

HONEST TO SUICIDE

Your column today is as disappointing to me as your columns usually are bracing, heartening because your "values profile" (ugly jargon!) is so near to mine & you preach to millions what I'm privileged to preach only to a few. I hope this compliment sets you up enough for you to give a listen to this critical commentary on your only subject for today, suicide.

1. As a theist, you can be expected to speak of God, if not also for God, on life-and-death issues. But you fail to do so even though your pro-suicide reader, by mentioning God, indirectly invites you to do so. How come?

2. You fall into the ego-trap of most would-be counselors of pro-suicides: you think the latter are "crying out for help": "I believe that you really want me to talk you out of killing yourself." Whenever I run into this ploy, the picture I have is of a pelican throwing a fish up till it comes down head first: imagine trying to swallow one against the fins and scales! The would-be helper's assumption is that the pro-suicide's bottom-line soul-state is what would be necessary if the would-be helper is to be helpful toward the would-be helper's goal, namely, frustrating the pro-suicide's intention. Latter-day science should help expose the error here: the observer pollutes the data.

3. At least as likely, if not more, is that she (the probable sex of the one who is "waiting for my elderly mother to die") wants confirmation, social support, for her decision ("When she goes, I go."). If that's what she's up to, you'd have more chance to get your way (namely, reversing her decision) were you to accept her cry for support (not for "help") & flatly refuse to support her. Your letter, instead of being honest to suicide (and relevant to the pro-suicide who's crying out for support), is only honest to the dogma that talking pro-suicides are crying out for help. As a clergy counselor, I know how inept is the counselor who imposes cookie-cutter dogmas on the counselee. That's why I'm disappointed in you this time: you usually manage to be theistic and compassionate without being cookie-cutter.

4. You have no word of praise for one who is so set upon not hurting another that she sets aside what she most wants in life, namely, to be rid of it. Your counselee has something to live for, which is more than a lot of zombies "out there" can say. Further, her mom may be a tough old bird who will naturally outlive her: suicide, here, is only theoretical.

5. She says "I no longer fear death," but you fail to touch of this touchy subject. Should she fear death? If you think she should, should you not use this sanction against her suicide? In a Greek church day before yesterday I heard the priest tell of a hospital visit that day to a patient who wants to suicide but who, according to the priest, will go to hell if he does so. A car bomb 12½ years ago reduced the poor man to a tangled mass of flesh. Despite 100 operations, he's in constant pain. The priest feels good about using fear to keep the man in torture--torture here, so he'll not have torture there. Well, Ann, where are you on this? Me, I believe it's a moral universe on both sides of the grave. I'm not about to reduce the moral seriousness of this-side decisions by denying them that-side consequences. God wants us to make intelligent, compassionate decisions about ourselves, others, the world. Has it occurred to you to one might be punished in the next life for failing to suicide when suicide would have been the indicated decision meeting the criteria of intelligence and compassion?

6. You state plainly your dogma: "Even under the worst conditions, life is precious." Are you consistent about this? Does it apply to deformed fetuses? "Are you, under all circumstances, against war and capital punishment and "pulling the plug"? I'm not saying one should be consistent; indeed, I see "a consistent life ethic" as morally monstrous (though it's the slogan of a Washington lobby called "JustLife" [713 Monroe St., NE, Wash., DC 20017], against poverty, abortion ["except when necessary to

prevent the death of the mother"], & nukes but whose brochure doesn't mention other issues involved it being consistently "prolife," namely, suicide, euthanasia, capital punishment, & nonnuke war)....The dogma that all human life is "precious" passes the test of compassion but gets an F for intelligence.

7. Somalatry is the worship of the human body instead of God. Jesus corrects this by telling us to fear God more than anything that can happen to our bodies. But the religion of "wellness" now preaches that health is the supreme value. By contrast, the Bible speaks of life as extensional ("length of days") and relational ("eternal life," intimate relationship with God here and hereafter, the ultimate value). Antiabortion, "extreme measures" of medical technology to keep the flesh alive, and antisuicide locate what's "precious" elsewhere than where the Bible does.

8. Against suicide you use the currently common sanction, "death with dignity," the primary sanction ancient Stoicism--which had much influence on the New Testament--used for suicide. God gives us reason, and we fail of dignity if we fail to use it. Is it, in every case, unreasonable to choose how one is to leave the world? Not even Hospice, which fights to control pain & maintain the dignity of the dying by spiritual as well as medical care, would say so.*

9. Some suicide because they want to cease being a burden on their loved ones. Increasing numbers of compassionate, intelligent folk will suicide because they want to cease being a burden on the now groaningly overburdened (1) medical-care system & (2) biosphere (our species being its only earthly enemy). Let's go Daniel Callahan one better. Instead of laws forbidding expensive medical attention to the over-80, let's sign up over-80s to refuse expensive medical attention. Would the latter fall into your definition of "suicide"?

10. In most cases, your advice to "wait for the cloud of depression to lift" is good. But in the present case, are you not telling somebody without boots to pull herself up by her bootstraps? The spiritual says "All God's chillun got shoes": how about giving her shoes? Like, a fresh way of perceiving God, whom she's now experiencing only as enemy? Her malaise is spiritual & theological.

Letter writer crying out for help

Dear Ann Landers: I have been planning to commit suicide for a long time. Although I haven't yet actually attempted to do it, I have come close enough so that I no longer fear death. When the time comes, I have every intention of doing it right.

When I hear of someone who has taken his or her life, I silently applaud the decision. When I hear of homeless people living in boxes under bridges, people who are trapped in a dysfunctional body, and those who are dying a slow death and are racked with pain, I wonder why they feel that life is so precious that they want to continue to live.

You tell people who are harboring suicidal thoughts to seek professional help, but you never tell them why they should. When it comes right down to it, Ann, no one is indispensable. We will all die eventually, so if



Ann Landers

life is lousy, why stick around?

I have found that life's trials and tribulations are not temporary. When one agonizing situation ends, a new one pops up to take its place. I no longer believe that God does not give us more trouble than we can endure, or a heavier load than we can carry. Often people who are crushed by life's cruel blows opt for sleeping pills, a rope or a bullet in the brain. I see nothing wrong with that.

The only reason I am still alive is because I am waiting for my elderly

mother to die. She is the only person in my life I care enough about not to hurt. When she goes, I go.

If you have any answers, Ann, I'd like to hear them. — A Reader in Parma, Ohio

Dear Parma: I have a sneaking suspicion that your letter is a cry for help. I believe that you really want me to talk you out of killing yourself.

The fact that people live in boxes under bridges and suffer with terminal diseases is the best evidence that even under the worst conditions, life is precious. Otherwise, why would they want to go on? Even though life may be painful and depressing, hope springs eternal that things will get better.

I urge those who contemplate suicide to wait for the cloud of depression to lift. I cannot tell you how many letters I have received from

* Wisely, Hospice takes no formal position on suicide. Concentrating on palliative care, it neither hastens death nor prolongs dying.