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Michael French  
School of Health Sciences  
University of New Haven, USA  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0972-9204>

## Death Awaits Me: An Existential Phenomenology of Suicide

### Abstract:

This paper provides a phenomenology of the suicidal process. It begins with an examination of the self and the breaks that occur within the world that the suicidal individual endures. This includes an examination of suicidal hopelessness, termed in this paper as ontological petrification. It follows with the role in which hope plays in the suicidal. The paper then turns to carrying out the action of suicide, including a discussion of the suicide note and the developing form of the suicide note as found in live-streams on social media. The paper concludes by describing the completion of the suicidal process, and the persistence of the suicidal drive in the suicidal individual. The paper makes use of suicide notes, video suicide notes, and stories of suicides.

### Keywords:

suicide, phenomenology, suicide notes, hopelessness, existential phenomenology

*Happiness precedes me  
Sadness follows me  
Death awaits me<sup>1</sup>*

## Introduction<sup>2</sup>

What is hoped to be accomplished in this essay is a phenomenological, existential journey along the path of the suicidal mind, examining how the questions the suicidal person attempts to answer can be answered, and the way in which their relation to themselves and their world guide these answers. This method will allow us better opportunity to study and engage with the suicidal person as we attempt to join them on their journey toward the noose, gun, pills, lake, or bridge.

The public discussion around suicide is surrounded by moralizations and captured by panic. We will slow down to speak softly and listen intently to strive for the two tools laid out by Jean Amery in *On Suicide: A Discourse on Voluntary Death* – introspection and empathy.<sup>3</sup> Introspection requires that we search inside ourselves for situations that can correspond or offer a point of reference to the suicidal. Empathy requires that we find commonalities in our suffering. For some this may be therapeutic; for others, graphic. But before we begin, strip your preconceived notions of taboo away, leave moralizations behind, and attempt at a new understanding in order to engage in a more mature conversation about, and with, the suicidal person.

## Part One: The Question

### Why This Method?

R.D. Laing gave an existential phenomenology of the schizophrenic person in *The Divided Self*. In this work, Laing developed a greater level of engagement with his schizophrenic patients through this method. Laing describes the method as such: “Existential phenomenology attempts to characterize the nature of a person’s experience of his world and himself. It is not so much an attempt to describe particular objects of his experience as to set all particular experiences within the context of his whole being-in-his-world. The mad things said and done by the schizophrenic will remain essentially a closed book if one does not understand their existential context.”<sup>4</sup> While Laing uses this method in order to understand the schizophrenic, this project will make use of the method for engaging with the suicidal person.

Durkheim declared that “the circumstances are almost infinite in number which are supposed to cause suicide because they rather frequently accompany it.”<sup>5</sup> The method of existential phenomenology goes beyond enumerating the mere circumstances a person endures. Instead, it focuses on the foundational pieces underlying these circumstances. While multiple people may experience a congruent situation or similar biology, the phenomenological movement is what brings a person to the situation; firstly, the ideation, that they would rather not be, and secondly, the action, to bring about their death.

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1) Leve, *Suicide*, 118.

2) I would like to thank editors Dr. Laura Mueller and Professor Kenneth Stickers as well as the two anonymous reviewers for *Eidos. A Journal for Philosophy of Culture* for their critical comments which helped me to improve this article.

3) Amery, *On Suicide: A Discourse on Voluntary Death*, 3.

4) Laing, *The Divided Self*, 17.

5) Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, 297–298.

More than any other, two fields have dominated the conversation regarding suicide. These are the conflated fields of ethics and psychological studies. In discussing suicide, each has shortcomings in attempting to understand the suicidal person. Because of this, understanding the suicidal mind requires a different approach. Additionally, these perspectives do not allow the primary philosophical question to be properly addressed. The question is the following: *Is my life worth living?*

In the world of ethics, suicide is typically discussed by questioning the legitimacy of the action. This can be of great benefit when discussing the political positions on suicide or the societal impact that suicide can have. However, I would propose that the person should be understood before making these ethical and political rulings on them. In court, both the prosecutor and defendant are to have ample opportunity, but here we are lacking a defendant. Additionally, while the ethical or political impact may have influence in the suicidal individual's decision-making, sole examination of potential ethical motivations as an explanation of the suicide does not allow the suicidal person to be holistically understood, which is the attempt of this work.

