



By Margaret Evans, Editor

Suicide rates in the United States have risen almost 30% in less than two decades. This is the finding of a government survey spanning the years 1999 through 2016. I stress that end date – 2016 – knowing that many of my readers might otherwise Jump to Trump. (Jump to Trump is my catch phrase for “jump to the conclusion that it’s Donald Trump’s fault.” Won’t work this time, y’all.)

Last week we lost fashion icon Kate Spade and celebrity chef Anthony Bourdain, both in the prime of their illustrious lives – a double blow to our beleaguered national psyche. And here at home, we’ve been left reeling and heartbroken by the loss of several well-loved Beaufortonians over the past few years. My church has been particularly hard-hit. I’ve been to *w ay* too many funerals for terrific people I liked enormously, young-ish men who “had it all” – including families they adored, now left behind.

Kate Spade had a 13-year-old daughter. Anthony Bourdain’s little girl is 11. There are fatherless children at my church – far too many – and I have marveled at their resilience and strength over the months and years, but I ache when I think of their wounds that can never fully heal.

I feel shy and hesitant even writing on this subject. If you’re of a certain age – like me – you probably remember a time when suicide was something you “just didn’t talk about.” It was too . . . delicate. Fraught. Shrouded in mystery and questions of morality. Along with all that, it just made people uncomfortable. It still makes me uncomfortable.

But if we don't want to get comfortable with suicide itself, we'd better get comfortable talking about it. And that seems to be happening.

On the day we learned of Bourdain's death, there were discussions all over Facebook – where *nobody* is uncomfortable talking about *anything*. (More on that later.) For everyone who asked “why?” there was someone else with a ready answer, and they were all over the place. Here are just a few comments from one discussion thread – followed by my own thoughts on each:

“Seems the biggest problem is dealing with success. Not failure . . . ”

Not necessarily. According to the survey above, suicide affects people up and down the ladder of success – the poor and struggling, the rich and famous, and everybody in between. It doesn't discriminate on socio-economic terms. Interestingly, however, it *does* discriminate in terms of race and gender. Whites have a much higher suicide rate than blacks, and men are 3.5 % more likely to take their own lives than women.

□□□□□□□□□□ **“Depression doesn't have anything to do with dealing with success or failure, just like success or failure has nothing to do with whether you have diabetes or high blood pressure. It's a mental illness. Illnesses kill. It would be most helpful to de-stigmatize mental illnesses and treat them like other illnesses, so people can talk about them and get support from their friends.”**

I hear this a lot, but I'm skeptical. I would argue that mental illness is far *less* stigmatized now than it was 50 years ago, when suicide rates were much lower. I'm not exaggerating when I say that almost everybody I know is on antidepressants or anti-anxiety meds of some kind. Many of my friends see a therapist regularly, and they will tell you about it with great candor. Heck, Woody Allen actually made “going into therapy”

chic

back in the 70s. It may have lost its sheen at this point – much like Woody Allen himself – but that's only because it's become so mundane. I think we're exaggerating the stigma surrounding mental illness, at least among women. Men, I'll grant you, may still feel it, prideful cusses that they are. (I say that with love, boys.)

“The rise in suicide tracks the loss of religious faith . . . We are little more evolved

than the savage who cowered in fear at an eclipse while standing at the cave. The fact that we now hold glowing screens in our hands only means we cower in fear over different things. We are still human. And we still need faith.”

□□□□□□□□□□My hunch is that there’s some truth in this. According to a 2015 Pew Survey, the number of “nones” in the US – those who call themselves atheist, agnostic, or “nothing in particular” – rose from 16-23% between 2007 and 2014. At that rate, I’d imagine the number is up around 30% by now. Of course, correlation doesn’t equal causation – and what about all those men at my church? – but it’s certainly a theory worth considering. (At this point I’d say *all* theories are on the table.) Unfortunately, this one has no easy fix. I don’t foresee a national religious revival anytime soon, do you?

“Suicides are up a whopping 30% since 1999. So what has been different since 1999 in a major way? The internet explosion and the advent of social media, combined with the isolating reminder every day of how disconnected we actually are from each other.”

□□□□□□□□□□This one really hit home for me. I must have penned a dozen essays over the years about the weird paradox of social media, the way it connects us like never before while simultaneously making us feel deeply disconnected – both from each other, and from reality. In a recent column I wrote, “When you spend too much time on social media, you can develop a skewed sense of reality – a “virtual” reality, as it were. As in . . . almost, but not quite. As in . . . fake. One example of this fake take on reality is the general impression one gets that people – individual human beings – go around hating other people all day, every day. Spend enough time on Twitter and Facebook and you’ll come to believe that Americans are clawing at each other’s jugulars 24/7, locked in an ongoing un-civil war that feels endless, pointless, and positively fruitless. If you’re the sensitive type, easily stung and discouraged, it can bring you to your knees.”

Could it even make you suicidal? I wonder. According to the aforementioned government survey, only 54% of suicides have any documented history of mental illness. And, again, mental illness is nothing new. What *is* new – and tracks pretty neatly with the rising suicide rate – is the rise of the Internet and the communities we form there. Those communities can be stimulating and even supportive, but all too often they encourage our innate tribal fears and hatreds, exacerbating hostility and paranoia. These virtual enclaves lull us to closed-minded complacency in cocoons of abstract ideology, while distracting us from the messy, complicated, joyful flesh-and-blood relationships we all need to live and thrive.

Talking About It

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So, to recap: We've got the decline of religion and the rise of social media, happening in tandem – possibly even connected. And we've got the Internet itself, a soul-sucking hydra that spreads bad news before it even happens, fake news that never *did* happen, and so many conflicting *versions* of the news that one begins to doubt the very existence of truth. And, as ever, we've got mental illness, which some are still ashamed to acknowledge and seek help for. Throw in the general turbulence of daily life in 21st Century America, and what you've got is that thing we call a perfect storm.

What can we do about it? How do we shelter our fragile ones from the wind and the rain, the thunder and the lightening? How do we help them stay anchored in port? I have no answers, but, please, let's keep talking.