



“SUICIDE IS MOST MISUNDERSTOOD OF ALL DEATHS”

BY FATHER RON ROLHEISER

There is perhaps nothing more painful in the world than for us to have lost a loved one to suicide.

A couple of months ago, I received a letter from a woman, a mother, who had recently lost her 28-year-old son in this manner. The young man had been suffering from clinical depression for nearly eight years when he took his own life.

Her letter to me betrayed a healthy understanding (at some deep level) of what had happened as well as the unhealthy fear and second-guessing we all do when we are confronted with the suicide of a loved one.

She recognized that his death was, in the end, due to illness (not malice or weakness), that he had a gentle soul and that God is understanding. She shared the intuition that her son is now in heaven. At the same time, she worried, as we all do, whether her son had now found peace and where, if anywhere, she had failed him. She also worried that her faith was not strong enough because it was not giving her the type of consolation that she felt it should. Her pain is deep – but it is also wide.

Thousands of parents and families and friends of suicide victims around the world are enduring similar pain. What’s to be said about suicide? What can be helpful to us when we lose a loved one in this way? There are, as for all the great mysteries of life, no definitive answers that dissolve all pain and questioning. But there are some important perspectives of which we must never lose sight.

First of all, at this time in our history, for all kinds of reasons, suicide is still perhaps the most misunderstood of all deaths. We still tend to think that because it is self-inflicted it is voluntary in a way that death through physical illness or accident is not. For most suicides, this is not true.

A person dying of suicide, dies, as does the victim of physical illness or accident, against his or her will. People die from physical heart attacks, strokes, cancer, AIDS and accidents. Death by suicide is the same, except that we are dealing with an emotional heart attack, an emotional stroke, emotional AIDS, emotional cancer and an emotional fatality.





This comparison is not an analogy. The two kinds of heart attacks, strokes, cancers and accidents are indeed identical. In neither case is the person responsible for his or her own death and in neither case does the person leave this world of his or her own will.

Second, in most cases, we should not worry about the victim's eternal salvation. God is infinitely more understanding than we are and God's hands are infinitely more gentle than ours. Imagine a loving mother, having just given birth, welcoming her child onto her breast for the first time, and then you will have some image of how the suicide victim is received into the next life.

Again, this is not an analogy. God is infinitely more gentle, loving, understanding and motherly than even the most perfect mother on earth. We need not worry much when an honest, over-sensitive, gentle, over-wrought and emotionally crushed person leaves this world – even if that exit was far from ideal.

However, even given that truth, we should not expect that our faith will take away all the pain of losing a loved one through suicide. It is not meant to take it away, but rather to precisely give us the sense that the one we lost is in far gentler hands than our own and is now, after so much pain, finally at peace. Faith gives us insight but does not, of itself, take away the pain of loss and death.

Finally, we the living who loved that person must refrain from second-guessing ourselves with every kind of haunting question: What else might I have done? Where did I let this person down? If only I had been there? What if...

We are human beings. People die of illness and accidents all the time and all the love and attentiveness in the world sometimes cannot prevent death. We must recognize that we are dealing with an illness which, like cancer or heart disease, can be terminal irrespective of every human effort to restore health. There are sicknesses that no humans can cure.

We can grieve our inadequacy as humans. Ultimately, we must take consolation in the fact that we loved as best we could and that we have not really lost this person. He or she went back to God.

Our job now is not to second guess, but to trust – trust that God is far more gentle and understanding than we are and that God, who is adequate, can give this person a peace that we never could.

