

Thank you for Staying
A sermon offered by Rev. Kathleen Rolenz
Sunday, November 10, 2023
Unity Church Unitarian

Oh how I wanted to her to stay that evening. You see, it was late in the day, and it was just the two of us in the church office; me, the minister and she – the church’s administrator. It had been a long day and Diane and I had been working side by side on getting the order of service ready for Sunday, and talking through the complexities of our new phone system. It was the time of year when it got dark around 4 PM and I was postponing going home to an empty apartment. It was my first ministry too, and I felt alone in a way that I didn’t experience while in seminary. “Hey Diane, “ would you like to get some dinner after we lock up the office?” She smiled and shook her head. “No, I’m sorry, I’ve got to get home. See you tomorrow?” Yeah, I said, see you tomorrow.”

I didn’t see her the next day. Instead, I got a call from a Unitarian Universalist colleague, who was serving the UU congregation across town, of which Diane was a member. “There’s no good way to say this. Diane died by suicide last night.” I remember just staring at the phone, in shock, stunned into silence.

Movies, articles, tv shows will often announce a trigger warning to alert the readers that the images you see or the stories you hear you may find disturbing. This is true for this sermon as well. Thank You for Staying is about the impact that suicide has on those left behind – and it’s also making the case to stay alive when everything inside of you may be telling you otherwise.

Truth in advertising; I have preached on the theme of suicide in the past. I wish it got easier, but it doesn’t. And also to tell the truth, I am always nervous about bringing up this subject, knowing how triggering and sensitive it can be. Last week’s service was so much fun – with the band and Unity Choir and lots of laughter and joy – I thought to myself, why would I

want to bring this downer of a topic into this joy filled space? Well, you already the answer. If you're willing, I'd like to ask if you know of someone who has died by suicide, would you be willing to raise your hand?" As of August 2023, suicide deaths increased by approximately 5%. Approximately 50,000 deaths last year were attributed by suicide. And even more frightening is that suicide is the second leading cause of death for children, adolescents and young adults age 15-24. Youth from marginalized communities are at an even greater risk due to additional pressures resulting from discrimination. And black children are nearly twice as likely to die by suicide than white children. Not surprisingly, our lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, genderqueer students consider suicide far more than heterosexual children. To say that our nation is suffering from a Mental Health Crisis is an understatement. Because so many people keep their mental health struggles a secret; and because our mental health system is woefully inadequate to meet the demands of the growing crisis, to do just one sermon about this seems barely enough. And yet, if collectively we – as spiritual and religious people and leaders – can stop one heart from breaking – to keep one heart beating, it is worth the effort.

So what can help us to help one another to stay? Some attempts have been more effective than others. Jewish law believes that preserving human life is among one of the highest values and suicide is seen as counter to this fundamental value. Human beings are barred even from harming themselves, let alone ending their own lives. Moreover, more traditional Jewish thought believes that the body belongs to God, and as such, ending one's life is not considered within the scope of a person's authority. Maimonides, whom many of us studied this past month in the book called Repentance and Repair by Rabbi Ruttenberg, said about suicide: "he who destroys himself, destroys the world." The human world is held together by our optimistic trust that life matters to others and that the things we do in concert with others, even just living are invested

with that meaning.”¹ Similarly, The Roman Catholic Church believes that our life was not ours to dispose of. It is God’s, and to end one’s life is rejecting God’s greatest gift to humans – the gift of life. As Unitarian Universalists we don’t have those theological assumptions to point to. We don’t believe suicide to be a sin, nor do we believe doing so will send our spirits to hell and eternal damnation as punishment. That theology may have made a difference to some, but likely not. Yet the tragic increase of suicides, particularly among our children and youth, leaves us grappling with foundational questions of how and we can theologically and spiritually, make a convincing case for each other to “stay.”

One of the books that has strongly influenced my own thinking about this topic is “Stay: A History of Suicide and the Philosophies Against It.” by Jennifer Michael Hecht. Before I explore the main points with you, I want to make a clear distinction between suicide as a result of depression and hopelessness, vs. what we now call Medical Aid in Dying. Medical Aid in Dying is the decision to end one’s life from unbearable suffering, usually caused by a terminal illness. It is not a spontaneous act, but rather one that is made in collaboration with family, physicians, friends and the larger community. Choosing to end one’s life in this way can bring release not only to the suffering, but can provide peace for those left behind. The Wellspring Wednesday Series, Dying for Beginners, has provided us with a detailed journey of how we navigate the end of our lives, with dignity, with integrity and, most importantly, in community with others.

Hecht’s book offers several themes in her arguments against suicide. The first idea she presents for “staying” is that suicide can trigger more suicides. She calls this effect delayed homicide. By that, she means that one person’s suicide can have a contagious effect. There are

¹ Hecht, Jennifer, Stay: A History of Suicide and the Philosophies Against It, pg. 119.

many significant studies to prove this is true; that the rise of suicides, known as suicide clusters are a well-known phenomenon, particularly among teenagers and young adults. Hecht's argument is an important one, yet I will say that for a person in the midst of a mental crisis, they are likely not to be thinking about the impact that their permanent solution to a temporary feeling may produce.

Her second point may be more compelling: that you owe it to your future self to live. It's been now well over twenty years since I got the call, telling me that Diane had taken her own life. Remembering that moment to this day makes my heartbeat faster – and brings up an indescribable sadness for a person I didn't even know all that intimately. And while I feel sadness about her death, I also felt angry and betrayed. I had no indication that she was depressed or struggling. She said she loved her little job. We drank coffee robustly; we laughed readily. Had I but known, I might have told her "Diane, you owe it to your future self to stay alive." I imagined that might have asked me "why?" And I would have told her "because I know people who have survived those impulses and whose lives were transformed in ways they could not imagine while in that despairing place. Because I have read stories of people who miraculously survived a suicide attempt and regretted the attempt."

