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# The ultimate act of will

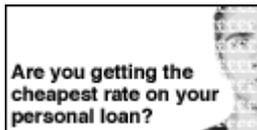
Suicide is often the choice of physical death over psychological annihilation

**Tim Lott**

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The delight of some sections of the press and public at the suicide of Harold Shipman this week was shocking and depressing to me. I felt that way, not because I am high-minded enough to extract "tragedy" from Shipman's demise, but because to express such naked merriment at the suicide of any human being, evil or good, seems a small triumph for the part of us all that hates life. I wouldn't go as far as John Donne in claiming that "any man's death diminishes me because I am involved in mankind". Yet to clap and dance at the spectacle of somebody, however wretched, extinguishing themselves, verges on the savage - and that is what diminishes us.

I don't feel that Shipman's death itself diminished me, any more than Fred West's. But I couldn't celebrate. I felt a grim satisfaction and a vague regret for the destructiveness, and wastefulness, of his life. But one's reaction to suicide is highly personal and, in many cases, profoundly political.

The public tend to classify self-murder into what you might call "good" and "sad" suicides. The act of suicide is good in inverse proportion to the degree that the person who committed the is bad. Shipman, being a very bad man, was a "good" suicide. David Kelly, being a good man, was a "sad", that is to say, regrettable, suicide.

Most suicides tend to be thought of as "sad". People evil enough to be thought to deserve it are rare. But here, a qualification is necessary. We live with the residues of a religious mindset that sees any suicide as a sinner. As recently as the 1950s in Britain, people were still sent to prison for attempting "self-murder". The church agrees that they are sad, but also bad - which is odd, since there is a sense in which Jesus committed suicide (inasmuch as he went willingly to his death).

Suicide brings into play the deepest religious, cultural and political beliefs and takes on different meanings depending on where you stand. The suicide of a Palestinian terrorist would be a "good" suicide from the standpoint of an Israeli - if he

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didn't take out a busload of Jews with him. But if you are in Hamas, the suicide bomber is beyond "good" or "sad". He (or she) is positively noble.

The liberal western position may be to see the martyr as "sad" - Jack Straw purports to feel a "degree of compassion" for the suicide bombers, as do Cherie Blair and Matthew Parris.

Our attitudes to suicide are contradictory. Many people choose to think of suicides as "cowardly", whereas practically the only unqualified statement I would venture about suicide is that it is never cowardly. I know, because, 15 years ago, I stood on top of a tall building and prayed for the courage to throw myself. I couldn't do it because I was too scared. To survive is the prime biological directive of every human being, however debased. To overcome that takes courage.

The martyrs who flew into the twin towers, Shipman, Fred West - all in their manner of death were castigated as cowards. But this simply isn't the case, however much our moral urges demand that it be so. Evil, yes. Cowards, no.

More convincing is the conceptualisation of suicide as "selfish". It is selfish, but not in the way that the word is commonly used. It is selfish because it is deeply tied up with how one sees oneself. As the psychologist Dorothy Rowe has pointed out, suicide is a desperate defence of one's identity in the face of encroaching chaos and terror of psychological annihilation. It is to choose physical death over psychological change.

Of course, there are those who kill themselves because they are mad (the fourth category after good, bad and sad) - schizophrenics, for instance, who might throw themselves out a window believing they can fly. But the majority know what they are doing, even those who are severely clinically depressed.

And what they are doing, in most cases, is maintaining a sense of selfhood. This is as true of Kelly as it is of Shipman as it is of a suicide bomber.

Suicide is an assertion that you will survive as an identity even if you can't survive as a body. For Kelly, perhaps it was a matter of continuing to think of himself as a good man in the face of potential and actual humiliation. For Shipman, it was about protecting fantasies about his blamelessness. For the Palestinian, it is maintaining a sense of selfhood in a place where statelessness as well as poverty and ideology have robbed individuals of a way of asserting themselves in any meaningful way.

I use the word ideology advisedly. Injustice, poverty and hunger exists in Hindu India, for instance, but political suicide bombings to address the situation are almost unheard of. And where they do occur, for instance with the Tamil Tigers, the issue at stake is still one of identity - in this case national identity. Why, on the whole, though, do some cultures remain relatively immune? Because a sense of a valid selfhood can exist through an intact life of nation, religion, culture and ritual.

Palestinian martyrdom can be seen as a kind of identity crisis. As Professor Mark Harrison of Warwick University comments

in his paper, *The Logic of Suicide Terrorism*: "I see it as a contract between the young person and the terrorist faction to exchange life for identity. It's hard to construct an identity in a society where nothing works and opportunities are severely restricted." He goes on to claim that young men are prone to adopt the mantle of martyr, while young women have the opportunity to find a sense of meaning in motherhood.

What else is suicide about? It is almost always a matter of control, anger and (connected with anger) revenge. Suicide is the ultimate act of will and, as such, always appeals to those who are overwhelmed by feelings of helplessness. As for anger, it has been said that whoever kills himself is symbolically killing someone else. Shipman and Kelly alike may have been partly "getting their own back" on those whom they perceived as visiting injustice on them ("see what you made me do"). And doubtless revenge and anger would feature highly on the list of any martyr.

The inner world of the suicide is complex, with conflicting, paradoxical and overlapping motives. Disliking complexity, society tries to stuff it into a simple series of pigeonholes. But it is hard to be consistent when using such crude methods. Some who felt Harold Shipman had "cheated justice" and had the "last laugh" by committing suicide, were doubtless baying for his execution at the time of his trial. How can suicide be escape while execution is justice?

There is no doubt that our attitudes to suicide will continue to be confused. Like the suicide, we seek to maintain our own selves, and fundamental to that process is the preservation of our personal ethical universes. Humans are fundamentally Manichaeans. We simplify to get the psychological outcome we demand.

Our perception of the suicide almost never fits with the reality, but this will not stop us. Like the suicide, the deepest part of ourselves is angry and afraid, and thus we always consider the assertion of our selves, and the meaning we make of our selves, more important than the facts. That's why suicides aren't all weird, or wicked, or tragic, or cowardly. They're just like us - only more so.

• *The Scent of Dried Roses*, Tim Lott's memoir about his mother, is published by Penguin

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