

Surviving Suicide: to Hell and Back

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Suicide is one of those things that happens to other people, is a grievous sin and means that there was something seriously wrong in the family.... or so the stereotype goes. Imagine when it happened to my family and it was my brother who took his own life- a devastating event personally and for the whole extended family. It is only now, almost three years on, that I am even able to articulate some of the issues around it, so difficult and painful was the grieving process, and the shock of adjusting to this shattering reality. The irony was that I, as a Jesuit priest, should have been well able to deal with it, theologically and pastorally; however, I found myself little prepared for all that this uniquely challenging experience would bring. I owe a deep debt of gratitude to the family, friends, Jesuits, doctors, counsellors and support groups that held me together during this difficult time. I offer this personal account in the hope that it will help others find a way through suicide, hold onto their faith and sanity, and maybe even help individuals or families avoid this devastating event.¹

I was barely in the door when my sister hit me with the question that everyone was thinking: "Is my brother in hell?" I was exhausted from the trauma of the journey from Spain, but it was the emotion in the question that caught me by surprise and floored me. I thought of myself as reasonably progressive and theologically well read, but, at that moment, I found myself overwhelmed by the family expectations and the insecurity of not having been in this situation before. Particularly, it was the sense of fear and shock that was paralysing; all common sense and Jesuit training seemed to have deserted me as faced with this devastating family crisis. As a priest, the biggest single challenge for me was the whole theological question about what suicide meant. I had to go off and consult with some Jesuit friends and theology books, and then examine my own heart on it before it became clear to me that Donal was not in hell, he was with Christ and at peace. It seems so obvious now but why, at the time, was there such stigmatisation, rushing to judgement, and such a deep-seated, negative image of God portrayed through this tragic suicide?

It was Saturday 2nd September 2005 and I was relaxing by the pool in Murcia, in southern Spain. I had my mobile switched off to enjoy the last few days of a Spanish holiday with a Jesuit friend. The previous night I had had a terrible sense of unease and foreboding, that took the edge off the holiday feeling and didn't seem to make sense... little did I realise that it was the night that my brother took his own life back in Ireland. In their frantic efforts to reach me, the family managed to get through to a friend we were visiting, and she passed the phone to me. The bright sunny afternoon in Murcia suddenly turned icy as the horror seeped in. My brother had hanged himself in the family farmhouse- the feeling of dread and disaster was overpowering. I didn't know then that this was the moment where our lives were irreversibly changed. It was like waking up in a nightmare.



¹ Much of this article was inspired by: "A Special Scar- The experiences of People Bereaved by Suicide", Alison Wertheimer, 2001 (2nd Ed.), which I found particularly helpful and based on research which also integrated people's real-life experience.

Previously I had noticed Donal had become more withdrawn and victim to his depression, and that he had distanced himself from me and the rest of the family. My efforts to get him to get professional help had become more frantic and shrill... I could only look on in helpless rage as the brother I loved was overcome with darkness and self-destruction. I had this image of him as a swimmer drowning in a pool full of lifeguards; many of our family, like myself, in the helping professions and with access to so many ways out, were unable to help. The darkness reigned supreme.

The next few days were a blur of endless phone calls, coupled with the frustration of getting a flight home at short notice. I got there a day late and was the last to arrive into the stunned family home in Lisnaskea. That moment of walking in through the door to so much pain, shock and grief will never leave me. Fortunately, in this crisis my Jesuit training didn't desert me and I knew enough to get everyone to turn off phones, lock the door and open a space to talk about how they were coping or not. This simple sharing of experience allowed us to take a respite from the outside world, pray together and support each other, and shore up our defences for the next few difficult days. Going to the morgue to see the body was a helpful experience. It was shockingly tough at the time, but of great help subsequently in accepting the reality of what had happened. My sister, a doctor, was wise enough to encourage this, and we also brought in the neighbours who had the added trauma of having found the body. Seeing him at peace was heart-breakingly difficult but consoling nonetheless.

