



SUICIDE: TO BE OR NOT TO BE



By Carolyn Spring

I could cope with it no longer. Every part of me – eyelids, throat, bowels – everything was clenched tight in a ball of furious unbearability. This feeling – such a feeling! – loomed up over me like some prehistoric sea-monster, ready to snap me up and devour me, ready to pilfer my bones and pick apart my brain. This feeling was too much. It was all too much. Feelings weren't supposed to be this overwhelming. I didn't know how to 'do' feelings. I didn't know you could feel like this. I certainly didn't know you could survive feeling like this. And so all that I wanted, all that I could see, the only option in this fetid slime-pit of despair, was suicide.

If you've never felt suicidal, never stood at the abyss and swayed unsteadily forwards, ready to fall, ready to go, you won't really know what I'm talking about. I'm sure everyone, from time to time, momentarily ponders the possibility of death: the lazy, languid option of two steps to the left and into the traffic. But not this.

Not this heaving, terrifying, sickening overload of emotion that will crush you if you don't act. Not this sense that if you don't kill yourself soon, you will be tortured to death by your own emotion. Not this deep-in-your-bones conviction that your very life is a reek and a stench



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and your best service to humanity is to rid it of you. That's the kind of suicidal ideation I'm talking about. The kind that hurts too much not to obey.

The first time I felt like that, I was at University and I was twenty years old. Over several difficult weeks at the beginning of my second year, a dark, oppressive cloud had rolled in over the fens, into my bones, and down into my guts. Everywhere I went, everything I felt, was this dank, gloomy cloud, robbing me of hope, robbing me of joy. I now know that it's called 'depression', but this was the 90s – before anyone decided that it was 'good to talk' about mental health. Depression meant you were just a bit down, a bit can't-be-bothered, a bit low. I didn't know that depression is a parasite that sucks the life out of you. I didn't know that it bleaches colours from

your vision, that it leaches tastes from your food, that it plugs closed every orifice in your mind where joy or pleasure or contentment might enter. It starves you from the inside.

This depression robbed me of daylight, and in rolled the thunderclouds, the lightning strikes of pain. Memories long suppressed – memories long dissociated – clapped out of the heavens and set me ablaze. Sudden, intrusive, bewildering images of something I couldn't quite see, but which I would now label as abuse. But it was in my body that I felt it. The lightning strike of a flashback lit up my being with indescribable, tormenting pain. I had to get away from it, but I didn't know how. Night after night, day after day, my body convulsed with the agony of unremembered trauma. I felt I was going mad. After six shameful weeks, backlogged on my course, isolated from support, disgusted with myself for this outbreak of 'insanity', I could bear it no longer. In the damp chill of a November night, in the jaundiced flicker of my student bedside lamp, I lined up the paracetamol and decided that I would fight it no longer. That was over twenty years ago, and yet here I am today. There have been many other nights like that. But I'm still here. It's a few years now since my last serious attempt. So the fact that I'm still alive – does that mean that I wasn't serious, that I was just pretending, that I was just doing it



HOW SHAME SAVED MY LIFE



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for attention, that it was just a phase, that I never really intended it? Not at all. For me, suicide was never the choice I wanted to make. Rather, it was the choice I didn't feel I could avoid.

Suicidal feelings are intensely painful. They are the unbearability of despair, inarticulate and visceral. They compel you to act. They drive you to leap and run and squeal and flee, like a cat falling into a fire. They are not about feeling 'down'. They are about feeling that there is no end to the feelings, and that you can bear it no longer. And then comes the stillness. In the maelstrom of agony is the choice – that breathless, final choice that you're going to end it, and you can do it, and you have to do it, and so now you will. And, addictive as crack, then comes the feeling of calm, because it's over, and it's going to be over, and you're not going to have to fight it any longer. It's the most dangerous time. When a suicide is 'completed', people often talk about how the person seemed 'ok' beforehand, the last time they saw them – sometimes 'upbeat', 'better', 'calm' even. But it was the swoon before the suicide.

