



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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Suicide – And Its Awesome Aftermath

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This paper isn't so much about suicide as it is about the desperate feelings one can have that lead either to the contemplation of suicide, or to the act itself. And it is designed mostly for those who are left to cope with the death of a loved one when it has occurred in this way.

Recently, I received a letter from a friend who knew that I was planning to write this paper. It was in two parts. One was about the person's own encounter with contemplating suicide, and the other was about a family in which one member chose suicide to resolve an intolerable (for the person) situation.

The letter ended, "Suicide leaves an awesome aftermath. I love all this family, and they are unable to handle the situation. As a result, more destruction is happening. So, if you do the suicide paper, please put some stress on the aftermath."

With some editing, I also quote the first part of the letter.

"When *** ***** and I tried a trial separation many years ago, I considered and planned this (suicide) option. Every Friday, I drove a long distance to my home, and, on Sunday midnight, I drove back. On the way, I selected a spot in the road from which I could drive my car into a huge chasm.

"I now believe I was just before falling into a mental abyss. I had a feeling of terror at continuing to try to cope with life alone. I wasn't just flirting with oblivion; it seemed an improvement.

"Coming right to the time and place, I couldn't do it."

Concern about the future effect on the children, fear that the effort might result in permanent injury and pain instead of death, the belief that "maybe, going one day at a time, I might make it.", and a sly sense of humor in the midst of a grim situation that said, "If I do this, I might miss something." were among the reasons for not carrying out the intention.

I think few of us grasp how desperate just being alive can be sometimes.

No, I think that is not quite an accurate observation. In fifty-plus years of counseling, I've encountered many people who have felt so desperate at times that, at that time, suicide looked like a welcome relief and a desirable option.

Life can be – or can seem to be – that desperate and that hopeless.

"Hopeless" is probably the more accurate descriptive word. Sometimes what is happening in a person's life can seem so intolerable and so hopeless that there appears to be absolutely no way out. The burdens and pains just cannot be endured any longer. This being the case, to end one's life seems to offer welcome relief.

As indicated in the letter quoted above, life situations can reach such a level of feeling hopeless. If I have not been at that point in my own experience, and/or have not shared with a person who is at that point, it is very difficult for me to believe that one could ever feel that desperate or that helpless.

I am thoroughly aware, however, that one can feel that desperate and that helpless.

I believe, also, that body chemistry out of kilter – either because of malfunctioning in the body, or because of side effects brought on by taking powerful medications – can bring about that same feeling of desperate hopelessness that results in the decision to end life.

Either way, people can and do reach the point where the need for relief is so intense that it takes precedence over every other consideration.

And then there is the awesome aftermath. No matter how a suicide comes about, we who remain have to cope with what has happened – somehow, we have to cope.

There are no easy answers for us. Such as they are, they are complicated by the circumstances – personal and/or family – that bear upon the reasons for the suicide victim to have become so desperate and so hopeless.

A suicide disrupts the status quo. It comes as a shock – a profound shock – to those for whom there is an emotional stake – family, loved ones, friends, and any others whose pattern of life is disrupted by the event.

My first reaction to such a shock is to deny it. It takes a bit of time for me to allow what has happened to be reality to me. It is almost as if I haven't received the information at all. I even tend to go on about my normal activities as if nothing has changed.

And then it begins to sink in.

Then a wild mix of emotions surges through me. Disbelief. Anguish. Grief. Physical and emotional pain – acute physical and emotional pain. Concern for others who also experience the loss. Outrage. Feelings of guilt. Remorse. Recriminations. Intense anger. Emotion upon emotion, seemingly without end.

In the midst of the surge of emotions, the “Why?” questions besiege and beset me. I feel a desperate need to find answers – explanations for why this suicide has happened. Maybe I can manage if I have the answers.

But the answers do not come easily. Since I believe it should not have happened, I try to explain it by fixing the blame on something or somebody – starting with myself.

While I am searching for the answers, I go through much pain and recrimination. I think about our various encounters and tell myself that I should have seen that something was wrong. Then, I should have done something about it. I even identify the things I should have done and feel very guilty for not having done them.

The feelings of guilt and anger are an almost impossible burden. I need some relief from them, and, consciously and unconsciously, start blaming others – especially those of the close circle of family and friends. I try to convince myself that it is their fault. I take my feelings out on them – especially those of guilt, outrage, and helplessness.

I may even feel intense anger toward the one who has killed him/herself, and then feel guilty all over again for having that feeling.

