

Our Misunderstandings About Suicide



Every year I write an article on suicide because so many people have to live with the pain of losing a loved one in this way. I rarely go for even a week without receiving a letter, an email, or a phone call from someone who has just lost a family member to suicide. In virtually every case, there is a corresponding sorrow that there really isn't a lot of material out there, religious or secular, to help console those left bereaved. A friend of mine, who through some very dark years has had to work through the pain of losing her husband to suicide, plans one day to write a book to try to offer consolation to those left behind. There is a desperate need for just such a book.

When someone close to us dies by suicide we live with a pain that includes confusion ("Why?"), guilt ("What might we still have done?"), misunderstanding ("This is the ultimate form of despair") and, if we are believers, deep religious anxiety as well ("How does God treat such a person? What's to be his or her eternal destiny?")

What needs to be said about suicide? At the risk of repeating what I have been writing year after year:

First, that it's a disease, something that in most cases takes a person out of life against his or her will, the emotional equivalent of cancer, a stroke, or a heart attack. Second, that we, the loved ones who remain, should not spend undue time and energy second-guessing as to how we might have failed that person, what we should have noticed, and what we might still have done to prevent the suicide. Suicide is an illness and, as with a purely physical disease, we can love someone and still not be able to save him or her from death. God too loved this person and, like us, could not interfere with his or her freedom. Finally, we shouldn't worry too much about how God meets our loved one on the other side. God's love, unlike ours, goes through locked doors, descends into hell, and breathes out peace where

we can't. Most people who die by suicide will awake on the other side to find Christ standing inside their locked doors, inside the heart of their chaos, breathing out peace and gently saying: "Peace be with you!"

But I also receive a lot of very critical letters every year suggesting that I am making light of suicide by seeming to lessen its ultimate taboo and thus making it easier for people to do the act: Wasn't it G.K. Chesterton himself who said that, by killing yourself, you insult every flower on earth? What's about this?

Chesterton is correct, when suicide is indeed a despairing act within which one kills oneself. But in most suicides, I suspect, this is not the case because there is huge distinction between falling victim to suicide and killing oneself.

In suicide, a person, through illness of whatever sort, is taken out of life against his or her will. Many of us have known loved ones who died by suicide and we know that in almost every case that person was someone who was the antithesis of the egoist, the narcissist, the over-proud, hardened, unbending person who refuses, through pride, to take his or her place in the humble and broken scheme of things. Usually it's the opposite. The person who dies by suicide has cancerous problems precisely because he or she is too sensitive, too wounded, too raw, and too bruised to possess the necessary toughness needed to absorb life's many blows. I remember comment I once heard at a funeral. We had just buried a young man who, suffering from clinical depression, had committed suicide. The priest had preached badly, hinting that this suicide was somehow the man's own fault and that suicide was always the ultimate act of despair. At the reception afterwards a neighbor of the man who had died came up and expressed his displeasure at the priest's remarks: "There a lot of people in the world who should kill themselves, but they never will! But this man is the last person who should have killed himself; he was the most sensitive person I've ever met!" Too true.

Killing yourself is something different. It's how some of the Hitlers pass out of this life. Hitler, in fact, did kill himself. In such a case, the person is not too sensitive, too self effacing, and too bruised to touch others and be touched. The opposite. The person is too proud to accept his or her place in a world that, at the end of the day, demands humility of everyone.

There is an infinite distance between an act done out of weakness and one done out of strength. Likewise there is an absolute distinction between being too bruised to continue to touch life and being too proud to continue to take one's place within it. Only the latter makes a moral statement, insults the flowers, and challenges the mercy of God.

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