

When a person takes his own life, not only does he die in body, but much of his spirit here on earth dies as well, more so than for someone who had an “ordinary” death.

Why? Because nobody knows what to say, and there seems to be no statute of limitations on silence. The shame of suicide stiffens people’s tongues, sometimes permanently. Loved ones might fondly reminisce at Christmas dinner about the grandmother who valiantly fought cancer until the bitter end, but try that if the family member died by his own hand. Chances are that that topic will be met with a good deal of awkwardness and discomfort. There is no valiance in losing to yourself.

With suicide, it is commonly believed that the cause of death lies in the character of the person himself, his inability to “appreciate what he has” or “cope” or “suck it up.” The individual who kills himself demonstrates weakness in the worst way, taking the “easy way out.” He has no faith. He doesn’t love his family enough. He gives in. He gives up.

I do not accept this.

I believe that individuals who commit suicide have succumbed to a “toxin” (a.k.a. mental illness) that first attacks the mind and eventually corrupts and corrodes “the soul.” The victims of suicide experience psychic pain so intense that their powers of reason are warped, their mental defenses compromised, and their souls fractured. In this state, the “logical solution” to end this level of suffering is for the person to end it himself.

I believe that individuals attacked by this caliber of mental illness do not in fact kill “themselves.” At this point, the thing that we call the “true self” has ceased to exist. The “self” is no longer separate from the predator that has penetrated it and is ready to destroy it. The individual who dies is simply doing the illness’ dirty work.

I have seen this pattern too many times, and I would prefer not to see it again. I have known people, known well and loved well, that have suffered in this way and died horribly. Few talk about it. Few talk about it, not only because of the shame and the pain of loved ones associated with it, but because the ghastly nature of the deaths often overshadows the true quality of the lives they lived.

I am going to talk a bit about one of my friends now, T.C., Jr., a man who I credit with keeping me afloat when I was at my lowest point in life. I met T.C. in September, 1990, three months after the death of my father who passed away after a long struggle with bipolar depression.

T.C., Jr.

T.C. was one of my most beloved, cherished friends, my best friend at UCSD. He was an accomplished poet, scholar, and athlete. He drank copious amounts of coffee and loved to critique anything and everything. He graduated valedictorian of Muir College at UCSD in Classics and Philosophy and earned a full scholarship for the PhD program at Stanford. He could read Latin and Greek with the same fluency as English. He had sinister laugh and equally sinister personality. We took a great dislike to each other at first sight and then became even greater friends. Our favorite thing to do together was walk in the fog at night at UCSD under the neon sign of the Seven Vices and Seven Virtues, as the huge neon letters flashed on and off, turning the fog all the colors of the rainbow. Tim would often say that walking around the campus at UCSD was like walking inside of a glowing computer chip. To me, the nights spent walking around with T.C. were among the best times of my life.

T.C. passed away shortly after finishing his dissertation at Stanford, before his oral exams. He died of bipolar disorder with psychotic features. He was 27 years old.

It took me a long time to come to terms with the method of my father’s and T.C.’s deaths. They were both clearly mentally ill at the time they took their own lives, and yet I still felt abandoned. I blamed them in my heart, even though intellectually I knew that they suffered from something greater than themselves. It has only been with time that I came to realize that depression is a “thing,” like a virus, and potentially lethal.

I no longer blame my loved ones. I evoke my father’s name at family gatherings—his love of the USC Trojans, for example, and at times, you will even hear me reciting T.C.’s poetry.