

Suicide: Maybe Not As Wrong As You Think

Suicide makes everyone uncomfortable. No one is certain why. This article explains some related facts. Find author Bill Allin at <http://billallin.com>

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[Warning: People who are easily offended should not read this essay. Some find this subject sensitive.]

The dissenter is every human being at those moments of his life when he resigns momentarily from the herd and thinks for himself.

- Archibald MacLeish, American poet and librarian (1892-1982)

Heaven forbid that anyone dares to resign himself from the belief set of the herd and think for himself. He becomes a pariah, a self appointed renegade, perhaps worse. Especially so if the person decides to end his own life. What right does he have to do that?

What right does he lack to be denied that choice?

One of the most widely held beliefs across cultures holds that suicide is wrong. Yet when you ask why of anyone who believes suicide is wrong, most replies are lame, at best, totally lacking in logic and, at worst, a violation of the principle of freedom of choice we claim to value so highly.

This essay brings a personal perspective to the topic and is not intended to advocate either way as to the ethics or wisdom of suicide. Except to say that suicide is the ultimate personal choice, though a selfish one as a person prepared to end his life considers no one but himself. I am not feeling suicidal, though I confess to having thoughts of dying during periods of depression in the past.

We claim, at least in Western countries with which I am familiar, that freedom of choice is a value we hold dear. A woman or man can choose to be a parent or not by taking birth control measures during sex. If she becomes pregnant, the woman (in most Western countries, most jurisdictions) has the choice to abort or to carry the child full term. These are critically important life choices we can make. Each makes, ends or prevents a life. Laws support these choices, even when religions may oppose those laws and their practices.

Surely the choice to end one's life is the ultimate indicator of freedom. If we consider thoughts of suicide to be the work of an insane brain, let's remember that insanity is not illegal.

Our governments do not hesitate to send young men and women in the military or police service into violent situations, even into war zones. Whether decisions to do so are made by a governing party, the head of state, a mayor or chief of police, one human chooses whether another human will be sent into situations where the latter's life could end. In effect, we allow one person to send another to death, should it come to that. We claim that we don't want death and provide protective devices to the person at risk, but isn't that like providing free condoms to prostitutes?

In many parts of the world, the militaries of dictators receive orders to shoot to kill at unarmed demonstrators who give no indication they plan to riot. These situations often precipitate riots, in reaction. The leaders who gave the orders never present themselves for trial for murder, most find safe haven in other countries even if they lose their battle for control. Do the countries that provide safe haven not effectively condone the murder of innocent, unarmed people who disagree with the regime? The safe haven countries always consider themselves to be upstanding and righteous democracies, protectors of human rights.

Paramilitaries, little more than armed gangs who want a change of leadership in their respective countries, sometimes kill innocent people who have nothing to do with the cause they fight, simply as indicators of their strength against the heads of state. As I write this, nearly 1000 innocent and unarmed civilians died in Ivory Coast

for exactly that reason, to persuade President Laurent Gbagbo (who lost power in a democratic election) to step down.

So far as we know, Adolf Hitler took his own life in his final stand in a bunker in Germany. We know that many Germans and some people in several other countries grieved. Do most of us care about those who grieved? Many would regret that Hitler took his own life simply because they wanted him to stand trial and to be executed under more formal and official circumstances.

During the same war, Japan committed far more atrocities (and more detestable ones) than Germany. Japan's emperor was not held to account. He admitted that he would no longer claim to be infallible, but suffered no further consequences. Rich people in other Western countries rushed to invest in both Japan and Germany after the war, making them the economic power houses they are today. Neither Germany nor Japan were made to suffer shame as a result of what their leaders and their militaries did to destroy lives and to severely harm the lives of many millions of people who almost died but managed to survive. For Western democratic governments, the self interest of their corporations trumped any feelings of loss in so many countries.

In the pre-historic past when the human component of the world was comprised of many tribes, most of which battled with neighbouring tribes at least once each generation, losing a member of the tribe to suicide would have been a physical loss of one fighter, but also the damage to morale of the rest of the fighters. In tribes, suicide was forbidden, except in some cases in some places where suicide was a form of retribution for loss of honour. Modern day taboos against suicide merely extend the moral dictates against suicide though the original reasons for the censure vanished over time.