The psychological research (into which I have also included the psychiatric and psychoanalytic) searches for a cure, or the lifelong management of a problem. In this way, it has already answered the question, declaring that life itself *must* be worth living,<sup>6</sup> and through their practice, be it therapeutic or medicinal, they can cure that which makes life seem *unlivable* for the suicidal individual. In conversation with the author, psychoanalyst Jamieson Webster claimed suicide cannot be discussed in psychoanalysis because analysis requires a patient, and in suicide there is no patient.<sup>7</sup> In addition, the backwards facing view the therapist and analyst use in assessing why a suicide occurs, makes us tell the biography in reverse, as if every action is meant to be in reference to their suicide.<sup>8</sup> Through this method, suicide is addressed as a result of symptoms, rather than being a separate, unique discussion. "It is also not true that suicide is necessarily a selfish act in that it leaves behind gaping wounds in the lives of others. Obviously, that can be and often is the scenario. Just as often, however, suicide is an act of moral courage and altruism, putting an end to the mayhem and hurt caused by the person who no longer believes that life is worth living."<sup>9</sup> By limiting suicide to the realm of mental and physical disorder, we lose the experiential resolution that occurs in the suicidal person.

The psychological approach contains intrinsic ethical commitments, particularly regarding suicide. The commitment the field of psychology has to its ideology precedes the commitment with its subject matter. Additionally, its basis requires the field to impose ethical claims onto both the analysts and the patients. By searching for suicide on the American Psychological Association (APA), one must notice that the page is about suicide prevention, though its title is *Suicide*.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, the Continuing Education in Psychology section of the Education Directorate of the APA is focused on suicide prevention, an ethical statement against the action. In doing so, the field has a directed understanding.

For the general population, suicide is often a silent tragedy. For the media, it is a treacherous taboo. For those of us in the mental health professions, it is a deeply disturbing occupational hazard and the most common psychiatric emergency we face. Although we as clinicians cannot prevent all

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6) Pompili, *Phenomenology of Suicide*, Preface.

7) Webster, Conversation with Author, October 2014.

8) Critchley, *Suicide*.

9) McDermott, "Why Bother: Is Life Worth Living," 680.

10) American Psychological Association 2018, "Suicide."

suicides, we can lessen the number of suicides. This is why we need to learn all we can about suicide to better understand, assess and treat suicidal individuals.<sup>11</sup>

In the field of biology, the purpose of research in suicide is to find an anatomic element, which one can fix to cure the individual of their neurological or genetic malfunctions. While, eventually, these may be better understood and more treatable, it reduces the experiences of a suicidal person to neurological and chemical imbalances. The biological approach tells us suicide is a problem, and it is the result of natural deficiencies. It is to be solved through medication, genetic alterations, or electroconvulsive therapy. However, “approximately fifty percent of patients do not adhere to their medical treatment.”<sup>12</sup> This leaves the questions of willingness of patients and success rates of patients open.

The field of therapeutic sciences often avoids attempting to understand the suicidal mind in relation to our own, as if there is something dysfunctional in the suicidal person. While treatment, biological or therapeutic, can be successful in improving lives, and removing people from the state of suicidal depression, one does not commit suicide from misfiring neurons or lack of chemicals. In this way, there is no pharmaceutical baptism.

The question of suicide has been approached philosophically. Camus famously claimed suicide to be the “only one really serious philosophical question.”<sup>13</sup> He believed to have resolved it with the notion of rebelling against the universe. Schopenhauer had stated: “Just because the suicide cannot give up willing, he gives up living. The will asserts itself here even in putting an end to its own manifestation, because it can no longer assert itself otherwise.”<sup>14</sup> He did, however, think that individuals could release themselves from the will through the aesthetic and/or ascetic forms of life.<sup>15</sup> Emil Cioran, known for his remarkable pessimism, claimed both that “it is not worth the bother of killing yourself, since you always kill yourself too late”<sup>16</sup> and that “no position is so false as having understood and still remaining alive.”<sup>17</sup> Unlike those upon whom this paper focuses, these three lived their lives to their natural or accidental ends. However, these three thinkers are limited. Cioran posits suicide as a temporal issue (in that its action is consistently late) or a necessity of understanding. Schopenhauer wrote: “Suicide may also be regarded as an experiment.... The question is this: What change will death produce in a man’s existence and in his insight into the nature of things? It is a clumsy experiment to make; for it involves the destruction of the very consciousness which puts the question and awaits the answer.”<sup>18</sup> By destroying the individual’s role in their suicide, he posits an explanation of suicide within his question. The statement limits suicide to being impactful on the totality of the universe, particularly, insight into it. Camus claims that the question of suicide, which amounts to the lone philosophical question, is “Is life worth living?”<sup>19</sup> Camus’ question is an important universal one, and though he answers the question with appeals to the individual, it is a singular response for all. When questioning suicide in its universal form, the answer will affect our relationship to others and ourselves. Answering the question as a universal may prove relevant in relation to suicide, but it fails to address the individual despite answering with individual appeals. The true question of an individual’s suicide

