

THE BURDEN OF SUICIDE

My mother died seven years ago by her own hand. My father found her when he returned home from work that Friday, her body already cold where it lay huddled in the back of the little red Corvair Monza. A hose led from the exhaust pipe through the rear window of the little car.

I can't imagine what he must have felt when he found her. I can imagine how my mother must have felt as she descended the stairs to the garage for the last time. There was a numbness, a sense of suspended disbelief; her body already seemed not to belong to her. In her anaesthetized mind was a single spark of clarity, the knowledge, vivid and unfrighting, that the peace she had longed for was not, really and truly, to be hers. Maybe she left in anger, maybe that was why. But the only reality for her those last moments was the desperate hunger for a final, eternal end to pain. She never fought against the blackness that swallowed her.

I know. I've been there. I tried suicide several times in my life when I was in my early 20s and was quite serious at least twice. I bitterly resented having my life saved. I despised and raged against the doctors and nurses who prevented my death, against the psychiatrists who locked me up until I was cajoled into wanting to live again, or was at least willing to give it a try. All I really wanted was the kind of peace of mind everyone in the whole world seemed blessed with except me. Was that asking too much?

Nightmare: Apparently so. A manic-depressive like my mother, I have a physiology that never seemed to give me an end break. Just when my internal seas began to calm, and I began to think living might be palatable after all, minute chemicals in my brain would either recede or reassert themselves and I'd be off on another nightmare roller-coaster ride, out of control, a stranger to myself and everyone who thought they knew me. Some manic-depressives are greatly helped by medication, notably lithium-carbonate. Nothing seemed to help me. Suicide often seemed the most sane resolution to the insanity my body forced on me. Besides, actually attempting suicide, I've wanted, wished and even prayed to die more times than I can count.

Well, I'm 32 now and I'm still alive. I'm even married and have moved from a secretarial position into entry-level management in a Fortune 500 company. I keep house and look after my husband and our three cats. I have bills to pay, a bus to catch every weekday morning, laundry that never seems quite white or bright enough, a body that refuses to conform to Cheryl Tieg's configuration. I'm a lousy cook. But, I'm alive because of my mother's death. She taught me that in spite of my illness I had to live. Suicide just isn't worth it.

I saw the torment my mother's death caused others: my father, my brother, her neighbours and friends. When I saw their overwhelming grief, I knew I could never do the same thing she had done – force other people to take on the burden of pain I'd leave behind if I died by my own hand.

**Suicide doesn't end pain.
It only lays it on the broken shoulders
of those left behind.**

Suicide is not a normal death. It is tragic beyond the most shattering experiences, and the ultimate form of abandonment. There is no fate on which to place the blame. It rests squarely on the shoulders of the victim and the people left behind, many of whom spend the rest of their lives wondering, never knowing, if there was anything they could have done to prevent such a tragedy.

There is something about suicide that, even when done as an escape from an agonizing terminal illness, signals complete and utter defeat. It is without any semblance of nobility or pride. Life can become too heavy a burden to bear, but the release that suicide offers is not a triumph of life, the ultimate mastery of self over fate, but a grim renunciation of hope and a failure of the human spirit. There may be legitimate rationalizations for committing suicide, but my experiences have taught me that suicide, by and large, is a decision made by a desolate soul. The many suicidal patients I have met in my hospital stays had no philosophy of death; their desire to die was not a condemnation of current socioeconomic or political realities. They were in profound emotional pain, and all they wanted was an end to that suffering.

For years I was no different. My illness was a source of immeasurable pain to my family and friends, and seeing my irrationality and despair mirrored in their eyes was often unendurable. I still have seizures of profound depression, and I can still see that ugly self reflected in the faces of the people I love. Then, too, there is the stigma of being a mental patient, a victim of a major psychotic disorder, which is as humiliating as it has always been.

However, I will not, cannot, end my life as my mother did. Suicide no longer can offer me any peace.

Wasteland: She was 55 when she died. She looked behind her and saw a wasteland, never willing to accept that she was loved by many and had richly contributed to the lives of friends, family and strangers. She perished because she allowed herself to be deceived by her own mind into believing she was worthless. She refused professional help because, like many of her generation, she felt it was shameful to seek psychiatric aid. What would the neighbours and relatives think? She was consumed at the end by unbearable depression. The best thing she could do for those who cared about her was to remove herself from their presence – permanently. She could not have been more wrong.

She taught me the valuable lesson of my life; no matter how bad the pain is, it's never so bad that suicide is the only answer. It's never so bad that the only escape is a false one. Suicide doesn't end pain. It only lays it on the broken shoulders of the survivors.

Ironically, my mother's final gift to me was not death, but life, a determination to live as she chose not to.

By the way: to all the doctors, nurses and psychiatrists who forced me to live when I didn't want to – thank you for keeping breath in my lungs and my heart beating and encouraging hope in me when I didn't have any.

I'm glad I'm alive to say that.

Anne-Grace Scheinin