And it scared me. Whenever I reached that point, whenever it went still within myself, with the voices quiet and the emotions numb, I was terrified rather than soothed. I felt annihilated. Always, for me, at those moments, somehow a swooping, powerful,

unremitting sense of purpose has taken hold of me and propelled me back into life. Something has dawned. I have needed to live, and make a difference, more than I've needed to die. But an ugly battle always prefaces that shift and I have not always survived it unscathed.

Being dissociative, with disconnections and contradictions inherent within my mind, sometimes one part of me overdoses and then another – usually a part we called 'Flag' – sounds the alarm and mobilises us to survive. It is an ambivalence that appears to the uninitiated like attention-seeking, but the reality is more subtle and complex. It is the inevitable consequence of a dissociative mind where my actions are not linked with my intentions or memories. I am fortunate not to have died. I am fortunate that my organs have not been damaged. It's not a course of action I would recommend to anyone. It's a course of action that I would do everything in my power to stop another person taking. But it's a course of action all too common for survivors of trauma.

Bethany Brand (2001) estimated that suicidal ideation afflicts 61 to 72% of dissociative survivors. 1-2% of people with DID have completed suicide. So I am not alone, and nor are the hundreds of other dissociative survivors who I have been in touch with over the last few years who also



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live lives of quiet desperation, teetering on the edge of the abyss. Things do get better, although often not before they have gotten worse.

There were different reasons at different times for my suicidality. Mostly, it was because it seemed to offer a way out, to end the pain. Sometimes, it was the fabled 'cry for help'. I have never understood people's negativity about this. When you're feeling extreme distress, when things hurt so badly that you are contemplating the ultimate cure, why shouldn't you cry for help? It's natural. And when you don't know how to put what you're feeling into words, when you don't know how to elicit support from others – or no one is listening and you can't get the help you need – then a 'cry for help' is a natural thing. Only rarely for me was it a naked, all-out cry for help – like many people with avoidant attachment, I tend to withdraw when I am in pain, and seek solitude rather than the care and support of others. But with my attachment style aside, a cry for help seems an eminently sensible, survival-based option to take.

At other times, suicidal ideation has been a way of taking control. When everything else around me has felt out-of-control – my feelings, my behaviours, others' behaviour towards me, my circumstances, my finances, my flashbacks, my body – then suicide at least gave me a semblance



of control. Sometimes, the planning of it would bring comfort, a way for me to order my world and feel that I had choices and things that I could do, in contrast to the powerlessness and overwhelm of what else I was experiencing. It was an outlet for my rage, this torrent of self-destructiveness at all the injustice and all the pain and all the horror of all the criminality that had ever been visited upon me. Sometimes it was an eruption of shame and self-loathing and a despicable, end-it-all explosion of fury that they had wanted me dead, back then when I was child, so I would give them what they wanted now, as an adult, because now I have the power. That kind of rage often finds no other place to land.

Suicidal thoughts were also a natural consequence of the despair that so dominated me. I was unable to visualise a future. What was the point in living if there



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was nothing beyond the torment of my memories, my wretched self-loathing, my isolation, my poverty? In the really difficult times, when every night was bereft of sleep and flooded with memories of torture, when the daytimes were a muddle of switching and fugues and anxiety and nausea, what was the point of living? I couldn't imagine things getting any better. There was nothing that I enjoyed. No one understood. I felt marooned, alone, isolated, outcast. I couldn't reach people, and they couldn't reach me. I couldn't 'change' quickly enough. I was seen as 'problematic' and 'difficult' and 'challenging' and 'bad'. I was told that I was choosing to be the way I was. I was labelled, and judged, and condemned. So what was the point? If I was intrinsically bad, as so many people at that time seemed to believe, then where was my future? I could people-watch in Costa and feel like some persecuted illegal immigrant. How on earth could I fit in? How could I be what I needed to be, in order to be what was acceptable to be? To be or not to be – that then was the question.

