



All Walks of Life

National Suicide Prevention Conference

Halifax, Nova Scotia

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We are pleased to present a commissioned composition from our 2023 Conference written by Tanya Davis, Poet Laureate of Prince Edward Island.

Lean in and Listen

I started this poem on a low day at home, feeling far from peers and purpose, workload never-ending, money never falling from trees. I stalled quicker than a beginner learning to drive stick shift with an ~~anxious~~ patient parent in the passenger seat.

I started optimistic, because poems and goals need that, but what was missing was context and I wasn't going to get it until I got to the conference so that is where this poem essentially begins

Essential to the beginning, or the establishing of context, I will let you know that I am not a care practitioner, not a suicide prevention community member; in this field of professionals, I am a baby deer who wandered in from elsewhere. I am traipsing about smelling the flowers and let me tell you I am happy to be here

I am happy to be here because the landscape is not only bold and refreshing but also healing and peaceful. And not peaceful in the everything is fine kind of way, which as you all know is not a very peaceful thing to hear, but peaceful in the we are together kind of way, this work, like life, is hard but we are here



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It's nice to be in rooms so infused with hope. So imbued with hope no one needs to be too cool for hope, this place is like school for hope, and I am glued to hope like kindergarten hands holding a whole bottle of Elmer's, like macaroni on Styrofoam covered in glitter. Some say we're fools for hoping, but this place shows us hope's wisdom, proves we need more hope in the system

Which system? The whole system. We can make distinctions for ease of conversation, but we all know nothing exists in isolation

We try to contain our work, our thoughts, our budgets, our borders
but the world is a web and the boundaries are porous

We pour over reports full of numbers, statistics, words. They differ in theory and specifics, but every thesis could be the same: it's us, we're here.
Every summary could match every introduction, the basics of which state we need meaning, we need connection
in conclusion every conclusion finds no one wants to feel alone

But our world is confusing, we forget things, like what is the purpose of a silo (hint: it's not for people, or strategies of care or anything other than grain)

But hey, the world is in pain and leaders are seeking strategies, whatever it takes so that a word like suicidality is not in our dialect, not a risk we assess, not a term so many are familiar with

Every conference has its lingo, some jargon is sadder than other jargon though
You know this. You work with heavy words representing heavier realities.
As an outsider I knew some of it, but I had that blissful ignorance,
which is peaceful though not exactly helpful in changing outcomes for us all

This really does affect us all, if disproportionately so
even if we don't lose someone close to us, we'll likely lose someone in the constellation of us
or we'll lose someone we never got the opportunity to know



All those stories cut short before they're fully told
all the tellers leaning away thinking no one wants to hear what they have to say
seeing no place to be, no future for which to reach
because the present is feeling empty
disconnected from meaning and identity
the illusion we live separately
reinforced by lack of equity in our society
with its capitalist priorities
patriarchal hierarchies
our colonial mentalities ongoing

We can't keep going like this
we need a paradigm shift
we need to reach into the narrative and reconcile with it
we need to reconcile for real, not just talk about it
we need to talk less
we need to listen more

Every life is a love story we can fall for
we need to listen to the details, the inhales, the detours
we need to notice the tall tales, the exhales, the contours
if folks are going to feel secure to take us on the grand tour of the landscape inside them
we need to be an open mind beside them

Not a leading question
not a pre-conceived idea or narrow definition
not a standard path or set of instructions.

This week I was reminded the best suggestions come directly from the ones we are supporting

When we purport to be experts on someone else's story, we close ourselves to the potential
of what their wisdom carries
how their lived experiences might marry or vary from ours
what intersections we might share
what connections we might miss
what misconceptions we might have
and how to let go of them



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Well-intentioned, we ask, how can voices be heard
we need a reframe, in fact, how can ears listen

And if ears listen, how can minds open
and if minds open, how can we keep that going
in a world that would see them closed, so to keep business running

Life promotion might mean we need to let go of some things

Hyper individualism, for instance
dividers between us, silos amidst us
the siphoning of resources at the expense of our existence
prioritizing the successes of entire populations
while ignoring the necessities and basic rights of others

This crisis does not have a simple solution to uncover
its roots are deep and far-reaching and for hope to get there we need to work together
a coalition of life supporters
mental health workers and suicide prevention coordinators
natural helpers and government gatekeepers
teachers and Elders and community caregivers
if we're going to make it upriver
everyone needs a paddle

If suicide prevention is a battle
let's approach it like warriors with expansive and diplomatic hearts
let's contemplate the circle in which we play a part
let's care for the losses so to prevent more
let's address the causes
the intersections
how oppression affects it
the stresses unique to each population
the missing metrics
the relations between us
our interconnection
in this messy and beautiful web we weave



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I reckon we'll all be taking something from this conference when we leave

Me, an introduction to you, the work you do, the pain you see
the love you share, the hope you breathe

I take profound and accessible teachings from Elders about fundamental questions
a call for healing, spirit-led, all walks of life connected

I take personal responsibility for any attention I mis-directed
for any stigma I reinforced despite my best intentions

I take a new and growing understanding of suicide prevention
the truth of collective wisdom
the benefits of partnership, including the hardships in it,
the power of coalition

I take with me the insight that life promotion is the goal and it needs everybody in it
as Elder John Rice said, "life will throw mud on your spirit"

There is real struggle
and every heart has a story
let us lean in, and listen, and hear it.