

June 3, 2011

“Echoes of the Heart”

Reflections on Life and Community Living

Suicide talk. The worst thing that can happen to any human being is to have a child commit suicide. Losing a child is bad enough; but for our child to take his or her own life is the worst.

In recent weeks, a brother and a grandson (twenty-nine and sixteen years old, respectively) of members of our church took their life, sending ripples of inexpressible pain and unending grief into the family systems of the respective families.

Generally, those who commit suicide are in a dark place with some combination of depression, anxiety, fear and issues of self-esteem and personal worth. At the moment they act against their life, they see it as their preferred option.

On the other hand—from the point of view of *the rest of us* (family and friends)—suicide is the most self-centered thing a person can do. It is so utterly final. And yet, one of the ambiguities of suicide is that—particularly with younger people—the *utter finality* is almost certainly not the intent. Most likely, the intent is to kill oneself for the short term (for the moment or a few days or weeks); but almost certainly, *not* forever. Forever is a long time.

A word of caution and hope. If you know anyone displaying even minimal symptoms of suicide, do your best to refer them to an experienced suicide therapist or counselor. Intervention is paramount in many cases.

What happens in suicide is that, at the moment, the person contemplating suicide can't imagine life beyond the pain and the darkness. Therefore, to make the pain stop, they act against their life. However, if we could only slow things down, these *moments* of darkness and pain never last forever. They are always ephemeral, transitory, short-lived.

One of the keys for prevention (again, particularly with younger people) is to challenge the suicidal person on the meaning of their feelings. For example, it's useful to suggest something like: *Your feelings of the moment are not going to last forever. Tomorrow, next week, next month—you're not going to feel like you do now. You can make it through this.*

So often, if the person can just make it to the other side of the darkness and pain of the moment, or series of moments, they can begin to come to grips with their life-situation and build on their purpose for living. The key is the realization that their pain is not forever and that it will most probably be only short-lived.

As part of the intervention, it is also useful to engage the person in a conversation about consequences. Much of the time, the suicidal person has a host of family members and

friends who love them beyond words. The suicidal person needs to be challenged to a heart-felt consideration of consequences.

It is useful to ask them, for example: *Do you really want to bring this depth of unspeakable pain into the lives of those who love you? If you take your life, they will suffer and grieve you the rest of their lives. Do you really want this?*

Consequences of suicide. The reaches of suicide are extensive and painful; they are not something we get over. We learn to cope, for sure; but there is no *getting over it*.

The biggest issue *the living* are left to deal with, of course, is *guilt*. The guilt can be excruciating, particularly to those who were closest to the person who took their life. Invariably, we can't help but wonder what more could we have done? Or what could we have done differently? Or why didn't we think of this or think of that?

The question of *guilt* in suicide is a complex matter. However, almost never is it helpful or useful to focus on the guilt. No matter what we did or didn't do, the person who acted against their life didn't have to do it. There were other options. It is also true that if the person is determined to take their life and the determination persists long enough, eventually they find the means to do it.

In the wake of any death or suicide, all we can do is choose to live our lives in ways that honor the best that was in our deceased loved one. But *live* we must because the life that God gives us is to be lived. No human being should ever feel guilty for living. Rather, we should feel joy for the gift of life and eager for more days in the glow of life's blessings.