Suicide made sense, whilst living did not. What I didn't realise at the time was that I was wearing a blindfold. So while well-meaning people were telling me that 'It's not all bad' and 'Things will get better' and 'It's time to move on', I couldn't see what they were talking about. When people talked about having a hope and a future,

I didn't know what they meant. Under my blindfold, all I saw was the blackness. All I could hear was the silence. There was no future that I could see. There was no laughter, no joy, no hope, no potential 'acts of triumph'. My current experience was all that I had, and I lived it under the strictures of a blindfold. So I didn't believe people. I thought reality was all that I could see. I discounted their vision.

And that is where faith came in: not faith in the sense of organised religion, but faith as an inchoate reaching out for what isn't, and willing it, believing it, to be. Faith is being certain of what we cannot see. Faith is saying that there will be a beautiful sunset, even though it's not yet dawn. Faith is that experience of flying above the gloom-roll of clouds and saying, 'It's a beautiful day and the sun is shining'. And when I didn't have faith for myself, which for several years was most days, it was important that someone else had it for me. More often than not, my therapists and my husband held my faith for me. They kept saying, 'The sun is still shining, even though you can't see it today.' And I would argue with them that they were wrong, and I was right, but in the end they won.

They won, not through the brute force of shouting at me and making me see, but simply because they just kept saying it. What they had was a memory of the sun



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shining, even though it was a gloomy day. And one of the things that began to change for me was that I began to learn to be mindful. I began to be able to notice – ‘Just notice! Just be curious!’ as my therapist would say in that sing-song voice. I began to notice that the sun was shining, on days that it was. Even if only for a moment, it was important to direct my attention to it, to catch that ray, to focus on it, to make my brain imprint it in my memory, so that in the future I could look back and remember that it had been there. So much of faith is built on memory. When we’re struggling, we can’t remember a single sunny day. I had to retrain my brain to notice the sun was shining so that I could remember in the future that it would shine again, even on the most dismal of days.

And I began to notice that feelings come as a wave, that they crest, and that then they fall. Too often, on the crest, in the unbearability

of emotion, I wanted to die. I couldn’t see that if I could just ride it, if I could just surf along under its frothing underhang, things would feel better, and other options would open up to me. Because it didn’t feel like it would feel any better. We can only feel right-here-right-now feelings. We can’t feel a feeling from the future. So we have to know, or imagine, or believe that we’re going to feel better later. And that’s hard. We have to remember that when we felt like this before, that feeling didn’t last. I developed two mantras: ‘Feelings are meant to be felt’ (which as a consequence means that feelings don’t have to be acted upon – just felt), and ‘Feelings don’t last forever.’ Everything screamed at me that pain, this suffering-screach of unbearable despair, would remain until I did something about it, and the only thing I could do about it was to kill myself.

But then I learned that there are things that we can do when we feel big feelings: things that don’t involve suicide, nor even self-harm. Things that are soothing. At first, I wanted just to vomit even at the sound of the words ‘self-soothing’. There was something distinctly, creepily uncomfortable about them, like somehow it was to do with abuse (it’s not) or that it’s selfish (it’s not) or that it shows that I’m not coping (it doesn’t).



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I had to learn that self-soothing is merely a set of strategies we can have for helping our emotions to remain within a 'window of tolerance' – not too high, not too low. It's things we can do that help us rebalance, like playing Sudoku; or talking to a friend; or watching comfort telly; or going for a walk; or filing and tidying; or sleeping; or counting backwards; or taking a shower; or cleaning; or shredding old bank statements; or breathing from the belly; or journalling; or birdwatching; or anything at all that helps or distracts or amuses or reassures. Because right at that moment, on that wave of crushing emotion, too often I would freeze and forget that there are things that I can do (other than suicide) that will make things just a teeny bit more bearable, just get me through the next five minutes, just get me acting and being and asserting my right to life, rather than being drowned under the collapsing wave of too-much-too-much.

