



Journey

Newsletter of the
National Catholic Ministry to
the Bereaved

Volume 15, No. 2

Summer 2005

SUICIDE: MOST MISUNDERSTOOD OF ALL DEATHS

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Death is always painful, but its pains are compounded considerably if its cause is suicide. When a suicide occurs, we aren't just left with the loss of a person, we're also left with a legacy of anger, second-guessing, and fearful anxiety.

So each year I write a column on suicide, hoping that it might help produce more understanding around the issue and, in a small way perhaps, offer some consolation to those who have lost a loved one to this dreadful disease. Essentially, I say the same things each year because they need to be said. As Margaret Atwood once put it, some things need to be said and said and said again, until they don't need to be said any more. That's true of suicide.

What needs to be said, and said again, about it?

First of all that it's a disease and perhaps the most misunderstood of all diseases.

We tend to think that if a death is self-inflicted it is voluntary in a way that death through physical illness or accident is not. For most suicides, this isn't true. A person who falls victim to suicide dies, as does the victim of a terminal illness or fatal accident, not by his or her own choice. When people die from heart attacks, strokes, cancer, AIDS, and accidents, they die against their will. The same is true for suicide, except that in the case of suicide the breakdown is emotional rather than physical—an emotional stroke, an emotional cancer, a breakdown of the emotional immune-system, an emotional fatality.

This is not an analogy. The two kinds of heart attacks, strokes, cancers, breakdowns of the immune-system, and fatal accidents are identical in that in neither case is the person leaving this world on the basis of a voluntary decision of his or her own will. In both cases, he or she is taken out of life against his or her own will. That's why we speak of someone as a "victim" of suicide.

Given this fact, we should not worry unduly about the eternal salvation of a suicide victim, believing (as we used to) that suicide is always an act of ultimate despair. God is infinitely more understanding than we are and God's hands are infinitely safer and more gentle than our own.

Imagine a loving mother having just given birth, welcoming her child onto her breast for the first time. That, I believe, is the best image we have available to understand how a suicide victim (most often an overly sensitive soul) is received into the next life.

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Again, this isn’t an analogy. God is infinitely more understanding, loving, and motherly than any mother on earth. We need not worry about the fate of anyone, no matter the cause of death, who exits this world honest, over-sensitive, gentle, over-wrought, and emotionally-crushed. God’s understanding and compassion exceed our own.

Knowing all of this however, doesn’t necessarily take away our pain (and anger) at losing someone to suicide. Faith and understanding aren’t meant to take our pain away but to give us hope, vision, and support as we walk within it.

Finally, we should not unduly second-guess when we lose a loved one to suicide: “What might I have done? Where did I let this person down? If only I had been there? What if...?” It can be too easy to be haunted with the thought: “If only I’d been there at the right time.” Rarely would this have made a difference. Indeed, most of the time, we weren’t there for the exact reason that the person who fell victim to this disease did not want us to be there. He or she picked the moment, the spot, and the means precisely so that we wouldn’t be there. Perhaps it’s more accurate to say that suicide is a disease that picks its victim precisely in such a way so as to exclude others and their attentiveness. This should not be an excuse for insensitivity, especially towards those suffering from dangerous depression, but it should be a healthy check against false guilt and fruitless second-guessing.

We’re human beings, not God. People die of illness and accidents all the time and all the love and attentiveness in the world often cannot prevent a loved one from dying. Suicide is a sickness and there are some sicknesses that all the care and love in the world cannot cure.

A proper human and faith response to suicide should not be horror, fear for the victim’s salvation, or guilty second-guessing about how we failed this person. Suicide is indeed a horrible way to die, but we must understand it (at least in most cases) as a sickness, a disease, an illness, a tragic breakdown within the emotional immune-system. And then we must trust, in God’s goodness, God’s understanding, God’s power to descend into hell, and God’s power to redeem all things, even death, even death by suicide.

*God’s understanding
and compassion
exceed our own.*



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RECOMMENDED READING

Bolton, Iris. *My Son... My Son...: A Guide to Healing after Death, Loss, or Suicide*. Bolton Press

Childstrom, Corinne. *Andrew, You Died Too Soon: A Family Experience of Grieving and Living Again*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress. 1993

Linn-Gust, Michelle. *Do They have Bad Days in Heaven?* (Loss of sibling). Bolton Press. 2001

Lukas, Christopher and Seiden, Henry M., *Silent Grief: Living in the Wake of Suicide*. Jason Aronson, Inc. 1997

Nouwen, Henri J.M. *Reaching Out*. New York: Doubleday. 1975

Suicide Prevention Resources can be found at www.boltonpress.com.

Recommended Reading can be located at www.thelink.org.