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11) Firestone, “Suicide: What Therapists Need to Know”.

12) Brown, and Bussell, “Medication Adherence: WHO Cares?”

13) Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, 3.

14) Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, Vol. 1, 515.

15) *Ibid.*, 514–520.

16) Cioran, *The Trouble with Being Born*, 22.

17) Cioran, *All Gall Is Divided*, 63.

18) Schopenhauer, *Studies in Pessimism*, 202.

19) Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, 3.

is: *is my life worth living?* Particularizing the question befits the individual. An individual may claim that their life is worth living because all lives are (as Camus postures), but both the question and result will arrive from the individual questioning themselves. This paper will not attempt to answer that question but will attempt to go along the suicidal path in which one posits the question and answers it with a *no*.

To understand the suicidal individual, we will attempt a phenomenological approach. The utilization of phenomenology allows for a greater understanding of world, others, and self. In doing so, empathy is facilitated through deepening our understanding in the structures of experience for individuals for whom it could not be available otherwise. Without the use of phenomenology, “certain changes in the structure of experience that occur in psychiatric illness and also in a range of other contexts are either misinterpreted or altogether resist interpretation.”<sup>20</sup> It is hoped that an approach of this kind will allow us to best utilize the tools of Jean Amery: introspection and empathy. Maurizio Pompili wrote about recognizing the need for such approach: “I came to the realization that suicidal patients experienced moral pain ... the pain of the negative emotions – shame, guilt, abandonment, ennui, dysphoria, hopelessness, and inanition – what Shneidman calls psychache.”<sup>21</sup> Pompili’s *Phenomenology of Suicide* also claimed that, “Suicide is still very much tied to mental illness and ultimately considered only a complication of such conditions.”<sup>22</sup> If this were his stance, he should embark upon a phenomenology of mental illness (or the mental illnesses) tied to suicide. His attempted phenomenology was a weaving of psychiatric experiences (told through thirteen individual papers with a total of twenty-one authors) and lacking use of the philosophic field of phenomenology. I seek to add phenomenological elements underlying suicide while treating it as an action-in-itself, rather than a consequence of mental illness. In doing so, a more holistic understanding of the suicidal individual can continue to be attempted.

## The Self

Dealing with the issue of the self involves showing the way in which a person can move from a typical form of being-in-the-world to a being-in-the-world which is concerned with the destruction of themselves and their world. The distress arising from a change in our relation with the world leads us to trying to take our lives. It is the catalyst for suicide. While a variety of different occurrences can cause this change, this change in our interactions with the world is what leads to suicide.

In this existential phenomenology, we will be focusing on the relationship between the person and their world. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger presents the notion that one is being-in-the-world. “The compound expression ‘Being-in-the-world’ indicates in the very way we have coined it, that it stands for a *unitary* phenomenon.”<sup>23</sup> Here, Heidegger presents an individual which is neither mentally nor otherwise isolated. Nor is there a dichotomy between my being and the being of the world. Rather, “I am my world.”<sup>24</sup> This world cannot be understood as being compiled of objects. Rather there are others within this world. In this way, being-in-the-world is constructed with our being-with others. “Being-with is an existential constituent of Being-in-the-world.”<sup>25</sup> For Heidegger, this notion of being-with is a rather benign mode of being, in which various parts of our being, such as empathy, can be disclosed to us. “‘Empathy’ does not first constitute Being-with; only on the basis of

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20) Ratcliffe, *Phenomenology as a Form of Empathy*, 459.

