

The Problem of Suicide or Self-Killing

by Ger Murphy

In recent years society has become more aware and concerned with the problem of suicide or self-killing. The problem has come to be spoken of more openly in public discourse, which is taking suicide into the limelight as a major public health concern. This new awareness is to be welcomed. The days where suicide was a dark, hidden and shameful secret may be changing in both the public and private sphere. Much has been written about the prevention of suicide and the promotion of good mental health practices as well as about the duty of care that professionals, including psychotherapists, have in relation to the care and support of suicidal clients. However new questions arise now, such as, how can we find ways to begin to understand the act, as well as attempt to prevent it, and what may it say about our society that this issue is so frequent. I want to address some of these issues in my comments here. I believe that it is important to offer clients a safe place to discuss their suicidal ideation and to explore the themes within it at a deep level, alongside or before, the medicalisation of the issue and referral to psychiatric services. I also believe that the problem of suicide invites us to consider wider societal issues along with the care of the individual client. We are asked to consider how individual suicide may be a symptom of societal challenges, including how the whole of society may be engaged in self-harming behaviour and how suicide may be a response to our increasing loss of wildness and contact with the natural world.

My brother ended his own life in 1984 and coming to accept it has been something with which I have grappled for over 30 years. To hold the act of a family member as a tragedy and a wound which will always be with me and yet find acceptance of the act which my brother did, has been challenging. It is a shocking happening in the life of any family and one which leaves us with deeply troubling questions. Living with these questions may be part of the legacy of any suicide. To hope to ever fully answer the questions this has raised in me, is a road to continual suffering, and I have seen many people tortured for years with the quest. To live with such questions as 'Did he intend to complete the act or was it a cry for help?', 'What is the nature of real intent?' and to allow them to open me to a deeper understanding and appreciation of the mystery of life, is a gift I see my brother's chosen death as having given me. This in no way covers the deep grief that any suicide will cause, for me or for the many families marked by this issue.

Questions which arise from our individual journey and which are of a more general nature include:

How do we view the act of self-killing?

How may we respond to the problem?

What may it say about our society that this act is so prevalent?

How may psychotherapy offer a particular contribution to the discussion?

In a fine discussion on the issue, the eminent Jungian psychotherapist James Hillman wrote in his book *Suicide and The Soul* (Hillman 1990), that the different sectors and professions in society will look upon suicide differently depending on their own ethical and moral framework. For example, medicine may look upon suicide as a failure, as their basic task can be seen as the preservation of life. Religion may see the act as a sin, as it can be seen as the human taking a power which is not theirs to take, that is, life as a gift from God. The law may view suicide as a breach of the social contract which binds citizens together. Hillman (1990) suggests that a psychotherapeutic perspective is necessary and different in regard to this issue. Psychotherapy may hold a viewpoint which values the voice of the psyche or soul, and

this may at times be at odds with other perspectives. This is most important for me in the present time as it implies that a psychotherapeutic viewpoint should remain separate from the conventional viewpoint of prevention of suicide at all costs and of putting all the professions' efforts into this project. What would it mean to be true to the voice of the psyche or soul in this regard? It might challenge us to remain open to the possibility that this person may choose their own death and that this may be a conscious choice which we can sit through with them, even if it is one which grieves us deeply. To view the act of self-killing as a conscious choice is in itself a radical act. We may never know the state of mind of the one choosing the act. We will not know if they were conscious of their act, if it was a cry for help gone wrong, if they were overtaken by a psychotic delusion, or if the emotional pain was so intense that they could think no further than a release from this pain. I believe there is a value in considering the act a conscious one, although this view is often a deeply troubling one to consider. It would then be seen as a radical choice to leave this level of experience and to ask us to sit with our feelings around their choice, and ultimately to see this as a choice we might come to accept and one we could all make. I think it has taken me 30 years to fully accept the possibility of my brother consciously choosing his own death, and it is a journey which asked many questions of me. The journey has been a most important one for me where I have had to consider deeply my views on personal autonomy, social responsibility, and the meaning of life for the individual and the collective, as well as my views on death and the spiritual journey.

