

Struggling with the question of why



Panmure artist Lisa Firestone, who works out of the Fletcher Jones studios, is using a series of paintings to ask some thought-provoking questions about how to prevent suicide. (Sculpture: Robert Ulmann)

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By Carol Altmann

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A02F2F;"] F
[/dropcap]or those left behind after a suicide, the question is always and agonisingly the same: why?

On Monday, August 11, this question reverberated around the world as news spread that actor Robin Williams – a person who

seemingly had it all – had taken his own life.

A day later, the friends and family of Warrnambool man and musician Nick Fox were grappling with the same heart-breaking question. Nick was born in 1985, the same year as my own brother, Ian, took his life at the age of 24. It is almost 30 years since that terrible day, and I still don't know why.

In trying to understand the “why” we hope, of course, that we can stop another suicide from happening: that we will know what to look for, or know what to do, or say, to help change a person's mind.

This is the premise, in many ways, behind the [“R U OK?” campaign](#). That by asking a troubled friend, family member or colleague if they are okay, we might be able to change their course. The hard part, however, is when someone says “no, actually, I am not okay”. What can we say or do then?



[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A02F2F;"] P
[/dropcap]anmure artist **Lisa Firestone** has been grappling with these questions since a friend and fellow artist took her own life earlier this year.

At that time, Lisa used her art to deal with the “raw grief and shock” of losing someone who was a treasured friend, cheerful neighbour and artistic colleague.

“Doing that work really helped me process my grief and to work through it. I wanted to show the ripple effect that suicide has and how many people are affected,” Lisa said.

Her collection of nine paintings – a series of sentences across brightly coloured, sunset or ocean-like backdrops – capture the anguish and helplessness felt by those who have lost a loved one to suicide.

[box]Reads one panel:

“Depression, anxiety and pain are a deadly mix.

I wish there was more I could have done.” [/box]

The series of paintings was recently exhibited in Melbourne by the [Mental Health Foundation of Australia](#), but Lisa’s most recent work broadens the focus from the personal to the collective and asks us to contemplate how we, as a society, can make suicide redundant.

[box]One asks:

“What is the message that humanity isn’t getting regarding suicide?

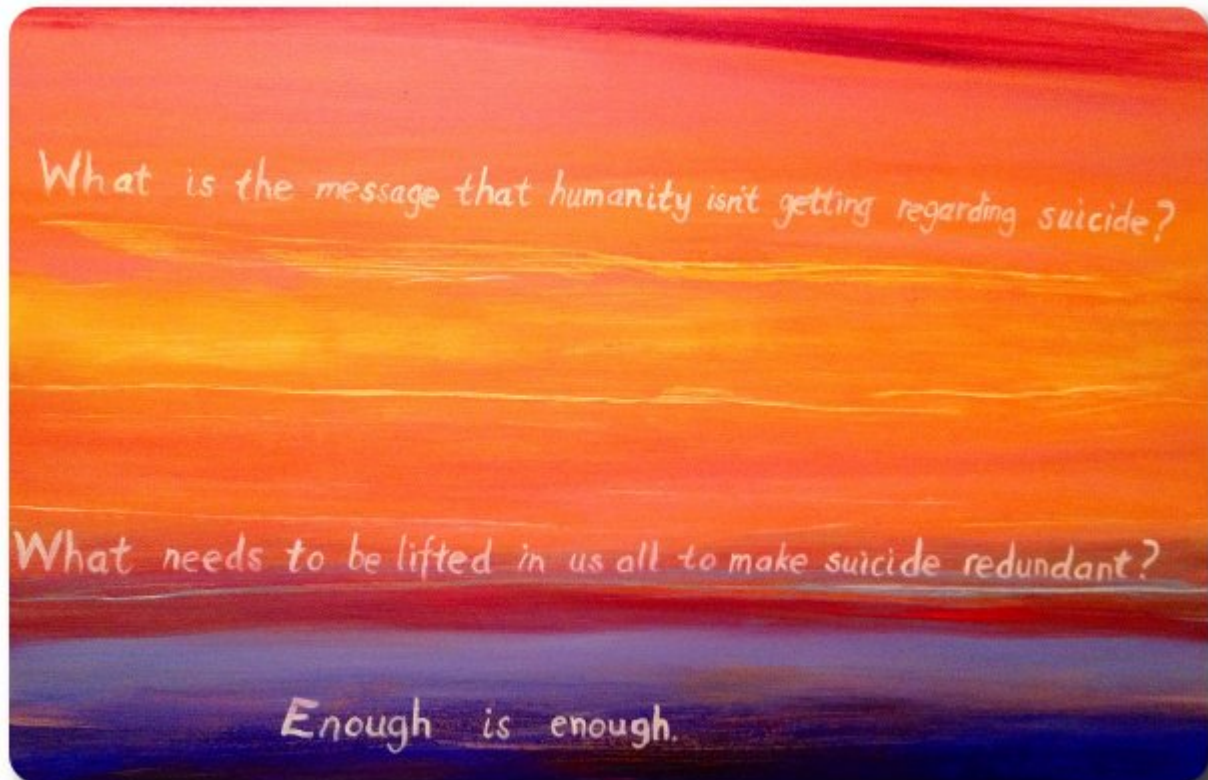
What needs to be lifted in us all to make suicide redundant?

Enough is enough.” [/box]

They are not easy questions to ask, or to answer.

"I am asking people to go deeper with their thinking, to really look at how we operate as a society and how we can better address these issues," Lisa said.

"One woman who saw the painting (on display during the recent open day at Factory Arts, in the Fletcher Jones building), scoffed and walked away, but I hope it will touch other people's hearts."



[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A02F2F;"] While suicide is universal, it is far from uniform.

Why is it, for example, that South Korea [has the highest suicide rate](#) in the world (24.7 per 100,000 people) while Greece has the lowest (2.9 per 100,000)? Australia sits in the middle on 11.2 per 100,000 – double that of Mexico or Italy. What different social and cultural factors are at play?

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the [national suicide rate has fallen](#) significantly among men since 1997 (23.3 per 100,000 down to 16.8) and for women (6.2 down to

5.6), and the peak age group is not among younger people, as we might assume, but the elderly (37.6 deaths per 100,000 in men aged 85 or over). Indigenous men are also at a much higher risk than non-indigenous men.

Although we are headed in the right direction, the statistics are still too high and have a way, like numbers do, of removing the individual stories.

Lisa believes we need to share more of these stories – to let the air and light in and to remove the shame – and she speaks openly of her own battle with depression and suicidal thoughts in the past.

Her healing came not from thinking about the impact her death would have on others – “I actually thought people would be better off without me, which is part of what depression is about” – but from a holistic approach that involved medication, art, Reiki and “spending a lot of time in nature”.

“My art is now a way of helping others, to reach out to people and to start a conversation about how we can make suicide redundant: if we are talking about it, the answers will come.”

[box] Lisa will have her work on display at the Brophy Community and Youth Complex, 210 Timor St, Warrnambool during National Mental Health Week October 6-11. ABC Open is also running two projects – Speak Your Mind and Mental As – for full details [visit here](#).

If you need to reach out to someone, please try any of these contact numbers for 24/7 support: [Lifeline](#) 13 11 14; [Suicide Callback Service](#) 1300 659 467; [Kids Helpline](#) 1800 55 1800; [MensLine Australia](#) 1300 78 99 78. [/box]

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