

Order of Service “Breaking the Silence About Suicide”

Sunday, January 31, 2010

9:30 AM and 11:00 AM

Welcome and Announcements: Board Host
Choral Introit: “How Could Anyone?” by L. Roderick
Chalice Lighting
Opening Words
Opening Song: #151 “I Wish I Knew How . . .”

Reading: “Depression and Suicide” by Elizabeth Morrison, MD
Celebrating with Music: “I Wish . . .” by L. Pennock
Sermon: “Breaking the Silence About Suicide”
Sung Response: #100 “I’ve Got Peace Like a River”
Spoken Response

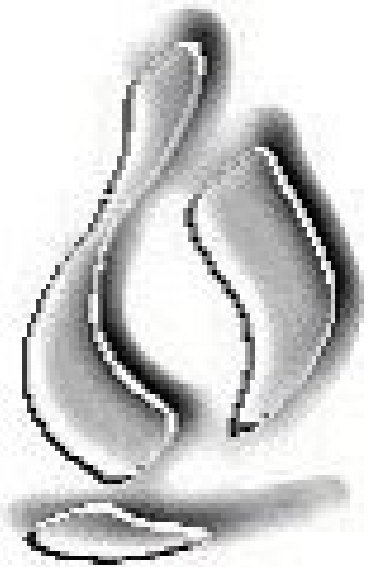
Candles of Joy and Sorrow/Offering
Prayer and Meditation

Closing Song: # 84 “Winds Be Still – verse 1 & 2
Closing Words
Closing Song: #84 “Winds Be Still – verse 3

Celebrants: Sheila Smith and the Rev. Dr. Gretchen Woods

Chalice Lighting: The flame of our faith calls us to bring light into places that long have been left dark among us. Kindling this flame offers warmth and light to those who are lost in depression and pain. May it be so.

Opening Words: We gather in recognition of the vast spectrum of human experience: from joy and ecstasy to sorrow and pain. We gather as a community that holds all in this spectrum, from celebrating to deploring, but always supporting those who gather.



Sermon

“Breaking the Silence About Suicide” by the Rev. Dr. Gretchen Woods

A year before my father died, I spent several hours with him recording an oral history. Most of the tape is filled with laughter, but there is a quiet time during which my father told me that his Aunt Violet had committed suicide. He did not learn of this “family secret” until he was well into adulthood, and he never learned how she did it. He assumed it was a drug overdose, but he was not certain.

He went on to note that he had had dark times himself and that he knew that this was part of his family background. Frankly, I know of few sensitive people who have not considered suicide at some time or other in their lives. I know I have. I suppose this is part of my interest in this subject.

But an even more powerful influence in my choosing to address the issue of suicide is that I witnessed families who have experienced suicide throughout my life as a minister. It is among the most difficult things ministers do. So today we break the silence that shrouds this powerful mental health issue. We will explore warning signs, approaches to preventing suicide, and ways to help those left behind.

To begin, I need to honor that some suicides are a kind of release that is understandable. When a person is experiencing excruciating pain and has no way for it to be alleviated, physician- assisted suicide makes sense to me. As the movie asserts, “They Shoot Horses, Don’t They?” Do we offer our pets more relief than we do our loved ones? An interesting question. . .

We need to understand the reasons that people consider suicide. For example :

There are many reasons why individuals engage in suicidal behaviors. Some reasons attributed to the appearance or increase in suicidal behaviors in college students include:

- * New and unfamiliar environment
- * Difficulties adjusting to new demands and different work loads
- * Lack of adequate social and coping skills
- * Academic and social pressures
- * Feelings of failure or decreased performance
- * Sense of alienation and lack of social support
- * Family history of mental illness

(ULifeline: Suicide Prevention – internet)

In addition, we know that suicide is much more prevalent among gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, and transgender youth, than in the average population. To be precise:

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning youth are up to four times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers, according to the Massachusetts 2006 Youth Risk Survey. A 2009 study, "[Family Rejection as a Predictor of Negative Health Outcomes](#)" led by Dr. Caitlin Ryan and conducted as part of the Family Acceptance Project at San Francisco State University, shows that adolescence (sic) who were rejected by their families for being LGBT were 8.4 times more likely to report having attempted suicide. And for every completed suicide by a young person, it is estimated that 100 to 200 attempts are made (2003 Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey).

But reasons do not tell us what warning signs to look for when dealing with someone you suspect is suicidal. Here are some warning signs:

Should you witness, hear, or see anyone exhibiting any one or more of the following, get help **IMMEDIATELY** by contacting a mental health professional, calling your college's emergency number, or calling 1-800-273-8255(TALK), the National Suicide Prevention Hotline, for a referral:

- * Someone threatening to hurt or kill him/herself, or talking or wanting to hurt or kill him/herself
- * Someone looking for ways to kill him/herself by seeking access to firearms, available pills, or other means
- * Someone talking or writing about death, dying or suicide, when these actions are out of the ordinary for the person

Should you witness, hear, or see someone you know exhibiting any one or more of the following, seek help AS SOON AS POSSIBLE by contacting a mental health professional, calling your college's emergency number, or calling 1-800-273-8255(TALK), the National Suicide Prevention Hotline, for a referral:

- * Hopelessness
 - * Rage, uncontrolled anger, seeking revenge
 - * Acting reckless or engaging in risky activities, seemingly without thinking
 - * Feeling trapped – like there's no way out
 - * Increased alcohol or drug use
 - * Withdrawing from friends, family and society
 - * Anxiety, agitation, unable to sleep or sleeping all the time
 - * Dramatic mood changes
 - * Expressing no reason for living; no sense of purpose in life
- If you cannot reach the contacts listed above during a crisis:
- * Take the individual to an emergency room or mental health walk-in clinic
 - * Do not leave the person alone until professional help is with him/her
 - * Remove any firearms, alcohol, drugs, or sharp objects that could be used in a suicide attempt
- (ULifeline: Suicide Prevention – internet)

As with any other mental health issue, it is possible to help someone with suicidal ideation. It is also possible that you will be unsuccessful. Dr. Morrison reminds us not to take too much responsibility if someone we know and/or love completes suicide. Many times the person does not let us know how pained they are, nor of their plans to suicide. They may also be trying to deal with problems they perceive as insurmountable without worrying us.

