

“From Hopelessness to Hope”

February 5, 2017

This time of year can be depressing for some people. We all appreciate the rain, but the dark skies, short days, and cool temperatures can be gloomy. Plus, the recent election and now the changes and reordered priorities in Washington have left religious liberals perturbed. Some people I recently spoken with report teetering on the edge of despair. It's partly the winter blues and it's partly, I think, a collective response of the body politic to the new, hard-edged political atmosphere—experienced by many as a body blow to their democratic faith. Seven or eight years ago a church member I was close to requested that I write and deliver a sermon on the right to die. I did, in the end. Initially, however, I was reluctant. Until I remembered reading an article years earlier by the writer and editor Stewart Brand. Always pushing the envelope, Brand was contemplating publishing an essay on “How to Commit Suicide.” But he had misgivings and decided to ask his minister, Richard Baker, then-Roshi of the San Francisco Zen Center, what he thought of the idea. “Don't publish an article on how to commit suicide,” said Baker Roshi. “Publish an article on how not to commit suicide.” Hence, this morning's sermon.

Let's be honest: suicide merits our attention. As an ever-present option, it's also scary; whenever someone we've known succumbs to suicide, we are reminded of our vulnerability to its apparent allure. My dad committed suicide two weeks after I graduated from high school, the summer I turned eighteen. Others I have known and cared for have also committed suicide, including more than a few congregants over the years. In my last settled ministry the Chair of the Membership Committee, a deeply loved and respected church member, took her life alone at home despite the efforts of many of us who knew she was depressed and did all we could to keep her alive. I am still grieving years later.

Stewart Brand's original plan had been sparked by the Hemlock Society's efforts to promote death with dignity for the terminally ill. Now known as *Compassion and Choices*, many of its chapters across the country were started by Unitarian Universalists, including here in Los Angeles. Compassion and Choices members argue that suicide is acceptable under certain circumstances, such as incurable disease and old age. The idea is that although life is in general good, people who face *irreversible suffering* should not be forced to continue suffering. Most Unitarian Universalists would agree with this idea or at least support the rights of those who do. By in large, liberal religion asserts that a person's life belongs only to him or her, and no other person has the right to force on others their own conviction that life must be lived. Only the individual involved can make that decision, and whatever decision he or she makes, should be respected.

Psychiatrist Thomas Szasz (once named Humanist of the Year by the American Humanist Association) goes further, arguing that suicide is the most basic right of all. If freedom equals ownership over one's own life and body, then the right to end that life is the most basic right of all. If others can force you to live, you do not own yourself but belong to them.

Indeed, philosophical thinking in the 19th and 20th centuries led, in some cases, to the point that suicide was no longer a last resort, or even something that one must justify, but something that one must justify *not* doing. Many forms of Existentialist thinking essentially begin with the premise that life is objectively meaningless, and proceed to the question of why one should *not* go ahead and jump off the bridge; most answer by suggesting that *the individual has the power to give personal meaning to life*. The existentialists Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre, for instance, both rejected suicide, considering it *an escape* from freedom. Fleeing from the absurdity of reality into illusions, religion, *or into death was not*—either for Camus or Sartre—the way out. We should embrace life passionately, both men believed, despite its meaninglessness—and despite its alarming, sometimes horrible violence.

Philosophy notwithstanding, *nearly everyone* who contemplates suicide does so because they're depressed. In *The Butcher's Wife*, Taiwanese feminist writer Li Ang declares "people commit suicide for only one reason—to escape torment." While I was living and serving as a Unitarian Universalist minister on Martha's Vineyard Island, the late award-winning author, William Styron, (living right across the street from the little UU church there) fell victim to a crippling and almost suicidal depression, the same illness that took the lives of Sylvia Plath, Primo Levi and Virginia Woolf. Styron wrote about his descent in a memoir, *Darkness Visible*. He manages to convey its tortuous progression and his eventual recovery with a heart-rending candor and precision that will arouse a shock of recognition even in people who have been spared the suffering he describes. Television actress and Los Angeles resident Mariette Hartley has also written powerfully about suicide—and how to prevent it. When I was living in Venice Beach, I attended a lecture by Ms. Hartley at the Venice Public Library on how she overcame a family history of alcoholism and suicide; there were a lot of others attending with similar family histories. Mariette Hartley's down-to-earth presentation and the heartfelt discussion that ensued were powerful—*healing*—experiences for me. And for many others in attendance, I am sure.