Doing the funeral as the family priest was probably one of the hardest things that I have ever done, yet I knew that my brother wanted me to do it and accordingly, the homily took on a special poignancy. In the sacristy before mass, a Jesuit companion told me to pray to my brother for help as I was about to go out onto the altar, and that seemed to strengthen me, taking me right through virtually the whole ceremony. Towards the end, when I came to the words "Final Commendation" in the ritual, I couldn't continue. Another Jesuit friend ably stepped in to pick up the reins as we had pre-arranged.

I had this book on Funeral Liturgies² to prepare the mass and, annoyingly, there was no liturgy for suicide victims (adding to the feeling of stigma & exclusion), so we made up our own. We presented various symbols from Donal's life at the beginning of Mass: a photo of him in Colombia smiling, his bible, work boots, Gaelic football & PhD Thesis. We also chose readings that reflected his life. The first was from the Book of Wisdom: "*their departure was regarded as disaster, their leaving us like annihilation; but they are at peace*"³. The sung Psalm, picked up by the congregation, was a favourite of Donal's that he used to keep the depression at bay: "*The Lord is my shepherd...by restful waters he leads me to restore my drooping spirit*"⁴. The key reading though, was that of Romans: "*Nothing can separate us from the love of God*"⁵, which best seemed to capture the compassion and fo



² Flor McCarthy SDB, Funeral Liturgies, 1994, Dominican Pub., Dublin.

³ Wisdom Chap. 3, Verses 1-6 & 9. "The souls of the righteous are in the hands of God".

⁴ Psalm 23, "The Lord is My Shepherd".

⁵ Romans Chap. 8, Verses 35 & 37-39. "Nothing can separate us from the love of God".

could overcome even this. This reading was to become the motif on Donal's memorial card, so aptly did it seem to express our hope and belief. The Gospel reading was chosen from John, evoking our hope in the resurrection for Donal: "*Anyone who believes in me, even though that person dies, will live.*"⁶

The homily for the funeral mass was something we wrote together as a family. I was able to draw together some basic ideas and we discussed these together as to what line we would take. We decided to hit the issue of suicide head on, though there was a moment where we almost succumbed to the temptation to cover it up. It was a delicate balance between acknowledging the devastation of what had happened, not wanting to underplay the negative effects of it, and yet trying to find the good in it, especially finding the person behind the depression:

"Even though we are burdened down with grief, sorrow and shock, today we choose to celebrate his life, for that is what our faith tells us. The shock of the last few days has shown us something of the shadow side, the darkness brought about by depression, the things he couldn't cope with, but there was so much more to him. We will remember him for his many good qualities, great goodness and kindness; he was such a talented man."

This homily was poignant given the context of the local church where Donal himself was a regular mass attender, and which was packed with many family and friends united in grief, and trying to come to terms with the incomprehensibility of him choosing to end his own life needlessly. At the end of the service we read a short reflection called "*Dying in Order to Live More Fully*"⁷ which seemed to capture the sentiment:

*For those with faith,
death is not extinguishing the light;
it is putting out the lamp because the dawn has come.*

Significantly, the funeral was an important moment of ritual that helped to address the suicide issue, support the family and assist the grieving and healing processes. However, the theological question on suicide continued to dog us, especially my mother. I became more convinced of his salvation and was casting around for ways to convince my family of the fact. I found the New Catechism of the Catholic Church a useful reference: "*Grave psychological disturbances, anguish, or grave fear of hardship, suffering, or torture can diminish the responsibility of the one committing suicide. We should not despair of the eternal salvation of persons who have taken their own lives.*"⁸ The role of depression⁹, so obvious in the case of my brother, was clearly the reason and cause for this self-destructive act that largely reduced his responsibility and therefore the implication of serious sin. Helpful as the Catechism

⁶ John Chap. 11, Verses 21-27. "I am the resurrection".

⁷ Flor McCarthy SDB, Funeral Liturgies, 1994, Dominican Pub., Dublin. p. 208.

