

Hight, Joe. 2019. *Unnecessary Sorrow: A Journalist Investigates the Life and Death of His Older Brother, Ordained, Discarded, Slain by Police*. Oklahoma City, OK: The Roadrunner Press.

Unnecessary Sorrow is a powerful indictment against the social systems and institutions that fail those with mental illness. This book is a lovingly written and poignant biography of the author's eldest brother. Hight tells this story from a deeply personal, familial perspective—but it's also powered by the drive and talents of a renowned investigative journalist. The book anticipates one of the main critiques advanced by the "Defund the Police" movement. That is, law enforcement generally is under-equipped and badly trained to handle the violent and threatening behavior by certain persons with mental illnesses such as schizophrenia with paranoia. With that in mind, resources should be reallocated to improve law enforcement training, demilitarize police forces, and perhaps even support other social service instruments more capable of handling mental health crises. The author suggests that professionals beyond police officers might better serve as the default first responders for these types of incidents. With this in mind, Hight helped form the nonprofit organization, Oklahoma Partnership for Creating Change, to "bridge the gap between agencies and organizations that deal with those who struggle with mental illness" (p. 306).

This brutally honest recollection is also an incredible window into the history and culture of Oklahoma. Hight really sets the stage through authentic detail and colorful character studies. He takes the reader through a tour of small-town, rural Oklahoma during what we often think of as a simpler time. Because of its descriptive scope and ability to pique the reader's interest throughout, it's easy to miss at first blush that this book has profound political implications.

As the youngest of seven children, Joe Hight grows up to idolize his oldest brother Paul. This devout Catholic family is shaped by its unique development in the rural setting of Guthrie, Oklahoma during the postwar period. The lowest point in the family's history

comes from the death of “Baby Linda” who tragically dies in 1948 shortly before her second birthday. This heartbreaking event reverberates through the decades and greatly impacts even the lives of the Hight children born much later. The book reveals that the tragedies of this family are both acute and chronic.

More happy times are described as well. The highest point in this family saga is when the author’s eldest brother Paul joins the priesthood in 1968. This was a culmination of over a dozen years of study going back to Paul’s selection to attend Saint Francis de Sales Seminary. The school’s mission was to prepare sophomores and juniors for a life in the priesthood. Hight notes that his brother failed to attend his own graduation from this junior seminary due to illness. This was a small detail mentioned early in the book. In a later chapter, the author elaborates on how a probable mumps infection in Paul’s early life may have a possible connection to his subsequent mental illness. Hight cites some of the recent research on this likely link to schizophrenia (e.g. Khandaker, et al, 2012).

The beauty of this book is how it unexpectedly intersects the needs and hopes of one family with the hopes, dreams, and wants of the nation as a whole. To his credit, Hight is a wonderful storyteller. He brings us vividly into his world. He breathes life into the institutions that surround us and aspire to protect us. He demonstrates that even at their best, these organizations are still just tools of *human* invention. Despite the noblest of goals, these institutions quite often succumb to inherent limitations. The Catholic Church, for example, undergoes tremendous challenges with its priesthood. Hight takes us inside the inner workings of the Catholic Church as it struggles to deal with errant and troubled priests. One of the major themes of the book is how the Catholic Church failed to support one of its own, Father Paul Hight. The hypocrisy of “once a priest always a priest” (Paul, 1992) is shown in stark relief here.

Among the diverse set of other institutions that come under Hight’s critical eye include banks, healthcare providers, police departments,

prisons, social welfare institutions, state agencies, and tobacco companies.

In the spirit of Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), Hight notes the importance of a few people who when strategically placed throughout someone's lifetime can make a real difference. In Paul's case, the significance of a supportive and understanding local sheriff, an encouraging state agency supervisor, and former priest colleagues who would occasionally check in helped the family cope with "the fragility of caring for an independent adult with mental illness" (p. 255). These people are eventually transferred, promoted, or stricken with illness. If they are replaced at all, it's usually by those who are less familiar or unwilling to provide a similar degree of support. Without the care and oversight of this extended network of key individuals, Paul would stop taking his medicines. Then the voices of schizophrenia would take over. These relapses proved scary for family members, friends, neighbors, church parishioners, and law enforcement officials. In the latter case, Paul ended up being shot by the Guthrie police and coming close to death during one of his episodic breakdowns. However, he survived this Spring 1996 experience and even thrived—only for the tragic cycle to return again. Ultimately, Paul would check in and out of residential and outpatient mental health facilities throughout Oklahoma during his lifetime. Having access to Paul's prolific writings allowed Hight the ability to track changes in Paul's mental health over time. He was also able to buttress this information with interviews and medical records.

The shooting in Guthrie prompts Hight to ask if there are better ways for officers to deescalate these situations. The author notes that it wouldn't be until 2015 that a *Washington Post* article (Lowery, et al) documented that "people with mental illness were sixteen times more likely to be shot and killed by police" (p. 222). The title, *Unnecessary Sorrow* foreshadows the idea that proper political intervention might mitigate the severity of these circumstances. The availability of pharmaceutical interventions along with political

pressures from the Reagan administration deinstitutionalized subsequent generations of persons with mental health disabilities. Hight notes that these individuals and their families never regained a similar level of support services. By interweaving the experiences of his own family, the author is able to effectively illustrate one of the major public policy problems of our time.

Paul's dreadful encounter with the Guthrie police would be replayed once again, but this time in Oklahoma City during a cold wintry evening in December 2000. This time, Paul did not survive being shot. During discussions with mental health professionals, Hight would learn later that people with schizophrenic illness are not likely to respond well to the "command voices" that police are trained to use to quell domestic disturbances.

What are the answers? Hight realizes that these problems are complex and interconnected. He shows a keen empathy for the challenges faced by law enforcement professionals. His time on the streets as an investigative reporter informs his analysis. He's able to come up with numerous specific policy recommendations. His main points are that "a lack of training for police in how to deescalate an encounter with someone suffering from mental illness, as well as a lack of treatment for those with serious mental illness" (p. 222) should be strongly considered. Hight's involvement with the nonprofit organization helps to advance the mission to help those struggling with mental illness. One of the early successes was a "revamping" of "the mental health component of CLEET-approved training for new officers" in Oklahoma (Dolive, 2012). Continued work by advocates for persons with mental illness has helped implement the new 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline through the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration at the national level. What ostensibly is a biography of his older brother turns out to be a persuasive treatise on public policy toward persons with mental illness.

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