

Leftover Stories Being Told Spalding Gray

Kathie Russo talks about her husband's legacy

by Dave Korzon

On Saturday evening, January 10, 2004, Spalding Gray called home for the last time. He spoke briefly to his six-year-old son, Theo, telling him that he loved him. All signs then point to him boarding the Staten Island ferry and, later that night, jumping from the boat into frigid waters. Two months later his body was recovered off the Greenpoint section of Brooklyn. The body was badly decomposed, but X-rays, dental records, and the black corduroy pants he had been last seen wearing were used to identify him. He was sixty-two years old.

If you've ever heard the actor-writer Gray perform one of his monologues, the art form he is credited with pioneering, you cannot help but think two things at once. First, that it was inevitable he would choose to take his own life, as suicide was a recurring theme in his performance pieces. And second, it was still somehow beyond belief that Gray, who could take the darkest parts of his life, his deepest crises, and work through them on stage, finding humor and redemption when all seemed hopeless, could actually complete such an act. It

was as if the material in his life that should have been fodder for the next Gray monologue was just too big, too bad to be woven into anything that would save him.

Certainly, though, there is the side to this story that is not mysterious at all. It's medical. On June 22, 2001, Gray and his wife, Kathie Russo, and three friends they were traveling with were involved in a horrific car accident in Ireland. "The most violent moment of my life," Gray would later write in his book *Life Interrupted*. Gray's party was hit by a van on a rural Irish roadway, and while there were no fatalities, there were injuries, Gray's being the worst of the lot. He badly injured his hip, which resulted in a pronounced limp, and cracked his forehead. It was the beginning of a medical odyssey for Gray and his family that would ultimately end in brain damage, massive depression, and suicide.

Born in Barrington, Rhode Island, in 1941, Gray, the middle of three boys, was brought up in the New England tradition of quiet desperation. His mother, Margaret, a Christian Scientist, fought mental illness all through Gray's young



adulthood, finally taking her own life in 1967 while Gray, a budding actor, was traveling in Mexico. It was the beginning of Gray's obsession with suicide and whether or not he would repeat family history.

Gray became part of the avante garde theater scene of New York in the early seventies and later helped found the now-famous ensemble the Wooster Group. In 1979 he performed his first autobiographical monologue at the Performing Garage in downtown Manhattan. He titled it *Sex and Death to the Age 14*. This was just the beginning for Gray and his newly discovered self-realizing art form. His monologues, performed behind a plain wooden desk, became his signature even though he found some mainstream success as a movie actor with supporting roles in *The Killing Fields*, *Clara's Heart*, *Beaches*, and *King of the Hill*.

But it was his ironic voice, his New England accent, and his powers of observation that made famous his monologues *Swimming to Cambodia*, *Terrors of Pleasure*, *Monster in a Box*, *Gray's Anatomy*, *It's a Slippery Slope*, *Morning, Noon and Night*, and his final piece, *Life Interrupted*. Besides publishing many of these works in book form, Gray also wrote the novel *Impossible Vacation* and starred in the film versions of *Swimming to Cambodia*, *Terrors of Pleasure*, *Monster in a Box*, and *Gray's Anatomy*.

Whatever medium you find them in, these stories are all intensely autobiographical, marking Gray's professional and personal development and seeing him through some of the biggest crises and landmark moments of his life. *It's a Slippery Slope* is especially important, as it signaled a turning point in Gray's life, away from lifelong bachelorhood and toward a stable family life with Russo, their sons Forrest and Theo, now thirteen and nine, and Russo's daughter, Marissa Maier, twenty. As is evident in *Morning, Noon and Night*, Gray's happiest years were after his sons were born and before the accident.