⁸ The New Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1992, Libreria Editrice Vaticana No's 2282 & 2283. However, note here the use of the word "commit" suicide, implying a criminal act, and which is an unhelpful way to describe suicide. The language around suicide is very important and how it is described has larger implications.

⁹ "Psychiatric disorders, usually depression, or an intoxicant problem is present in 90 % of people who take their own lives." Suicide In Ireland: A Global Perspective and A National Strategy. www.aware.ie/online%20books/suicide.html.

was, it was surprising though to find these old theological ideas and condemnation of suicide victims so ingrained and prevalent. Indeed, this was to become a theme for us, in the funeral and afterwards; deciding to be open about what had happened and refusing to accept the stigma of it.

Over the next year and more, all of us went through various stages in the grief process¹⁰. The first was the numbness stage that lasted for about a month, as the shock, horror and painful reality are too much so you are shielded from this awful reality. Then there was the searing pain as the numbness wore off and the brunt of the trauma began to seep in. There were conflicting feelings of vulnerability and also deep anger- how could my brother do this to us, to me? Then there was the pining and missing the person that felt like an amputation, there was such a hole in my life. Through all this, the “why” question tormented me continually and I became obsessed with trying to find answers. I sought out people who had spoken to him in those last days and was on this hopeless quest for the elusive “reason”¹¹. In the end I had to accept that there was no knowing what was going on in his mind during that ‘dark night of the soul’.

Getting to see his medical records as the “next of kin” did help somewhat to understand how ill he was and corroborate the glaring role of depression¹². Inevitably there were the classically corrosive guilt feelings about what had happened: Did I do enough for him? Was there some opportunity I missed? What did I say to him in that last conversation? Pouring over those last days and weeks became an obsession, a self-inflicted torture through feeling responsible for what had happened. Paradoxically, another kind of guilt was in feeling the relief of not having to worry about him any more. Not having to hear about the self-destructive behaviour he was engaged in, no longer tuning into the traffic reports, for fear that he had died on the roads that weekend.

At various times there was the feeling of being on the edge of madness or a breakdown, which was particularly alarming and disabling. I was driven to seek help from a Jesuit counsellor and to read everything I could about depression and suicide. Being in a suicide bereavement group, Console¹³, was particularly helpful in terms of having people in the same situation who understood the awfulness of the experience, and who were at different stages of working through it. There was nothing like the sense of being listened to by others who were living the same nightmare of the suicide of a loved one. The sense of solidarity, compassion, support and mutual understanding, was something that I will always remember. These were not easy

¹⁰ These books were to prove particularly useful for this period of mourning: D.B. Biebel & S.L. Foster *Finding Your Way after the Suicide of someone you Love*, 2005, Zondervan. Joan Guntzman, *God Knows You're Grieving*, 2001, Sorin Books.

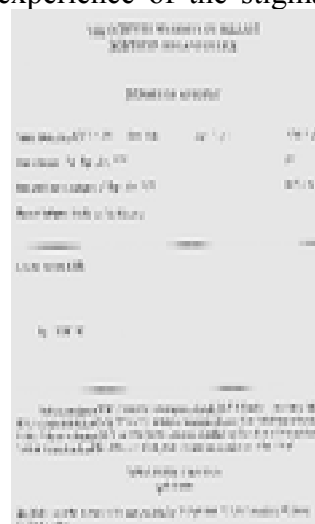
¹¹ Andrew Solomon, in his book *The Noonday Demon: An Anatomy of Depression* (Vintage Press 2001), outlines different types of suicide (impulse, anger/vengeance, “logical” etc.) within which I tried to place my brother’s motivation. In the end I felt that it was probably anger based, reflecting acute depression, but I will never really know what went on in his head.

¹² There was a clear medical history of serious clinical depression that had been diagnosed consistently but which Donal did not manage at all well, not taking medication and not turning up for appointments. However, I have a certain amount of anger towards the medical profession for the initial diagnosis and “drug” approach; he needed more than just medication (See *Depression- An Emotion not a Disease* by Michael Corry & Aine Tubridy, 2005, Mercier Press).