Seeing the act of self-killing as a potentially conscious one has other ramifications also (please note here that I am referring to the act as self-killing rather than suicide. I do this deliberately as I see the naming process to be a powerful one). Calling it suicide places the act in the same realm as homicide, infanticide, and so on, as an unlawful act of killing. Speaking of it as self-killing may emphasise the deliberate nature of the act, including the deep choice involved. Perhaps we can remove the blame of the person while still allowing the possibility of the individual's responsibility for their action, and our thinking and our language are often unclear in this regard.

To see the act as a conscious one, brings us to consider differently how we might engage with the person considering the act. We might not only consider how we might prevent the act but we might have to grapple more deeply with why someone may want to make this choice. Great emphasis and resources are currently being placed on suicide prevention. While this is to be welcomed, I wonder if the focus may not be too narrow in focusing mainly on preventing the act. In fact I believe we may not really be able to prevent the act if someone wants to kill themselves strongly enough, they will do so in many instances. Might we ask ourselves 'Should we prevent the act?' We can admit people to hospital, medicate them, even institutionalise them in a mental health setting. All of these responses may be necessary on occasion but they are hardly a complete response. Seeing the act as potentially a conscious one invites us to meet the person as a fully conscious person with choice, whom we can listen deeply to. Such a listening, with its implicit knowing that the person may choose to take their life is a deeply challenging listening, especially to those who are committed to helping people stay alive at any cost. What if we could find a place in ourselves that could listen to the other and surrender the outcome that will ensue? This is not easy, as it asks us to hold the dual positions of fully being open to the heartbreak we may feel if the other chooses death and our responses to this, and at the same time accepting the other's autonomy. This listening allows the other to fully speak of their wish to kill themselves, and that this can be explored with empathy, curiosity and spaciousness where it is not automatically seen as a sign of illness, with the consequent need for urgent medical and other responses. To accompany someone as

they fully engage with the question of killing themselves is, I believe, a courageous act and one which allows the question to be engaged with more deeply. When this question is fully received, the person can feel less alone and consequently less panicked towards hasty action. I have found that people are often ashamed of the urge and feel it to be unspeakable, and thus it is kept hidden, from where it is often more likely to be acted on in secret. People know that speaking of the urge makes professionals anxious and even sometimes angry, and so they hide it. Speaking of it openly can allow deep existential despair to be met fully. It also allows the question to be explored more fully. For example, the urge for death may not simply be about killing myself but may be about what needs to die now, perhaps it is the body but often it is a symbolic reference in someone's psyche, where something does need to die, perhaps a way of being, an identity, a way of life, a relationship, or a way of seeing the world. To help someone broaden the question for themselves so that they can move beyond the binary choice of 'Will I?' or 'Won't I?' and see the other levels of the question in a compassionate way, can be transformative. The person may not have had any context where the question of self-killing could be tolerated and explored without judgement. Taking the time and care to consider these questions is often a great gift to someone who has sat with the question, filled with shame and guilt and yet knowing of no other avenue to consider. The act of receiving the urge to kill oneself with acceptance and compassion can also be transformative, as it is often only in the light of such listening that the self-hatred, which is very often at the base of the urge to kill oneself, can be finally exposed and challenged. Often such self-hatred is accepted by the individual as simply the only way to see themselves, rather than as a toxic introject, and a thought which can be challenged with self-compassion and awareness, and which can be mitigated against and possibly rendered harmless. If well received, the urge can be transformed into a doorway where previously it was a dead-end. It can become a doorway into a period of death and rebirth in the person's life, where they carefully consider what brought them so close to self-killing, how might they meet the suffering of their lives differently, how might their lives be changed to allow them to relish their living and to sit with their dying in a way that might make them more alive and engaged in life.