After dealing with Irish hospitals, misdiagnoses, and convincing his doctors that he could travel back to the States for an operation to fix the hole in his forehead, Gray made it back to New York, but it turned out that his medical problems would only worsen. After his operation, the events of 9/11, and the trauma of moving from the family home in Sag Harbor, New York he loved so much to a larger one in North Haven, a different part of the village, Gray sank into a depression that he would never recover from. Russo sought out the very best medical advice, even acquiring the services of Oliver Sacks to help Gray out of his downward spiral. It was no use. For the next two and a half years doctors argued as to whether Gray was just severely depressed or if he had brain damage stemming from the accident and subsequent operation. He became, to use Russo's term, a medical guinea pig, forever on a changing menu of antidepressants and undergoing eighteen separate shock treatment sessions and a number of hospitalizations. Nothing worked. He tried, and failed, to kill himself a number of times, once being talked off a bridge in Sag Har-

bor and once diving into the water from his sailboat (for some reason he grabbed the rudder of the boat). He became obsessed with riding the Staten Island ferry, once needing to be escorted off the vessel by police after leaving a suicide note for Russo and the children. He left no note on the night he took his last ride.

The following interview with Russo took place this past summer at their home in Sag Harbor. Russo, who runs her

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own talent agency, is a dynamic and positively energized woman of forty-six. She is currently touring the country with a core group of actors and a play titled *Leftover Stories to Tell*, in which the actors read from Gray's monologues and his private journals. She is making plans to open off-Broadway in early 2007.

Russo is enthused and happy to see me, and I find her to be straightforward and at times painfully honest about Spalding Gray's last years. She holds nothing back in expressing the range of emotions she and her family have experienced in connection with Gray's illness and suicide.

Before sitting down to talk with Russo, I excuse myself to use the bathroom located right off the kitchen. It's a real Spalding Grayesque moment, I think. Here I am, Dave Korzon, peeing at Spalding Gray's house. But then I think, it really isn't his house anymore. There are two books in the bathroom. One is about Van Gogh. The other is a survival handbook about what to do in extreme situations (how to land a plane, what to do if you're attacked by a shark). This may not be his house anymore, I think, but this must have been his bathroom.

DAVE KORZON: Kathie, could you talk about what kind of father Spalding was? Fatherhood came to him late in life and really seemed to agree with him.

KATHIE RUSSO: Oh, he was great. At first he was very unsure about being a dad. But I knew he wanted to be a father, I just knew. It's interesting because now I get to read all of his journals. I didn't read them when he was alive, because they were very personal and private. For instance, he wrote this poem called "Unborn Children in My Thighs," in the early seventies, almost twenty-some years before he had kids. There are all these excerpts from his journals that talk about "Why don't I have kids, I think I want kids, but how come I'm not doing it?" Then he goes on to say, "The only way I could come into fatherhood was to have someone else make the decision for me." Which I obviously did, with our son Forrest. When he saw Forrest, that was it. He was in love. He felt like

he had a real purpose in life other than his work. What was great about him as a father was that he was always challenging the kids—he didn't baby them, he would treat them almost like little adults. He wasn't the kind of dad that would go out and play ball with the kids, but he was more a father of the mind for them. And you know, I would say his death was probably hardest for the middle child, Forrest, because they were very, very close.

KORZON: It's hard for me to reconcile the Spalding Gray who committed suicide with the Spalding Gray I know from his monologues, where he seemed able to work through his problems.

RUSSO: Well, that's how we knew he was really sick. And probably past help. Because for the first time in his life he couldn't make material out of this horrible thing that had happened to him. He tried with the story of the car accident in Ireland.

If he hadn't had the brain damage, he probably would have come out of it. It was increasingly difficult for him to come out of these crises in his life, but he somehow found a way through them, through his work. But in this case, because of the brain damage, he couldn't get out of that loop, that obsessive loop of whatever he was obsessing on. This just brought him down to a level of depression he'd never really experienced before.

KORZON: He experienced depression all his life.