Stories like Kevin Hines. In 2000, Kevin Hines hoisted his leg over the railing of the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco with one thought on his mind; he was going to end his life. He said that the millisecond his hands left the rail, it was an instant regret. He said while falling he realized he had made a terrible mistake. He was among the 1% of people who survived that jump. After surviving the fall, he dedicated himself to work as mental health advocate and suicide prevention activist. Hines is the focus of a feature length documentary film called "Suicide: The Ripple Effect." Just as Jennifer Michael Hecht makes the case for the ripple effect

of suicide, Hines also makes the case for the ripple effect of the importance of helping people stay alive.

Death has a way of haunting us; and always feels like unfinished business. I grieved my parent's death, but they died after a full life and a short illness, so there is a sense of both sadness and completion of a life well lived. A suicide creates a wound in the living that may never completely heal. It can also give tacit approval to someone else who may be struggling. It's important to state here, however, as Hecht does in her book, *"I do not mean to pass judgment on those who have committed suicide. I mean instead to express to the suicidal person who has rejected suicide that you deserve gratitude from your community and from humanity."*

I also need to acknowledge that the decision to stay alive is not only the result of one's willpower. Depression, bi-polar illness, trauma, existential despair, being highly sensitive in a callous and cruel world – all of these – and those not listed - require more than willpower. It may require medication, acknowledging that finding good medication is both science and art and may take time. Yet my hope is that as a society we continue to de-stigmatize taking anti-depressants or other medication that literally saves lives and make them affordable for persons of any income strata.

I've never gotten to the razor's edge myself, but I have seen it and have felt its sharpness. That same year that Diane ended her life, I remember driving home from church to my apartment. It was cold and dark, and I was a brand-new minister, single, lonely and terribly insecure. On the way home from my office, I would pass by this murky black pond with no guardrails. One evening, I remember thinking while driving past the pond : "I could just drive my car into that pond right now..." it seemed like such a calm, logical thing to do. At that moment, I didn't believe that anyone would miss me that much, really. Or if they did, they'd get

over it. But instead of turning into the pond, I steered my car towards my apartment, Why? I couldn't have told you then, but maybe it was because in my mind's eye, I saw my mother's face and the hurt on it; and I thought about my friends and the pain that would cause them. Maybe it was because I supposed to show up in church that Sunday to deliver a sermon. Salvation by sermon!

I look back on that moment with profound gratitude, for whatever spirit compelled me to keep driving would lead me, eventually, into a future I never dreamed could be this good – a ministry and marriage and step-parenthood, and being an aunt, and an amma, (grandmother) and an author and settled minister in Cleveland and then interim ministries in Appleton and Annapolis; Washington DC and now here. There is so much I would have missed had the pond won that night. I didn't have the words at the time, ***but I owed it to my future self to stay alive.*** Sometimes the light inside of us leads us into new a new life that we can't see when we're in the darkness.

I don't know this to be true, but its possible that many of us have, from time to time, thought about suicide. It's a thought that can arise from great pain. And sometimes just naming it out loud as one of many thoughts can take some of the fear out of it. What's different of course, is whether those thoughts persist over time and eventually develop into a plan.

Several years ago I had the privilege of working with a worship associate on this topic. She shared with me her own life-long struggles with depression and anxiety. I asked her if she'd be willing to write out her thoughts, which she did.. Out of respect for her privacy, I'll refer to her simply as "J." In her own reflections, she spoke about how, sometimes, staying alive can feel like a daily battle. Given that, she said "so why stay? Why keep fighting?" "Fight because you matter. Despite whatever the voices in your head are telling you, you are enough; strong enough,

smart enough, talented enough, good enough and you matter. You are important. You add to this world in a unique way that no one else can and none of us can ever comprehend all of the ways we affect the world.”

“Fight because you are not alone. It is easy to feel alone and isolated, to feel shame and guilt. That is why it is so important to share our stories with one another, to erase the shame and the stigma, to make it okay to say, “I’m struggling, and I need help”. According to a recent government study, over 8 million people consider suicide every year and millions more are struggling with depression, addiction, PTSD and any number of other challenges. How many of these people could be saved simply by understanding what was happening to them, that it wasn’t shameful and that help is available?”

Lastly “J” writes, “fight because the darkness will pass. German philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstine writes “the aspect of the person who wants to end [their] life is only, one part and it has to plot against the rest of the person and circumvent objections of the rest by sneak attack by taking the person by surprise. .. Sometimes the feeling that life matters and has meaning resides in our other selves and we do not always have access to it. Sometimes it is necessary to wait and refuse to be taken by surprise by one’s own saboteur.” For those of us fighting a life-long battle, being told to wait and things will get better can feel like a slap in the face. However, even the most inescapable despair ebbs and flows. Even though your battle may continue, this moment of absolute darkness will pass. Hold on and you can survive the night.”

I think of Ross Gay’s poem, “Sorrow is not my Name.” He sees a vulture, nodding his red, grizzled head at him, as if to say “I’ll see you later.” But then, Gay doesn’t stop there, for he remembers his niece running through a field calling his name, and perhaps we too, remember a time when someone we loved called out to us and their voice broke through our wall of isolation;

or maybe we hear our neighbor singing like an angel or we hear the kids, playing basketball down the street and they are laughing and teasing one another and there's just something so vital about that moment that maybe, just maybe, we get a glimpse of that green thing that is pushing against us drawing down the shade and sitting in darkness. Stay, we say to one another. Stay for even one more day. Please, stay.