

Comfort for Those Who Grieve a Suicide

Walter Wangerin, Jr.

*Save me, O God,
for the waters have come up to my neck.*

The event of a suicide encompasses, I believe, not one, but two separate griefs, each distinct from the other by cause and effect. The first of these, often too brusquely dismissed, caused the suicide.

*I sink in deep mire, where there is no foothold;
I have come into deep waters,
And the flood sweeps over me.*

The second grief is that which is caused by the suicide. Moreover, this particular grief is distinct from our more general mournings because it resists--it undermines--our more general comfortings. How do we return to life again when the death seems to have been a willful act of our beloved?--as though the heart had chosen to cut itself out of the body.

*I am weary with my crying;
my throat is parched.
My eyes grow dim with waiting for my God.*

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When one of us is snatched away from all the rest of us forever; when someone into whom our lives were woven is ripped away from us, and lives are left to dangle, unraveled; when someone dies the death we all expect one day to die, there gaps within us a wound which takes

the care of every other part of us for healing.

The **community**, by sympathy and ceremony, by wakes and words and food and funeral--the whole community--sets us free to grieve a while. It gives our grieving space, even as it gives an amorphous sorrow its proper shape. It leads us in and teaches us how to grieve. It accomplishes these necessary services unconsciously, by pressure of natural compassion and by the deep patterns of long tradition.

The healthy body of the community was created to bear the dead away, while bearing the living up. "We" do it by the very "us-ness" of us.

So does the **faith** of the wounded begin straightway to administer healing. Faith urges us to believe that there is something more than the facts at hand; that the invisible God is *not*, as we are, crippled by the event; that the timeless God, who stood before our birthing, stands also past our dying; that a restless mercy moves him to receive the ones whom we have lost. By faith we see through the walls of this present reality, this common daylight and the nights of fear. By faith we see to a greater reality which is unimpressed by death. By faith that the Almighty God loves the dead whom we did love, we begin to hope and in hope to heal.

So do our personal and private **emotions** help us struggle by stages toward healing. These are the invisible hands with which we wrestle the invisible enemy. Anger, for example; anger grave and vengeful seeks its object in someone or something responsible for this hurt; anger with a wild irrationality seizes on another person, on sin itself, on sicknesses with hideous names, on me the griever, on a faulty tire or on any other system which should have supported this life now lost; then anger flames the hotter, accusing, damning, raging, weeping, striking the griever wordless, stunning the griever into a silence most miserable. And though there be no traceable logic in the thing, something within us is relieved, a certain order restored to our bewildered souls.

Likewise, love deep and terrible; love seeks its object in the spirit of the one whom we have lost; love in us becomes a re-creating force, for by it as by a mystery we re-call, we invoke, we find some palpable something of our beloved, by which to touch her spirit, which spirit lives

again--embodied in our minds, our hearts, *our* beings.

In consequence: anger, by the symbol of its object, has identified an evil, and love a good. The universe is slightly less scrambled. We can begin to walk it again. We are healing.

So do our individual **intellects** help us, together with our own God-given **skills** for beauty or for crafter, for words, for story-telling, for songs and laughter. (Consider the song of David at the deaths of Jonathan and Saul.) By these abilities we make memorials to the dead, thus discharging a certain sacred duty to them by establishing their own good memory among the peoples--and so do we move toward the peace of completion, if not to the ends of a sad remembering.

Community, then, and faith and the emotions and the intellect and a host of other angels descend to serve us, that in time we may be healed. Ah, thanks be to God.

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*I have become a stranger to my own kindred,
an alien to my mother's children.*

But what of the peculiar death of the suicide? And what of the more cruelly complicated grief it causes? Can we understand a pain split double?--where each piece wars against, and tries to deny, the other? Yes, I think we can "understand" when we recognize how the very instruments of healing are themselves blunted, undermined, and compromised.

