

Suicide prevention – a spiritual approach

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Published in the *Christian Science Sentinel*. September 15, 2003, pp 6-7, 20

After years of rising suicide rates in Australia, the figures are finally declining. Governments and community groups have worked hard to achieve this goal. A program in the nation's high schools is helping adolescents find their identity, purpose, and meaning in life. Another program is assisting young journalists to address the topic of suicide in thoughtful and constructive ways.

Participating in a "Suicide Prevention Australia" conference

In another positive move, around 300 decision makers, professionals, and those affected by loss through suicide attended the tenth annual Suicide Prevention Australia (SPA) National Conference in Brisbane last June (see www.suicidepreventionaust.org). Attendees and participants included the following:

- Therapists, counselors, psychiatrists, psychologists, general practitioners, and nurses.
- Teachers; professional social, religious, community, and youth workers.
- Government representatives and leaders from a range of ethnic and religious backgrounds; people who had survived the desire to commit suicide; and families, friends, and caregivers affected by loss through suicide.

From June 12-15, the delegates considered the theme "Finding meaning to sustain life: The place of spirituality in suicide prevention." They heard speakers such as Dr. David Tacey, Associate Professor in Arts and Critical Enquiry at Melbourne's La Trobe University. Tacey, who teaches courses on spirituality, literature, and the psychology of religion, is author of *The Spirituality Revolution* (Sydney: Harper Collins, 2003).

According to the national Chair of SPA, Dr. Michael Dudley, the conference was "among the first mental health conferences in Australia to explicitly address this issue, and perhaps the first to make it the key theme." Some of the topics were "Spirituality in suicide prevention," "Spirituality and youth," and "The place of meaning in preventing suicide."

Given the highly secular nature of Australian society, the theme was in some respects a controversial choice. Yet to Dudley, "Spirituality, culture, the sciences and medicine share much common ground ... Whatever enables resilience and fosters hope should be promoted." For him, "Spirituality is about our deepest longings as human beings: for wholeness, connection, and transformation, for providing a sense of purpose and agency, for the sense of sacred presence that often anchors these."

I was glad to have participated in this year's groundbreaking event, and I hope that the 2004 Suicide Prevention Australia conference will offer opportunities to build on these first discussions and look further at the practical nature of spirituality. Spirituality does improve the human condition. It gives balance and acts as a buffer against the ups and downs of daily life. It helps prevent suicide.

Letting God change our lives

I've seen the effect of spirituality in my work as a Christian Science healer. For more than 20 years now, I've helped people who were suffering from stress, depression, and loss of hope find happiness and healing in God.

That's why I attended the conference and presented a one-hour workshop titled "Spiritual approaches to suicide prevention: finding a life worth living; gaining resilience; speaking words that comfort and heal."

The message I shared during the first part of my presentation was along these lines:

- Each of us has a life worth living.
- You and I are worthy of respect and recognition. We have value.
- No bad situation has the power to destroy us.
- We're not alone. There is a divine power that we can call on for help.
- Because we're connected to this life-sustaining power, we can get through tough situations.

I knew these things from personal experience. During my childhood, I felt insecure at home and at school. My parents argued a lot – mainly over money. When I was in my mid-teens, my father's attitude toward me changed. He criticized me constantly, regularly searched my bedroom, and read my mail. After enduring this for a few years, I finally told him that he should respect my privacy. He told me to get out of his house. My mother was heartbroken. My maternal grandparents took me in and gave me a home with them. But it was a terrible time for my mother and me.

One day I was standing at the front of a platform at Flinders Street Railway Station in Melbourne, waiting for a train. The crowd behind me was restless – anxious to get home. Engulfed by sorrow, confusion, and rejection, I stared fixedly down at the tracks, wondering why my father had treated me so unkindly. I felt worthless – without meaning or purpose. I heard the train approaching. Suddenly I thought, "I wonder what it would be like to fall in front of the train?"

Just then someone bumped me, and I stumbled toward the edge of the platform unable to stop my forward momentum. Unexpectedly a hand grabbed me and pulled me back. The train whooshed past me and stopped. "That was close," said a stranger's voice. "You gave me a scare. Don't get so near the edge next time!"

When I got on the train, I thought about what had happened. It would have been so easy to fall in front of that train, but I'd been prevented from doing so. Was it just coincidence that the man had grabbed me – a lucky break? Instinctively, I felt that it wasn't. These words from Mary Baker Eddy's book *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures* flashed into my thought in answer to my questions: "Divine Love always has met and always will meet every human need" (p. 494). I felt this meant that divine Love, which is God, had been with me at the railway station. I hadn't been alone – I had a connection to a life-sustaining power.

