

Suicide and Semicolon

*A Sermon preached at the First Unitarian Church, Albuquerque, New Mexico
By The Rev. Christine Robinson and Ian Carrillo on June 12, 2016*

Suicide, Period. That's when anxiety or depression or the voices or the anger or the despair gang up on a person and they kill themselves, and the sentence that is their life ends. No more words. Full Stop. Over.

Suicide, Semicolon is when anxiety or depression or the voices or the anger or the despair gang up on a person who slows down...slows way down, and maybe peers over the abyss and backs up a few steps, and turns to inner our outer resources for help, and their lives go on.

There's a movement in the teen and young adult world, to help young people who think about suicide, think about ending their lives....to slow down, back up, and turn for help. It's the Semicolon tattoo movement, and you'll hear more about it in a few minutes.

And before I start in on the main message of this sermon, which is... please, don't put a period on your life! let me say that I'm talking about suicides that happen in the midst of life, and not the issue of taking charge of one's dying. The terminally ill person who wants to die on their own terms is in a fundamentally different category than the person who has a future that is likely to be better than it feels right now. Sometimes called assisted suicide, or compassionate choices, this is a different subject, different sermon....next Fall. Today the topic is suicide in the midst of life.

You are probably aware that rates of suicide are going up in this nation and in the world, but you may not know that, unlike many dire sets of statistics, this one affects us all...rich and poor, highly educated and not so educated, liberal and conservative, spiritual, religious, and not....suicide is no respecter of social categories. It's the 10th most common cause of death in this nation, here in New Mexico, it is the 8th... more people die each year of intentional self-harm than die of Alzheimer's Disease.

Some of us in this room have been suicidal, and I imagine that many of us have known someone who was, or is, or we've had to grieve someone who killed themselves...and know that there's always extra pain involved. The fact that it's a taboo subject makes it harder to talk and therefore harder to know what to say...today we're going to break the taboo.

I make a practice, when a family allows me, of speaking openly about suicide at the memorial service of someone who has killed themselves. This startles some attendees...I can see it in

their faces. Non UU's are sometimes surprised that a person who has killed themselves is permitted to have a service in the church, or that there's a reception afterwards. They are still steeped in pre-modern Christian attitudes towards suicide which were, to say the least, severe and punitive. But for all the surprise, there is also gratitude, and learning. Many people do not realize that most people who die of suicide suffer from an illness, most often depression. Most people don't realize that depression is a little like Pneumonia; it is all at once, very common, most often treatable, AND sometimes becomes such a galloping drain on a person that it is fatal. People tell me that it helps them to understand, forgive, and grieve the death of their friend or family members who killed themselves, to have the subject discussed openly, so I do.

Some people don't talk about suicide because they think it would give despondent people ideas, but actually, people who have had fleeting thoughts, or even are actively struggling with suicidal thoughts are relieved when someone will talk to them, and helping them get over any shame they might be feeling and get the help they need is...well...it can be lifesaving.

But talking sympathetically about suicide, understanding the reasons people might kill themselves, and being non-judgmental about people who kill themselves because, after all, we didn't walk in their shoes, is only one half of the path we have to walk on this topic, because the other half is to say very clearly that we want, we desperately want, people to give themselves a chance to live the life they were given to the fullest, even when it is terribly painful and desperately hard. We want this for the people we love, and, if we value the worth and dignity of all people, as UU's often do, we want it in general: We want people to value their lives and the lives of others. We want you to choose life. Even if it is hard.

We are realistic people. We know that life is sometimes hard and painful...almost all of us have been there, for shorter and longer periods of time. We know all about bad decisions and excruciating disappointments and that horrible feeling that we've done something that will change things forever. We've been there, too. And more than a few of us know about depression, about the dreary days and sleep disturbed nights and months of slogging through life with no sunshine, sometimes, fighting off the inner dialogue which says, "It's not worth it." and "They're better off without you."

But it's not true. We are better off WITH you. So we know it's hard but we want you to be a hero and choose life.

In our society, the loudest voices against suicide have been religious voices, and that for a long time. The church decided centuries ago that God forbids suicide and also hates people who are suicidal and for many of those centuries punished suicide, or the corpse and family of someone who killed themselves, with a shocking passion. Maybe that's why, when the Enlightenment

gave us choices about spiritual paths and modern medicine started treating depression as an illness, not a moral crime, liberal philosophy went overboard about suicide, in too many places seeming to say, "Well, it's your life...." Parents didn't say this, just to be clear, and children didn't say it, and friends didn't say it, but philosophy seemed to say it, and that didn't help.

Most people who consider suicide are suffering...suffering a very low mood, suffering a lot of negative self-talk, suffering the kind of mental state that tells us that whatever is going on....the bad economy, the horrible social scene, the relationship breakup, the failure or bad decision...that that scene is permanent, catastrophic, and will never be better. We'll never marry, never have a good job, always come in second, always blow it.... That kind of self talk is never an accurate picture of reality and if it takes over, it is dangerous. When we feel that kind of pain, we should go to urgent care, just like we go if we have a pain in our chest. I would go so far as to say that it is our duty to care for ourselves this way, a duty that comes out of our faith.

Now, this is not a "your life belongs to God and he'll be mad" argument. Even those of us who believe in the kind of God who wants us to choose life also, I imagine, believe that there's enough love and understanding there for those who suffer. Rather, this is a Humanistic, this-world oriented argument for life, based in what we know about people.

1. The first is that we humans are not individuals by nature, we are by nature, parts of groups, families, clans, communities. And it hurts those groups, families, clans, and communities, when people kill themselves. Suicide, as one person told me many years ago, leaves footprints on the heart...and not good ones. For while any death of someone we cared about brings grief, suicide brings a host of other feelings that must be resolved, principally guilt, but also anger. Grieving is bad enough, and unavoidable in this world of connections. Dealing with the grief of suicide is a bigger thing. Those of us who want to treat those around us gently will do whatever we need to do to not put our loved ones through that dark night.

