

Suicide, sin, and modern tribalism

By [Steve Pankey](#)

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It has been a couple of years now since a man pulled his car diagonally across the busiest intersection in south Baldwin County at AL-59 and US-98, got out, took a seat on top of the trunk, and, in broad day light, shot himself in the head. Traffic was backed up for hours as locals tried to figure out what had happened to shut down the road. Rumors swirled, but all we heard was that an incident had occurred which required the intersection to be closed for several hours. Ultimately, the final say on the matter was that “the media does not report on suicides.” This is still, by and large, the case. The media does not report on suicides, unless it is the death of a major figure in politics or entertainment.

There was a time, a very long time, in the not too distant past, in which the Church (I use a capital “C” very intentionally here) condemned suicide as an unpardonable sin. The theology, such as it was, behind it stated that because suicide is a blatant violation of the Sixth Commandment (Thou shalt not kill) and is therefore a sin and because the sinner cannot ask for forgiveness after the sin was committed, then one who commits suicide died as an unrepentant sinner and was therefore condemned to hell for eternity. Let’s be clear about something, this is a terrible and damaging theology. Nevertheless, it was the prevailing understanding of suicide in the the Church for about 1,960 years (+/-).

The questions surrounding how we handle suicide as a culture have come under the bright light of the news media in the past few days as we’ve collectively mourned the loss of comedic legend Robin Williams. From the international back lash surround Shepard Smith’s suggestion that Williams was a “coward” to a local op-ed piece on the [unpardonable sin](#), Williams death has opened up a long overdue conversation about depression, addiction, and suicide. Thankfully, the Church has walked alongside advancements in psychology and physiology over the past half century, and, at least on this matter, we don’t sound like barbaric cave men spouting ignorance in the name of Jesus. We can now say that depression can kill just like cancer can, and respond with compassion and grace rather than

condemnation and law.

What I've found most interesting over the last couple of days however, is how social media has created something of a neo-tribalism that gets exacerbated in the aftermath of large scale life events. I think it has been largely unintentional, but watching as groups have worked hard to address the grave issues behind Williams' death, celebrate his life, and drive traffic to their websites has been intriguing for me. Whether it is the [TODAY show](#) sharing clips of all of his visits to their set or the local Top-40 station inviting me to check out something they've shared on their [Facebook page](#) or the scores of Episcopalians sharing [Robin Williams' Top 10 Reasons to be an Episcopalian](#) or the San Francisco Giants holding a moment of silence for one of their greatest fans, there has been a rush to have Robin Williams included among at least one of almost every tribal grouping you can imagine: church, sports team, local radio stations, even morning "news" shows. Heck, even this blog post can be looked at with suspicion. Am I writing this with entirely pure intentions? Probably not.

What is really interesting isn't searching out the motivations behind all of the internet traffic that Robin Williams' death has caused, but how we have so drastically changed the way suicide is viewed, and rightfully so. Sixty, 100, 1,000 years ago, Williams' name would have been shunned from society. There would have been a rush by groups he was associated with to remove themselves from the shadow that his suicide would have cast on the culture. Today, as we know more about depression, as more of us have experienced it, as we've become more open to removing the stigma of mental illness, we are able to actually learn something from what is really a national tragedy. That a man who brought so much joy was paralyzed by such deep pain boggles the mind, but it helps to remind us that depression doesn't look like what we think it should, and to be on guard, watching for signs of depression and suicidal thoughts. People still want Robin Williams to be included among their tribe. They want all of him: manic stand-up comedian, gifted actor, hilarious talk show guest, and yes, even depressed and cash-strapped mega-star. We want him to be included among us because now, more than ever, we're able to say, "none of us is perfect, we've all got demons, we all struggle from time to time, and we're all in this together." I rejoice that we've come so far. Anything to find some good in the midst of such a sad story.

And please, if you find yourself having thoughts of suicide, know that there is help available and things really can be better. [Call 1-800-273-TALK\(8255\)](tel:1-800-273-TALK(8255)).

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