RUSSO: And when you read his journals, it's like, oh my God, this guy was dealing with the worry of turning into his mom and trying to kill himself from the time she committed suicide, if not before. Even I didn't realize how long he'd been battling the demons inside his head. I didn't realize they were as big as they were. It was a constant battle for him. He wasn't letting anyone else know about it, but he'd write about it in his journal.

KORZON: His last monologue, *Life Interrupted*, deals with that car accident in Ireland, and even in his depressive state he was performing it. What were his performances like at that stage?

RUSSO: They weren't great. But if you had never seen him before and caught him on a good night, you'd think he did a great job. But he'd be fidgety under the desk like he couldn't sit still. And he'd go "ahhh, ahhh," and he'd be flat, there wouldn't be a lot of excitement to the pieces.

KORZON: But he was still out there trying.

RUSSO: I pushed him to do it because I thought it would help him, but it didn't. I was just out of ideas, I didn't know what to do with him because he was just impossible with a capital I. Just someone so deep in depression. It was constant. If he wasn't moving, he would sit in one of those red chairs [*points to chair in living room*] all day. Just sit there. It was very hard on the kids, because they didn't want to bring their friends over here. Theo would say, "You're embarrassing me, Dad. Stop. You talk to yourself."

KORZON: What would he be saying?

RUSSO: He was obsessing, not on his foot, not on his head, but on the house. We had lived in this little charming house in the village, and then we bought this larger house before the

trip to Ireland. Our moving day was September 11, 9/11. We'd just come back from Ireland, from that ordeal, and we were in our old house one night, and then the next day was September 11 and the movers actually showed up. I said to them, "Go away, we're not moving today, it feels like the end of the world." And Spalding snapped. That was the day he just really couldn't handle anything, and he wasn't talking about anything that was happening in New York. He was saying, "I can't leave this house, if we leave this house, I'm going to lose my mind. I'm going to lose my life. This house means more to me than anything." It was all about the house, and that's all we heard about for the next three years. The house, the house, the house. When he tried to kill himself on the bridge in town, he left me a suicide note saying, "I love you all but I can't live in this house." That was his obsession.

The weird thing is that his mother—before she killed herself—had moved from a house that she loved to a house in the woods that she couldn't stand. His father actually tried to buy their old house back, and we tried the same thing. Tried to buy the old house back. But they wouldn't sell it to us. Not that that would have made him feel better. As he said, "Yeah, then we'll buy it for twice what we sold it for and all I'll be doing is obsessing about how much money we spent on it." So I said, "You're telling me it's a no-win situation here?" And he said, "Yup."

KORZON: How could a house be that important?

RUSSO: Well, he said, and his journals confirm it, that the five years we spent in that little house were the happiest of his life, then the whole disruption of moving and 9/11 and the car wreck and everything put an end to that.

KORZON: You've been quoted as saying that you felt the Tim Burton movie *Big Fish* somehow gave Spalding permission to kill himself. Is this accurate?

RUSSO: Yes. I didn't see the film until a week after he disappeared. He took Marissa and Theo to see it the day he killed himself. We're assuming that's the day he killed himself. I think he did it that day, that night. Marissa said he couldn't stop crying the entire movie. Spalding had no idea what it [the movie] would be like. He liked Tim Burton, but he had no idea. But when I saw it, I was just like, Oh my.... That closing: "My father will always be remembered for the stories that he told." I couldn't believe it. And then jumping into the water....

KORZON: It's unbelievable, almost.

RUSSO: I think Spalding was determined to kill himself. It was sort of like he believed in fate and that kind of stuff. I think after seeing that film, he just saw that as a sign—OK, tonight's the night. I really think that. It's not to say he wouldn't have done it the next day had he not seen the film. I think what he was probably planning was killing himself in Aspen, because, you know, he was supposed to go there that weekend. We still have no information from the airline as to why that flight was canceled. We never got the definitive answer. But his flight really was canceled. I think he was thinking, I'm going to go to Aspen and maybe wander off in the woods and freeze to death or something.

End of excerpt