

Suicide and the Agony of Separateness

When the Ego Becomes an Eggshell

by Alan Harris

Note: If you are now contemplating suicide or know someone who is, please also read the last page.

THE NATURE OF THE FORCES which motivate a person to take his or her own life usually remain hidden from those who are left behind, for if the suicide has been completed, no further psychological inquiries can be made, and if incomplete, only tentative hypotheses are possible due to the fact that there really was not a suicide. However, there does seem to be a common mental condition which underlies not only suicide (whether completed, abandoned, or thwarted), but also the loneliness and depression which often lead up to this act. Such a mental condition goes by many names, but I will call it "separateness," or more accurately, a separative consciousness.

Let us not deceive ourselves by merely pointing to this condition in "others," for we all share it to some extent. "Their" agony is our agony, even though it may now manifest less intensely in us. And to be completely honest, let us even allow that we *are* they. A surprisingly large group of our population has either contemplated or actually attempted suicide at some time or other. For many of those seemingly happy people we meet on the street or in our jobs, the thought of suicide has been a more or less silent alternative in the midst of life's reversals. It is not an impulse that people commonly publicize regarding themselves, hence one naturally imagines that few others experience it.

Sympathetic friends typically regard a suicidal person as being an unfortunate victim--of blind chance, of other people's thoughtlessness, of an unfair social system--or some combination thereof. While this impression of a suicidal person as a victim is probably frequently held, there is another view--that an attempter's "victim psychology" may be the logical outcome of his own subtle but deadly ego trip.

What does it mean to say that suicide can be the result of an "ego trip"? We could define an ego trip as the separative frame of mind already mentioned, usually accompanied by an inaccurate image of one's own worth. Careful observation might reveal that feelings of superiority and feelings of inferiority *both* spring from separative assumptions, and are therefore *both* egoistic. One attitude says, "I am better than you," and the other says, "I am worse than you," but "better" and "worse" are merely different names for the same imaginary wall between "I" and "you." We sit precariously on this wall like Humpty Dumpty, trying desperately to balance our egg-like existence amidst the strong winds of adversity which threaten and discourage us. This is separatism, and it is likely to lead to "a great fall" because it is based upon illusion or unreality. The inexorable (but in the end, kind) forces of evolution eventually must topple us off this wall which our minds have built up out of rotted thoughts.

In the following scenario, let's assume for the sake of illustration that you and I have fallen into this trap (or, perhaps more accurately, never climbed out of it). It is quite easy for us to adopt an attitude of separateness because we are conditioned into it almost from birth. Most of us have unwittingly bought into the assumption that we

are separate from others. After all, we have separate bodies, separate homes, separate jobs, and separate ambitions. We want to make money, perhaps *more* money than other people make, so that we can indulge our egos a bit by having fancier cars, wearing more stylish clothes, living in larger homes, or sending our children to more prestigious colleges. Even if we don't have such tendencies toward conspicuous consumption, we may put ourselves first more subtly by taking the largest piece of cake on the plate at a party ("I really do deserve it"), by feeling that our religion is superior to that of others (and generously trying to convince them of it), or by burdening our friends with long stories about our successful encounters (and blithely ignoring their yawns). Many of us lack a sense of unity and brotherhood toward our fellow humans, and we instead view our associates as divided between the "bad guys" (our competitors and enemies) and the "good guys" (those who serve and comfort us). Our minds whisper to us, "You deserve the best, because you're number one. Let the others fend for themselves."

The hidden danger in having a separative outlook is that, while it appears to serve our best interests in the short run, it can eventually lead us into that dreaded and all-too-common ailment, loneliness. The very attitudes that maximize our own feelings of importance and minimize the roles played by others are the same attitudes which, when the chips are down, trap us in a cocoon of self-pity or self-destructive desire for oblivion.

Into a life lived separately there may come a shocking discovery: "I am *not* the most important being in the universe, and never was." This discovery may come suddenly by way of some devastating personal tragedy or great disappointment, or gradually through a long succession of smaller eye-openers. We learn that the world can indeed get along without us--that we are expendable. We then feel cynical like the man who observed, "The graveyards are full of people who couldn't be replaced." Such an awakening may hit us like a ton of bricks (if suddenly), or like a ton of feathers (if gradually)--but either way, it's a ton. We feel as if some great weight were pressing down on us, and we perceive a world inexorably closing in. All hope seems to have fled. Nothing remains but black despair.

When we do fall off the wall of self, when our ego shatters like the egg that it is, and when we thus turn our thoughts to suicide in a misguided attempt to ease the resulting emotional pain, we agonize in guilt and fear. If we are religious, we may worry that suicide will send us straight to hell, or we may be tortured by concern for those whom we will be leaving behind. However, the overriding mission remains--to escape from this apparently unfair, hostile, dreary, meaningless life. Typically, we wish to end the pain by somehow drifting off into a pleasant, nebulous never-never-land where cares and sorrows are behind us forever. And, by the way, we *do* want our death to be painless. If we could handle pain, we wouldn't be suicidal in the first place--hence the popularity of sleeping pills or the sudden-death methods.