¹³ **Console** is a registered charity supporting and helping people bereaved through suicide by means of support groups, counselling & prevention programs. www.console.ie.

sessions, not for the faint hearted, and yet out of them came a sense of hope and hard-won progress. There was life beyond suicide bereavement, and people could come through it. I was happy to be accepted as another group member, leaving the “priest” role aside for the time, just to be another grieving human being. My contribution to the group, however, was in communicating a more compassionate vision of God and forgiveness even for these “souls lost to suicide”. It surprised me to realise that there was quite an echo within the group of our own family’s experience of the stigma and ‘sin’ aspects of suicide, even in modern Ireland.

The other difficult moment many months after the event was the arrival of the coroner’s report. This was basically a medical report of the autopsy but nothing could have prepared me for the shock of seeing that first page with my brother’s name on the top and then a huge box of white space in the middle with the words “CAUSE OF DEATH: HANGING”. It sent me into a spin that took me several days to get over. The brutality of the clinical language and the reduction of a human being to the mechanics of death, and the various test and examinations carried out were insensitive in the extreme. I was angry after I got over the shock of seeing it. After all, this was my brother they were talking about in clinical, detached terms. It was as if he were an anonymous body that is casually examined and written off as just another clear-cut suicide case. I was angry at the medical profession’s lack of compassion and basic humanity that would inflict such suffering on family members with such a blasé attitude and reductionistic approach to the human being. I still can hardly bring myself to look at that report- ‘is this all that my brother amounts to?’ was my question, what about the humour, the intelligence, the generosity- the whole personality that they never knew.



In trying to come to terms with the experience, if that is ever possible, it is in the paradox of trying to find the positive aspects within the horror of suicide. The starting point has to be faith based: believing that my brother is with Christ and that his suffering is over; he is in a better place. Though I would not have wanted this death to happen, I have come to understand his desire to end the nightmare that his existence had become. I believe that for him in his pit of depression, it seemed the only way out.

Ironically however, it was to bring about a huge faith crisis within me too: how could I believe in a loving God faced with the horror of suicide- how could God let this happen? I definitely “lost faith” over this and went through a real “dark night of the soul” in my relationship with God. I remember at that time giving a homily at the Gardiner St. Gospel Mass which I started with the words “I feel like a fraud up here, my faith is hanging by a thread”. I was helped by the writer Joyce Rupp and her explanation of why “bad things happen to good people”. It was only after walking the feet off myself in the wilds of New Zealand about a year later, that I eventually came to understand that I had many false ideas about God and suffering¹⁴. I now understand it as a purification of faulty images of God. These were: God being responsible for

¹⁴ Joyce Rupp’s book on “Praying Our Goodbyes” (Eagle, 1988) is very useful on this, particularly Chapter 2 and the section “False Theories of Suffering (p.28)”.

everything; as protecting me from “bad things”¹⁵ (faith as “divine insurance”); and as making good things happen as long as I keep the “rules”. I realised a lot of my ideas about God and life were transformed. It was a very different image of God that I came away with; a God who is present but doesn’t control, who is compassionate and understands suffering, and leaves people radically free. Probably the biggest lesson was that God is not in the ideal but in the real; in life and the messiness of the “now”. The Jesuit slogan “finding God in all things” was to take on a new meaning for me in this suicide of my brother, the most harrowing of experiences.

The main positive outcome was the way that it brought the family together and how supportive people were. Never have I experienced such solidarity like it; a real sense of being supported and hanging on in the toughest of times. Our geographically dispersed family were on the phone to each other every week, the new Internet video phonecalls (Skype) saving us from exorbitant international calls.

