

Our Misconceptions About Suicide

Margaret Atwood once wrote that sometimes things need to be said, and said and said, until they don't need to be said anymore. Each year I write a column on suicide because, given the misconceptions about it, some things need to be said over and over again.



Rev. Ronald Rolheiser, OMI

What are our misconceptions about suicide? What must be reiterated over and over again?

First, that suicide is not an act of despair. We are, too slowly, emerging from a mindset that understands suicide as the ultimate act of despair — culpable, irrevocable and unforgivable. To commit suicide, it is too commonly believed, puts one under the judgment once pronounced on Judas Iscariot: "Better to not have been born." Until recently, victims of suicide were often not even buried in church cemeteries.

What we didn't understand when we thought these things is that the propensity for suicide is, in most cases, an illness, pure and simple. We are made up of body and soul; either can snap. We can die of cancer, high blood pressure, heart attacks, aneurysms. These are physical sicknesses.

But we can suffer these, too, in the soul, not just the body. There are malignancies and aneurysms, too, of the heart, mortal wounds from which the soul cannot recover. In most

cases, suicide, like any terminal illness, takes a person out of life against his or her will. The death is not freely chosen, but is an illness, far from an act of free will. In most instances, suicide is a desperate attempt to end unendurable pain, much like a woman who throws herself through a window because her clothing has caught fire. That's a tragedy, not an act of despair.

If this is true, and it is, then we should also give up the notion that suicide puts a person outside the mercy of God. God's mercy is equal even to suicide. After the resurrection, we see how Christ, more than once, goes through locked doors and breathes forgiveness, love and peace into hearts that are unable to open up because of fear and hurt. God's mercy and peace can go through walls where we can't. As we all know, this side of heaven, sometimes all the love, stretched-out hands, and professional help in the world can no longer reach through to a heart paralyzed by fear and illness.

But, where we stand helpless, God's compassion can still reach through. God's love can descend into hell itself (as we state in our creed) and breathe peace and reconciliation right into wound, anger and fear. God's hands are gentler than ours, God's compassion is wider than ours and God's understanding infinitely surpasses our own. Our wounded loved ones who fall victim to suicide are safe in God's hands, safer by far than they are in the judgments that issue from our own limited under-

standing. God is not stymied by locked doors, as we are.

When suicide victims wake on the other side, they are met by a gentle Christ who stands right inside of their huddled fear and says: "Peace be with you!" As we see in the post-resurrection appearances of Christ, God can go through locked doors, breathe out peace in places where we cannot get in, and write straight with even the most crooked of lines.

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Finally, too, there is a misunderstanding about suicide that expresses itself in second-guessing: If only I had done more! If only I had been more attentive, this could have been prevented.

Rarely is this the case. Most of the time, we weren't there when our loved one departed for the very reason that this person didn't want us to be there. He or she picked the time and place precisely with our

absence in mind. Suicide is a disease that picks its victim precisely in such a way so as to exclude others and their attentiveness. That's part of the anatomy of the disease.

This, of course, may never be an excuse for insensitivity to those around us who are suffering from depression, but it's a healthy check against false guilt and anxious second-guessing. Many of us have stood at the bedside of someone who is dying and experienced a frustrating helplessness because there was nothing we could do to prevent our loved one from dying. That person died, despite our attentiveness, prayers and efforts to be helpful. So too, at least generally, with those who die of suicide. Our love, attentiveness and presence could not stop them from dying — despite our will and effort to the contrary.

The Christian response to suicide should not be horror, fear for the person's eternal salvation and anxious self-examination about what we did or didn't do. Suicide is indeed a horrible way to die, but we must understand it for what it is, a sickness, and stop being anxious about both that person's eternal salvation and our less-than-perfect response to his or her illness.

God redeems everything and, in the end, all manner of being will be well, even beyond suicide.

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