Assuming that our suicidal feelings or attempts do not actually result in our death, how do we heal ourselves? Slowly. Suicidal depressions are seldom cured quickly, due to the immensity of the task. Our self-centered thought patterns, established and hardened over many years, can hardly be reversed in the typical month or two we might spend recuperating in a psychiatric ward. Gradually we have to reconstruct our broken egos along lines that allow a progressive realization that other people are our brothers and sisters, and are not almighty "others" to be impressed, coddled, or feared. After our suicidal ego trip is over, we must move upward from humiliation to humility, and we can do so by finally perceiving more clearly the deep unity within which we all share our lives as a *family* of earth dwellers.

Probably the most healing first step we can take in recovering from our failed ego trip is to begin putting others first--by living a life that begins to manifest loving, giving, and forgiving. The impartial law of cause and effect which led us into our "valley of the shadow of death" can now become our friend and firm support. Before, hatred beget hatred and competition beget competition. Now we discover that love begets love and cooperation begets cooperation. A definitely therapeutic psychological chemistry arises in us through our loving and giving to others. In fact, a generous spirit is perhaps the quickest and surest approach to permanent health or wholeness. The American might call this approach Christianity (love); the Japanese might call it Buddhism (compassion); the Chinese might call it the Tao (balance). But plainly speaking, it's just common sense, mainly because it works. According to scholars, the scriptures of all major religions assert in one form or another that "whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap" (Galatians 6:7). Thankfully, this goes for the good seeds as well as the bad seeds.

If a lesson is to have any lasting value for us, we must learn it *by ourselves*, through our *own* initiative or our *own* pain, or both. It is highly difficult for a well-meaning Good Samaritan (whether friend, family member, crisis line operator, or psychiatrist) to convince us that our suicidal thoughts have arisen from separatism, an ego trip, a tripped ego. And even if our helper sees this, he is wise not to mention it, for when we are crying out for help, the last thing we want or even need is a set of unflattering theories. What we need is support, caring, being there--at least until we can wade out of the mud.

The unwelcome truth cannot really be communicated to us adequately through words at all. It must flow from the very marrow of our bones. There may need to be sleepless nights, flaming anger, tears by the pint, gnashing of teeth, and even some more glimpses into the chasm of death before we can slowly awaken from our nightmare of self-imprisoning separateness or egoism. When hope dawns again, as it usually does, we begin to see life's inevitable misfortunes and disappointments not as deuces dealt out by a heartless deity from a stacked universe, but as *opportunities*--for growing, for learning, and for aiding fellow strugglers. Each failure teaches us a valuable lesson in the "dear school" of experience--a lesson which advances us toward a more useful attitude of self-forgetfulness and one-pointedness (by which is meant "pointed towards the One"). When we can live for others, we no longer have to die for ourselves.

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If You Are Feeling Suicidal Right Now....

**Call Suicide Prevention Services (IL): 630-482-9696
or the National Crisis Hotline: 800-784-2433,
or visit Suicide Prevention Services at www.spsfv.org**

Nobody who has not previously been suicidal can fully imagine the pain you are experiencing right now. You are trying to maintain your outer life as you think it should be lived and seen, but secretly you may be trying to figure out how to end your life prematurely, whether gracefully or not. The surges of deep agony you are experiencing may often become unbearable. You may grit your teeth often, or even sometimes writhe on the floor.

Perhaps you are already seeing a therapist or a doctor, but you can't bear the thought of telling him or her about your secret feelings or plans. You may have determined to solve your problem yourself, to carry it through to its conclusion, no matter what the consequences for you, your family, and your friends. Within you there may be a bleak doubting of your worth, a blank wall where the future used to be.

You may be researching ways to end your life, hoping for the least amount of pain that will lead to an imagined release into oblivion. You may be deciding upon the perfect place, and you may be mentally composing the perfect message to leave behind. Guess what?

YOU ARE NOT ALONE. Thousands of people have had feelings like yours. Although some of those people are no longer with us because they succumbed to desperation, many others have found ways to cope with such previously unmanageable feelings -- and they have created useful, successful, and happier lives out of what could have ended in tragedy.

What did these people do? **THEY GOT HELP.** They talked to counselors or doctors or pastors or parents or trusted friends. Some received help from taking prescribed medicines that alleviate feelings of depression, anxiety, and desperation. These medicines allowed them to get a new grip.

Chances are that, awful as you may feel right now, you value your life very much, but you just don't know how to stop the pain. There's a way. By means of some combination of time, counseling, medicine, and planning, you can avoid the fate of those who, for whatever reason, didn't take that first step forward.

At this very moment you have the option to **GET SOME HELP** if you have access to a telephone. If you live in northern Illinois, you can **call Suicide Prevention Services at 1-630-482-9696**. If you live elsewhere in the United States, you can **call the National Crisis Hotline at 1-800-784-2433**.

You don't have to say who you are over the phone. You can explain your situation and feelings to a person who understands. You can learn about new alternatives that you may not have considered before. You have nothing at all to lose. **NOW IS THE BEST TIME.**

Your inner pain can become less troublesome if you get help. Very likely these impulses will go away completely after a period of healing. You have much ahead of you, and right now a concerned person is ready to help you on the phone. Just call.