That moment of spiritual understanding changed my life for the better. It healed me of the deep hurt and sorrow I had been feeling. I knew now that I wasn't unloved or unwanted. And I knew that with divine Love's help, it was possible for me to have a good future – home, friends, opportunity, security, and independence – a life worth living.

Respecting our spiritual qualities

As I continued to practice spirituality in my life, I found fresh meaning and purpose. Although my father never changed his attitude toward me, I was able to put the past behind me and move forward. I learned that divine Love had given me spiritual qualities of mind and character such as intelligence, ability, patience, and happiness.

They were within me. And *Science and Health* showed me how to develop them: "We must form perfect models in thought and look at them continually, or we shall never carve them out in grand and noble lives" (p. 248). It showed me how to put them into practice: "We must look where we would walk, and we must act as possessing all power from Him in whom we have our being" (p. 264).

Following these directions had helped me on many occasions. The first time was when I was in senior high school and still living at home with my parents. I was taking singing as an extra subject. To have it count, I had to pass the Australian Music Examination Board's third-grade theory and fifth-grade practical exams. As I hadn't done any exams before, my mother sent me to an expert theory teacher. This woman said I had no hope of learning three years of theory in nine months. So I asked my mother, who taught piano, if she would help me.

Each day as I worked with her, I also prayed with this idea in *Science and Health*: "The devotion of thought to an honest achievement makes the achievement possible" (p. 199). I reminded myself that divine Spirit had given me intelligence and ability. I had to act as possessing these divine qualities – not turn my thought back to doubt and fear of failure. I passed both the singing and theory exams with honors.

This experience showed me how realizing that we have spiritual qualities empowers us and brings success. It also helps prevent suicide. I found this out when a young woman asked me to pray with her. She said she was depressed and suicidal because she wasn't beautiful. My words to her were along these lines: "But you are beautiful; God made you this way. He gave you beautiful spiritual qualities. These are already within you. You're caring and have a wonderful sense of humor. Because of this, people appreciate you. Look for more of these good things in yourself. It's humility, compassion, and seeing the good in others, which make us beautiful." As she stopped focusing on her outward appearance and looked at her spiritual qualities, her confidence was restored. She was healed of depression and suicidal thoughts.

Developing spiritual resilience

Becoming aware of their spiritual nature enables people to gain control of their lives and lifts them out of hopelessness. When knocked down by unforeseen changes or misfortune, they're able to recover easily. That's why, in the second part of my conference presentation, I explored the role of spiritual resilience in suicide prevention.

Resilience is the capacity to be flexible, supple, and adaptable. This capacity is often associated with genetics, temperament, or good parenting. But I have reason to believe that resilience is essentially spiritual. The capability to recover from illness or misfortune comes to us from a higher source – from infinite, universal Love, or God. God has given each of us spiritual resilience, enabling us to be buoyant and irrepressible.

As a teenager, I learned how to gain spiritual resilience and effectively maintain it. I used to be easily disheartened. If I got dejected, I didn't recover readily. I didn't like being that way, so I explored the idea of resilience. I thought about a circular rubber band and how it demonstrated resilience. You can easily stretch it into a triangle, a rectangle, or roll it into a ball. Yet no matter what is done to it, it can immediately regain its original form. From this example, I inferred that if I wanted to live a happy resilient life, I had to be more mentally flexible and adaptable.

The following idea helped show me how to be successful: "Hold thought steadfastly to the enduring, the good, and the true, and you will bring these into your experience proportionably to their occupancy of your thoughts" (*Science and Health*, p. 261). So I held firmly to the thought that I was resilient, that I had spiritual buoyancy, that I could remain on top of situations and not be easily depressed. With resilience in my thoughts, I knew I could resist sinking into feelings of dejection. I could be happy and *stay* happy, independent of the circumstance.

This new way of thinking healed me of dejection. It also gave balance to my life. Many times since then, spiritual resilience has helped me to face and overcome problems with courage, determination, and buoyancy, and it has given balance to my life. I have seen it help others, too.

Preventing suicide

A woman who said she couldn't go on living asked me to pray with her. I shared what I had learned about resilience. I assured her that divine Love was with her, that she would get through the difficult period and recover her hope and joy, that God had given her strength and courage, and that she had spiritual resilience. As we prayed together, she recovered her natural buoyancy and went on with her life.

Just as spirituality brings healing, it can also help to prevent suicide. God's grace gives everyone the ability to experience Love's healing power. His care is all-embracing, life-sustaining, tender. It supportively guides us through the difficult periods in our lives. Life is never really futile, because God is Life, and the life He gives each of us is worth living.