Suicide Survivors: 
Psychotherapeutic Implications of Egocide*

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ABSTRACT: Interviews with seven of ten known survivors of jumps from the Golden Gate Bridge and San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge revealed that all of them experienced transcendence and spiritual rebirth phenomena. The psychotherapeutic implications of these findings lie in helping depressed and suicidal individuals confront death in a symbolic and meaningful way. The issue is one of "egocide" (symbolic suicide) and aiding individuals in the rebirth process. In this way actual suicides can be prevented. When individuals experience partial "deaths" (like loss, failure, rejection, depression, suicidal states, or negative parts of their egos), there is opportunity for "rebirth" (positive transformation, creative change, growth, and significant spiritual reawakening). The therapeutic task is to help individuals differentiate between "ego death" and total death and to discover through the creative process of psychotherapy that overt suicide need not be a solution.

O Compassionate Ones, you who possess the wisdom of understanding, the love of compassion, the power of doing divine deeds and of protecting in comprehensible measure: This person is passing from this world to the next. He is taking a great leap. The light of this world has faded for him. He has entered solitude with his Karmic forces. He has gone into a vast silence. He is borne away by the Great Ocean (of birth and death).  
—The Prayer (Adapted from The Tibetan Book of the Dead, W. Y. Evans-Wentz, Ed., 1965.)

This paper focuses on the psychotherapeutic implications of previously reported findings from research on "suicide survivors" (Rosen, 1975). The initial research study was a follow-up study of survivors of jumps from the Golden Gate Bridge and the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge. It was undertaken in order to shed light on the nature of suicidal behavior and to investigate what the experience was like for these people and what effects surviving such an event had on

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their lives. Six of the eight known Golden Gate Bridge survivors and one of the two San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge survivors were interviewed. The results of that study will be summarized briefly. A suicidal leap from either bridge is almost invariably fatal. Only 1% survives. All six of the Golden Gate survivors' suicide plans involved only the Golden Gate Bridge. They spoke of an association between its beauty (grace) and death. Although the seven interviewed survivors gave varying reasons for jumping, there was a similar core of aloneness, alienation, depression, rejection, worthlessness, and hopelessness. One of the Golden Gate survivors denied any suicidal intent at all; he said he was just entering the "golden doors" to a higher spiritual realm. The experience of jumping from both bridges was described as "tranquil." They lost their time orientation and said the fall felt like a long time, from "hours" to "an eternity." None of them experienced life events or distant memories passing through their minds or before their eyes. However, all of them experienced transcendence and a spiritual rebirth phenomenon. They unanimously recommended that a suicide barrier be built on the Golden Gate bridge. (The Bay Bridge survivor suggested erecting barriers on both bridges.) This is most likely a projection of an inner barrier against suicide since none of the survivors has gone on to commit suicide. It is surviving this self-chosen confrontation with death and the resultant rebirth and spiritual transcendence that has psychotherapeutic implications for working with depressed and suicidal persons.

With regard to the psychology of rebirth, Jung (1959) has stated: "Rebirth is not a process that we can in anyway observe. . . . It is entirely beyond sense perception . . . a purely psychic reality, which is transmitted to us only indirectly through personal statements. One speaks of rebirth; one professes rebirth; one is filled with rebirth. This we accept as sufficiently real."

We have much to learn from these survivors of suicide, who in a very real sense have lived out ancient myths of death and rebirth. Like Thoth in Egypt, Hermes in Greece, or Inanna in Sumer, they have "descended to the underworld, the land of No Return, experienced death, and achieved the impossible return to life again" (Henderson & Oakes, 1971).

Survivors' Death-Rebirth Experiences

So let us turn to the survivors' own statements about their transforming death-rebirth experiences. One survivor who described the first half of his descent as "peaceful" realized halfway down that he was going to hit a concrete piling, and he remained conscious to solve this problem. He maneuvered his body so that he only grazed the concrete piling and landed in "the arms of mother water." He then nearly drowned, but he feels his prayers to God were answered and he was saved. Regarding his experience he said:

It was strange because I thought suicide was the right thing to do. Before I jumped I was an agnostic—no real belief in God. After the jump I became fully Christian; I believed in God and Jesus Christ. Christ became a living reality for me. [He felt Christ and his disciples were around him.] It is still going on. I'm now in a period of painful growth—of being reborn.

