

## Suicide monologue

By Everett Cox<sup>1</sup>

One steamy night, the summer of 1969, at Marble Mt. Air Base near Da Nang in Viet Nam, a rocket exploded near me and I died. There was screaming, explosions, dust, smoke, chaos; I had no torn flesh, no blood in the dust, but I died.

My flesh did not die but I had shattered. In death, I became a ghost. In life, a shadow. The ghost dominated the shadow. That domination has meant self-destructive behavior, an obsession with suicide and suicide attempts. Self destruction. Who, what is self? My body? My heart? My spirit? I had to destroy all that might be self. I had to destroy self completely, my complete self, even though there was no complete me.

If you knew how much pain you would give to those who love you would you still commit suicide? I want to find the words that will stop suicide. I started with that question. But I already knew the answer. Yes, I would. I would still kill myself. My youngest brother had found me once convulsing from an intentional drug overdose and it didn't stop me from more attempts.

I have the answer to my question but I still want to know what words will stop a suicide. I will also tell you this. There is nothing anyone can say to prevent me from killing myself. But I still want to know, are there words that will stop a suicide?

Suppose you go home tonight and in the middle of your sleep your phone rings and it is someone you love dearly and she says she can't stand the pain anymore and is calling to say goodbye. What are you going to say? Are you going to tell her life is a gift, a precious gift? That she should cherish it? Are you going to try to convince her of that when she has a razor in her hand? Are you going to say that you love her, that so many people love her, that she would hurt so many people? Suicide ends the pain for one and begins a lifetime of pain for others. "What about me?" a girlfriend said to me after I attempted to electrocute myself. What about me?

I have asked vets who should scrape their brains off the ceiling. Who would you have find you with your head missing? Your little girl or boy? Your spouse? Your mother or father? Your Battle Buddy? If you knew how much pain your suicide would give to those who love you would you still kill yourself?

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<sup>1</sup> Everett is a Vietnam veteran.

OK, we know the answer and it doesn't help. My question is wrong. I repeat, there is nothing you could say to stop me from suicide. So let's look at life. What could I possibly say about living that would make you want to give it one more chance? I'm not asking you to make believe the pain will go away. I'm not asking you to embrace life, as if my words would make you want to do that.

I knew three things for sure when I came home from Viet Nam. I did not deserve to live. I could not be forgiven. I had become less than human. Any one was reason enough to kill myself. Add to that, a year or two later, I was diagnosed by a psychiatrist as paranoid and/or paranoid schizophrenic, a then common diagnosis for Viet Nam War vets. He told me it was incurable, that I would get progressively worse and that I would eventually be put away. That's a death sentence for a living death, a curse. The ghost sought to complete my death. The flesh was comatose. I was so angry even my bones raged. When I wasn't angry, I was suicidally depressed.

At some point, I began to say I am not going to kill myself until I have a reason to live. I said that every time I put a rope around my neck or stood at the railing of the George Washington Bridge. It worked. Not always but most of the time. Of course, it's a mind trick, a delay tactic. It is also intuitively correct. With no words that could save me, I turned to intuition and experimentation.

I dropped out of one college after another, usually with suicidal depressions and, sometimes, an attempt. My college experiment failed. My intuition told me it was the wrong place for me.

I worked as a laborer. Pick and shovel work. Exhaustion helped me manage anger and depression. I worked in landscaping and gardening. Trees and flowers lifted my spirits. Beauty has transformative powers. I have planted 1,000 or more trees, since coming home from Viet Nam. Small work teams gave me camaraderie and connection. I was a snowmaker at a ski center. The snow, the frozen, starry nights, connected me to nature. Intuitively, it felt right.

I went to sea as a merchant seaman. I went up the gangplank of my first ship and the sailor on watch told me to turn around, go back down and never board a ship again. He said I'd be a bum the rest of my life if I didn't. I didn't listen. It was a brutally lonely life with hardcore alcoholics. The experiment failed but with a good lesson learned.

If you were lonely, my brother said, go work with people. I became a houseparent for a dozen teen aged homeless boys. We'll push you until you scream, one boy advised me, so scream loud and often. But war had silenced me. They pushed and pushed. I

finally screamed. A mixed experiment. Lonely, depressed boys with lonely, depressed me held together by small, sometimes large, acts of kindness, generosity and love. My intuition began to actively break into my consciousness and guide me.

A friend suggested I read "Gestalt Therapy Verbatim" by Fritz Perls. I did and my intuition flowered. Perls said to look at those things we avoid for growth. He said to do dreamwork. I was consumed by nightmares. There was far more war in my sleep than I had experienced in Viet Nam. The battles in my sleep became food for growth.

