

## When "Carpe Diem" is Beyond our Grasp

I imagine we all have our favorite 'Robin Williams' memory - Patch Adams, which some people think every medical student should be required to watch before graduating - Good Will Hunting, Aladdin, Good Morning, Viet Nam, Mrs. Doubtfire, or the various Late Night shows where he stole the show. My favorite Robin Williams movie is "The Dead Poets Society." What an amazing teacher, introducing his students to the world of poetry and their own inner worlds, and life and passion and truth. He challenges his students to "Carpe Diem" or "Seize the Day." It's more than the school officials can handle so they force him to leave. As he comes to his classroom to pick up his things one last time, one boy, and then another and other stands on his desk and, quoting Walt Whitman's poetic tribute to Abraham Lincoln, calls out: "O Captain, my Captain."

Carpe Diem, seize the day - what Robin Williams did every time he was before a camera - until he couldn't; until Carpe Diem exceeded his grasp and he took his own life - in 2014. When he did, I felt led to change my sermon in order to talk about suicide; it seemed to speak deeply to our congregation.

Then again, this past December, I was compelled to revisit this reality. You may recall Maison Hullibarger, a straight - A student, 18 years old, a promising athlete in a community just south of Detroit, MI - took his own life. At his funeral at Our Lady of Mount Carmel Catholic Church, the priest raised questions as to whether Maison would be permitted into heaven because he had committed suicide, a term the priest used six times during the homily - "taking your own life is against God who made us..." And thus, a great tragedy was made worse by a great travesty of incorrect theology, misreading of scripture and mistaken judgment.

Many of us grew up with this mistaken notion that the priest stated, though we secretly doubted it. We may have known stories of shame and secrecy; no one must know. Perhaps you found out many years after the fact what really happened.

Where does this wrong idea come from - that suicide is a mortal sin? In the 5th century, St. Augustine, an early father of the Church, interpreted the 6th commandment - "Thou shall not kill," to include taking one's own life and therefore making it a mortal sin. In 1562 the Roman Catholic Church denied a "Christian" burial to anyone who had committed suicide. In 1693, even attempted suicide led to excommunication. This is all pre-psychology, pre-medical science, and the Church was and is wrong.

The Church was and is wrong on this as it was on slavery, views of women as property, indulgences, inciting wars and more. It is a persistent problem that comes with a literal interpretation of the scriptures. The Bible is to be interpreted through the lenses of reason, experience, tradition and the greater witness of the entire Scripture, especially the lens of the life and teaching of Jesus. Can you really imagine Jesus treating Maison Hullibarger with anything other than compassion and eternal love?!

In preparation for the sermon after Robin Williams' death and then after Mason Hullibarger's I asked our congregations to share with me their thoughts and stories. Oh my! The flood gates opened, for which I was so grateful. Many were powerful personal stories of a family member who had committed suicide. One person shared that they had known this other person for forty years and only a few weeks ago learned that they had a child who committed suicide. Another, at age 5 witnessed his father take his life.

The number one response was this: "Make sure you let people know that depression is very, very common. Please help remove the stigma! One in three people experience anxiety; one in five experience a mood disorder.

Sometimes the depression is so intense it leads to suicide. Robin Williams is one of 39,000 Americans who take their lives each year. Someone shared this: "My mother lost a brother to suicide - in those days, the 1930's it was a secret, not to be announced, discussed or sympathized with. It was a sin, a crime, a stigma. Not until I was in my 30's working as a counselor with suicide prevention at the County Crisis Center did I learn how my uncle died. All these years it was our family secret - because of the stigma that the Church had perpetuated.

One of our University of Florida Medical people wrote this to me: "Mental illness, depression, anxiety disorder and panic disorder have a chemical basis. Serotonin and dopamine in specific areas of the brain control these processes and disruptions in these brain chemical regulators are the bases for expressions like depression. Depression is nothing to be ashamed of; just like you wouldn't be ashamed of heart disease or diabetes. No shame! It's an illness.

