

Thanks for Staying

Sunday, February 24, 2019

Sermon. *Thanks for Staying* Kathleen Rolenz

It was 8 am on October 17, 2010. The place – Jewell Trail on Mount Washington, in New Hampshire, and Pam Bales was stoked for a hike. As an experienced hiker, she was also well prepared. She had food and water and extra layers of clothing because bad weather was always a possibility on the mountain. . Bales was not only an avid hiker but she was also a member of the all-volunteer Pemigewasset Valley Search and Rescue Team. The first two hours on the trail were gorgeous; sunny and warm, but by 10:30 am, a dense fog settled in, followed by a cold wind. As she climbed higher, snow began to fall. It didn't matter to Pam – she was well prepared with extra clothes and food. What she wasn't prepared to see, however, was a single set of footprints made by a pair of sneakers in the snow ahead of her. As part of the rescue team, she'd seen this before, hikers going out for what they thought was a stroll in the woods, only to be surprised by the sudden force of an early autumn snowstorm. Pam Bales was growing increasingly convinced that someone was on the trail ahead of her, and that whoever that person was – was in over their heads.

I can relate to both Pam, the well-prepared hiker, and that hapless stroller who found him or herself in a situation that had become increasingly dangerous. Sometimes our choices bring us to such places; and sometimes, despite every careful plan we make, we find ourselves in the middle of blizzard, with a dead battery in the car, a dusty granola bar in the glove compartment, and no cell phone service. We are now wondering if we will make it through the night – much less survive the encounter with overwhelming forces.

Earlier this year, Rev. John Crestwell officiated at the memorial service of a member who chose to end her life. When we heard the news, waves of grief and shock rippled throughout those who knew her. And even those who didn't know her were affected and asked the first and last question of every person who dies by suicide:

“why?” This morning, I want to look more closely at that question, because with every person I've known and lost to suicide, I keep asking that question. The answers are both simple and complex; and it's that complexity I want to dive into with you now.

I have been a Unitarian Universalist for almost thirty-seven years. The reason I was attracted to Unitarian Universalism in the first place was its insistence on individual rights and individual choice. Just as I believe in the autonomy of a woman to make her own reproductive choices, so I strongly believed in the right to die. I believe in the Compassion and Choices organization, formerly known as the Hemlock Society. As a minister, I was asked to be present at the death of someone who chose to end their own life at an advanced age due to an incurable illness.

I have always believed that everyone has the right to determine the time and means of their own end. I had So when Jennifer Michael Hecht's book came out, entitled “Stay,” I was prepared to argue with her; that is, my commitment to self-determination should also extend to those who decide to die by suicide. Her book and my own deeper reflection on suicide changed my thinking, and I found myself agreeing with her. Hecht's book presents two main ideas that she hopes people contemplating suicides will keep in their heads; first, suicide actually kills two people; the one who dies and the ones who survives. She makes a compelling argument about how suicide is actually delayed homicide; that they happen in clusters with one person's suicide influencing the others. Her second argument – and the one I find most compelling is that *you owe it to your future self to live.*

I want to acknowledge that this sermon is not about end of life decisions when one is grappling with a painful, incurable, terminal illness, or when one has reached the end of one's natural life and does not wish to prolong it. Choosing to end one's life by using an established process like Compassion in Choices which involves family members and friends, while worthy of our contemplation, is not the topic of today's service. I want to acknowledge that mental anguish can be as excruciating and as debilitating as any physical pain, but this morning, I am focusing on the

decision to end one's life, usually brought about by sustained mental anguish. But first, come back with me now, to that mountain where Pamela Bales is hiking in search of those footprints.

By now, Pamela Bales was facing 50 mile an hour winds. Winds were ramping up. Darkness would be upon the mountain soon. She knew if she continued to follow the tracks, she would add risk and time to her ability to get down the mountain herself. But something inside of her could not let this go. She turned to the left where the sneaker tracks continued and called out "hello? Is anybody out there? Do you need help?" She blew her rescue whistle and listened for a reply.

I wish I had blown a rescue whistle when Dianne, the secretary of the first church I ever served, told me that she was fine; that she was going to go home and have some wine, but that she would be okay. It was my first ministry and Diane was my church secretary, but she was more than the that to me. She was a seasoned Unitarian Universalist church member, administrative genius and a warm and generous spirit. She was the one who took the call from the distraught parishioner, who called tell his minister that his wife Jean had just died by suicide. She was the one who helped me to find the best funeral home in town; who choose the deceased burial dress, who typed up the program for the memorial service. So, it was a double shock, when just two weeks after Jean's death, the night after she left the office for the day, that I got the call from Diane's husband, that she too, had died by suicide, in the same manner as Jean. They had both read the same book, "Final Exit" that described a painless way to end one's life; a book which I had in my minister's library.

In Hecht's book, Stay, Hecht argues from a philosopher's point of view; that is, that to die by suicide can also "cause suicide." She writes this: "In the West, the dominant religions had told people suicide was against the rules, they must not do it; if they did they would be punished in the afterlife. People killed themselves anyway, of course, but the strict injunction must have helped keep a billion moments of anguish from turning into calamity.

