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YOUTH, SUICIDE, AND OUR SUCCES-CENTERED CULTURE

by Catherine Cook

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Suicide has a deep impact on communities. Someone taking their own life makes a profound statement that things were too hard, and life wasn't worth living with that much pain. Losing someone to suicide always leaves the survivors of those loved ones asking *Why?* But our culture doesn't view all suicide as equal; we focus on a narrow sample of suicides in the media, revealing what we believe makes life worth living in the first place. I believe Christianity's unique narrative challenges how we value the worth of a person's life.

Culture Ignores the Statistics. Suicide is a real and present danger among many people living with mental health issues and psychological scars, but the media focuses almost exclusively on the young or famous when they end their lives. Therefore, it was surprising for me to learn that the demographic most at risk for suicide is the one we spend the least amount of time thinking and talking about: our elderly. In fact, elderly and middle-aged people are at a much higher risk of suicide than young people. According to the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, "In 2014, the highest suicide rate (19.3) was among people 85 years or older. The second highest rate (19.2) occurred in those between 45 and 64 years of age. Younger groups have had consistently lower suicide rates than middle-aged and older adults. In 2014, adolescents and young adults aged 15 to 24 had a suicide rate of 11.6."[1]

So why aren't the front pages and news headlines raising awareness of mental health for those suffering silently in nursing homes or for those who are middle aged and struggling to pay their mortgage? And why are we morbidly fascinated every time a young college student takes his or her own life?

Culture Obsesses over the Quest for Perfection. I believe our reaction to suicide reveals a great deal about what we value as a culture. The fairy tale we are telling ourselves is that we will be happy when we have _____ (fill in the blank). According to this fairy tale, being happy is the only thing that will make life worth it all. With this mindset, if we can't have our "fill in the blank" (money, success, youth, love, and so on), we would rather die than to live out of reach of the American dream. But Christians have an opportunity to offer truth in the place of these distorted values.

In such an event as an idealized young life lost to suicide, we have two options: abandon our quest for "happiness" or try to explain away each individual case that failed to live up to our expectations. Before entering grad school, I worked for a ministry at the College of William and Mary where I saw a lot of students affected by suicides in their community. I recently sat down with Kelly Crace, the vice president of health and wellness at the College of William and Mary. Crace has a lot of thoughts about how the millennials and their parents operate out of a constant state of fear: fear of not succeeding and achieving their goals. I asked him how he thought this fear-based mentality affects our response to suicides on college campuses:

Suicides on college campuses move us toward myopic criticisms of stress and academic pressure. We want to blame the suicide on how stressed out or pressured a student was made to feel. But stress and academic pressure are not strong predictors of completed suicide attempts. What is a strong predictor is a complex mental health state that goes untreated. Stress and pressure can deteriorate someone's well-being and can compound a complex mental health state but they in themselves are not indications that someone will commit suicide.

However, these stresses can reveal the values of our culture that have failed to bring us the always-elusive happiness we seek. Last July, the *New York Times* ran an article on a freshman at an Ivy League school who battled depression and suicidal thoughts. The article lists all the accomplishments this young woman had achieved all the while wearing her "Penn Face," a term that has been "long used by students to describe the practice of acting happy and self-assured even when sad or stressed." This *New York Times* article points out that this is not a problem unique to Penn: "In 2003, Duke jolted academe with a report describing how its female students felt pressure to be 'effortlessly perfect': smart, accomplished, fit, beautiful and popular, all without visible effort. At Stanford, it's called the Duck Syndrome. A duck appears to glide calmly across the water, while beneath the surface it frantically, relentlessly paddles."[2]

These young people reveal the narratives in which we are living. The pop culture narrative tells young people that they are beautiful because they are young, and that is why they are loved. But if love is correlated with youth and beauty, then we are never as greatly loved as we were yesterday. We are taught that love is a quickly fading commodity that we must grab ahold of before it fades completely.

The academic and career narrative tells young people that they are bright and full of potential to do good and be successful, and that is why they are loved. But there is always someone smarter, someone making more of an impact, someone earning more, and someone receiving more recognition. And therefore we believe that because we are only as loved as we are successful, we are never as loved as we could be if only we were just a little bit smarter or working just that much harder.

College students are caught between these two worlds. They are told that they are the most beautiful they will ever be and have the most possibilities ahead of them that they will ever have. So they feel the crushing weight of "happiness" pressing in on their mortal minds. But as a culture, our response to the suicidal thoughts or actions of the young is one of shock: "You have everything! Why are you depressed?" What's more, our silence in the face of our elderly committing suicide affirms that society doesn't care about those outside our fairytale narrative.

Culture Is Lacking the Hope of Christ. I believe it should not be surprising to Christians that many people, even those with "everything," have moments of despair so great that they want nothing more than to end the pain. Christians know how marvelous this world was intended to be, how broken it now is, and how painful that chasm can be for the human spirit. We believe the world was once more beautiful and more full of potential than any college student ever has been. But evil entered into the narrative, and the world fell from its pinnacle of beauty into unbearable death, pain, and misery. For those of us doing "OK," perhaps it is because we have the comfort of the Spirit to help us cope with the suffering we see in our broken world, or perhaps it is that we are just more numb to suffering than those who seem "overwhelmed." Perhaps we have bought into the world's alternative narratives that promise us comfortable lives. And perhaps some of us are just better at playing our part in these narratives than others who are more visibly "broken" or struggling through life.

I am not attempting to explain why anyone commits suicide. Rather, I am offering up an examination of our values in response to suicide, and I am suggesting that a theological understanding of the creation, fall, and redemption doctrines actually invites us to understand mental illness and suicide and all the complexities therein in a way that the American dream never can. Kathryn Greene-McCreight, a priest and

theological writer, shared her own experience of depression and suicidal ideation in *Darkness Is My Only Companion*. In this book, McCreight reflects on how the American dream has seeped its way into even our most holy thoughts and motivations:

I find that many people think of God as a self-help device we can use to improve our personality. To help us quit smoking, drinking, overeating. To help us be nicer people so we can stand to live in our own skin. To help us win more friends and influence more people. Or maybe even to be more affluent. The drive to improve ourselves, personality included, motivates much religion in America. Many of us Christians are functional atheists, even though we may be quite pious indeed. We often can't imagine how our religion would require anything of us that would not be directed solely to our betterment.[3]

In Scripture, we find a metanarrative that has the power to replace the elusive promises of our American dream. But those other values have a stronghold on us so that even Christianity becomes a way to achieve this American dream. Christ never promised us a comfortable life decorated with accolades of beauty and success. Yes, He promised the comfort of the Holy Spirit, but what is the nature of this comfort? It is a spiritual, not a physical, comfort, and (in my own experience with mental illness) not always a psychological comfort, either.

So what does Christianity offer a world that is shaken by young suicides and has become disenchanted with the American dream? It offers a worldview not dependent on who we are but on who God is. When beauty, success, and even your mind fail you, come to the One who will never fail you and who will continue to love you when the world stops calling you beautiful or when it sees more of your flaws than your successes. —*Catherine Cook*

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NOTES

1 "Facts and Figures," htttp://www.afsp.org.
2 Julie Scelfo, "Suicide on Campus and the Pressure of Perfection," *New York Times*, July 27, 2015, htttp://www.nytimes.com.
3 Kathryn Greene-McCreight, *Darkness Is My Only Companion: A Christian Response to Mental Illness*

(Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2015), 85–86.