

Life Without Meaning?

Youth Suicide Rate Climbing

"There is only one philosophical problem that is really serious, and that is suicide," said French existentialist writer Albert Camus. "To decide whether life is worth living or not is to answer the fundamental question in philosophy."

Whether those who kill, or attempt to kill themselves are giving their own response to a consciously framed "philosophical" question, is for the most part unknowable; but the fact remains that millions of desperate people yearly opt for self-destruction.

In the United States alone, according to Jacques Choron, author of *Death and Western Thought*, between six and seven million living persons have attempted suicide. Mr. Choron estimates that 25 per cent of these will try again; many will succeed.

By official World Health Organization count, about 25,000 Americans of all ages, or 11 for each 100,000 of population kill themselves each year.

In the past 25 years, suicide has

risen to become the second leading cause of death among young Americans.

(The first cause is accidental death, but many experts believe that some youthful suicides are erroneously listed in that category.)

Some researchers estimate that between 70,000 and 80,000 young Americans, between the ages of 15 and 24, will attempt suicide within the next year, and that, of these, between 3,500 and 4,000 are likely to succeed.

In Los Angeles County, one of the few areas of the nation where suicide statistics are recorded in detail, the youth suicide rate, based on population, has more than doubled in the last 10 years.

Between 1960 and 1970, the Los Angeles rate for males from 10 to 19 years of age went from 3.3 per 100,000 to 10; in the 20-29 age bracket, the rate went from 18.3 to 41.3.

The female rate for the 10-to-19-year-olds increased from .04 to 8 per 100,000, and for the 20-to-29 category, from 6.3 to 26.2.

Dr. Michael Peck, clinical psychologist and director of

youth studies at the Suicide Prevention Center in Los Angeles, holds that any large city not showing a marked increase in young suicides "is probably not recording accurately."

Most studies show that the rate of attempted suicide by women has always been much higher than the rate for men, but that more men succeed in killing themselves. One suggested explanation is that the methods generally used by males (guns, hanging) are more effective than those generally used by females (razor, pills).

However, the rate of death by suicide among young women in the U.S. rose rapidly from 1960 to 1970 — an increase that has been attributed by some members of the American Association of Suicidology to growing conflict over what the woman's role is in society.

Suicide rates among blacks and Indians in this nation are estimated as of epidemic proportions.

Studies show that the average suicide is a lonely, desperate person, who has lost, or believes he has lost, the vital ingredients of human life — hope and a supporting, loving community.

For the majority of suicides, experts agree, the act of taking one's life is a "cry for help" — 80 per cent of all suicides signal their intentions in advance, apparently by way of final, forlorn pleading.

The experts also agree that, contrary to the rationalizing myth, most suicides are not psychotic, but that many are caught in a web of alcoholism and drug addiction.

In assessing the reasons for the increasing number of youthful suicides and attempts, Los Angeles' Dr. Peck said "Stresses today have increased dramatically."

Says Calvin J. Frederick, formerly with the National Institute of Mental Health, in a recent booklet he co-authored, "Many young people who commit suicide have never had one person that they can trust and admire."

Most suicides, many authorities hold, are an indictment of the surviving community which failed to give the possibility of life to their suicidal victims.

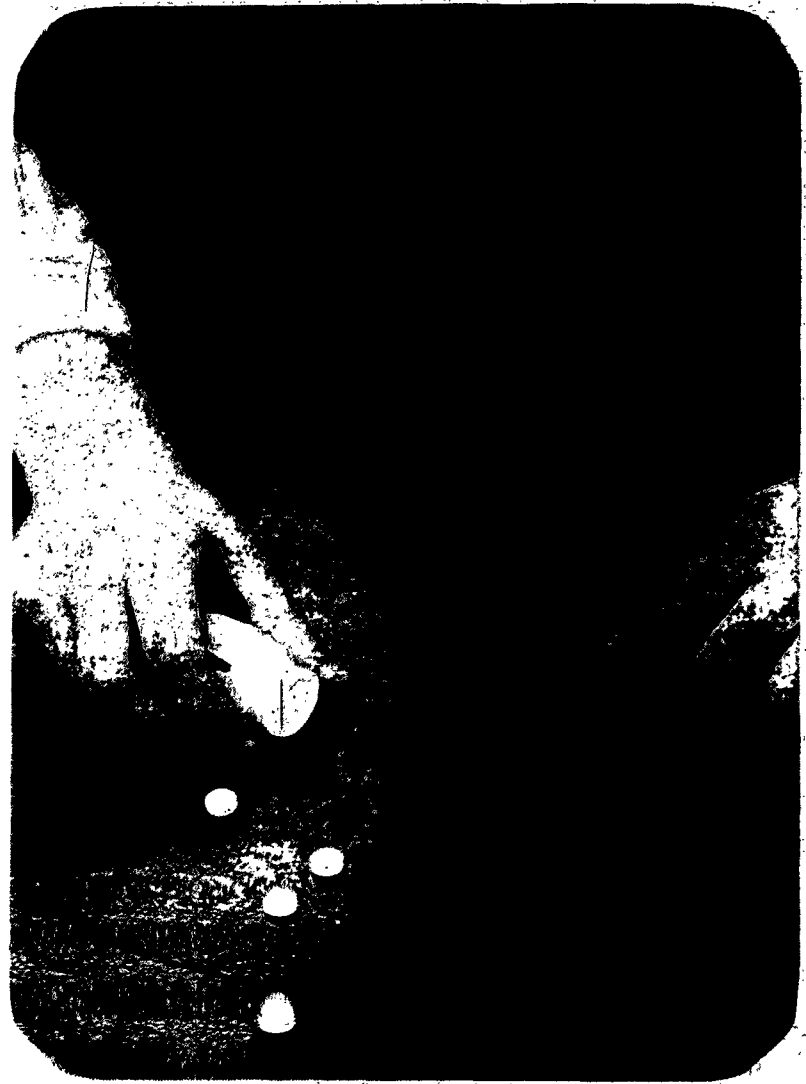
But, for the record, there are segments of the "surviving community" throughout the country that strive, with compassion and understanding, to give would-be suicides effective motivation for continuing to live.

