

Article on Suicide for the Leader Telegram  
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July 31, 2013

Probably more of us than not have been touched by suicide, either by our own attempt or that of someone we know. Suicide is increasing, particularly by returning soldiers (especially those facing difficulty accepting or finding mental health care) and gay teenagers literally bullied to death by classmates and some religious communities. And yet, suicide remains a largely taboo subject. Remember how we used to refer to cancer in hushed whispers as “the c-word”, hid developmentally disabled children in the attic, or called the gay couple “roommates”? As though if we don’t speak it, it doesn’t exist. But silence only gives it more power. Just as cancer research received public support only once we were willing to reduce the shame by saying the word, and people with disabilities and our LGBT brothers and sisters started achieving social (and churchly) acceptance only when we started speaking openly, perhaps speaking about suicide can better help prevent and overcome its pain.

You may have heard an adage that as unhelpful as it is old: “God never gives you more than you can handle.” Unhelpful because God does not inflict us with suffering. What God gives is goodness and blessings. Not life-numbing pain.

The fact of suicide also very obviously shows that some people DO have (but are not “given”) more than they can handle. Suicide comes from a place of deep suffering (depression, PTSD from war or sexual abuse, bullying, etc.) that is often kept hidden from others, and which most of us will never experience nor comprehend.

But lack of comprehension does not mean we cannot empathize with the suffering of the committer, and the suffering of their loved ones left with a lifetime of anger, shame, and wondering, Why? or, Did I fail somehow? The answers, by the way, are: We cannot possibly ever know, and No.

Especially we people of faith ought express compassion to eliminate the stigma and shame. Suicide is not an unforgivable sin. Those left behind need not feel shame. They certainly ought not be shamed. Who wants to hear from a cleric that a spouse or child who commits suicide is in hell? Some traditions even refuse to do funerals (or have them in their sanctuary) for people who have committed suicide. Where’s the compassion in that? I can imagine gods of our own invention being that evil, but the God of the Bible is loving and consoling that I imagine greets the sufferer with open arms and releases their pain. Shame is a too-prevalent evil in this world, but only because we are so easily allured by its narrative of self-righteousness. Is there a balm in Gilead? With God, always.

I have known people who committed suicide, and their deaths diminished me and those they left behind. But the shame put on survivors, or survivors put on themselves, is just as crippling.

Maybe worse. And they have few outlets for their pain and anger.

Suicide has long been considered just a theological problem: call it a sin and leave it at that. But that is as unhelpful as the above adage. Easy answers are rarely faithful. Suicide is mostly a psychological issue, but is economic and political. We need affordable shame-free access to mental health care. We need more vigilance in ensuring all our children are safe from bullies. Our religious institutions need to be less bullying from their pulpits and more willing to greet The Other with love. There is much we must, and which we can, do. But only if we talk about it.