The effect of acting out those powerful negative emotions can bring about tremendous upheaval in a family and/or in the circle of friends. It can push one into saying and doing things that are very destructive to relationships. The recipients, not understanding, can become bitter and unforgiving. Barriers can be raised that take years to overcome – if they ever are. At the very time family and friends need each other the most, these negative feelings tend to dominate and to drive them away from the caring relationships that could sustain them.

I think it often is this way because one feels so utterly helpless in the face of such an experience, and something has to be done with that feeling.

What is done doesn't have to be negative and destructive.

If I allow myself to understand and to believe that my feelings are utterly normal, and if I allow myself to own how I feel, I can work through the feelings without taking a destructive route.

No matter what the circumstances were leading up to the death, it occurred. No matter how I feel about it, I can't change that reality. But I can deal with myself. I don't have to be consumed by my feelings, and I don't have to act out in destructive ways with my loved ones and friends.

I can accept my own feelings as valid and normal. I can assume that the others who are affected by this death feel much as I do and have similar needs. I can undertake to be a comfort and support to them, even as I want to be comforted and supported. I can reach out in love rather than to build barriers between us with outrage, accusation, and recrimination. I can allow myself to understand that all of us are suffering, and that now, more than ever before, we need each other. I can choose to “be there” for them, and so discover that they are “there” for me as well.

The aftermath of suicide is not confined to those who are closest to the one who has died. The wider circle of caring friends are also affected. For them, one of the issues

involves how to respond to those who have suffered this grievous loss. What does one say? What does one do? How does one offer reassurance, comfort and consoling to the grief stricken? It seems that there must be something appropriate and helpful to say or do at a time such as this.

I offer a suggestion. Consider the possibility that there isn't something appropriate and helpful to say or do. Maybe just being present, and speaking a brief word of sympathy, is what those who are grieving most need.

It could be that listening without having to speak any words in reply is the way to be most helpful to those who are having to cope with this unexpected and unwanted loss. Maybe allowing and encouraging the grieving person to talk – or not talk – about what has happened is the most supportive thing to do.

Maybe, for the others of us, being there in fact and/or in spirit, and having no other agenda than to be there, is the way to be most helpful.

When the crisis time is over, the adjustment period is at hand. I know of no way to predict just how long that time may be. I do know that it is in the adjustment period that people most need the caring and the support of their friends. But friends, who have to adjust as well, may feel ill equipped to provide any care and support. Indeed, they may feel so ill equipped that they choose not to be in contact with their grieving friend – and probably feel guilt about it.

It is understandable that one would feel unable to respond to a friend either at the time of crisis or during the adjustment period. These kinds of experiences are not commonplace. There is no “map” of what to do and how to do it. To say the least, it is an unfamiliar road.

All too often, friends and/or family, feeling helpless – and maybe a little angry – will become quite impatient, saying something like, “You’ve grieved long enough. Why don’t you get over it and get on with your life?” As a result, there may be even more tension and estrangement.

However, what may be needed most during the adjustment period is to be with the adjusting person in normal and everyday ways, and to be willing to listen and talk about what has happened – about the person who has died – and about anything else that has meaning for the one who is grieving. Being involved in this way doesn't call for special skills nor special training. It just calls for being willing to be with the person, to let him/her express him/herself in any way desired, and to let go of any need for him/her to be in a different place.

For every point of view, a death by suicide is a tragic loss for everyone involved. Whether it is a response to an intolerable situation, or because of out-of-balance body chemistry, or side effects of medication, it requires adjustments for which no one is prepared.

I wish that every person who reaches the point that suicide seems to be an attractive alternative could choose the option instead of talking with a trusted friend and/or a skilled and caring counselor. Even so, I am aware that a person can feel so desperate and so hopeless that this doesn't seem to be a viable alternative either.

When, for the despairing person, suicide becomes the alternative of choice, I wish that those who are left could feel secure enough to turn to each other for help and support, and not erect barriers that prevent them from being able to see each other through the awesome aftermath of suicide.

In the face of such grievous loss, those who are left need each other more than at any other time in life. I know that trying to cope with one's own loss can seem to be so nearly an impossible task that there doesn't appear to be any strength or capacity to offer anybody else anything at all.

Strange though it may seem, to move toward help and support for each other turns out to be the most helpful thing one can do for him/herself. To turn away from, or to turn against one another is to cut one's self off from the only real help available.

Hence, if for no other reason than to help myself, I reach out to those who have also suffered the loss and derive strength for myself as I give my strength to them.

It works. It really works. We are created to minister to one another. To do so is to fulfill our reason for being.