In the United States today, someone takes his or her own life every eighteen minutes. Suicide is much more common than homicide. Suicide is the highest cause of death among those fifteen to twenty-four *and* among people over sixty-five. Many of them were probably preventable.

Survivors often regret their decision immediately. Ken Baldwin and Kevin Hines are among the handful of people who have jumped off the Golden Gate Bridge and survived. Baldwin was twenty-eight and severely depressed on the August day in 1985 when he told his wife not to expect him home till late. As he leapt, Baldwin recalls, "I instantly realized that everything in my life that I'd thought was unfixable was totally fixable—except for having just jumped." Kevin Hines was eighteen when he jumped off the bridge in September, 2000. "I was like, 'Screw this, nobody cares,' " he recalled. "So I jumped." But then, "My first thought was, what the hell did I just do? I don't want to die."

There's a mixed-up, confused quality to most suicidal thinking—a sense of power that comes from having the last word. But do we? Buddhists and Hindus, believing in

reincarnation, also believe that we carry our karma with us beyond the grave. While they do not consign suicides to hell or anything like it, they point out that according to their understanding taking one's own life doesn't resolve *any* of a person's problems; that whatever's gnawing at one's soul will continue through many lifetimes, if necessary, until it's properly addressed and resolved. Meanwhile, here in this life you have a support system—if you avail yourself of it—that can help you. Reach out to them! I often mention this to UUs who confide in me about their suicidal ideation. Despairing over the loss of a job, or loved one, or declining powers, overwrought souls just want to die and escape it all. Knowing they cannot blot out a certain page of their lives, they decide to throw the whole book in the fire. Okay; but if the Buddhists and Hindus are correct all their issues will abide within their soul, whatever they do to their bodies. And they'll still have to deal with it all.

I'm not sure about life after death and reincarnation; I'm pretty agnostic on the subject. But I do know how I feel about church members who are contemplating suicide and don't talk to me about what's churning away inside their hearts. Please: if you're struggling with such matters, give me a call. Let's talk it over. And who knows? Maybe the Buddhists and Hindus are right. Maybe there is reincarnation. Impossible to know for sure; but if that's so, let me make one thing clear: if there is reincarnation and you go ahead and kill yourself *without* letting me know what's going on first and talking with me about it, then get ready: because come your next life, I'm going to find out who you are and where you're living and I'm going to come kill you! So be forewarned.

The other thing I always try to gently remind those contemplating taking their own life—and here I speak from experience—is what a terrible burn suicide is for those they leave behind.

A wound that doesn't have to be. Consider: some suicides are carefully planned, but most are not. Few people wake up thinking they'll take their life, but circumstances suddenly make it possible. A couple of beers, an impulsive thought, and a gun can be an extremely volatile mixture. Berkeley suicidologist Dr. Richard Seiden published a study, "Where Are They Now?," in which he followed up on five hundred and fifteen people who were prevented from jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge between 1937 and 1971. After, on average, more than twenty-six years, ninety-four per cent of the would-be suicides were either still alive or had died of natural causes. "The findings confirm previous observations that suicidal behavior is crisis-oriented and acute in nature," Seiden concluded; if you can get a suicidal person through his or her crisis—Seiden put the high-risk period at ninety days—chances are extremely good that they won't kill themselves later.

Ninety critical days. Three months. One season. How to keep on keepin' on for a quarter of the year?

