

## **Suicide is an illness in which someone is too bruised to be touched**

### **Living in Exile**

**Ron Rolheiser, OMI**

A few days ago, I was asked to visit a family who had, just that day, lost their 19-year-old son to suicide. There isn't much one can offer by way of consolation, even faith consolation, at a moment like this, when everyone is in shock and the pain is so raw. Few things can so devastate us as the suicide of a loved one, especially of one's own child. There is the horrific shock of losing a loved one so suddenly which, just of itself, can bring us to our knees: but, with suicide, there are other soul-wrenching feelings too – confusion, guilt, second-guessing, religious anxiety. Where did we fail this person? What might we still have done? What should we have noticed? What is this person's state with God?

What needs to be said about all of this? First of all, that suicide is a disease and the most misunderstood of all sicknesses. It takes a person out of life against his or her will, the emotional equivalent of cancer, a stroke or a heart attack. Second, we, those left behind, need not spend undue 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 any sickness, we can love someone and still not be able to save that person from death. God loved this person too and, like us, could not, this side of eternity, do anything either. Finally, we shouldn't worry too much about how God meets this person on the other side. God's love, unlike ours, can go through locked

doors and touch what will not allow itself to be touched by us.

Is this making light of suicide?

Hardly. Anyone who has ever dealt with either the victim of a suicide before his or her death or with those grieving that death afterward knows that it is impossible to make light of it. There is no hell and there is no pain like the one suicide inflicts. Nobody who is healthy wants to die and nobody who is healthy wants to burden his or her loved ones with this kind of pain. And that's the point: This is only done when someone isn't healthy. The fact that medication can often prevent suicide should tell us something.

Suicide is an illness, not a sin.

Nobody just calmly decides to commit suicide and burden his or her loved ones with that death any more than anyone calmly decides to die of cancer and cause pain. The victim of suicide (in all but rare cases) is a trapped person, caught up in a fiery, private chaos that has its roots both in his or her emotions and in his or her biochemistry. Suicide is a desperate attempt to end unendurable pain, akin to one throwing oneself through a window because one's clothing is on fire.

Many of us have known victims of suicide and we know too that in almost every case that person was not full of ego, pride, haughtiness, and the desire to hurt someone. Generally it's the opposite. The victim has cancerous problems precisely because he or she is wounded, raw, and too bruised to have the necessary resiliency needed to deal with life. Those of us who have lost loved ones to suicide know that the problem is not one of strength but of weakness, the person is too bruised to be touched.

I remember a comment I overheard at a funeral for a suicide victim. 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 afterward a neighbour of the victim expressed his displeasure at the priest's homily: "There are a lot of people in this world who should kill themselves" he lamented bitterly, "but those kind never do! This man is the last person who should have killed himself because he was one of the most sensitive people I've ever met!" A book could be written on that statement. Too often it is precisely the meek who seem to lose the battle, at least in this world.

Finally, I submit that we shouldn't worry too much about how God meets our loved ones who have fallen victim to suicide. God, as Jesus assures us, has a special affection for those of us who are too bruised and wounded to be touched. Jesus assures us too that God's love can go through locked doors and into broken places and free up what's paralyzed and help that which can no longer help itself. God is not blocked when we are. God can reach through.

And so our loved ones who have fallen victim to suicide are now inside of God's embrace, enjoying a freedom they could never quite enjoy here and being healed through a touch that they could never quite accept from us.

## **Suicide is the 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 of 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, and 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, the person 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 on to 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.

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 are 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 toward 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 eternal 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 by suicide.

## **Death by suicide continues to be marked by unhealthy notions**

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It's always painful when someone close to us dies, but the pain is compounded considerably when the cause of death is suicide. Suicide doesn't just leave us with a sense of loss, it also leaves us with a residue of anger, second-guessing and fearful anxiety. Partly this is because we will have some unhealthy notions about it. What are these?

The first is the idea that suicide is an act of ultimate despair. We are only just emerging from a mindset that understood suicide as a final act of despair – culpable, irrevocable and unforgivable. To commit suicide was to put oneself under the judgment that the early church pronounced on Judas Iscariot: "Better for that man if he had never been born." Until very recently, victims of suicide were not even buried in church cemeteries. As G.K. Chesterton, the great apologist, once put it: "A person who commits suicide defiles every flower by refusing to live for its sake."

What we didn't understand, of course, when we still thought those things was that the propensity for suicide, most times, is an illness, pure and simple. We are made up of body and soul. Either can snap. We can die of cancer, high blood pressure and heart attacks, or from malignancies of the heart, emotional strokes and mortal wounds to the soul.

In most suicides, just as in any terminal disease, death is not freely chosen. Suicide is a desperate attempt to end unendurable pain, much like when a man who throws himself through a window because his clothing has caught fire. That's a tragedy, not a sin; a

succumbing to disease, not despair; a real death, not intended.

Given this truth, we must also give up the mistaken notion that in committing suicide, a person puts himself or herself outside of God's mercy. After the resurrection, we see Christ, time and again, going through locked doors to breathe forgiveness, love and peace into hearts that are unable to open up because of fear and hurt.

God's mercy and peace can reach through when we can't. This side of eternity, sometimes all the love, stretched-out hands and professional help in the world can no longer reach through to a heart locked inside a prison of pain and illness. We try to reach through but our efforts are for naught and suicide claims our loved one anyway.

God's compassion, however, can reach through where ours can't. God's love can descend into hell, where it can breathe peace and reconciliation right into the middle of wound, anger and fear. God's hands are gentler than our own, God's understanding infinitely surpasses ours and God is not, as Scripture assures us, stymied by locked doors in the same way as we are.

When our loved ones die of suicide and awake on the other side, Christ is standing inside their huddled fear, gently saying: "Peace be with you." Jesus told us that God does not promise to eliminate pain, death and suicide in this world. These remain. What God does promise is to redeem crooked lines, and to rescue us even beyond suicide.

Then too there is the myth about suicide that expresses itself this way: This could have been prevented if only I had done more, been more attentive and been there at the right time. Rarely is this the issue.

Most of the time, we weren't there for the very 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, more accurately, it could be said that suicide is a disease that picks its victim precisely in such a way as to exclude others and their attentiveness.

Of course, this may never be an excuse for insensitivity to the needs of others, especially those suffering from dangerous depression. But it is a healthy check against false guilt and neurotic second-guessing. I have stood at the bedside of a number of people who were dying and there wasn't anything I could do to stop the process. They died, despite my attentiveness, presence and prayers.

So, too, generally, with those who have died of suicide. We were present in their lives to the end, though not (as we found out after the fact) in a way that could stop them from dying.

The Christian response to suicide should not be horror, fear for the victim's eternal salvation, and guilty self-examination about what we didn't do. Suicide is indeed a horrible way to die, but we must understand it for what it is, a sickness, and then stop second-guessing and worrying about the eternal salvation of its victim.

In the pain of losing a loved one to suicide, we must affirm the bottom line of our faith, that God redeems everything and, in the end, all will be well and every manner of being will be well – even beyond suicide.