These days we encourage people to stay alive and not kill themselves, but we say it for the person's own sake...I'm issuing a rule. You are not allowed to kill yourself. When a person kills himself, he does wrenching damage to the community. One of the best predictors of suicide is knowing a suicide. That means suicide is also delayed homicide. You have to stay." As Hecht puts it, if you want your niece to make it through her dark nights, you have to make it through yours." ¹

She followed the tracks gingerly for 20 to 30 yards. She rounded a slight corner and saw a man sitting motionless, cradled by large rime-covered boulders just off the Clay Loop Trail. He stared in the direction of the Great Gulf, the majesty of which could only be imagined because of the horrendous visibility. She approached him and uttered, "Oh, hello." He did not react. He wore tennis sneakers, shorts, a light jacket, and fingerless gloves. He looked soaking wet, and thick frost covered his jacket. She could tell that he knew she was there. His eyes tracked her slowly and he barely swiveled his head. She knew he could still move because his frozen windbreaker and the patches of frost breaking free of it made crinkling sounds as he shifted. A switch flipped. She now stopped being a curious and concerned hiker. Her informal search now transitioned to full-on rescue mission.²

Diane's death was the first suicide I encountered as a minister, but it wasn't the last. Yet even now, almost twenty five years later, I can still feel that moment of shock and disbelief and yes, anger. Anger, because I wished I had the words then that I found in Hecht's book, "Stay," of the many things I've since thought of to tell her - I would have said "Dianne - don't do it, because you owe it to your future self to stay alive." Don't do it, I'd say, because I know people who have survived those impulses and whose lives were transformed in ways they could not imagine while in the depths of despair. Because I have read of the stories of people who miraculously survive a suicide attempt, stories like Kevin Hines. In 2000, Kevin Hines walked onto the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco with one thought on his mind; he was

¹ Daily Beast, Military Suicide by Ted Janis

² <https://www.unionleader.com/nh/outdoors/footprints-in-the-snow-lead-to-an-emotional->

[rescue/article_482a2e0f-e725-5df6-9e7c-5958bdb272e5.html](https://www.unionleader.com/nh/outdoors/footprints-in-the-snow-lead-to-an-emotional-rescue/article_482a2e0f-e725-5df6-9e7c-5958bdb272e5.html)

going to end his life. He said that the millisecond his hands left the rail, it was an instant regret. He said while falling he realized he had made a terrible mistake. He was among the 1% of people who survive that jump; and now works as a mental health advocate and suicide prevention activist. Kevin Hines, is the focus of a feature length documentary film called “Suicide: The Ripple Effect.”

Just as Jennifer Michael Hecht makes the case for the ripple effect of suicide, Hines also makes the case for the ripple effect of the importance of helping people stay alive.

What is your name? Pam Bales shouted above the 50 mile an hour winds. The young man did not respond. “Do you know where you are?” she asked. Nothing. His skin was pale and waxy, and he had a glazed look on his face. Winds were blowing, the temperature was at 27 degrees Fahrenheit and the ice pellets continued their relentless assault on Bales and the man who was now her patient. She thought of abandoning him in the interest of her own survival, but that was a horrifying prospect. She propped him up against the rocks, stripped him to his t-shirt and underwear, and placed adhesive toe warmer packs on his bare feet. She then retrieved a pair of pants, socks a winter hat and jacket, pulling warm, dry layers onto his body. He could not help her because he was so badly impaired by hypothermia. For Pam Bales and this stranger whom she named simply as “John,” she knew that if they did not get off of that mountain and soon, there would be no future self for either of them. It was now a battle to simply stay alive.

It’s hard to imagine staying alive when you are in the midst of really deep depression. Depression merits its own sermon because it is sometimes a misunderstood and misdiagnosed illness that, if goes untreated, can kill just as surely as some forms of cancer or diabetes can kill. Fortunately, both the medical profession and society at large understands that mental illness is real, and that you can’t just wish it away by positive, energetic thoughts.

I understand that for some the mental pain of living is just as severe as unrelenting physical pain. So it’s important to state here, as Hecht does in her

book, “I do not mean to pass judgment on those who have committed suicide. I mean instead to express to the suicidal person who has rejected suicide that you deserve gratitude from your community and from humanity.”

