anger, tears, laughter, heartache, memories, and all!

Likewise, *Forget Me Nots*—a series of short interviews—is also about memories and remembering. In this instance, Rice used the interviews as a means of bridging for the audience the notion of abstract emotion and physical functionality on one's way toward meaning-making, especially in the wake of violent-death loss. Similarly, with the gift of poignant narration at her fingertips, Rice garners the descriptive-rich accounts of other individuals who have lost family members to suicide and bravely told of their experiences. Five survivors of suicide loss, represented by parents, siblings, and spouses, expressly contributed painful portrayals of what it is like to experience the untimely yet self-inflicted death of someone you love.

Kenya's husband, Razak, who had suffered lifelong depression and was diagnosed with bipolar disorder 18 months prior, committed suicide after only 5 months of marriage. Kenya's commitment to move forward with her life and not let Razak's suicide take any more from her played a large part in how she has coped in the days following her tragic loss.

Dierdre lost her brother, Paul, after only a single episode of depression and a diagnosis of major depressive disorder that came just days prior to his suicide. The irony of Paul's suicide is that he loved life and lived it to the fullest, hence the shock Dierdre experienced in hearing the dreadful news. Dierdre reportedly gained control over the situation by letting herself spend plenty of time reflecting on Paul's life and in attempting to make sense of the loss.

Unbelievably, Al and Mary lost two adult children to suicide. Their daughter Amy committed suicide without warning, only to be followed by the same self-inflicted demise by their son, Michael, just 2 years later. However, in contrast to his younger sister, with Michael there had been a lifetime of warning signs. As Al and Mary wrote in his obituary, "Michael Kleusner died at the age of 38 after a long and courageous battle with major depression." Because of their experience with Amy, by the time Michael died, Al and Mary knew a lot about suicide prevention, so it was especially difficult to lose their son to something they felt that they

should have been able to prevent. Still, Al and Mary maintain that their lives have been changed by the deaths of Amy and Michael but not ruined.

Jerry and Elsie described their daughter, Terri, as a smart and funny medical doctor who had a thriving practice in Chicago. However, she struggled with unipolar depression that was invisible to those around her until she completed suicide unexpectedly in 1987. Later, when the couple founded the Suicide Prevention Action Network (SPAN USA) to help raise awareness about the great number of suicide survivors in the world who want to make a difference, Elsie learned not to blame herself for the suicide and, instead, gained a more accurate and productive view of the loss.

Susan, Jerry and Elsie's other daughter, also grieved the loss of Terri. As a school teacher, Susan's response to the loss of her sister was to enroll in graduate school, where she became a SPAN USA counselor who encourages young suicide survivors that they are not forgotten in the grief.

Suicide, in terms of prevention (i.e., anticipating if and when it might occur in previously distressed individuals) and postvention (i.e., finding ways to cope in the aftermath of suicide) is an unbelievably shocking experience for most people. Still, as vignettes from Dempsey's DVD portray, these brave survivors often find themselves on both sides of their loved one's untimely death, looking for a way to understand what happened, to grieve, and to move forward in the wake of unimaginable loss.