The community is as confused by suicide as is the sea when beaten by opposing winds. It lacks a particular ceremony for this particular grief. Why? Because in this case it cannot act unconsciously, nor can it act out of the deep, instinctive patterns of long tradition. Again, why? Because the suicide has made the community painfully self-conscious by implying a terrible accusation against the body whole. "You could, none of you, help me," the hand that took its own life wrote upon its death. "I reject you and remove myself from you--irrevocably."

The community has been judged as helpless or cold, indecent, blind, self-absorbed, not compassionate--at least in this particular instance of failed relationship. If the community believes the accusation, it is ashamed. If not, it is indignant. Either way, its "we-ness," its

sweetly embracing "us-ness," has been broken. And the tenderest souls, from whom might have come the tenderest comfort for the bereaved, are most silenced by these confusions. They tend merely to turn away from the fact of the suicide, and so their comfort never reaches toward the cruelest pain of the grief. The wounded one finds himself, herself much alone

For which of our common, murmurous comforts can fit the rudeness of this death? And how can our feelings be purely, pristinely and piously sad when we harbor personal guilts or else angry judgments against the dead? We, the community, bear minor storms in our conduct, unhelpful reservations in our expressions, even when we do utter our common comforts.

As for faith? Well, we've been taught (wrongly, as I will show in a moment--but we've been taught it, and it nags at our theologies) that suicide is unforgivable, being unconfessable. God also said (goes this reasoning) Thou shalt not kill. How could God accept one who crossed from life precisely by breaking down that ineluctable Don't? The suicide seems to have rejected God as well as the community, not only his commandments, but also his governance of this world and of our lives. Faith, therefore, is afraid to look this pain straight in the eye, and hope is horrified, and the bereaved feels as much farther from God as she feels closer to her beloved. This is an aloneness almost cosmic.

Emotions trip and fall from their natural steps from grief to healing again. Their progression is not toward order. Oh, my dear!--emotions are a chaos. For when anger goes forth (as it absolutely should) to seek its object, something, someone blamable, it cannot help but seize upon the very object love keep finding: the one who died. The one who killed himself. And as long as the griever cannot separate these two, hating and loving the same one at once, screaming in fury while yearning his peace, glad for the death as punishment for the suicidal act, embittered by a death which punishes her the more; as long as these two opposing emotions are tangled into one another, then neither finds fulfillment. Nor are good and evil separated. The two pains rip her wound the wider, until the bereaved herself is torn apart.

Memorabilia? Memorials? Eulogies, flowers, foundations, the means whereby to keep a name alive? At first each gesture and every such choice seems half a lie, since the most

memorable act, the most defining and lingering deed, is precisely the one we strive to forget.

How long, how uncomprehendingly the friend of a suicide grieves, simply because there are so few angels left to help him heal. All the ministers have gone away. Or else they've grown self-conscious and mute.

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*In your great mercy, O God,
answer me with your unfailing help.
Let not the torrent of waters wash over me,
neither let the deep swallow me up;
do not let the pit
shut its mouth upon me.*

O you who grieve, let faith begin anew in you. Allow its seed a planting in the soil of your soul. And this must be that seed: the great mercy of our God.

You have believed it for the sake of your own salvation; believe it again for the sake of the suicide: God does not turn away from the sinner, no, not even while she is sinning. (Read all over again Romans 5:6-10) Neither does God turn away from the one who dies in the midst of her sinning.

If God withheld forgiveness at such a time as that, why, then the farmer with whom I was praying, that aged member of my congregation who suddenly upped and died in the midst of howling, purple curse, would be plowing in perdition now. No: it was not a mindless act. I knew the man. He meant it. Jeremiah-like, he was scolding God--and hemorrhaged. But he who debates with God believes in God. And this man loved the Lord in his blunt manner and with his blunter tongue. All his lifetime his faith never flagged, and the Lord God loved this cantankerous man as well. Mr. Kohlmeier, I am convinced, harvests the golden what of Heaven until I, too, shall arrive to eat the bread thereof.