I’ve never gotten to the razor’s edge myself, but I have seen it and have felt its sharpness. That same year that Diane ended her life, I remember driving home one night in the dark, and the cold, and I would always pass this ominous looking lake with no guardrails. I was single, a brand new minister, lonely and terribly insecure, too sensitive for my own good.. I remember thinking while driving past the lake one night: “I could just drive my car into that lake...” it seemed like such a calm, logical thing to do. At that moment, I didn’t believe that anyone would miss me that much, really. Or if they did, they’d get over it. But instead of turning into the lake, I turned towards my apartment, because I did have a family and friends who loved me and who would be terribly hurt and confused and, well, there was a sermon to write for that Sunday. I look back on that moment with profound gratitude, for whatever spirit compelled me to keep driving would lead me, eventually, into a future I never dreamed could be this good – a ministry and marriage and step-parenthood, and being an aunt, and an author and settled minister and an interim minister and everything in between. I didn’t have the words at the time, **but I owed it to my future self to stay alive.**

Bales recognized that he would die soon if they didn’t get out of there. She looked him in the eyes and said “John, we have to go NOW. At one point, John dropped down in the snow and he seemed to be giving up. He curled in a sitting fetal position, hunched down. He told her he was exhausted and that she should go on without him. Bales would have none of that. “That’s not an option, John. We still have the toughest part to go – so get up, suck it up and keep going.” She felt relieved when he slowly stood up.

After nearly eight hours of agonizingly slow going, inching their way down steep sections, they arrived at the trailhead, exhausted and battered. Bales made her way to her car and started her engine, placing the frozen clothing she had taken off John on the heater to dry. Why don’t you have any

extra dry clothes and food in your car? “ And, “why didn’t you check the weather forecast dressed like that?” John didn’t answer. When his clothes were dry, he thanked her, got into his own car and drove across the empty lot toward the exit.

Long ago, Unitarian Universalists rejected the idea that suicide was a sin because it offended God’s moral law. Yet, to my mind, we’ve never come up with an adequate reason not to end one’s life prematurely, out of impulse or prolonged mental anguish, until now. The metaphor of the interdependent web is often cited in terms of our responsibility to the environment, but it also commands us to be responsible with and for one another. But this interdependent web is also the commitment we make as human beings to stay alive; not only for our own sake, but for the sake of others.

Pam Bales never knew what happened to John until about a week later, when Allan Clark, the President of her Rescue Group, received a letter and a donation in the mail. This is what was in the letter:

I hope this reaches the right group of rescuers. This is hard to do but must try, part of my therapy. I want to remain anonymous, but I was called John. On Sunday Oct. 17 I went up my favorite trail, Jewell, to end my life. Weather was to be bad. Thought no one else would be there, I was dressed to go quickly. Next thing I knew this lady was talking to me, changing my clothes, talking to me, giving me food, talking to me, making me warmer, and she just kept talking and calling me John and I let her. Finally learned her name was Pam.

Conditions were horrible and I said to leave me and get going, but she wouldn’t. Got me up and had me stay right behind her, still talking. I followed but I did think about running off, she couldn’t see me. But I wanted to only take my life, not anybody else and I think she would’ve tried to find me.

The entire time she treated me with care, compassion, authority, confidence and the impression that I mattered. With all that has been

going wrong in in my life, I didn’t matter to me, but I did to Pam. She probably thought I was the stupidest hiker dressed like I was, but I was never put down in any way — chewed out yes — in a kind way. Maybe I wasn’t meant to die yet, I somehow still mattered in life.

I became very embarrassed later on and never really thanked her properly.. I am getting help with my mental needs. I have a new direction thanks to wonderful people like yourselves. I got your name from her back pack patch and bumper sticker. My deepest thanks, — John

John would have surely died on that mountain if Pam had not come along. As Hecht writes: *“To live through this painful feeling is hard work and requires prodigious courage. That courage come first from recognizing that we are not alone..... If we can grasp that commonality the pain can become easier to bear. The courage to live may also come from having shared with other people, through reading or conversation that despite pain it is worth finding the courage to live-for the sake of other people and for the sake of our future selves. We might be able to save one another and ourselves in part by becoming more aware of the community and especially the community of sufferers. It can feel like we are alone, unseen, frozen out, but that is not the case. There is a lot of company on the dark side of life.”*

Pam kept fighting to keep both her and John alive. So why stay? Why keep fighting? One of my former members,³ who herself had struggled with mental illness and depression wrote this, as she reflected on why she continues to stay alive:

“Fight because you matter. Despite whatever the voices in your head are telling you, you are enough. You are important. You add to this world in a unique way that no one else can and none of us can ever comprehend all of the ways we affect the world.

Fight because you are not alone. It is easy to feel alone and isolated, to feel shame and guilt. That is why it is so important to share our stories

³ With gratitude for K.T. member of Fox Valley UU Fellowship for these words.

with one another, to erase the shame and the stigma, to make it okay to say, “I’m struggling and I need help. Every time we share our story it’s an opportunity to help someone else better understand their own struggles, to no longer feel isolated and ashamed and to begin to claw their way back to life.

Lastly, fight because the darkness will pass. For those of us fighting a life-long battle, being told to wait and things will get better can feel like a slap in the face. However, even the most inescapable despair ebbs and flows. Even though your battle may continue, this moment of absolute darkness will pass. Hold on and you can survive the night.

So fight and fight hard; because you are enough, you matter, you are not alone and the darkness will pass. So for all of you who are here, who have fought your way towards life – who have climbed from out of the valley of the shadows of death – thank you. Thank you for staying.