The survivor who entered the "golden doors" to a higher spiritual realm described his experience as follows:

I caught a glimpse of San Francisco. Thoughts of goodbye—leaving San Francisco is like leaving the world. I felt like a bird flying—total relief. In my mind I was getting away from one realm and going to another. I did not struggle. I gave up. I was looking forward to what was to come. Even now I'm symbolically still looking for the better world—I'm still in that place between the bridge and the water. . . . When I hit the water I felt a vacuum feeling and a compression like my energy displaced the surface energy of the water. At first everything was black, then grey-brown, then light. It opened my mind—like waking up. I was very restful. When I came up above water, I realized I was alive. I felt reborn. I was treading water and singing. I was happy and it was a joyous occasion. It affirmed my belief—there is a higher spiritual world . . . in that moment I was filled with new hope and purpose of being alive.

Another survivor left a suicide note stating:

Why me? Can I understand what's beyond death? Is there something outside the realm of understanding to be understood?

He later said he felt that his "whole life was reborn," that he "broke out of old pathways," and can now "sense other people's existence."

Yet another survivor went to the Golden Gate Bridge with thoughts of being with God. He thought if God understood and accepted him, he would go to "Paradise." After surviving the jump he said his "will to live had taken over," and he felt that there was "a benevolent God in heaven who permeates all things in the Universe." He said we are all members of "the godhead—that great God Humanity." He stated that he "loves God" and wants to "do things for others." Another said he was glad he survived and that after his jump he felt closer to God, and he thanks God that he did not die.
An additional survivor said:

It’s beyond most people’s comprehension. I appreciate the miracle of life—like watching a bird fly—everything is more meaningful when you come close to losing it. I experienced a feeling of unity with all things and a oneness with all people. After my psychic rebirth I also feel for everyone’s pain. Surviving reconformed my belief and purpose in my life. Everything was clear and bright—I became aware of my relationship with my creator.

The Bay Bridge survivor stated:

I felt chosen because I didn’t die; I said this in front of the congregation. I was thankful. I cried in front of them. I wanted to help others. I pointed out how sovereign and powerful God is and how little we are and that it’s not up to us. I was pure and cleaner inside. I thought somehow I was helping others in the spiritual realm. Others were helped by my testimony—I thought I could save others. I spoke in tongues twice and asked for the church to be united and for everyone to love each other more.

The suicide survivors’ death-rebirth experience represents both an ego death—a feeling of total annihilation—and a rebirth, with feelings of love and salvation (Grob, 1972). This study corroborates Grob’s (1973) statement: “After the ego death, the individual sees human existence in a much broader spiritual framework—no matter what the personal problems are, suicide does not appear to be a solution anymore.”

Psychotherapeutic Implications

The psychotherapeutic implications of this research lie in helping depressed individuals confront death in a symbolic and meaningful way. If we can assist suicidal persons in committing “egocide,” what is here termed symbolic suicide, and aid them in the rebirth process or more properly “the birth of the Self,” then we will be preventing actual suicides. Assisting persons in committing “egocide” is in reference to aiding them in the process of destroying ego parts that have been the sources of the individual’s conflict, pain, and suffering, and the block to the center of one’s being which is the Self. “The Self is the ordering and unifying center of the total psyche (conscious and unconscious) just as the ego is the center of the conscious personality” (Edinger, 1973). Through the “death” experience the ego realizes “that it is not the supreme directing force in the human personality; it finds out that it is confronting a more powerful entity” (Singer, 1973) in the form of the Self. The “egocide” (the ego death and the resulting disintegration) allows for contact with the Self (the original psychic state before birth). Through this experience of rejoining the Self, the person is “twice born” and feels whole. “Having experienced the transpersonal center of the psyche [the Self—the point where God and man meet], the [newly reintegrated] ego recognizes its subordinate [but balanced] position and is prepared to serve the totality and its ends rather than make personal demands” (Edinger, 1973).

The best way to decrease our own anxiety about death and suicide is to confront these issues within ourselves and with others. As Hillman (1973) has stated, “One approaches death by dying. Approaching death requires dying in soul, daily, as the body dies in tissue. And as the body’s tissue is renewed, so is the soul regenerated through death experiences.” In order to guide others through suicidal crises, we must be able to accept, as Camus (1975) stated, “the danger that lies in the subtle instant that precedes the leap. Being able to remain on that dizzying crest—that is integrity and the rest is subterfuge.”

