

When someone takes their life...

By Richard Fowler

Editor's note: In January 2019 the *NZ Herald* carried the story of three daring motorists who pulled to safety a man attempting to commit suicide on the Auckland Harbour Bridge.¹ Later in the month PM Jacinda Ardern stated in a panel discussion in Switzerland:

Unfortunately one of the sad facts about New Zealand is that

everyone knows someone who has taken their own life...We're a small country, less than five million people, but last year over 600 people committed suicide.²

In the following article Richard Fowler suggests some ideas about how to approach this heart-rending subject.

I was so young when I saw it, maybe too young to understand. I was at the beginning of my life, and he was trying to end his.

We lived in a secluded area of just four houses. That day, my parents had noticed something strange happening outside one of them. Even though I was young, I could tell something was not right. Our neighbour was sitting in his car with the engine on, and he seemed asleep. I was asked to stay inside, but I knew what was happening. I did not understand my emotions at the time, but I felt uncomfortable. Something had to be done. My dad intervened and stopped the exhaust fumes from filling up the car. This



A number of measures are in place to discourage people from jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge, including telephone hotlines and patrols by emergency personnel and bridge workers. In 2014 the Bridge's directors approved a proposal for a net below the bridge's deck, extending out on either side. Work on the net began in 2018 and is scheduled to be completed in 2021.

time, at least, a tragic death was avoided. Our neighbour eventually woke up and turned the engine off.

At that age, I found it hard to understand how someone could want to end his own life. Mentally and emotionally, I simply could not get what he had been thinking. And maybe I still can't. Perhaps we all find it hard to understand—to reach someone who is hurting from life so much that he or she does not want to carry on living.

Is there any way, or anyone, who can reach us in such a dark hour? And is there any hope beyond the tragedy?

Kevin Hines is a man that shares his story around the world of hope, healing, and recovery. In a powerful interview he shares how he survived his own suicide attempt when he jumped off the Golden Gate bridge.³ His story isn't just amazing because of his survival, but also because of what he can now tell us.

Kevin was someone who had suffered from a number of mental illnesses. In his late teens he felt he was a burden to all those who loved him. In 2001, after writing his suicide note, he travelled to the Golden Gate bridge. He simply felt nobody cared. But, as he retells his story of that day, he reflects: 'But the reality was, everybody cared, I just couldn't see it'.⁴ What he then tells us is what 19 other Golden Gate bridge jump survivors have also said: 'The millisecond my hands left the rail, it was an instant regret. And no one's going to know that I didn't want to die'. Four seconds later, he hit the water at 120kph.

When the Coast Guard officer pulled him from the water, astonished to find Kevin alive, he put his hand on Kevin's forehead and said: 'You're a miracle'. The next conversation Kevin had was when his dad walked into the hospital. His father took one step into the hospital room, Kevin looked up at him and said: 'Dad, I'm sorry'. His dad replied: 'No, I'm

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sorry'. Both men's first reactions were guilt. Guilt, as Kevin explains, that did not belong to either of them.

As Kevin finishes telling us his story, he explains that, although he still has his mental health difficulties, he has learnt how to cope. He has built a support network around him. So often crises that we go through do end up passing, and better times replace them. He encourages us to remember: 'It's okay not to be

okay. But it's not okay to not ask for someone to help and back you up'.

Help. This is what Kevin wanted when he was going through his darkest hour. He said: 'All I wanted was for one person to look me in the eye and say: "Hey, kid, are you ok?"'

And that is exactly what did happen one day in 2008, at Waterloo Bridge, London. As Jonny Benjamin was going to take his own life, Neil



'Whatever you do, I'm going to stay with you.'



Laybourn walked by. Neil stopped and talked to Jonny, saying: 'It'll get better mate, you will get better'.⁵ His words encouraged Jonny not to jump. After this life-changing day, Jonny searched for this stranger who had helped him by launching a campaign that went global. Their reunion was turned into an award-winning documentary.⁶ When Jonny found Neil, they became friends. And then ran the London Marathon together, even passing under the spot where their journey had started, Waterloo Bridge. And in the most ironic of role reversals, during the marathon, it was Jonny this time who said to Neil, when he needed to stop due to cramp: 'Whatever you do, I'm going to stay with you'.⁷

I guess we all need someone to stay with us. Someone to run the race of life with. For every one person who dies by suicide there are many others who seriously think about suicide but don't go ahead with it.

Not all stories end like the three shared in this article. The pain

experienced by those who are affected by this tragedy is something our community cannot forget or ignore—life is not the same for them. Surely, we can grieve with them, and be sensitive in how

we do this. After all, when someone takes his or her own life, there are so many questions that remain. Why? What was the reason? Could we have done something that would have prevented it? For some there may be a spiritual question: is he or she lost forever? Is it the end of the story? Is there hope? Will I see him or her again?

That childhood experience when I saw our neighbour in his car left me confused and with many questions, but something within me has changed since then. Much later, when I was a teenager, my friend's sister took her life, but this time, my reaction was different. I'd like to share with you my own perspective, which I realise you may not hold: maybe for the first time, I knew I had a faith that claimed love conquers death, no matter how the death occurred. Our lives are not defined by how we might damage ourselves or by our self-image. For in us, there's so much more living. Even when things are at their most bleak, there is still hope. My faith

continues to grow in the God who grieves with us when we grieve. I believe that, although death may separate us from our loved ones, it cannot separate us from the author of life: the God who loves us, and who will bring us back from death to be a part of an eternal story with him.

A first century visionary writer called John tells us of a new chapter that is coming in the story of all those who have died or will die: 'And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life'.⁸ For all those who want a new life, a new story whose chapters are written alongside our co-author Jesus Christ, then their name can be written into the book of life: a life full of healing, hope and happiness.

Endnotes

¹ https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=12188811 .

² <https://www.nowtolove.co.nz/celebrity/royals/prince-william-jacinda-ardern-mental-health-world-economic-forum-40337> .

³ <http://www.kevinhinesstory.com/bio/> .

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WcSUs9iZv-g> .

⁵ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/04/22/marathon-men-suicidal-man-will-run-alongsidestranger-talked/> .

⁶ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/newsbeat/article/38477747/jonny-benjamin-how-i-went-from-suicide-attempt-tombe> .

⁷ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-39711655> .

⁸ Revelation 20:12 (NIV).

If you have been affected by the issues raised in this article, the following free helplines in New Zealand operate 24/7:

- Lifeline: 0800 543 354
- Suicide Crisis Helpline: 0508 828 865 (0508 TAUTOKO)
- Samaritans: 0800 726 666
- Youthline: 0800 376 633
- Kidsline: 0800 543 754
- Depression helpline: 0800 111 757

If it is an emergency and you feel like you or someone else is at risk, call 111.