Which leads me to this: Suicide is not a sin. That is an old myth. Suicide is the result of an illness, a disease. It is a tragedy of a life interrupted, of what could be. When someone dies to suicide it's important to remember: "Depression took Joe/Sue, the same way heart disease takes some people. There are no bad us in this, no villains. He/she didn't do this to us; his sickness did this. And once you understand this, it doesn't take away the pain, but it takes away the anger.

Someone shared this powerful image: It's like being in a room engulfed in flames and you can't breathe. All you can do is jump out of the burning building. You're not jumping because death is appealing, but because the burning is overwhelming. How can we possibly understand what's going on inside some who takes his/her own life? I don't believe it's a "selfish thing" they did to relieve their pain and punish those who are left lo. I believe it wasn't so much their choice as it was the disease of depression that took them.

Another person shared: "It's important for the person suffering to understand it is not their fault. I know this firsthand because depression runs in my family - grandmother, mother and uncle all committed suicide. I was always taught to "brush things under the rug." If you sought help, "people will think you are crazy." "Snap out of it." It is like living in a deep, dark hole, and it is hopeless. I was so embarrassed about my depression because I truly thought it was a character flaw; a weakness. I suffered over six years until I got the courage to seek help when I was 30 years old. Even then, I paid in cash because I did not want anyone to know. Now, several years later I still get a bit embarrassed even though I know it's not my fault or a character flaw. Yes, it's still hard to shake the stigma.

Here are a few things NOT to say to someone who is depressed:

1. You look so good and have so much, how could you possibly be depressed?
2. Put on your big boy/girl pants; toughen up!
3. You think you've got it bad; wait until I tell you about my situation.
4. Take an antidepressant; that's all you need - get some happy pills. Someone shares this helpful word about medications: "My doctor explained medications in a very simple way: you act and have the same emotions people without depression have... Then this dark cloud of depression comes and hangs over

you... The medication doesn't change you, or change your mood, rather, it blocks the dark cloud and allows you to be the person you truly are."

5. At least it's not a serious illness like cancer!
6. Everybody feels down sometimes; it will pass - (minimizing or invalidating another's feelings is wrong).
7. Good grief! It's been six months since Joe died; it's time to move on.
8. If you had more faith this would go away (it's a chemical thing in the brain and has nothing to do with faith!).
9. Don't try to "fix" someone. Here's how this ineffective cycle works: When all their good efforts to "fix" us don't work they shy away from us and become uncomfortable. They ask how we're doing each day and we can tell they want to hear that we are better which often isn't the case. This, in turn, makes us unwilling to share how we really feel, and we begin to believe it's all our fault; we're just not trying hard enough. We then become increasingly uncomfortable around each other. Instead of trying to fix someone, try a simple "How can I best help?"

Here are a few things you might prayerfully consider doing:

1. Be invasive and then be silent; don't give advice! The Biblical character of Job had three friends who came to visit him when his life had crashed in. For seven days they sat in silence, just being with him. Then they ruined it - by giving abundant, misguided advice - for nearly 30 chapters! They were terrible friends, and so are we when we act like they did.  
If you sense something, let your concern be your guide. Say something in love: "are you doing ok? How are you really?" And then just listen; be quiet. Learn to be kindly invasive.
2. Accept the person where they are. Acceptance is a beautiful thing.
3. Come alongside. Just BE with them; most of the time we don't have to do or say anything.
4. Ask - are there specific things I can do to be helpful, or would you just like me to be quiet?

Someone shared this: My elderly Mother was recently given a cane that is red and white by her "Low Vision Services." They told her people did not know when looking at her (she wears glasses) that she was vision impaired and the cane was a universal symbol to let people know. Unfortunately, there is no symbol letting others know when people are depressed or suffering from mental illness.

I leave you with these magnificent words from Psalm 139:

Where can I go from your Spirit, O God?  
Where can I flee from your presence?  
If I ascend to the highest heaven - You are there.  
If I descend to the deepest depths - You are there.  
If into the darkness - even the darkness is not dark to you.  
The night is as bright as the day; for darkness is as light to you.

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Dan Johnson