I tried college again. Failed miserably. Failed my suicide, too. You need an alternative school, said a professor. A what? Look for them, you'll find them, he told me. I found a course in American Western Literature. Read six books. Independent study. Write a paper. Backpack the Rockies for two weeks. Join in discussions. Three credits. I was elated.

I found New Experimental College in Denmark. No teachers. No curriculum. Develop my own study plan and share my learning. Create a community of scholars. - Try to get along with each and every person here, advised the founder, Aage Nielsen. It became my school of emotional intelligence. I began to learn to live with others. I began to live with myself. I remembered my calling to serve. I also fell in love. She turned my world upside down. I stayed for seven years. I still had suicidal depressions. Death still dominated my life. But I learned the power of experimentation. My faith in my intuition grew deeper.

I went from New Experimental College to the United Nations representing the Association for World Education, a NGO. We wanted to implement a Global Minimum Wage linked to Universal Health Care. The United Nations was my university. I was working with ideas and programs far greater than myself.

I married and became a father. When my son was born, I fell crazy in love with him. I promised him I would not kill myself. I would not do that to him. The promise did not stop depressions or rage. I had a house painting business. I still needed to be a laborer. I loved being a father, cooking for him, bathing him, putting him to bed, reading stories. I even went to school with him sometimes. We made gardens, planted trees, learned the names of birds, baked bread, picked wild grapes and made jelly. I could also be violent to my son.

My marriage ended in divorce. The Crash of 2008 killed my painting business. I was getting old. I wanted a change. Intuitively, I took a course on negotiation. We used archetypes to explore relationships and understand motivation. We used four: The

Sage, The Lover, The Prophet, The Warrior. We also explored the shadow side of each. It shocked me to realize I lived my life primarily through shadows. It shocked me to realize the Shadow Warrior dominated my life. With terrible anxiety, I realized I had to face my shadows.

April, five years ago, I went to a retreat for vets at Omega Institute. It was all about meditation. We could each have a private meeting with the retreat leader, Claude AnShin Thomas, an Army vet, a former helicopter doorgunner in Viet Nam. He had become a Buddhist monk. He asked me why I was there. I told him I didn't know. I said I didn't consider myself a vet. He said that was not unusual. Then I said I had two secrets from Viet Nam that were killing me. He offered to listen. I told him. He didn't condemn me. He suggested I tell other vets. No one condemned me. I cried for years. I learned that speaking and writing about the consequences of war and violence in our lives changes our relationship to those consequences. The following month, I went to a symposium on Post Traumatic Stress. When I heard Dr. Ed Tick of Soldiers Heart describe PTS, I knew it was me he was talking about.

I went to a veterans writing workshop at the Joiner Center and wrote an open letter on suicide to Afghanistan and Iraq War vets. A young vet said I was teaching her generation how to survive. I began to go to Veteran/Civilian Dialogues at Intersections International. Each time I dropped war debris, psychic shrapnel, from my shoulders. Speaking about the unspeakable changes our relationship to it.

I started writing with Warrior Writers. I danced with Exit 12 led by an Iraq War Combat Marine who uses dance to transform the movements of the military body into a creative, artistic body. I joined Impact Theatre's Veteran Theatre Project. We, vets with professional actors and director, Fay Simpson, created a story together called "Leaving Theatre", the theatre of war. When civilians see it they say they never got the war experience until they saw it on stage. Vets say it is the most accurate description of their experience they have ever seen.

I began to call these experiences Survival Arts. Survival Arts begin with intuition, then experimentation. Heavy labor kept me alive. Working with trees and stones and the earth pulled me deeply into nature. The camaraderie of small work groups making snow or gardens gave me human connections. Working with homeless boys pulled me out of myself. New Experimental College was community building as much as self-directed learning. The United Nations was world and global education.

Three things are true of most vets. We are silent. We are invisible. We are often lost in time. Speaking and writing about the consequences of war in our lives changes our

relationship to those consequences. Our stories must be shared in community with civilians. There is no coming home from war if civilians are not engaged in the process. Sharing our stories releases energy, the energy that binds us to self-destructiveness, depression, rage, drug abuse; the energy that drives us to suicide. That energy is then free to be creative.

Life wants to live. It is as simple as that. Life wants to live. Violence can pervert that very simple truth. It can twist it, create doubt, create ambivalence. Violence makes ghosts and shadows out of our lives. Life wants to live. That's our starting point if we want to listen for it. That's the starting point for intuition and experimentation. That's the starting point for Survival Arts.

Veterans tend to be silent, invisible and lost in time. Thank you for hearing me. Thank you for seeing me. Thank you for being here now.