

## THE SPIRITUAL DIMENSION OF SUICIDE PREVENTION

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A recent Unicef Report showed that New Zealand has the highest rate of adolescent suicide of any country. What a record to have! If we are living in the real world, we are going to want to know why.

Much commentary on suicide rates and suicide prevention recites statistics and demographics, trying to identify the risk factors. This is an essential part of what needs to happen; but only part. It is commonly acknowledged that risk factors include loneliness, bullying, mental illness, trauma and deprivation. [There is also risk from some illnesses which have an organic origin and these require a more specialised discussion than is possible here.]

A consequence of the risk factors considered here can be the feeling that one's life is no longer worth living. Somehow, therefore, people need to know their life *is worth living no matter what is happening to them*. Before looking more closely at this, it might be useful to identify some of the obstacles that get in the way of them being sure of this. I shall name four characteristics of our national culture which are not helpful:

1. Intellectual superficiality: I support the view that there should be public discussion of this topic. Obviously, such discussion needs to be accurately informed and responsibly conducted. But in a culture that has a diminishing regard for careful argument, preferring just head-line speak and blips of information such as are available through the social media, popular discussion often falls short of being a true "discussion".

Moreover, in this cultural context, clear understanding and good judgment can be impeded by the way actual examples of pain and suffering, which we all find distressful, can distort careful argument. Within a popular culture that is intellectually superficial, even the social sciences find it hard to compete with the pulling power of emotion.

2. Double standards and ambiguity in society's attitudes: It is not easy to convey the idea that one's life *always* matters regardless of what is happening, if at the same time society is proposing that *sometimes* life is no longer worth living. Whatever the case for or against euthanasia, ultimately, that is the message of legalized euthanasia.
3. How people are valued: if youth suicides are to be discouraged, and assisted suicide made legal, the question has to be asked: what makes them different? Here we come face to face with what it means to live within a culture that values people not on the intrinsic dignity of being human but on their ability to function, i.e. "their ability to be successful, productive, independent and in control." (Kleinsman, Dr J. Nathaniel Report, August 2017, p.3.) The ability to function becomes the basis of differentiation between lives that are worth living and lives that are deemed not to be. Society needs to face up to what this way of categorizing people implies, even apart from the question of suicide.

4. Loss of a sense of transcendence: We live in a culture that doesn't even look for reasons why life might still be worthwhile when it is no longer useful or has become a burden. Are there reasons that transcend the criteria of functionality? To see no further than what people can be useful for, or how well they can still manage, is a stunted way of looking at people and at human life. This brings us to the spiritual dimension of suicide prevention.

### The Spiritual Dimension

It is not enough to analyse why a person might *not want* to live. We need to reflect on what usually makes people *want to* live.

The desire to live depends on, more than anything else, the experience of being loved. This experience carries with it the experience of belonging, and a sense of self-worth, that normally come through the tangible experience of other people's love for us – starting with one's own parents. The absence of this experience of being loved can be damaging, and devastating. Fortunately, the experience of being really loved, even where it has previously been lacking, can still be a powerful source of healing. One who ought to know, having given his own life over to helping the most troubled and most needy, namely Jean Vanier, has said "People who are deeply depressed are transformed when they know they are really loved."

The Catholic tradition dares to say God's love is made present to us in human love. The "spiritual" dimension of human well-being is deeply human!

Unfortunately, the human experience of being loved can fail so easily. When the experience of being loved, especially by those who know us best, is lacking, we become unsure of ourselves, self-doubting and prone to anxiety. There is more than enough evidence of how marriage failure can affect children, and spouses.

The mystery of suicide is more complex yet, because some of its victims come from seemingly good family backgrounds. As young people begin to move out on their own – the normal development of autonomy – the bonds that helped them to know their self-worth become looser. But they still have a deep human need to know they are truly loveable.

It comes down to this: whether we come out of strong family life or weak family life, our sense of self-worth and the value of our life, need to have roots in *a love that cannot fail us*.

It is not being suggested here that "religion is the answer". On the contrary, there are distortions of "religion" that can do the damage. But, ultimately, the love God has for us is of the kind that cannot fail us. Unlike every other love, God's love for us, revealed in the Person of Christ and the events of his life, is unconditional and everlasting. God's mercy pursues us even when we have let ourselves – and perhaps everybody else – down. Christian revelation is above all the revelation of *how much we mean to God*, - and that can mean more to us than anyone or anything that would make us think less of ourselves.

It is this game-changing love that is denied to people by widespread failure to give them a formation in life-giving, joyous faith. This lack deprives them of the greatest reason for believing in themselves and believing their lives really matter. They need to know this, especially in times of difficulty. Without this deep sense of reassurance, some will look for other ways of escaping the pain of a life that seems cruel

and unfair, when opportunities constantly elude them, and then self-blame makes it worse. Short of suicide there are drugs and other ways of trying to forget. At a deeper level, what they are trying to escape is meaninglessness. What they need is *meaning* – over-arching, all-encompassing, unassailable meaning!

Like all false prophets, the deniers have much to answer for. It is an illusion on their part to think secular ideology is the touchstone of truth. Most of humankind applauds the work of Mother Teresa and the very many others like her, from all religions, whose work is pointless if people are to be valued only in terms of their usefulness, or ability to manage for themselves. Those who do see the point know that human beings have a value that reaches beyond the short horizons of our life-spans, which is what makes them so special even during this life.

A spirituality that is “deeply human” is not somewhere “up in the sky”. It is earthed in all that makes up human life. Its raw material includes the planet we are made from, as well as the events of our daily lives. What we do - socially, culturally, artistically, economically - no matter how small or seemingly insignificant - has a value that goes beyond our short life-times. “All the good fruits of human nature, and of human enterprise, cleansed and transfigured, we shall find again”; (Second Vatican Council, Church in Modern World, n. 39). Again, we cannot fully taste and savour our lives without a sense of transcendence.

But what about situations that can only be described as bad? People rightly try to escape poverty, oppression and hardship in all its forms. Bad is bad, and an authentic spirituality never tries to bless what is bad or unjust. On the contrary, it works for justice, peace and human development. So, in what sense can we still claim that every life is worth living, even when things are going very wrong?

Again, just as a sense of transcendence is the only way to see past the limited and limiting criteria of functionality, so here too, a sense of transcendence is the only way to see beyond the ills that oppress all people in one way or another. Hope is not a mere assurance that things will turn out right. Rather, it is deep down knowing that ultimately all will be well even when things don't turn out right! But this is a God-given awareness; it presupposes a person's openness to God, an intimate familiarity with God and God's ways. And this is what young people are deprived of in an environment of religious indifference and disregard. Does this have something to do with our high rate of youth suicide?

If people are to know their lives are still worth living even when the odds seem hopelessly against them, they will need to have reasons that don't collapse when everything else does; - transcendent reasons; God-given reasons.