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I've written before on post-traumatic stress, which can lead to impaired health physically and mentally. For example, in my family of origin, physical and mental-health problems were facts of life. When I immigrated to California, I thought I left behind. I was wrong.

"You are the nail to my coffin," Mother used to scream at me. She'd grab me by my braids, shake me like a rabbit, and fling me against cupboard or stove. For Karl, two years younger than I, she used whatever came to hand: a frying pan, an electrical cord. Once, when the boy was five, she went after him with a piece of firewood. Karl crawled under the table and screamed bloody murder, while I stood there, shaking with fear. Other times she'd tell us she'd die young, of cancer, as had been the fate of her mother.

I was eighteen when she passed; my brothers were sixteen, eight, and four. The youngest ever only knew a mother who was ill.

Karl emigrated to New York at 18, though his English skills were practically nil. I followed a few years later and married in California. Karl and his family eventually settled near us in California. He died of cancer at 45.

I, too, had the idea I would die young of cancer. "We'll have to watch you, won't we," said my gynecologist as he jotted down my family history.

Eventually I disclosed myself to our pastor. "I won't live long," I said. "My grandmother and my mother died of cancer when they were young. I'm next, I'm sure."

He sent me home with two books by Viktor Frankl, *The Doctor and the Soul* and *Man's Search for Meaning*, the latter a memoir of his incarceration in Nazi deathcamps. It was the first time I realized how imperative it was I change my life.

Post-war poverty was a large part of my family of origin, as were the effects of the big war twenty year prior to the one during which I was born. During the earlier war, each of my parents was a child who suffered the loss of a parent. My dad's mother perished as a result of that war; my mother's father lost his life when the ship on which he served exploded in the Baltic.

My dad was a prisoner of war in Soviet Russia until five years after the Reich surrendered. All these years he was not allowed to write home. We had no idea whether he was alive--except for a card reader's predictions that he still lived. I was eight when he did return. We fled to the West, seeking to escape the Soviet occupation of East Germany.

My husband struggled with childhood traumas of his own. He was the product of an unwanted pregnancy, and his mother let him know it. That he went to college when nobody in his family did was due to childhood polio. When he goofed off instead of doing school work, a nurse in

Children's Hospital, Chicago, pulled him up short. "You won't be using your body to earn a living," she said. "Start using your brain!" The message sunk in.

At fourteen Helmut, who was eight when Mother died, joined my fledgling California family. After high school he earned a degree in biochemistry at Cal Poly. Yet he killed himself at 31 after driving to rural Idaho, where he'd remained in contact with ex in-laws.

Karl and I had the sad task of flying to Pocatello to arrange for the body to be sent to California. We drove to the place in the country where Helmut's school-aged sons lived with his first wife's mother, a school teacher. Their grandpa off and on taught biochemistry at a college or university.

In Idaho Helmut had arrived in the middle of the night, the boys' grandma said to Karl and me. The next morning, on the way to school, she told them their father was home. "You'll see him when we get back."

They never saw him alive. "I turned the car around as soon as I saw," their grandma said as she showed us the tree where he hanged himself. "I don't think the boys saw."

I looked at the tree and wondered how they could not have.

Years later their grandpa took the boys to Disneyland in California. On their way home they stopped in our town and called from some greasy spoon, wanting to meet with me.

"I'm making dinner for my family," I said. "Why don't you come and join us."

No, said the grandpa, so I dropped everything to meet them at their restaurant. That's when I heard the boys' grief-stricken lament.

"If only grandma had waked us," they told me. "If we could have talked with him! Surely he would have seen how important he was to us. He would have lived for our sake."

"You must not blame yourself. You must not blame your grandma," I said. "Your father was mentally ill. The only thing that could have saved him was medical intervention." Did they believe me?

I told them what I'd learned from his second wife. Helmut had lost his job. Their marriage was falling apart; both were despondent and suffered from depression. Suicidal ideation was left unacknowledged in those days. No hotlines were in existence.

At the memorial service, the pastor told me, Helmut had played his guitar at their Easter sunrise service. "He talked with me a couple of times," said the man. "I had no idea he was struggling."

Sadly, I myself did not intervene when Helmut showed up at our house before heading to Idaho. He didn't mention he'd lost his job, though hinting his second marriage was in trouble. "They are calling me," he said of Mother and our youngest brother, who, at eighteen, stepped into the path of an oncoming train after a bout in a mental institution. "Mother and Reiner are calling me."

I thought Helmut's utterance a poetic way of remembering the departed. Why was I unaware that hearing voices is a sign of mental distress? Why did I not insist he sign himself into the psychiatric ward of the local hospital?

I did worry over his decision to drive nonstop to Idaho. "Should we alert the police?" My husband shook his head. "There's no law against driving to Idaho."

My nephews are not in touch with me. I hear the younger completed college and works as an engineer. His brother sometimes lives with his mother and her second husband; sometimes in a halfway house or an institution, having been diagnosed schizophrenic. Neither of them ever married.

My fellow Wyomingites, I implore you: For all you hold dear, elect legislators able to muster empathy for people not as well off as we are. What Helmut, his kids, and his siblings went through you would not wish on your worst enemy. Yet some of our neighbors suffer as he did; some of your extended family members do. Wyoming is the state with twice the per capita rate of suicide than other states in the union, writes Kerry Drake. He knows, and I know, poverty and ill health play a huge part in suicidal ideation. The CDC recently released a report documenting that mental-health issues have become a major risk for American youth. Time to get serious about it.