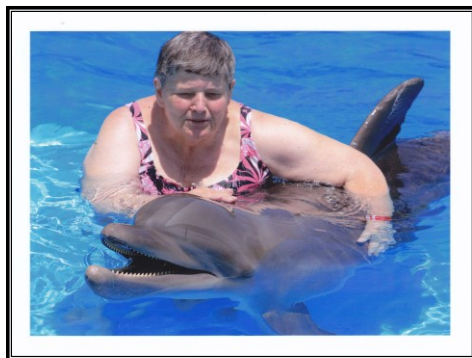


HOMELESS IN PARADISE

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Column #29



Part 3: THE SEASIDE SUICIDE

Tribute only after Death

By Wanda Sue Parrott

(This short series explores the question “What really happens at death?” as it relates to suicide and dying in general. From philosophical, scientific, and religious viewpoints, glimpses into the after-death experience will be shared by Monterey Peninsula residents who have both survived their own suicide attempts and witnessed them by others.)

Civilian and Military Statistics

SUICIDE SURVIVORS’ initials are used to protect their privacy in this edition. They live in Seaside, but location is secondary to statistics as reported by Ana Ceballos in the Monterey Herald, Wed., April 23: seven people in Monterey County had taken their own lives in April, ranging from a 73-year-old Toro Park man to a 22-year-old CSUMB student. Six were during the first week of the month. Contact aceballos@montereyherald.com.

As the local coalition of mayors pursues ending homelessness among Monterey-area veterans by the end of 2015, questions remain about the impact housing might have on reducing suicide. According to the Summary of ARMY STARRS finding published in JAMA in 2014, in 2008, the Army suicide rate exceeded the civilian rate (20.2 vs 19.2 per 100,000 per year, demographically matched). Why?

MJ Becco, pictured above with a friendly dolphin, retired from the U.S. Army 20 years ago as a Staff Sergeant. Now a Springfield, Mo. poet and traveler, she says, “In the Army suicide seemed to be more a mental weakness combined with the inability to deal with THE BIG GREEN MACHINE. People seemed to feel so controlled by the 'system,' suicide was the last resort they felt they had in the face of the controlling Army and their mental obsessions.”

Becco’s tours of duty introduced her to Zen philosophy, haiku poetry and cultural causes of suicide in the west versus the east. She says:

“Korea is a shame society--using shame as a social control--and as such has a high suicide rate among older people, the poor, and surprisingly, there is a large imitation pattern in Korea, particularly among celebrities and the young. Fault is a shame and suicide is the repayment.

“Guilt societies--like ours and Europe--have fewer suicides, in general. When I was in college, it (motivating factor) seemed to be the shame of failure in the face of parental expectations.”

“Farewell, Cruel World... But How?”

A suicide survivor known as S.C., 24, contemplated how to leave the confoundingly cruel world in which she had shamed and disappointed her parents: “I broke a few of the Ten Commandments and was in a guilt pit figuring how to justify my sins. Suddenly it felt like someone wrote a long poem through my mind and hand. I put it on the floor beside my bed, unsigned. More than 50 years later I still wonder, Who was he? Rembrandt? Van Gogh? I am female.” An excerpt of the poem follows:

Tribute Only After Death

Above the rest, whom do they uphold
And pay great tribute in unquestioned remembrance
When centuries past are dust that is rekissed?
 When his remains were underground they rushed
 Like wolves amidst the flock to claim his goods.
 Then they bragged in Puritanic falseness.
 When their kind die, they are not remembered.
 All they leave is Virtue’s hollow mist.
Forever cherished, once crowned blight to man,
When centuries past are dust that is rekissed,
Is now, was then, and forever will be
Upheld and made immortal, the artist.

About half the people who commit suicide use firearms or get others to shoot them, as in “Suicide by cop” where a person deliberately behaves threateningly to provoke lethal response from law enforcement officers. Many use gas, plastic-bag suffocation, pills or hanging.

Suicide methodology evolves as means and attitudes change. Suicide is an ancient practice; socially acceptable suicide is a modern taboo.

In 399 BC, 70-year-old Athenian philosopher Socrates’ died by self-administered hemlock poison after 280 jurors found him guilty of corrupting children by inciting disbelief in the gods.

In 30 B.C. the last reigning Egyptian pharaoh, 39-year-old Cleopatra, died from an allegedly self-inflicted asp bite, thus marking transition to the Roman era.

Since 1869 countless unhappy people have died by speeding trains—and still do.

Death By Train And Bridge

A Monterey Peninsula chef known as B.M., 58, lived outside Philadelphia 25 years ago. When walking near railroad tracks, he glimpsed a female figure cross the track up ahead. When the oncoming train screeched to a halt, he ran to the chaotic scene.

B.M. recalls, “It was surreal. I saw a thin white naked body in three parts. Thinking it was a mannequin, I kicked the head and felt something rise and enter my body. I heard a voice call my name clearly. She passed through me and out. She was only a 19-year-old girl. There was no blood. The wheels tore off her clothing and seared her flesh. I had been a skeptic, but I’ve been a believer in spirituality ever since.”

Belief wasn’t enough to convert B.M. into a teetotaler. He’d begun drinking at 14 and continued until his own suicide attempt at age 51 following two divorces and loss of work that placed him on the rail of a bridge in Pottstown, Pennsylvania.

“Just as I was ready to jump, a car pulled up and a little old lady wagged her finger and called, ‘What are you doing? Young man, you come down, and turn that frown upside down.’ I obeyed. She was black. I am white. She was an angel.”

B.M. spent 23 days in a rehabilitation facility where he wrote 13 poems, underwent counseling and group therapy, and has been sober for almost eight years. He advises the homeless: “If you want help for your alcohol or drug addiction, but are having trouble getting into rehab, reapply and stress that you are suicidal. You should be admitted immediately. Such rehab saved my life.”

To Be Or Not To Be?

Everyone contemplating a way out of physical, mental, or emotional pain asks Shakespeare’s best-known question from Hamlet. I have asked the question when things got tough. Have you?

*To be, or not to be: that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them? To die: to sleep. . .*

Matthew Bachelder’s suicide in Seaside in April inspired this series. My condolences to Matthew’s many loving, supportive friends and family. May we cherish his legacy as the phrase describing suicide as a sense like “homelessness of the heart,” and end this eulogy with MJ Becco’s thought-provoking Zen koan:

*A moth emerges
in the dawn. I ask “Is the
Caterpillar dead?”*

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