1. Reach out to people who care about you, starting with your family and *your minister*.

2. Talk to your doctor. Medication can achieve a lot. Even mild sleeping pills are helpful—very helpful—when it comes to making it through emotionally rough patches.
3. Be careful about self-medication—alcohol and controlled substances—it only tends to add fuel to the fire.
4. lock up any guns or other lethal methods.
5. don't be afraid to talk about your situation—you're not alone!

It's impossible to know whether any one suicide might have been prevented, but many suicidal people do in fact want to be saved. As the eminent suicidologist E. S. Shneidman has said, "The paradigm is the man who cuts his throat and cries for help in the same breath."

After thinking about this for the last forty-five+ years, I've decided that what would-be suicides need is *hope*: the feeling we have that the feeling we *now* have is not permanent. That things will change. That our pain—excruciating as it may be—will heal and that better days will come. As the English author and poet Vita Sackville-West once put it, "To hope for Paradise is to live in Paradise, a very different thing from actually getting there." Just imagining a better day is the first step—the critical step—to discovering it. But how to imagine and thereby mobilize hope?

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When dealing with superhuman powers—and depression, for those who have suffered it, is such a power—we are often helped by personifying them. That's the benefit (or *one* important benefit, anyway) of mythology. Consider the Greek myth of Pandora's Box. . . . After Prometheus' theft of fire (or the secret, that is, of how to control it), Zeus ordered Hephaestus [Heffa-Estes] to create the woman Pandora. She was given many seductive gifts from Aphrodite, Hermes, Hera, and the other gods and goddesses. Fearing reprisals for his theft of fire, Prometheus warned his brother Epimetheus [Ep-i-me-the-us] not to accept *any* gifts from Zeus, but Epimetheus became smitten, would not listen, and married Pandora. Pandora had been given a large jar and instruction by Zeus to keep it closed, *but having also been given the gift of curiosity* she ultimately opened it. *When* she opened it, all of the evils, ills, diseases, and burdensome labor that humankind had not known previously, escaped from the jar. Talk about cause for depression! But, it is said, that at the very bottom of her box there lay one additional spirit: hope. As the poet says, "hope springs eternal."

One particular poet, Emily Dickenson, put it this way"

"Hope" is a thing with feathers —

That perches in the soul —

And sings the tune without the words —

And never stops at all. (1861)

Hope, it seems to me, is not so much a *feeling* as something you *do*. A *modus operandi*. The old Universalists used to refer to their religion as “the Larger Hope.” They believed that, ultimately, all would be saved and everything in life—everything across the whole universe—would be redeemed; that the entire cosmos would in the final disposition of things be reabsorbed into the eternally loving Creative Principle—from whence it had all arisen. The old Universalists didn’t stop there, by the way: just *believing* that their salvation was wrapped up in everyone else’s. No, those Universalists then organized their lives accordingly—on the assumption that the whole of reality *was* connected and *was* destined for wonder and joy and happiness. I still believe that, unequivocally. Others of you may be less sure. I myself am sometimes less sure—we all are. Which is why then as now gathering regularly with others who share a creative and optimistic view of life is crucial to staying healthy and strong. But one doesn’t have to be an old-style theological universalist. Like Camus and Sartre, you may think the world is meaningless. Fine. But if that’s how it feels for you, please go a step further and, also like Camus and Sartre, embrace life in spite of its meaninglessness—you’ll find the absurdity funnier and the human touches sweeter, more poignant, and more beautiful too.

Be part of the Larger Hope. Like the poet Kabir proposed—clearly a “small ‘u’” universalist—make love with all you find beautiful and important and special in the life before you. Music? Art? Nature? Your grandchildren? Working for Justice? A good book? Marx Brothers movies? Gardening? Talking to old friends? *Whatever you love, hope is there*. And it will sustain you, if you let it, even through the darkest night. So let it in, and let it be....

Shalom... Amen... Namaste.