

Comment on Thomas Joiner's *Why People Die by Suicide*

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Although I have read many books on death, this (Joiner, 2005) was the first one on suicide. I thought that the book provides a very clear and helpful “theory” of suicide, referring to a number of cases, including his own experience. This book is highly recommended to those who desire to deepen their understanding of the topic. Now, there are two points I would like to discuss.

His theory of suicide can be summarized in the following quote: “[S]erious suicidal behavior requires the desire for death. The desire for death is composed of two psychological states--perceived burdensomeness and failed belongingness. ... When these states co-occur ... the desire for death is produced; if combined with the acquired ability to enact lethal self-injury, the desire for death can lead to a serious suicide attempt or to death by suicide.”

This is a very concise, yet highly illuminating point about suicide. For a precise discussion, there may be no need to go any further. However, for a casual discussion, it seems helpful to consider that the two psychological states boil down to just one thing, i.e., human connection, involving the two opposing directions. That is, failed belongingness can be seen as the “outgoing” direction of human connection (i.e., wanting other people) and perceived burdensomeness, the “incoming” direction of human connection (i.e., expecting others to want them). Although this may be an oversimplification, it seems to make sense to realize that what one desires most in the end is human connection.

Second, Joiner's point about the “beautification” of death seems somewhat limited. He “noted that people who are far along the trajectory toward suicide come to see death in a very peculiar light; they use terms like ‘beautiful’ and ‘graceful’ when describing it, and seem to fuse concepts of death, destruction, and waste, on the one hand, with life, sustenance, and nurturance, on the other hand. I believe this can only happen once someone has lost the visceral fear of death--in other words, has acquired the ability to enact lethal self-injury.”

While reactions like this may be common sensical, a sort of “beautification” of death has been discussed by people in various spiritual (but not necessarily religious) traditions, who are not suicidal. Here are some relevant quotes.

“You have learned powerful and uplifting lessons from this dying person you love, you have shared them with others, and you will carry this knowledge forward into any future dying experiences you may have. Now you can see ahead to your own dying--not in fear, but as a

most brilliant opportunity to write the last chapter of your life in a way that truly reflects the unique, caring, and generous person that you are. Appreciate what you have done, and who you are.” (Callanan, 2008)

“The confusion and suffering arise from our attachments to how it used to be and how we thought it always would be. For these people, dying is hell. It is tearing away of all that seemed so real and substantial. But dying doesn’t have to be hell. It can be a remarkable opportunity for spiritual awakenning. I have been with many people who have experienced this falling away of energy, this same wearing away of the body, this same inability to be the individual they thought they were, who, instead of tightening into even greater suffering, began to let go of the root of their contraction. As their self-image began to melt, I saw them begin to have a little more space in which to experience themselves.” (Levine, 1982)

“In reality the opening to healing and the preparation for death are the same. When we are differentiating between healing and preparing for death we are forgetting that each are aspects of a single whole. It is all within the attitude with which one comes to life.” (ibid.)

“Perhaps real acceptance is the first time we take death within. Where death is not the enemy but instead becomes the great teacher that directs us toward our fear and encourages us to relate to it instead of from it. Death’s teaching is to relate to your life as a whole rather than some fractured reality from which you wish to escape.” (ibid.)

“Learning to die is learning to dissolve past the holdings of this moment, opening fresh to the next without clinging anywhere. We are each day, each moment, learning to die: to dissolve into the ocean of pure being.” (ibid.)

“To drop opinion, belief, attachment, greed, or envy is to die--to die every day, every moment.” (Krishnamurti, 1992)

“The mind can be aware of the unknown only when it dies to the known--dies without any motive, without the hope of reward or the fear of punishment. Then I can find out what death is while I am living--and in that very discovery there is freedom from fear.” (ibid.)

“I see death not only as an opportunity to reflect on the meaning of your own existence, but to offer your life as a gift to others.” (quoting Donald Moore, in Kiernan, 2006)

“If we want a meaningful death, then we must strive to live a meaningful life. Our days are numbered; the potential quality of our days is infinite. The surest way to enrich that quality, and magnify its meaning, is to live a life mindful of its temporariness. As I interviewed people from all kinds of backgrounds, in all regions of the country, I saw how mortality helped them change priorities. Anyone would shift if told he or she had only a fixed amount of time to live. That could be a cause for fear, or it could have the opposite effect. Perhaps each day becomes more precious when we acknowledge that we have a limited supply of them.” (Kiernan, 2006)

“The art of dying well is the art of living well. There is no telling when the story will finish. And so the most important time in your life is none other than right now.” (ibid.)

“The only thing unnatural about death is how we try to defeat it, and when we can’t, how we try to hide it.” (a patient’s words in Hablitzel, 2006)

My sense is that we could understand suicide (as well as other aspects of death and life) better *not* when we resist to fuse death and life, but when we gain the ability to see death and life as two sides of a single reality.

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