

Danville News Column  
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"The Unacceptability of Suicide"  
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A co-worker committed suicide. What happened to her? This was a question a friend asked me one day. Actually, it's two questions.

What happened to her for her to choose suicide? Hard to tell.

What happened to her after her death? Harder to tell.

Bitter grief makes us worry. One of the first questions several high school young people raised about the suicide of their teammate and school-mate was: "Where is her soul? Where is she now? Is she in heaven?"

Wise counselors guide self-discovery rather than answer that prickly one. How can you give a doctrinal answer when what lies behind the question is pain and blame, anger and confusion?

Christianity and Judaism respond less doctrinally and more therapeutically today. How can God punish and condemn those crying in pain? We focus on the sorrow of it, on the causes, because when it happens, regardless how it happens, it never is good.

That it always is a choice is what we try to communicate when self-murder happens. The survivors mustn't blame themselves. The person made a choice. A very, very, very bad choice. Reviewing all the things you did with that person and all the things you didn't do has a self-examining value -- your growth as a human being and your spiritual development -- but you cannot beat yourself up for what they chose. Suicide always is tragic, always pathetic. Suicide never is painless. And it is not always handled well.

Following the suicide of a teenager last year, a neighboring pastor mentioned to me that his youth director wanted to hold a candlelight vigil in her memory. Even though she didn't belong to his church, the youth director thought it would be a healing gesture.

Maybe for some it would have been a healing gesture, but, however well-intended, it also was misguided. You don't do it. Yes, mourn with a funeral service, but glamorizing suicide puts others at risk.

For the same reason schools disallow memorials in the memory of suicides. They also will remove those tokens and mementoes the kids will place on her locker. You can mourn the person, grieve the death, but you must avoid honoring the manner of the death. This is especially true with young people lest the sad, lonely, and desperate begin to think that this is how you manipulate love, or attention.

Recent scientific research indicates how the young are biologically susceptible. Which doesn't excuse stupid and reckless behavior, but it does help explain it.

Their frontal lobes are underdeveloped. Which is why 18 year olds make efficient soldiers. The 18 year old is much keener and readier to engage in high risk behavior. Unlike a 34 year old. The older you get the more cautious and circumspect you get: "Man, I'm not going to do that - that's dangerous, that's nuts."

Their younger brains simply are under-developed in the areas that control impulses or temper emotions. This gives them an inflated self-concept and a sense of invulnerability. They biologically lack the ability to connect the deed with the consequence.

So we must state clearly that suicide is unequivocally unacceptable. It only spawns more victims because it's the ultimately selfish act. It leaves your family and friends, your teammates, even casual acquaintances - these survivors - wracked by guilt, blame, anger. You may think by suicide you escape, but they can't. All of which impedes healthy grief.

We have a message to the wounded, lonely, and hurting. First, there is nothing good about suicide. Suicide robs the future. Robs potential. The evil sadness of suicide is how it denies divine possibilities. Those who kill themselves make an unfixable action for fixable reasons, a permanent choice on the basis of a temporary problem.

Second, since when is your life your own anyway? We refute the false presumption that your life belongs to you. Your life belongs to God; it belongs to us too. Which is why we cherish you. What happens to you, involves me.

What best prevents suicide, whether contemplated by young or old?

A safe haven. A significant relationship with someone who sincerely cares about them. A supportive network that erases the isolation. A chance to express their emotions, their hurts, their worries, their pain, without judgment. A place where they can honestly talk about suicide, because talking about it doesn't put it in someone's mind. And absolution, forgiveness.

Yes, it's true that where there is life there is hope; it is far truer that where there is hope there is life.