Surviving suicide from the Golden Gate Bridge (or the Bay Bridge) contains much symbolism and seeds of ancient myths or archetypes that can assist us in helping suicidal persons through their journeys of death and rebirth. Grof (1972, 1973) has outlined what could be called stages of death-rebirth process. Likewise Henderson (1971) has pointed out that the transformation, from consciousness of ego to consciousness of Self, is made possible by a special archetype, the “rites of passage.”

The suicide survivors described initial feelings of depression, alienation, aloneness, and hopelessness, and they felt there was no way out except death. Grof (1972, 1973) describes this stage as “antagonism with mother” and the first stage in clinical delivery. There is indescribable suffering. It is hell and a “no exit” situation. This would be the period of disengagement before the “rite of separation,” which as a threshold experience is frequently symbolized as the act of passing through a door or gate (Henderson & Oakes, 1971).

The survivors were attracted to the Golden Gate Bridge, which symbolically represents a golden gate to heaven, or a way to God, or meaning beyond this world. From this beautiful and impressive modern structure that bridges heaven and earth the survivors leaped eastward into the San Francisco Bay, which symbolically could represent a receptive feminine container. As Jung stated, “death is quite commonly regarded as an entry into the mother’s womb [for rebirth]” (Maduro, 1974). Grof (1972, 1973) would characterize this stage as the “death-rebirth struggle,” “synergism with mother,” and the
second stage of clinical delivery. Henderson (1971) calls this the “rite of transition,” during which one is purified in the “water of death or water of life as amniotic fluid.” The final stage of survival or being reborn is called by Grof (1972, 1973) the “third and final stage of clinical delivery,” the “death-rebirth experience,” “separation from mother” (or the sea), and “re-emergence into light.” Henderson (1971) would call this final phase the “rite of incorporation” in which rebirth signals Self-realization or wholeness and completes the “rites of passage.” In this transformed state the suicide survivors felt reborn, identified with Christ in a real sense, and they felt closer to God with a sincere love for others.

The suicide survivors’ failure at killing themselves proved to be a triumphant victory and a transcending experience. Their suffering egos died and allowed for the spiritual birth of their souls or Selves. As Hillman (1973) stated and as the suicide survivors validated, “The impulse to death need not be conceived as an anti-life movement; it may be a demand for an encounter with absolute reality, a demand for a fuller life through the death experience.”

Death (and death anxiety) is the pressing theme for contemporary man (Lifton, 1973) and “there is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide” (Camus, 1975). By confronting death and suicide, change and transformation can come about. When we experience “egocide,” “deaths,” or “alternative death experiences for the soul” (Hillman, 1973)—like loss, failure, rejection, separation, depression, psychosis, dissociation, pain, isolation, or negative parts of our egos or ourselves—there is an opportunity for “rebirth,” positive transformation, growth, creativity, and significant spiritual reawakening. “Death appears in order to make way for transformation... the death experience breaks down the old order... analysis means dying. The soul favors the death experience to usher in change. Viewed this way a suicide impulse is a transformation drive” (Hillman, 1973). The suicidal crisis is “a cry for help to die—to go through the death experience with meaning” (Hillman, 1973). The therapist’s task is to aid the person to commit “egocide” and not suicide so that the Self may be born and allowed along with a “separate creative instinct... (su generis)” (Maduro, 1974) to flourish in the spirit of change and transformation.

Further Survivor Comments

Let us return to the suicide survivors themselves and to some personal and reflective statements concerning how they now feel about suicide (Gallagher, 1975):

It rejuvenated something in me. I had experienced rebirth trips before, but this was like a total renewing of myself toward myself and toward others. I figured then that things could only get better and they did... Dying was not the issue. It was really living. I jumped for my idea of life. To be free, going on, a change. But to people contemplating suicide, I say: “Things are rarely as bad as they seem. Have faith. Pick yourself up and go on...”

There are a variety of people from all walks of life who come to a point when there’s supposedly no exit, and to what they presume to be the only way out. But it isn’t. Because later, when you have gone through a severe thing like that, and you live through it by some grace of God, you’re thankful... Be happy with nothing. People become depressed because they have desires and they are not fulfilled. If a person could just realize that those desires are not going to be answered just by you wanting them.

I think the only time suicide should be legal is when you have a terminal disease. Not too many people really want to commit suicide, to really die. What they’re really saying is “I want to live. I want my life to change.”

References


Gallagher, N. Bridge jumpers who have lived. San Francisco Magazine, 1975, 4, 18-23.