I have found some real spiritual help for those contemplating suicide in Karla McLaren's approach in *Emotional Genius: Discovering the Deepest Language of the Soul*. She points out that suicidal urges may be a sign of the person's efforts to attain health:

. . . suicidal urges move forward when the difference between who you are in your deepest self and who you have become in this world of distractions is so extreme that it can no longer be tolerated. Suicidal urges are an emergency message from lost parts of your psyche – parts that are in real danger of soul death in your current situation.

Suicidal urges surge forward, sword in hand, shouting, "Give me liberty or give me death!" They are that serious about the issues they have come to address. However, you suicidal urges do not want to kill you! What they want is liberty from the life you've been living – but they certainly don't want your physical life to end. . . If you can understand that the primal energy inside you is and always will be dedicated to your survival and healing, you'll be able to view your suicidal urge in a mythological way, instead of treating it as a literal wish for physical death. . .

Suicidal urges come forward in all their intensity and all their ferocity when your situation is so unbearable that you require an intense infusion of energy – but they do not come to kill you. Your suicidal urges arise when you need enough energy to wrench yourself – bodily, emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually – out of a lifestyle that is killing you already.
(copied and adapted by pp. 357-360 with permission)

Just knowing this has helped numbers of folks I know to change their lives to match the call of their souls and to avoid suicide.

But suppose that whatever has been tried has not stopped someone from completing suicide. How do we help those left behind? And make no mistake, those left behind have a mess to deal with, physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and morally. This is truly a tragedy, and deep grief is a natural response. (Remember that our Grief Group begins this Wednesday at 7 p.m. in my office and will address all sorts of loss. Please come to me or Janet Farrell with any questions you may have.)

Here are some suggestions to offer those in grief from suicide:

- ‡ Eat healthier and eliminate junk food from your diet.
- ‡ Take a leisurely walk or exercise vigorously to reduce stress and re-energize yourself.
- ‡ Embrace physical activity such as golf, bowling, or running.
- ‡ Spend quiet time alone for self-reflection.
- ‡ Make time for meaningful conversation with family and close friends every day.
- ‡ Rediscover former hobbies such as music, reading, or gardening.
- ‡ Be kind to your body and spirit by getting enough sleep.
- ‡ Take time off, even a day or two, to recharge and replenish.
- ‡ Listen to music on your car radio or at home instead of watching television.
- ‡ Use your computer to play a round of solitaire or laugh at some online jokes.
- ‡ Practice yoga or meditation in a class or on your own.
- ‡ Play with your pet.
- ‡ Ask for help if you need assistance managing daily activities.

It is important to understand that grieving a suicide can be very different from other kinds of grief. Such grief may literally be more intensely painful and last longer than other kinds of grief. We also need to take into account the possibility of post-traumatic stress as a result of suicide, and the possibility that the deceased has lived in such a way as to create conflict and suffering for the loved ones left behind.

Our spiritual community can be very helpful in a host of ways:

- ‡ Recognizing the unique challenges in grieving the loss of a loved one from suicide.
- ‡ Reaching out to intentionally draw survivors into the fabric of the community's normal activities. . . The faith community should be an important source of love for the grieving.
- ‡ Supporting them with the same gestures of kindness that are extended to others who have deaths in the family (taking in meals, etc.).
- ‡ Talking with the survivors about the deceased in the same sensitive way they would about any other person who had recently died. This openness will help the surviving family overcome any embarrassment or shame they may be feeling.
- ‡ Encouraging them to seek specialized support in their grieving process, either through support groups for survivors of suicide or by seeking professional grief counseling with a therapist experienced with suicide survivors. (Suicide Prevention Resource Center)

These are all good words, good advice, hopeful thoughts – almost the antithesis of suicide. Suicide is a realm we wish did not exist, and one we hope never to have to visit. Ultimately, though, life comes to loss in one way or another. We struggle with that. We fight with it, but it is so, however it comes to us: through suicide, through slow deaths of alcoholism or drugging or overeating, through natural death: a blessed release. We have another lesson to learn, a lesson best voiced by Mary Oliver in her poem, “In Blackwater Woods”:

Look, the trees
are turning
their bodies
into pillars

of light,
are giving off the rich
fragrance of cinnamon
and fulfillment,

the long tapers
of cattails
are bursting and floating away over
the blue shoulders

of the ponds,
and every pond,
no matter what its
name is, is

nameless now.
Every year
everything
I have ever learned

in my lifetime
leads back to this: the fires
and the black river of loss
whose other side

is salvation,
whose meaning
none of us will ever know.
To live in this world

you must be able
to do three things:
to love what is mortal,
to hold it

against your bones knowing
your own life depends on it,
and, when the time comes to let it go,
to let it go.

I wish this for each and every one of us, regardless of the particulars of our lives: that we may know love in the best way possible and be able to let it go when the time comes.

So Be It! Blessed Be!