I personally found it helpful when people heard my distress but didn't overreact to it: when they didn't swing, full-scale into 'call 999, call an ambulance, call a doctor, call a priest'. When they heard how terrible it was for me, and they just sat there with me and went 'ouch', rather than ramping up my anxiety by talking of Places of Safety and sections and assessments. And I know it was hard for other people, as I sit now on the other side and have people tell me just

how desperate and despairing and futile and empty they feel. I want to swing into action, and make sure they're safe, and pass the hot potato of responsibility and risk onto someone else. I don't want to be the person who fails to act, who fails to do something, and finds them dead the next day. The anxiety of that is horrific.

So I see it on both sides now, and know that sometimes the right thing to do is to swing into action, and protect people from themselves. But mostly there's a space before we get to that point, a gap in the road from the kerb to the pavement, where we just need to step across rather than falling down into something we can't get ourselves out of. It's the gap where we can just sit with the person, and hear them, and soothe their emotions with them, and once they have settled, in a very clear way but in a very unpressured way, tell them quietly that the sun is still shining above the clouds but we know they can't see it right now.

I've always been amazed at how, when I've been at my most distraught, the simplest things have had the biggest effect. When I'm on the other side of it, I assume that there is nothing I can say to another suicidal person that will make any difference. But when I've been on the edge of the abyss, simple words have made a world of difference to me. Just telling me to hold on has been immeasurably powerful. Reminding me of



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one good thing in my future has made that one thing loom slightly larger in my mind, and I'm grateful, because I'd forgotten it.

When I'm feeling that there is no place for me on earth, that I don't belong, that I have no purpose, that I make no difference, that there's no point, then just hearing someone say, 'You matter, and there is only one you' can change everything, even if it's only for a minute. The effect is amplified if it's from someone who genuinely cares. When we're starving, sometimes even crumbs can make us feel less hungry. I've always thought, in reference to other people, that I should never forget that when I've been desperate, it makes a difference when someone hears my pain, and it makes a difference when someone reminds me too that the pain won't last forever.

This isn't meant as a glib, easy-cook response to suicide, and nor is this meant to be a comprehensive catalogue of the whys and why nots, the things to say and the things not to do. Some people do kill themselves, no matter what anyone else has said, no matter how sunny it was going to be the next day. Sometimes we can't pull back from the edge. It would be better – so, so much better – if events and circumstances and trauma and abuse and emotions and damage and pressure didn't push us right to the edge.

When people say that suicide is selfish, they fail to understand that what is truly selfish is the abuse and the pressure that was put on that person, to make them feel so desperate and hopeless and ostracised and alone that they chose instead to die. Suicide offers an escape to unbearable suffering. Maybe if there wasn't that suffering in the first place, maybe if we'd been helped more to bear it, maybe if the world wasn't the way it was and there were never any clouds, we wouldn't have to jump. I'm hoping, praying, pleading that no one jumps. Suicide is not the answer, although I know how much at times it feels as if it must be. I'm glad – now – that I didn't kill myself. And why didn't I? Maybe because I am one of the lucky unlucky ones – unlucky enough to have been abused, but lucky enough to have some support now, as an adult, to work it through.



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The best response we can have to suicidal people is to support them way before they get to that point, which in times of mental health cuts and austerity measures is easier said than done. But we can still try. I found a purpose in life, of recovery being my best revenge and a deep-in-my-guts need to bring change to this world, as my reason to push through the pain and to keep on living. It's what gets me out of bed every day of the week: the need to be alive, so that I can change something, and make things better, even if only a little. Judith Lewis Herman talked about a survivor mission being a crucial part of recovery.

We have to find better reasons to live than all our reasons to die. That's why I don't like suicide websites, and internet forums

which focus only on the negative. I don't need to be pulled down even lower when I'm already on the floor. I need to look up, and I need other people to help me look up. Empathy is important, but hope is more so. I'm glad I kept on hoping when everything seemed so hopeless. Because recovery is possible, and I could never have imagined back then, when I was twenty, with the paracetamol lined up and the hopelessness of despair beckoning me downwards, that life could be as hopeful and fruitful and positive and blessed as it is for me now.

There is hope. ■