The prevalence of self-killing also asks other questions of us. Rather than only seeing the phenomenon as a problem of individual pathology to be cured, we can make room to see the issue as a societal one, where the individual is a symptom of a greater malaise. In a society, which often seems to value growth above all else and is often death phobic, (for a full discussion on death phobic society see Stephan Jenkinson's fine work *Die Wise* (Jenkinson 2015), self-killing raises difficult and radical questions. In western society, we may have lost touch with the natural cycle of life where birth, growth, decline and death are all equally relevant and honourable phases of existence. We often meet death as a failed ending of a battle rather than as a natural part of the life-cycle, and this orientation must influence our consideration of the question of self-killing. Perhaps the one who chooses death is radically challenging us in this dominant paradigm?

Finally, we could consider self-killing as a truly wild act in a sanitised, civilised and tame world. How could it call us back to consider our own relation to the wild both within ourselves and in our society? In a technologically connected and networked world where we scarcely dare to be alone, or silent, or in nature, to be part of the earth rather than dominating it, and where our way of living may be the greatest act of communal and planetary suicide or self-killing. In this context, the act of self-killing can call us back to profound and nourishing questions. We may have civilised ourselves too much, sanitising our lives, no longer speaking of death but calling it 'passing'. We may have lost our deep connection to the cycle of life

which contact with nature gives us, embedding us as part of nature rather than its 'master' and the loss to our soul in this virtual world can be immense.

As Joan Halifax states in her insightful book *The Fruitful Darkness*

We are enclosed in a psychocultural cocoon, the outer world no longer flows into our being. The winds of communication with creation are dying. Yet earth and language meet and metabolise in the zones of dream and vision, in story, poetry, song and prayer and in direct communication with untamed beings. These zones comprise the boundary lands where cultural constraints and social habits are overridden, where tribal folk, shamans, and children, the mad and the inspired are caught in the holy winds of creation.

Halifax (1992: 137)

The reopening of the listening to these 'zones' as Joan Halifax calls them will take much more than wondering how we can stop our brother from killing himself. It will require us to face our own shadowlands, to re-consecrate our lives, change our relationship to our own death, rebuild community in a fundamental way and change our relationship to the earth in order to see ourselves again as part of the earth rather than its isolated and desperate master. We might then begin to remedy the deep alienation that so many people now feel which, sometimes tragically, is expressed as self-killing.

Perhaps we are called to reopen this deep listening in response to the problem of suicide as we know it. With this listening maybe the despairing, isolated choice to kill the body may give way to new possibilities. I hope that we can begin to broaden the discourse on suicide to include many of the themes touched on above and can meet the "fruitful darkness" which they hold in a more creative and soul-nourishing way. Such a consideration will, I hope, compliment the current discourse about suicide prevention and open the space for soul conversation with ourselves, our clients and our communities. In opening to this conversation, we can begin again to see as Thomas Berry states:

Our fulfilment is not in our isolated human grandeur, but in our intimacy with the larger earth community, for this is also the larger dimension of our being. Our human destiny is integral with the destiny of the Earth.

Berry (1988: 76)

In re-imagining ourselves we may make space to face the human suffering that has led to such isolation and self-destruction in so many, in new and healing ways. In this we might find a radical acceptance of the acts of self-killing which our brothers needed to do.

I want to finish with a poem I wrote for my brother.

Yes to You

When I saw you after it was over they had put rouge on your cheeks,
Something you had never wore before.
I came through the door in my pink jeans,
We both looked ready for some strange party.

I drank half a large bottle of whiskey, but to no effect – this was no party,
Rouge, pink jeans and whiskey – markers only of the madness of that day in
May.

You had decided not to stay,
And the echoes sound on like her little head banging in rhythm against her cot
all through the night.
Horror has no speech but the inarticulate pounding of real,
It takes so long, so long to feel, to lay the wound open,
To bathe the bruises – like those we never got to bathe around your sweet neck,
where the rope bit deep and no rouge could hide.
Now our rouge, pink jeans and whiskey can drop away – today
To honour you in horror, honour you – no longer pity you, and as my pity slips
so do my bandages – my cover.
I exchange my exotic other for homespun horror.
I see you now on your make-shift pyre – making your final desperate statement
like so many before on their crosses, and I say what has taken 30 years to say;
Yes to you, My Brother

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