Religions, whose primary function has always been control of behaviour of their followers, picked up on the suicide taboo. Restrictive rules of behaviour help to unify followers of a religion and to help members distinguish themselves from the "others." In general, the stronger the rules of a religion, the more devoted and committed its followers are to its survival and its spread to others as yet uninitiated. When one member of a religious community ends his life, the rest close ranks to either support and protect those family members who are left or to isolate and ostracize them from the community. Either way, the unity of the group gains strength.

Religions, by their nature, dictate morals. Yet other than for reasons of self interest, a religion has no valid reason to oppose suicide among its members. Indeed, more than one cult in recent decades has ended when the leader announced that its members would all "go to Glory" together. Nor is this a recent phenomenon. Jewish rebels at Masada ended their own lives in 73 CE rather than submit to execution by the Romans, according to Jewish/Roman historian Josephus.

In recent years, where we have more people living longer, thus more people suffering the pain and devastation of disease for more years rather than dying sooner without drugs and other medical interventions, we have more people wanting to end their lives rather than endure the final stages of terminal illness. Our societies insist that these people must suffer as long as medical science can keep them alive. A doctor or nurse who fails to keep to that standard may be accused of assisting in suicide, which could result in loss of licence and criminal charges.

A mother or father who simply can't bear seeing their child suffer in great pain and devastating emotional stress as a result of a terminal illness will be imprisoned for taking that final step. Euthanizing a dying pet dog or cat is considered merciful, but euthanizing a person warrants criminal prosecution and penalty.

What is the reason for the taboo against suicide? Set aside all the propaganda we have been taught, all the preachings from religions, all the self interested (self protection) from doctors for a moment. What is a real and valid reason to oppose suicide?

We know that for most suicides someone or a few people will suffer. Do they suffer guilt that they did not offer help when a depressed loved one wanted to end his life? Do they suffer the loss of someone they cared about, more than if the person had died of natural causes (in other words, death is inevitable, it's a matter of date). Or do they suffer because of the shame of having had someone with "that curse" or someone who was "overcome by the devil" in the family?

Thankfully, suicide bombings by Palestinians have been fewer in recent years. I vividly recall recorded interviews with the families--especially the mothers--of Palestinian suicide bombers in the past. They claimed their sons were

heroes, martyrs, role models for others of their families. They were happy that their sons (usually sons) had gone to heaven in Glory and would be welcomed there as heroes by God. Were they mentally ill or did they simply have different ways of thinking from people of other cultures?

Our old ideas about a boy growing to become a man--a man with particular cultural values and beliefs--and about a girl becoming a woman are coming apart. No longer can a mother believe with certainty that a young son will grow up to be a man these days, given surgery for transgendering. Nor can she even know that the lad will not one day join the gay community. If our concepts of life have changed that much, it's not much of a stretch to change our beliefs in the morality of suicide.

Let's also consider the role we play--or don't play--in slow suicide. Smoking tobacco has been proven to cause many diseases, yet it's not illegal to smoke or to sell or buy cigarettes. Tobacco manufacturers put chemicals that are poisonous and harmful to the health in their cigarettes, yet selling them remains legal and governments collect tax revenues happily. In Canada, my home country, 25 percent of adults smoke cigarettes. While the number is dropping for older adults, it's rising among teens. There is a lesson there that is not being taught or learned.

Almost every packaged food has chemical preservatives that manufacturers claim are safe, but testing only takes place over a few years. No tests exist for long term consumption of chemical-laden foods over, say, 40 years, despite the fact that our bodies tend to react and break down under severe stress such as bad food over that number of years. People are said to just die young. Before their time, but was it?

Our governments encourage us to eat fresh foods, garden foods, produce sold fresh in our markets. Yet almost every piece of food on those shelves has multiple applications of chemical fertilizers. And pesticides, whose sole purpose is to kill animal life smaller than us. As I recall from reading murder mysteries, poisons accumulate in the body over time. What will kill an insect today may help to destroy us 40 years from now if we keep eating the same stuff.

[Before reviewing and rewriting this essay, I stopped to wash two windows in a closed storage room in my house. Cluster flies had swarmed into the room, so I put an insecticide strip in there to kill the flies. As I opened the door to the room I saw a dead mouse curled up in the middle of the floor, no flies. As it was obviously too young to have died of old age, the little dude must have died from inhaling the insecticide. This kind of strip used to be placed in hospitals, nursing homes and restaurants in the past, though I believe that practice has stopped now. A mouse is a mammal, albeit a small one, and you are a mammal, albeit an unsuspecting one. Connect the dots.]

