

Our Misunderstanding about Suicide

Ronald Rolheiser, OMI, 2001-07-22

Each 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. When someone close to us falls victim to suicide we live with a pain that includes a lot of confusion ("Why?"), guilt ("What might we still have done? Why didn't we notice sooner?"), misunderstanding ("This is the ultimate form of despair") and, if we are believers, considerable 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: First of all, 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, 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 them from physical 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 a suicide victim 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 victims of 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 there are always number of objections: "You are making light of suicide! Suicide is the ultimate act of the despair and must always be named as such! Wasn't it G.K. Chesterton himself who said that, by killing yourself, you insult every flower on earth?" What's to be said about these comments?

They're 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". They're not the same thing.

In "suicide", a person, through illness of whatever sort, is taken out of life against his or her will. Hence we use the term "victim" - "a victim of suicide". Many of us have known "victims of 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 "victim of suicide" has cancerous problems precisely because he or she is too-sensitive, too-wounded, too-raw, and too-bruised to possess the necessary callousness needed to absorb life's many blows. I remember a 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 suicide victim came up and expressed his displeasure at the priest's remarks: "There a lot of people is 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 Hitler's pass out of this life. Hitler, in fact, did kill himself. He wasn't a victim of suicide. In such a case, the person is not too-sensitive, too self-effacing, and too-bruised to touch others and be touched. The opposite is true. 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, even though on the surface they might look the same. 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, though these too might look the same on the outside. There is all the difference in the world between being falling "victim to suicide" and "killing oneself". Only the latter makes a moral statement, insults the flowers, and challenges the mercy of God.

Our loved ones who have fallen victim to suicide are now joyous and whole, inside of God's embrace, where, as our faith assures us, all is well and every manner of being is well.