

Suicide - The Pain of the Ones Left Behind

Ron Rolheiser, OMI, 2006-08-06

Each year I write a column on suicide and try to highlight three things.

First, suicide is a illness, not something freely chosen. A person who dies by suicide, certainly in most cases, dies against his or her own will. Suicide is death by illness, not something someone wills.

Second, those left behind should not spend undue time and energy second-guessing: "What might I have done?" "Where did I fail?" "If only I had responded and reached out when I had the chance!" Suicide is the emotional equivalent of cancer, a heart attack, or a stroke, and all the care and reaching-out in the world cannot, at times, save a loved one from death by these. That's true too for suicide.

Finally, we should not spend too much time either worrying about the eternal salvation of those who die by suicide. God's love, healing, understanding, and forgiveness reach into those places where we cannot. God can descend into hell and breathe out peace even there. Moreover, as we know, most suicide victims are over-sensitive, wounded persons, too-bruised to be touched. God's touch is gentler than our own.

With that being said, I would like, this year, to share the feelings and reflections of a woman who, last year, lost her husband to suicide. The victim of suicide may be at peace in God's arms, but those left behind generally take a long, long time to make peace with this kind of death.

Here are her words:

My husband abandoned me and his daughters about a year ago. Without any warning signs, he left us to fend for ourselves. Yes, he had seemed stressed out and unhappy, but always insisted that everything was fine. One day he didn't come home from work. The next day his body was found. He had killed himself.

Despite being surrounded by loving family and friends, this reality was mine alone. The pain was excruciating, a pain that no one could share. The loneliness was beyond belief. A black weight settled into my being, a weight that suffocates and crushes. I seemed to live in an alternative reality, that of hell. I prayed to God incessantly for help. Help, help, help. I needed help. My husband had betrayed me massively. My daughters were fatherless. Words cannot convey the pain, despair, suffering I felt. I hurt badly. Anger seethed out of me. I was enveloped in a brutal black place. My being was crushed, my heart shattered irrevocably, my soul in dire need. Send me help. I need help. Please Lord send me help.

'Rest in God,' a friend advised in a sympathy card. I was desperate to do this. I prayed and prayed. Yet no breath of peace fell on me as I cried each night for help. Yes, friends brought meals over, they did yard work, they tried to be there for me. But no one could share my pain, my living hell. I tried to rest in God, yet the loneliness was too much for me.

I turned from God, the pain of his abandonment was too great. I stopped going to church. I stopped praying. I stopped caring. I considered casual sex, drugs, and drinking. Whatever. I was broken and

damaged and didn't really care anymore. I was still in an alternative reality, still in hell, I didn't care.

I started feeling better. Subconsciously I was still desperate, on my knees, begging God for solace. Help, help, help. This prayer, this simple prayer, this desperate prayer, wove itself into my being. The times I let myself feel it I would break down in utter despair.

I made it through the first year, but barely. On the one-year anniversary, I relived each excruciating minute, the horror of viewing his body, the unbelievable pain of comforting my wailing daughters whilst desperately needing comfort myself. I went to the chapel where the vigil had been held and sobbed myself sick. I relived my hatred, anger, guilt, abandonment, blackness, despair. My anger slowly dissipated into sadness. Deep, deep sadness. A sadness that continues to squeeze my heart, my soul, my being.

My husband was not created to die by his own hand. He was created in God's image, to become the person God meant him to be. Instead he murdered himself. This is so brutally wrong and skewed. I cannot wrap my mind around it.

My priest told me that sometimes God leads us to what we fear most, to show us we have nothing to fear. It's true that I don't fear death anymore. I saw clearly when I saw my husband's dead body that his spirit was no longer there. I know without a doubt that he is at peace. I just don't understand how I will ever come to my peace, at least in this world. I feel permanently disabled and damaged and sad.

I cry as I breathe deeply and try to trust. Guide me, guard me, O Lord my God.

