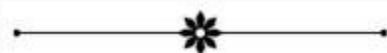


## THERE IS SOMETHING WE ALL NEED TO TALK ABOUT

By the time you finish reading this Reflection someone in the United States will have killed themselves. 30,000 people do it every year. Which comes down to one every 15 minutes. Are these all mental health cases? In more than half of the deaths, the people had no known mental health condition. Our national suicide rate has increased 25% since 1999. It is now the 10th leading cause of death in the United States. It is a major public health problem which presently lacks effective preventative strategies.



Probably all of us know of tragic situations. One that will always stick with me happened many years ago in the early days of the AIDS pandemic. Amanda

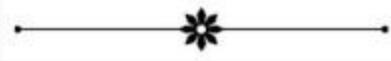
was a nurse working with AIDS patients. Soon after she became pregnant there was an accidental needle stick which infected her with the HIV/AIDS virus. In due time a child, Laura, was born. Amanda's husband Mark was a high level insurance executive with excellent medical coverage. Everything went along all right for several years but when Laura was three years old she tested positive for HIV/AIDS and so did her mother. Early testing at that time was not nearly as efficient as it is today. Both Amanda and Laura received the best care, but the virus was slowly winning the battle. Then Mark was told that his insurance had capped out. He started using the family's savings. But that also was eaten up in a short time. They did not live in the Bay Area but came here because the care was better. We became very close to the family. In my last conversation with Mark he did share his pain at not being able to properly care for his family but there was no indication of what would happen the next day when Mark took his own life. Several months later Amanda died followed the next month by Laura's death.



I am convinced Mark took his own life because he felt he had failed to provide for his family. He probably thought he was doing the right thing — but he wasn't. Amanda was much more interested in having him there than having his money when she faced her final moments. Laura would've wanted her father rather than hospital staff when she didn't know what was going on and closed her eyes the final time.

I think most of the people reading this have similar stories they could share, stories that remain with them and always will. A reporter for THE WASHINGTON POST wrote a powerful story about her father's suicide. He was

46. She was 21. After the police left, she undertook the very difficult task of cleaning up the blood. She didn't want her younger brother to see the mess when he came home from his high school prom night. She writes, *This week marks the 20th anniversary of my father's death. And I am still cleaning up.*



If a person walks into a therapy center and says, “I am contemplating suicide,” there will be some kind of response. It is seen as a mental health problem and will be “appropriately” addressed. The problem is that is not what usually happens. A Harvard psychologist points out that the majority of people who die by suicide “explicitly deny suicidal thoughts or intentions in their last communications before dying.”

We’re facing not just mental health problems but a Public Health crisis. Again going back to the AIDS pandemic, those of us who are old enough to remember realize that when there is no Public Health strategy, thousands of people die. We really had no strategy for AIDS, probably because it was seen as a gay men’s issue. We had a president who during his eight years in office never mentioned the word AIDS — thousands of men, women, and children died in those eight years.



Benedict Carey put it very well in THE NEW YORK TIMES recently,

*The rise of suicide turns a dark mirror on modern American society: its racing, fractured culture; its flimsy mental health system; and the desperation of so many individual souls, hidden behind the waves of smiling social media photos and cute*

*emojis.*

I have always been sympathetic to doctor assisted suicide when quality of life has evaporated due to pain and other causes and palliative care has been exhausted. But there was one unintended consequence that surprised me. Surveys show that the younger generations have come to believe in a right to die in many more circumstances including just being tired of the struggles of life.



This is a season of the year when I love seeing new life spring from the earth. I get great joy seeing the efforts that young people here at Starcross put into making the land healthy and productive. I hate to think that there could ever be a time in any of their lives when for whatever reason they might think it would be better, for themselves or the world, if they just stepped out of life. Practically speaking, I'm not in a position to see that our nation, my state, or county develops effective Public Health strategies to combat the 25+ percent increase in our national suicide rate. But, maybe I can say something about happiness.



There is no such thing as a “carefree” life. In fact, the word “carefree” is a very recent addition to the English language. Life has ups and downs. There are bumps and there are challenges. The sooner a person accepts that, the easier it is to find happiness. Here are some spiritual Band-Aids that I have found personally useful when everything turns dark.



There are enough troubles in life such as

sickness or the loss of a friend, that I personally don't think it's a good idea to troll back into our past history, bring up mistakes we wish we hadn't made, and sink into a kind of chronic unhappiness. I myself sometimes do that, But I just don't think it's a good thing to encourage. The antidote, is not a pill but plunging into the here and now. I was very frustrated a few minutes ago when I couldn't think of a word ("senior moment stuff") and then I looked out of the window and watched the olive trees dancing in the wind. There's always



something quite near us that can heal us if we give it a chance.

Something that may seem inconsistent but isn't, is what the Zen Buddhists term "*jhana*." It means roughly focusing on positive emotions rather than negative emotions. If we see something that makes us smile, let us focus on that no matter what else is going on in our life. I read where one teacher suggested experiencing that emotion for at least 20 seconds. It switches off the negative emotion and turns on the positive emotion! I think that's the Buddhist rendition of an old Bing Crosby popular song from my earlier years which went "Accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative."

If you are going to give this simple jhana a try, do it now. Don't wait.

***Brother Toby***