

Let compassion guide us so lives can be saved

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The Christmas story is about compassion. An innkeeper took in a couple—opened the barn door for the birth of a child. It's a beautiful story that has gifted us more than 2,000 years.

A recent story also calls for compassion—ours. You may have read about a young man named Randy who jumped from a Rockford bridge, ending his life. He died from suicide. Hopefully, this story of devastating loss and excruciating pain can become a gift to the community. Through their pain and suffering, Randy and others can teach us a way to serve each other so that lives can be saved.

When first ordained over 28 years ago, I found myself celebrating many funerals and burying young people dying of AIDS. A young man with whom I spent much time prior to his death said to me, "This disease needs cash to find a cure." More than cash, I thought then, we needed compassion. Fast forward to present time. In the past 2 years, during this time of economic uncertainty, loss of jobs and the unknown before us, I have buried eight people from addiction, suicide or depression. A letter written to me by a young lady during her treatment says it all. With her permission I share it with you.

"The pain of severe depression is quite unimaginable to those who have not suffered it, and it kills in many instances because its anguish can no longer be borne. The prevention of many suicides will continue to be hindered until there is a general awareness of the nature of this pain. ... and for the tragic group of those who are compelled to destroy themselves, there should be no more reproof attached than to the victims of terminal cancer. ..." she wrote.

As a priest, I painfully hear these stories time and again. Our call as a community committed to our future is to engage our love and care for each other. Randy and others call us all to reclaim the meaning of conspire: to "breathe together" for the good and redemption of others, thereby creating a community of "co-conspirators" of compassion.

Suicide is an illness, not something freely chosen. A person who dies by suicide, in most cases, dies against his or her own will. Suicide is death by illness, not something someone wills.

For those of us left behind, we should not spend undue time and energy second-guessing: "What might I have done?" "Where did I fail?" "If only I had responded and reached out when I had the chance!" Suicide is the emotional equivalent of cancer, a heart attack or a stroke, and all the care and reaching out in the world cannot, at times, save a loved one from dying from these diseases. That's true, too, for suicide.

We should not spend too much time worrying, either, about the eternal salvation of those who die by suicide. God's love, healing, understanding, forgiveness and compassion reach into those places where we cannot. God can descend into hell and breathe out peace even there. God's touch is gentler than our own.

My friend's letter to me has a double value: Not only should it help us to understand suicide more deeply and exorcise more of its shameful stigma, but also it should help to expose the anatomy of suicide. Listen, don't judge, Listen!

Beyond that, an open understanding of suicide should help us all walk more humbly and compassionately in grace and community, resisting the bias of the strong and unreflective who make the unfair judgment that people who are sick want to be that way.

As innkeepers of compassion, may we acknowledge that the human heart is exquisitely fragile. May our judgments be gentle, our understanding deep and our compassion wide. May we be one in each other, and recognize faith, hope and charity as our anchor.



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