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Suicide is not painless, but it can be brave, right and rational

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WHATEVER that haunting song from *M*A*S*H* may have claimed, suicide is not painless. Few fateful decisions are. To take one's own life can hurt others grievously. But it may be rational, it may be brave and it may be right; and even when it is wrong — and it is usually wrong — there is something noble about this most awesome of decisions which I can respect.

It was uncharacteristic of Mick Hume (November 12) to label a whole range of agonised and utterly personal decisions with a dismissive “stupid”, “mad”, “cowardly” or “selfish”. Very different people in very different circumstances and for very different reasons have throughout history felt impelled to the same act.

Mick represents a popular view (I think it is the prevalent view in England) when he scolds those who take their lives, because they make a dreadful mess. Yes, killing yourself does make a mess. Many acts of courage, some of them acts of folly too, make a mess. To a certain brush-and-dustpan mentality, that may be all there is to be said: tut-tut, look how you've hurt those who love you most. But as I curse the delay on the London Underground caused by a passenger under a train, I also ask myself what drove him to do this — to do something which I cannot begin to imagine summoning the nerve to do. The thought occurs to me that perhaps this person has, in the price he has just paid, earned the right to make us all a few minutes late for work.

If I examine the rational case for suicide, I know some readers will be upset by the attempt. They will say that in a populous country such as ours, at any one time such as this morning, thousands of people, many of them with the balance of their minds temporarily disturbed, may be contemplating the case for taking their lives, and so one should never publish anything which in a few cases might tip the balance.

But if we are governed by an imperative never to write anything which could be twisted in any mind into a justification for error, we wouldn't write much. A cautious censor might have advised Jesus that the declaration “Greater love hath no man than this: that a man lay down his life for his friends” was open to misinterpretation; but I am glad he said it. It is the view of many who work with the Samaritans that a blanket “suicide is simply, always, unquestionably wrong, so don't even think about it” discourages anxious people from seeking help.

To anybody contemplating suicide the advice should surely be that, if you are in two minds, then decide against. A last and only recourse should be obvious, there should be no bearable alternative. That one can see arguments both ways is probably a sign that a final, irreversible solution would be hasty. People (especially) of a seriously depressive nature should remember all those dark times in the past when there has been no light, and one has told oneself it would never return; yet it did; and will return again. Serious depression of a clinical kind is the worst state in which to approach such decisions.

You may retort that to contemplate suicide is itself proof of clinical depression: that nobody of sound mind kills himself. This is the old Catch-22 get-out by which the Church has rationalised giving a proper Christian burial to suicide victims, and countless grieving relatives have comforted themselves that a death was not, in the fullest sense, self-inflicted because their loved one was not wholly capable of knowing what he was doing. In many cases that may be true, but not in all. Despair is not always unreasonable.

Here are three good reasons for suicide: three circumstances in which a clear-headed decision may be taken in a state of mind which is bleak but not unbalanced. I do not say that any of these three reasons would usually justify taking one's own life: only that they might. They are infirmity, self-sacrifice and shame.

It is possible to imagine being so tormented or disabled by illness that life ceases to be worth living. Make all the qualifications you like to that statement — that a quadriplegic with only a fraction of the normal human scope for action and interaction may, with love and care, still find existence positive — and I might accept them all, but still maintain that pain can be so great and so unrelenting, or the prospect of looming incapacity so wretched, or the loss of a capability which to a particular individual was life itself so crippling, that each new day can only bring suffering.

We may say “try to learn to live with it,” or “you may get better” or “you may find new reasons to live”. We have every right to say this. But the sufferer has an equal right to respond “no, I do not wish to live with it”, or “my chances of recovery are too small”, or “I do not seek new reasons to live”. These responses may be rational. The choice should be his.

A second sound reason for suicide, self-sacrifice, is often allied to infirmity. I am afraid it is just not honest to claim that wanting to lift a burden from others is wrong-headed, because others are happy to carry the burden. Sometimes they hardly can. Old age — often cited — is the worst reason for suicide, for age comes gradually and knows where it is going, and we all have time to adjust; but those struck down by illness in an untimely way may never adjust, and those who care for them may be unable to cope. Death can be a release not only for the deceased, and I know circumstances where, whatever the sadness, there was also respect, gratitude and relief.

Though Mick Hume is right that suicide often does cause huge distress to others, his view that this is an argument for stigmatising suicide is perverse. If the aura of disgrace and calamity which in our culture surrounds taking one's own life means that a kindly intended suicide may cause tremendous pain, then we should try to lift the stigma. It is the stigma which causes the pain. Mick then cites the pain as a reason for intensifying the stigma. This is circular.

Self-sacrifice is not, in our language, a pejorative term, and death can be the ultimate self-sacrifice. In war, suicide missions are not thought disgraceful. The story of blinded Samson, bringing the temple down on the Philistines, was taught to me as heroic. Captain Scott committed suicide. Laying down your life for others means just that.

And shame can justify suicide. This is not to deny that the shamed may sometimes be redeemed, may find within themselves the strength to repent and renew themselves, and start again. But there are sins, and there are individual sinners, where it is fair to conclude that this possibility is very, very remote. Ian Huntley judged himself to have no good reason left to live, and I for one would not try to second-guess him. I can imagine acts of betrayal or cowardice on my part which so robbed me of self-worth and so filled me with misery that death would be the only exit. I do not think this is an ignoble thought. Suicide can be the ultimate apology.

But let me end on a cheerful note, though you may not think it so. Is suicide not the greatest of all tokens of the primacy of the human will? How shall a man ever demonstrate with more finality that he is the captain of his soul, the master of his ship, than by taking it by his own choice on to the rocks? Self-inflicted death is the ultimate defiance, the one freedom in your life and mine which nothing and nobody — not even God — can take away.

I have never contemplated suicide and hope I never shall. But to know that I can — to know that tomorrow I too could make that splendid, terrible two-fingered gesture to creation itself — is more than life-enhancing: it is sublime.

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