The most important thing for me personally however, was that I believe it taught me the real meaning of priesthood. I think I now understand the word “compassion”, as meaning “to suffer with another”; literally sharing the “passion” of others. I think I understand the nature of suffering and the humility involved in not judging others. A lot of this is down to the paradoxical gifts in suicide: having some experience of the suicide stigma, and the fear that surrounds it, teaches one about the true nature of humanity. It means understanding mortality and the fragility of life, how important it is to be compassionate, not to judge, and to understand vulnerability and pain in its many disguises. In this context faith or spirituality is not an escape but a desperate search for meaning in the most meaningless of experiences. Belief in an afterlife suddenly makes sense. Finally, there are all the many hard won lessons such as “you can’t take responsibility for another’s life”, “God works through this most difficult of human situations”, and “it is only in the mystery of faith that there are any answers”. As a priest, these are the insights about life and death, love and suffering, which are not in any textbook. I wouldn’t have asked for this experience for myself or my family, but I am grateful for the blessings that have come out of it.

APPENDIX

Finally, here is a summary of hard won insights that helped survive the experience¹⁶:

- The goal is to move from being a victim to being a survivor; suicide will always be part of you.
- A lot of people feel overly guilty and responsible; often the problem in grief is working through the conflicting feelings of love and anger towards the person.

¹⁵ See the classic by Harold S. Kushner, "When Bad Things Happen to Good People", (Avon Books, 1981).

¹⁶ Again, based on "A Special Scar- The experiences of People Bereaved by Suicide", Alison Wertheimer, 2001 (2nd Ed.).

- In the grief process, people often feel not normal, "totally different", like they are going mad, and even like being part of a "sect" (no one understands).
- The grief process brings one to very dark places of disorganisation and despair, necessary for one's healing; it is not a fixed, linear process, but very individual and everyone needs to find their supports, their own pace, and their own way through it.
- There is often a need for professional suicide/grief related help; there is a certain amount of work or 'processing' that has to be done, and there are no easy solutions or pat formulas that will work.
- Suicide related grief is very like normal grief except for the sense of horror at the nature of the death, and the feelings of guilt and rejection that suicide causes in survivors.
- People often find it difficult to accept help from those who haven't experienced suicide themselves; a suicide bereaved support group can help with providing a safe space, mutual support and role models for how to survive the process.
- The most difficult thing is trying to understand "why"; the nature of the death leads to asking "what was he going through" that caused this. Searching for clues can become an obsession, talking to people and even reading books on it, but eventually one has to let go and "let God" i.e. forgiveness and acceptance.
- It is a very positive thing to see the body after the suicide; it helps to accept the reality and is a one off opportunity that needs to be gently encouraged.
- Directly after the death there is a very intense period of talking about the person, their behaviour and motivations. Faith sharing groups among family members can be useful here. This helps deal with the sense of powerlessness for those left behind.
- The suicidal person almost always gives clear clues before the event; growing more distant is part of that (it certainly seems to fit in terms of Donal's withdrawal). Depression is obviously significant: research shows two thirds of suicides had a depressive illness; 90% some kind of mental disorder.
- It is common for close friends or family to experience sudden feelings of acute distress before the suicide happens, a kind of a premonition.
- Worry about negative religious consequences and eternal punishment for the person is normal and needs to be addressed. Some theological assistance and pastoral guidance is helpful here. Unfortunately it is still the case that feelings of shame and social stigma can prevent many people from getting the support they need, particularly getting free of guilt.
- The funeral service and how it is done is an important part of the healing; it is a good way to express grief and get support; it provides meaning for this

senseless act. It is good to acknowledge that it was suicide, that the person was good, yet without idealising suicide. An official church funeral rite for suicide is very much in need, along the lines suggested above.

- Within families the temptation is not to discuss the death; however, communication is key to healthy adaptation and it often draws families closer together. However, it is important to respect that different people grieve in different ways and at different times.
- The support of family and friends is critical in the recovery process; there is a need to have close friends to listen; just an embrace can be enough: "touch can be as healing as words". However, care is needed as a lot of people find it difficult to cope with suicide as it activates people's nightmares, fears and feelings of panic.

The need for an integrated faith vision is key here; a faith that has compassion for people's failings, that reflects the image of a loving God, and that helps those left behind to pick up the pieces and overcome guilt. Suicide forces the issues of the meaning of life, how much can we help others, the need for community and support, and a practical spirituality that finds God in asking and giving help when it is needed.