

OST Lecture Series
Spring 2023
March 15, 22, 29th.
Ron Rolheiser OMI

Three Difficult Contemporary Questions: *Clerical Sexual Abuse, A Radically Shifting Sexual Ethos, and Suicide as seen within a Faith Perspective*

Outline for the three sessions ...

1. March 15th – *Clerical Sexual Abuse*
 2. March 22nd – *A Radically Shifting Sexual Ethos*
 3. March 29th – *Suicide as seen within a Faith Perspective*
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Suicide – As Seen Within a Faith Perspective

- “The Will to save a life does not constitute the Power to prevent a death.” Joyce Aitken

Part One – Struggling to Understand Suicide

I. A Personal Note

- Some personal thoughts – my “history” with suicide
- An apologia

II. Statistics vis-à-vis suicide ...

- In the USA today:
 - More than 45,000 suicides per year in the USA
 - More than 90 per day
 - About 4 each hour
 - More USA soldiers have died by suicide coming back from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan than died within those wars.
 - Second leading cause of death for young people between the ages of 10 and 24.

III. Why is suicide so hard to deal with?

- **Outside us** – Suicide has been seen as the ultimate taboo both in church and in human life

- Both church and society have surrounded it with its strongest taboo – i.e., ultimate act of despair – the ultimate morally wrong thing one could do.
- **Inside us:** Our most powerful instinct is to stay alive; suicide goes against the deepest instinct inside of us.
- It wreaks such a particular kind of devastating confusion and hurt among those close to the one who died.
- It is very hard to “process” for those left behind
 - ✚ Metaphorically – We don’t have the innate internal psychic circuits to deal with suicide.

IV. Why is it so misunderstood?

- ✚ We do not understand mental illness and mental fragility in the same way as we understand physical illness and physical fragility.
 - From the point of our health we cannot understand the terminal pull of this sickness
- ✚ Emotionally we “feel” it as an act of despair or, at least, as an act of pitiful resignation.
- ✚ It leaves us with a unique feeling of shame
- ✚ It leaves the survivors with guilt and second-guessing
- ✚ It “ruins” the very memory of the person who died by suicide, becoming a prism through which that person is understood.

V. Towards an understanding

- *“Certain things need to be said and said again, until they don’t need to be said anymore.” (Margaret Atwood)*

A. Distinction between “suicide” and “killing oneself”

- In one case the person is too strong and proud to live (Hitler); in the other case the person is too-sensitive, bruised, and weak to continue to live
 - ✚ Distinguishing an act of “collapse” from an act of “arrogance”.

B. Understanding suicide - in most cases ...

1. We are dealing with a very sensitive and wounded person
2. He or she dies against their will
 - A metaphor - Their manner of death is akin to jumping out of a high rise window because their clothing and body are on fire
 - Their manner of death is the equivalent of an emotional cancer, stroke, or heart-attack
 - My experience with various “genre” of suicides
3. (At least, in many cases) we are helpless to stop it
4. In many cases too their depression has some biochemical root.
5. A footnote - Sexual abuse and suicide

C. A “grounding” metaphor – Suicide as the soul’s protest at not being heard and honored

- James Hillman – *Suicide and the Soul*

Part Two - Accompaniment of those who are Affected by the Loss of a Loved One

- *Sometimes all you can do is put your mouth to the dust and wait! (Lamentations 3)*

I. Introduction ...

- The poverty of our past and present response – both in the world and in the church.

II. Perspectives Towards a more Pastoral and Humane Response

1) The need to understand mental and emotional illness in the same way as we understand physical illness

- To understand that emotional and mental illnesses, like physical illnesses, come upon us uninvited and unwanted and wreak their havoc against our will and, often times too, against all attempts at healing.
- To move beyond the stigma of shame
- To then understand the “lack of choice” and “forgive” the death.
- To understand what has been classically seen as “despair” as weakness rather than sin.

2) The need to stop “second-guessing”, asking “what if?”, and assuming some blame.

3) The need to “grieve” this death and the darkness and chaos it leaves in its wake

- To understand and accept our anger as part of a process of grieving and saying farewell.
- To understand and accept the full extent of the hurt inside us.
- To understand and accept the “helplessness” inside of us in order to come to some perspective regarding consolation and healing.

4) The need to “redeem” the memory of the loved one who died by suicide

- What happens among survivors in the wake of a loved one’s suicide?
 - The “erasing of their memory”
 - Their death as a prism through which their life is now viewed
- Examples of trying to redeem a loved one’s memory:
 - Nancy Rappaport – *In My Mother’s Wake*
 - Marjorie Antus – *My Daughter, Her Suicide, and God*
 - Gloria Hutchinson – *Damage Done – Suicide of an only Son*
 - Lois Severson – *Healing the Wound from my Daughter’s Suicide*

- Brian Cahill – *Cops, Cons, and Grace – A Father’s Journey Through His Son’s Suicide*
 - Joy Pavelich, *Chasing My Son Across Heaven*.
 - Joyce Aitken, *Sincere Condolences – What to Say When You Don’t Know What to Say*.
- 5) The need to have more forums, symposia, and support-groups apposite the issue of suicide**
- 6) The need for a fuller theological understanding of God’s Mercy and Eternal Salvation**
- God’s empathy and understanding as infinitely deeper than our own.
 - God’s preferential love for “the poor”, “the weak”, “the vulnerable”, and the “little ones”.
 - The Christian doctrine of “Christ’s descent into hell”.
 - A footnote for Roman Catholics - The Catechism of the Catholic Church and Canon Law
 - Catechism – number 2283
 - Canon Law – Number 1184 - Mentions those who should be excluded from Catholic burial and names the categories, but does not name suicide.

Appendix – The Catechism of the Catholic Church – On Suicide

2280 Everyone is responsible for his life before God who has given it to him. It is God who remains the sovereign Master of life. We are obliged to accept life gratefully and preserve it for his honor and the salvation of our souls. We are stewards, not owners, of the life God has entrusted to us. It is not ours to dispose of.

2281 Suicide contradicts the natural inclination of the human being to preserve and perpetuate his life. It is gravely contrary to the just love of self. It likewise offends love of neighbor because it unjustly breaks the ties of solidarity with family, nation, and other human societies to which we continue to have obligations. Suicide is contrary to love for the living God.

2282 If suicide is committed with the intention of setting an example, especially to the young, it also takes on the gravity of scandal. Voluntary co-operation in suicide is contrary to the moral law.

Grave psychological disturbances, anguish, or grave fear of hardship, suffering, or torture can diminish the responsibility of the one committing suicide.

2283 We should not despair of the eternal salvation of persons who have taken their own lives. By ways known to him alone, God can provide the opportunity for salutary repentance. The Church prays for persons who have taken their own lives.

