

CHURCH CHAT

BY

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SUICIDE

As a part of his regular routine, Fr. Ron Rolheiser, the noted author, columnist and lecturer, writes an annual column on suicide. They are insightful, consoling, and helpful articles. He addresses this topic because he knows people who are grieving a suicide.

I am one of those people, so I figure I should address it too.

In fact, today, Sunday, January 13, 2013 is the tenth anniversary of the suicide of our twenty-six year old daughter, Karla. Yesterday I put the finishing touches on my next book, *The Unique Grief of Suicide: Questions and Hope*. So, I've been thinking a lot about Karla lately.

Ten years ago our parish was magnificent in supporting us as we struggled with the shock and loss of our daughter. Our pastor, Fr. Bill Hitpas, led the way with his compassion, skill, and sensitive presence as well as a warm, inviting style of presiding at the funeral liturgy. The rest of the parish was also understanding and sympathetic, and expressed these feelings openly and effectively.

Since I worked for the diocese at the time, the Bishop, Wilton Gregory, also attended and, both publicly and privately, extended his empathy and support in human and consoling ways.

We watched the video of the wake service and funeral today and cried again as we relived the unfathomable sadness of those days. There was absolutely nothing but sincere compassion from our church community then – and it continues until this day. There never has been anything even close to a condemnation or negative insinuation about how she died. Everyone knows it was suicide and that she had bipolar disorder. But no one judged her or implied that she might not be in heaven. Jesus clearly was and is present to us through these loving people.

There was a time when the church and society in general, automatically condemned suiciders and the family grieving the suicide. Fortunately, those days are gone. But some remnants of that attitude still remain and I am very sad to report that the condemnatory tone can be found in the wording of our Catholic Catechism's section on suicide (Paragraphs 2280- 2283). To its credit, it does say that "grave psychological disturbances...can diminish the responsibility of the one committing suicide." And it also says that "we should not despair of the eternal salvation of persons who have taken their own lives."

As Karla's father, I find the whole section unenlightened, hardhearted, haphazard, and simply missing the point of suicide and suicide grief. It's not that it is totally "wrong"; it's just that it is totally "not right." I can support the teaching from one perspective and condemn it from another.

But it doesn't match the compassion of our parish, family and friends. Wouldn't it be nice if the official teachings would reflect the unofficial experiences of people?

Suicide raises many questions, many of them unanswerable. The central question is why. To us, there were options. To them, they saw no options. Their emotional pain overwhelmed their reason, and they could see no way to erase that pain other than erasing their life. Their "reality" at the time did not match - reality. Their core intention was not to take their life but to relieve their suffering. They felt like they were alone, that they were a burden to others, and they acquired the ability to counteract their basic drive to preserve their life. When those factors all came together, their illness took their life.

But even after that rationale, the why question remains.

Faith communities should be good at unanswerable questions. We deal in mystery all the time. Maybe that's why our parish community responded so well spontaneously and instinctively. They felt the mystery and stood with us as the grief hunted and haunted our souls, determined to strangle our hope and shrink our spirits. When there is mystery, particularly tragic mystery, faith and community defend against that tragedy. At times, it is the only defense.

A parish can be extremely valuable in terms of suicide and its precursor, mental illness, as I know and for which I am continually grateful.

Since Karla is on my mind, I close this column with her Gratitude Prayer, which she wrote as a second verse to the popular Serenity Prayer. I believe she is "back home".

Show me the trace of You in everyone I know.
Gently turn my gaze back home, toward simplicity, grace and gratitude.
Remind me that we are all imperfect, holy, and free.
Open me to know and embrace Your peace.