Some sports, such as American style football and boxing, depend heavily on banging of heads. Research has shown the each concussion brings a person closer to death or irreversible brain damage. Yet we not only play these sports as children, we watch them avidly and encourage more hitting among professionals in our own adulthood. Are the participants in these sports really not risking death, meaning gearing themselves to die, which is a personal choice of potential suicide?

Do millions of people watch car races, downhill skiing and snowboarding events at least partly because they believe they may witness the death of one participant? Is participating in such events suicide (though we prefer to sanitize it by calling it sport)? Did the inexperienced luger from Georgia die during the Vancouver Olympics due to suicide, in effect, because he wasn't up to the challenges involved with an Olympic level event? How many times did you watch video reviews of his head hitting that post? It was sad, but nothing in the rules of Olympic luging changed to prevent it from happening again. Nothing will stop television networks from replaying the video until viewer no longer want to watch instant death.

Slow suicide, such as by engaging in harmful behaviours, or faster suicide, such as by participating in risky sports, hold established places in the lives of millions of people. They are called sport, not suicide, because there is money to be made from them. In a sense, suicide (or at least life-risking behaviour) is accepted by society in many forms. Why not the one where it's a simple, straightforward choice?

We should also consider the one factor that overrides all others in the minds of many people regarding suicide: its irreversibility. A depressed person who wants to end his life, but is prevented in some way from doing so, will likely "recover" and be glad he did not die. Not being allowed to die at the time of his choice does not take away from his suffering when he wants to die. Life is full of "IFs". It's not realistic to live your life based on all possible IFs. Terminal cancer and terminal stages of other diseases are not reversible either. We want to change that because

people in those conditions do not necessarily want to die. But what if they do want to die?

Murder is irreversible. That means ending the life of another person, not your own, but it's still legal if a government does it in war and illegal if you make your own individual decision to do it. Murder in any form is, ultimately, a personal choice to end a life. The commission of any crime is, in a sense, irreversible in that a criminal record follows the convicted person who does something uncharacteristic and rash in a moment of ill-considered action. It affects every day of that person's life. Psychological damage from a brutal childhood, a bad marriage, rape or even from financial bankruptcy are irreversible. Yet as a society we do little or nothing about preventing them, or even reversing them if that is possible.

Irreversibility as an argument against suicide works only if it is used in isolation, forgetting that most important decisions in life are effectively irreversible. Many people live in abusive marriages because they believe they have no viable way out. If murdering the partner is not an option and you can't afford to live on your own and you don't have the skills to survive on your own, living with the constant threat of abuse becomes irreversible in the mind of that person. Irreversibility is not, on its own, a valid argument against suicide.

Suicide is the ultimate example of personal free choice. If we lack that choice, we are not truly free. However, when someone wants to make the choice of suicide, in many cases it means that society has allowed the conditions of that person's life to degrade to the point where he no longer wants it to continue. Pointing the finger of blame means little if no one knows for certain how to avoid the problem.

Is this life choice confusing? Of course. Then why not let the individual sort it out himself and make his own decision? The alternatives are to provide coping strategies for people with severe problems and intervention strategies for people who can't cope. But that means society must change to support the individual, including poor and broken people as well as the rich and powerful. That isn't happening now in any country in the world.

Could we actually get to the point of encouraging, or at least accepting with equanimity, suicide for some people? That would mean that we would actually have to put into practice the lip service we pay to the value of life. That would mean that we would have to actually physically and emotionally care for others that we only give a passing nod to now. That would mean that we would have to provide each child with the tools he or she would need in life to be able to cope with life's stressors and downturns. That would mean that we would have to provide support for those who need it, when they need it, and how they need it. And that support would have to be unstinting and offered with confidence and assurance rather than with shame.

That would make the world a very different place.

Here's a suggestion that the author of the quote at the beginning of this essay claims would make me a dissenter: Let's make those changes anyway.

If the world is really going to improve on our watch, let's not just act like politicians and talk about improvement while doing nothing to implement it. Let's actually do it. When you look at the changes suggested three paragraphs above this one, none would be costly, none would be hard to do, none would take long to implement. Let's get started.

That would make the world a very different place indeed. In your lifetime and mine.

Bill Allin wrote ***Turning It Around: Causes and Cures for Today's Epidemic Social Problems***, a guidebook for teachers and parents, which also includes a simple, effective and shockingly cheap methodology to implement the kinds of changes recommended above.

Learn more at <http://billallin.com>

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