Even as Kohlmeier's, so may be the faith of the suicide. Yes: even in spite of some overwhelming weakness, some failure, some ruinous defeat in this present world. It is not the

sin; it is faithlessness that damns us. Likewise (as you must know by your own experience) it is not our own bright righteousness, no, nor our own more acceptable modes of death that saves us. Faith saves us. Nor does the manner of an ending reveal the quality of a faith. Please: it is the manner of a life, the changes and the drama of an entire life, which gives an open accounting of the faith therein. Take it whole! Remember whole the life of your beloved. One act at the end does not define it or crush the Christian altogether. (Now, having separated faith from a final act of sinning, read the first part of that same chapter in Romans, 5:1-5. There is access into grace for the suicide, for whom tribulation did not progress to patience and to hope; and there is hope for those who grieve, granted not by your own hard labor, but by the coming of the Holy Spirit, the comforter.)

But to be clear: how can we rightly speak of the faith of a suicide? Because faith never did spring from a sense of personal strength. True faith never came from some private accomplishment (however pious!), from an elevated self-esteem, from unshakeable confidence.

Rather, out of abject weakness comes faith in the God of strength. Out of failure and need and self-doubt, and from the fall the Prodigal took are we finally able to quit trying on our own, to fall all the way down, where nothing awaits us but the hands of the Savior. For we all died with the cry, "I can't!" We died into Christ, in whom is forgiveness and order and the great communion of all believers. And yet again shall abject weakness and failure and needs we cannot meet overwhelm our bodies, and we shall die. Yet. Again.

The suicide is different from all such other deaths in this, that she agreed; he consciously participated in the extremes of human weakness. O you who grieve: that suicide may have offended the world by her sow of impotence, by his self-destruction. And his self-destruction, destroying you, give you every right to an anger most spittingly furious. But before God there never was a sharper cry of craving than this, nor a more dramatic motive for faith. She who has cried, "I can't!" with such tremendous failure, might better than others hear the Lord Jesus murmur, "But I can."

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*Surely for you sake have I suffered reproach,
and shame has covered my face.
I have become a stranger to my own kindred,
an alien to my mother's children.
Zeal for you house has eaten me up.*

Throughout this article I've been quoting from Psalm 69. It knows intensely the experiences of the suicide and of the bereaved, both. But suddenly, with the last line above-- which is the first part of the 10th verse--we begin to recognize who it is has such knowledge (see John 2:17): one who drained the cup, who himself experienced every spasm of the event, every human weakness and the most absolute failure in human history, the crucifixion, the death that divine justice had imputed rather to us.

Jesus Christ carried to the cross not merely some abstraction of human sinfulness, some vague sentence of "Guilty." Christ experienced in his flesh, in his spirit, and to the roots of the universe the blasted fruit of any sin we chose to sin, the evil leaves of every suffering we ever suffered. And be his rising, the Father declared that sacrifice sufficient. And by that same declaration, the risen Christ--even now, in perfect glory--returns to our most downcast states, for in power he not only remembers his own crucifixion, but knows as well the crucifixions of us all. And it is there we find him: in failure. In human weakness. In sorrow and grief. And in death. In every kind of death.

Three hours before the dear Lord breathed his last, he engaged in a "Conversation of the Dying" with the criminal that hung beside him.

"Jesus," said the criminal, "remember me when you come into your kingly power."

And Jesus said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

(Luke 23:42-43)

That Conversation was private, between two in the process of dying--one whose death would raise the other from death. How gracious, that this loneliest of human events was in fact not suffered alone!

I believe that this same "Conversation of the Dying" occurs in private yet today, in the intensest and the deepest caverns of the human heart--even without words. It is the cry of a terminal weakness once confronted by a life too huge to be borne, now confronted by the pit of death itself. We who still wear flesh cannot hear this deep exchange, when death speaks unto death. But this we know by faith and by the Word of the Lord: that the conversation always ends in the promise: *Today!*

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