Known as suicide-prevention centers, there are now about 200 around the country.

In New York City, the telephone directory contains two listings under suicide: Suicide Prevention and Save-a-Life League, the country's oldest suicide-prevention organization.

The situation in New York is paralleled all over the country: churches, schools, Scout troops, Kiwanis clubs, hospitals, Junior Leagues — all have their Lifelines, Hotlines, Carelines, Raplines, Crylines, and Sighlines.

In a standard procedure, when a crisis call comes into a suicide-prevention center, the one answering the phone, the "operator," tries to find out, first, if the caller has actually done any harm to himself, and then where he is and what he is doing. The operator tries to get a promise from the caller that he won't do anything for 12 hours — records



indicate that many suicidal crises pass quickly — and then tries to persuade the caller to go somewhere for help.

Hitler, the causes are rooted in man's ineluctable drive for meaning.

If, as Bonhoeffer said, "suicide is man's attempt to give a final human meaning to a life which has become meaningless," then man, as many religious thinkers have said, will cease to do away with himself to the degree that he discovers a meaning that transcends himself.

Authorities maintain that the prime moral reaction to suicide should be an attack on the causes that yield such bitter fruit.

According to Dietrich Bonhoeffer the German theologian murdered under



TOWARD TOMORROW
Fr. Henry Atwell

Americans will celebrate Memorial Day next Monday with traditional parades, memorial services, and picnics — but with a difference.

Not only does the new Monday observance differ from the former May 30 date, but one group of veterans will be noticeably absent. Few Vietnam veterans will participate.

After the two World Wars, and even after the Korean Action, veterans came home, proud to don their uniforms, pin on their battle ribbons and medals, and march proudly behind the flag.

Many Vietnam veterans will be noticeable most by their absence. Many have thrown away their medals and marks of honor. Few have affiliated with any of the veterans' organizations, fewer still will march in any parade except it be an anti-war protest march.

One group of Vietnam veterans met in New Haven, Connecticut shortly after President Nixon announced the ceasefire. One veteran commented on the announcement, "What especially made me gag is talk about peace with honor." Another veteran spoke about "the incredible reluctance of the country to face what we did there." He referred to the callous, inhumane conduct of the war, dramatized especially by the indiscriminate, high-altitude "carpet bombing" of Hanoi and Haiphong at Christmas time when America employed the greatest amount of destructive power in the history of aerial warfare.

Most Americans today want to think that the Indochina war is over, that Mr. Kissinger attained "peace with honor" for the President, and we can now write it off as a chapter, admittedly, a sad one, for our history books.

Unfortunately, American bombs still daily devastate Cambodia and destroy the lives of people there. Watergate has captured the headlines and, nasty though that is, it has diverted our attention from the continuing Cambodian war.

Another veteran at the New Haven meeting described two dreams he had the night the President announced his attaining "peace with honor." Both dreams, the veteran said, were like composite re-runs of events he experienced while in Vietnam. In one dream he saw a man of his unit shooting Vietnamese civilians — "men, women, old people, children, everyone," and in his second dream he saw his best buddy "hit by a rocket, his guts falling out... trying to hold them in... even though he was already dead."

All wars of course, are grim. Battlefields have never been pretty.

Our task on this Memorial Day, 1973, is not so much to glorify nor condemn the veterans of either recent or past wars but look forward to what we as Americans together can do to unite our nation as we all want it to be. One person who can best guide us in this matter is Dr. Benjamin Rush of Philadelphia, one of the men who signed the Declaration of Independence, thereby risking his life and his fortune for the freedom we enjoy today.

He proposed that in addition to the War Office (now called the Department of Defense) there also be a Peace Office, with a Secretary equal in rank to the War Department's Secretary, whose task, among others, would be "to inspire a veneration for human life, and a horror of the shedding of human blood... to subdue that passion for war... and that a familiarity with the instruments of death, as well as military shows, should be carefully avoided."

Rush also suggested that those "timid souls" who refused to take part in the Revolutionary War be forgiven because, he said, they are "lovers of peace and order" and he asked them to contribute their "influence and advice" in fashioning the newly independent nation.

Isn't it too bad that for nearly 200 years we have so totally ignored this founding father of our free America. Maybe his ideas are not irrelevant even today.

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