

Funerals: suicide



Secrets have their place, but that place is seldom in the funeral for someone who has suicided. The fact is that all the worst thoughts are there, anyway, just under the surface. Unwelcome thought must often be welcomed into a funeral, and that is more true of a suicide funeral than most.

Suicide, perhaps more than any other frequently encountered cause of death, challenges our ways of thinking about the person who has died and our relationships with them. More than ever, a suicide funeral requires the facilitation of experimental restorying in order to help us fit people and events into an accounting that works.

*The licensing of speculation and discussion is particularly important when among those involved there are young people who might themselves be at risk of suicide. The best prophylactic against a chain of suicides is open discussion about the **whys**. An experienced celebrant will make sure that the **hows** are left to one side. A funeral is not the place to give people ideas on how to go about suicide.*

Here are some of the words, edited a little and with the names and details left out or changed, that I once used in a suicide funeral. Of course the circumstances are always different. Sometimes there are almost no clues about why this person suicided. But even then there will be speculations, and they should be addressed.

As you know John suicided.... I then explained the immediate circumstances (but not how-to information) as far as possible.

John was a loved and respected man; a kind, caring man. Hard-working, decent. Nobody had realised how difficult things were for him.

And now he's gone.

We cannot understand.

We must try

but we cannot.

And we must come to accept.

You who knew John must right now be feeling some mixture of numbness, and anger and sadness. That is inevitable.

And when someone ends their own life, mostly the people who are close also feel guilty, too. And that is probably also inevitable.

Everyone asks - where did I fail?

My question is, did anyone really fail?

Everyone here, perhaps, blames themselves for John's death, at least a little bit.
And almost everyone here blames someone else too, at least a little bit.
But in fact everyone did the best they could, in all the circumstances.
None of us is perfect. We can only do our best. We've all done things that are wrong.
We are human beings.
And, when all is said and done, none of us did too badly.
None of us is very much to blame at all.
When any one of us feels guilty about John, let them know that they share that feeling of guilt with most of us here.

And when anyone feels guilty, or blames themselves, or blames anyone else, let them also remember that guilt and blame are presumptuous. We have no right to take from John the responsibility he chose to take on. He chose to be responsible for ending his own life. That is his. To the extent that we feel guilty we take that responsibility away from him. It was his decision.

We think he was wrong. We think he has made a ghastly mistake. We think he was a fine person, an interesting person, a quirky person, a fun person. He was a good son, a good partner, a good brother, a good friend, a good workmate. A lot of people care for him. He made a wrong decision. But it was his decision. Nobody else is to blame. We think John lived a good life, but we think his death was wrong. Let us resolve today to live as John lived, not to die as he died.

Perhaps some of us feel angry with John for making his decision.
That's OK.
He's got some anger coming to him.
He's wasted his life, and it was a life we know was a good life.
We can feel angry, but we must accept and respect his decision.
And we must try to understand, though it is almost beyond understanding.
Nobody can really know why he ended his life.
Suicide is the final act in a complex web of causes.

We know some of the reasons why:

It is useful to list as many of the possible contributing causes as possible—work problems, relationship problems, addiction problems, prejudice problems, isolation problems.

We know that he felt he was weak.
We know how devastated he was when he was made redundant.
We know how difficult he found it to talk about things when he was down.

Perhaps he felt trapped.
Perhaps the image of self-sufficiency he had was just an image.
Perhaps.

But we don't know.

In the end we don't know much. Even John, if we were able to ask him, would not be able to give a very clear explanation of why he did it. So there is no way we can know for sure.

But it was his choice, and as we respect his life, so we must respect his death.

And we can know for sure that at the end there was a great deal of pain. And now the pain is over. And for that at least we should be grateful.

John, like each of us, carried his own hopes and fears, his own angels and demons, his own areas of light and darkness. And, as each of us sometimes does, he protected those he loved from his demons and his darkness. That was a mistake that we all sometimes make. Sometimes we think our darkness is too great, too personal to share. We are wrong. If we can only learn to share the darkness with our friends and those we love, then the light will show through. But John didn't share the darkness, and so we can never really know.

So John made a wrong decision with his life. And it leaves us very sad.

It is worth remembering, that sadness comes out of love
and all human love is completed in sadness.
And so, although we are hurt, and angry, and sad.
And even although we may feel guilty or blaming
We also think today of a life that is to be celebrated
A good life, which, in its ending makes us feel diminished.

As we reflect on John's life it is easy to remember the last few weeks and months. We remember first the most recent period. But today we want to remember the whole of John's life....

And then we can go on to talk about the living John did—his history, his gifts, his accomplishments, his qualities.

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