2. A second reason for someone who is feeling suicidal to keep slogging through their life is that suicide appears to be socially contagious. Just as a person is more likely to get drunk when around others who are drunk, so a rash of suicides can often be traced, one by one, to a first suicide. When one person ends their life, it seems to soften a barrier for others. Young people are particularly vulnerable to this social effect. Those of us who don't want to harm others should do whatever we can to make sure that we don't harm them by making it easier for them to take their own lives.

3. Then, there is a somewhat different kind of argument against suicide, which reminds us that, not only are we only a self in community, but in an important sense, we are not just one self. Within this self that might decide, today, that life is not worth living, are a large number of

future selves which deserve a chance at life, growth, happiness. Most people who attempt suicide and survive are glad they did...their future self is glad. Things did get better.

4. Here's yet another kind of argument, more spiritual than the others, because it assumes that human beings have a purpose in life, which is to grow in wisdom and in love, and ironically, the very suffering that causes suicidal thoughts is not only time limited but also one of the pathways to growth in wisdom and lovethose very qualities that humanity most needs as it advances through its own terrible adolescence.

If you start feeling like killing or hurting yourself, especially if you start focusing in on a plan, we want you to get help. Your best bet is to call a crisis help line, like the one listed in your order of service, because not only can they help by listening, but they know the best resources and steps to take next, and they're not scared of a taboo topic as even some medical people are. . You don't even have to save the paper. Just google Suicide and the numbers and chat lines come up first. Google's fixed it that way. Let that in itself remind you that we all want you to live.

If somebody you know is struggling in this dark place, you, too, can call these hot lines for advice. Don't keep suicide secrets for somebody. Friends get help for their friends. After that, they respect their friend's privacy, of course, but first, they get help.

If you want to talk to somebody you know, you can call me, or Angela, any hour of the day or night. It's part of what we do, and there is nothing we would rather do than listen and help and keep you with us or help you help a friend.

One promising project that's new in suicide prevention is the tattoo project, and Ian Carrillo is going to talk to us about that.

Ian Carrillo

I got my semicolon tattoo – this one, right here – about eight months ago. It was sponsored by a project run by UNM's Agora Crisis Center, a 24/7 hotline you can call to talk, anonymously, about anything. Now, as you heard, the semicolon represents that moment when you can stop – end your sentence, it's over, it's done – but instead, you choose to keep on going, to continue the sentence, to add to it. It's a long pause; it makes you stop and consider what came before it, and look forward to what comes after.

A lot of people get this tattoo on their wrist. It serves as a visual reminder, when they go in to hurt themselves, or when they feel the urge to end their sentence. I got mine behind the ear because I'm fortunate enough not to have experienced serious suicidal thoughts. The

purpose of mine was not to give myself a reminder, but rather to open up a dialogue; to get people asking about this punctuation mark on my head, and hopefully to bring a taboo subject out of the dark a little bit.

Now, let's just say I'm used to negative emotions; I work tech support. One day I got called up to somebody's office to fix her ancient computer. It took a while to boot up, and while I was sitting in her chair, she, standing behind me, noticed my tattoo. We struck up a conversation. She's in her late fifties, approaching the end of her career. She told me about a friend of hers who had attempted suicide. That friend didn't succeed, and got some much-needed help afterwards, but continued for a while to practice self-harm and experience suicidal thoughts.

Self-harm. I never imagined I'd be talking about self-harm with a silver-haired coworker while I waited for her computer to finish updating. I told her I had several friends who'd made it through high school by cutting or burning. Self-harm is something a lot of people don't understand. Each of my friends injured themselves, mutilated themselves, because it took away their anxiety. It brought them back to Earth and reduced their desire to kill themselves. It was the lesser of two evils, but they couldn't talk about it. There's a tremendous amount of guilt and societal taboo just for having these feelings. One particular friend of mine wears only long sleeves. She feels her family and community judge her for the scars on her arm. The only reason I know this is because of my semicolon. She knows she can talk to me now, and she calls Agora Crisis Center when she needs to. It's helped a lot.

Anyway, my coworker's friend ended up getting the semicolon tattoo as well, on her wrist. It served not only as a reminder for herself, but it got her support, sometimes from people she didn't even know. At this point my coworker admitted that she herself had struggled with severe depression since adolescence. We'd been talking for several minutes. The computer had updated and it was fixed. She told me about her childhood and a personal experience with suicide. We discussed the taboo against the subject of suicide. It's the topic that everyone is aware of, but for which public awareness seems to be lacking. The conversation doesn't come up, and to have suicidal thoughts and urges is isolating.

Finally, it was time to get back to work. I stood up and she put a hand on my shoulder. I'll never forget what she said to me. "Sometimes," she said, "you can find support in people you wouldn't expect." What remained unsaid was "even in the tech support guy."

That conversation was why I got the semicolon tattoo. It bridged the generational gap. It got a discussion moving about a very important topic. And it showed both of us that there's always someone to talk to.

If you're interested in the Agora Crisis Center or the Semicolon Tattoo Project, Maya Stephenson volunteers there; she and I will be free to talk during the social hour. I want to conclude with something I've learned through the conversations this tattoo has created. You have worth; you have dignity. When you feel like it's too much, when you feel like you have no one to talk to, when the world just doesn't seem worth it anymore... pause. That period you just wrote – change it to a comma. Add a little dot on top. Continue your sentence. You're worth it.

Christine

There's really not much more to say, other than, Thank you, Ian, for caring, and for sharing.

And that this gift of our lives is too precious, even when things are very hard, to bring to an early end.

Choose life.