21) Pompili, *Phenomenology of Suicide*, vii.

22) Ibid.

23) Heidegger. *Being and Time*, 78.

24) Critchley, “Being and Time, part 3: Being-in-the-world.”

25) Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 163.

Being-with does 'empathy' become possible."<sup>26</sup> We are being-in-the-world and being-with the world and others within.

Heidegger's notion of being-with is to be contrasted with the notion of *being-for-others* as presented by Jean-Paul Sartre. Sartre was quite influenced by Heidegger, but while Heidegger speaks about relation to the world, Sartre shows that our understanding of ourselves comes about through others. We are compelled to see ourselves as others see us. Sartre begins by describing the sensation of shame. Experiencing shame is a recognition of how one is seen by others. Here the view of others changes our view of ourselves. "Shame is shame of *oneself before the Other*; these two structures are inseparable."<sup>27</sup> Even in the situation where one is alone and ashamed, it is the impositions and moralizations installed by others which causes the experience of shame. In the structures put forth by Heidegger and Sartre, one sees the way in which our being is necessarily constructed with others. Our self-understanding is conjoined with (our perceptions of) the world's understanding of us. In the suicidal person, this notion of being, the question of *who (or what) am I* is central to understanding what happens to the self in the suicidal process. This question is addressed by the self to the self but requires answering from the self and the world. "The reality of the world and of the self are mutually potentiated by the direct relationship between the self and other."<sup>28</sup>

In this position, one has the ability for impactful action. Our actions can be impactful internally as well as in our world. The freedom of action allows us to act in a way which changes our interaction with the world. Even in situations in which we are alone, we change our world. Because of that, we can address our being.

## Hopelessness

The question of hopelessness is the question of how to understand the position of the self to the world when the self reaches the state of hopelessness. "When people are suicidal, their thinking is paralyzed, their options appear spare or nonexistent, their mood is despairing, and hopelessness permeates their entire mental domain."<sup>29</sup> This state is a common theme in suicidal persons. Given its salience in the topic of suicide, one must understand what hopelessness means from the position of the individual as related to the world.

Hopelessness involves a perception of the world and the self which then breaks. In the self, as presented by Heidegger and Sartre, the world and self are interrelated in understanding one's being. In the case of hopelessness, an ontological petrification occurs. The being of the individual or the world is solidified, everlasting, without change. In the instance that the individual sees the self as petrified, their view is such that no matter how the world could be, the person would be insufficient. When the direction is reversed, the view is that regardless of the individual's possibilities, progresses, and value, the world is such that the person remains insufficient. This is a two-way street, in which the ontological petrification of the world and the self is necessarily compatible. The self who once asked *who/what am I* now asks *what can be done*. The internal reply is absent.

The way in which action occurs in a typical, embodied self is as follows: The self acts, which is meaningful. This action is meaningful because it has the ability to affect those upon whom the action is made. The other, upon whom the action is made, then has a real perception of the act, which is forwarded to the self (see figure below).<sup>30</sup> In the occurrence of the ontological petrification, as occurs in the hopelessness of a suicidal

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26) *Ibid.*, 162.

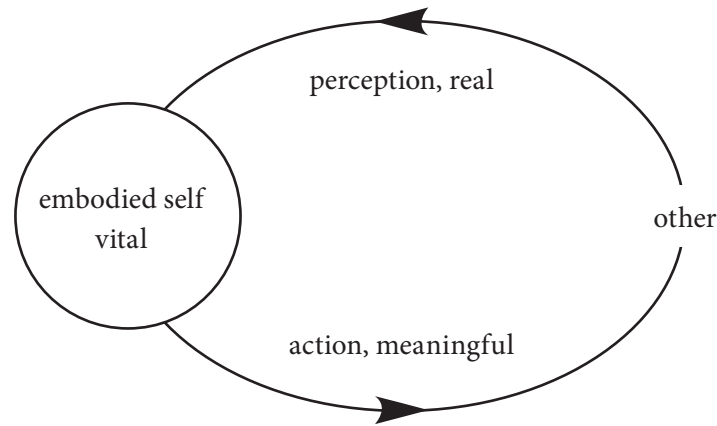
27) Sartre *Being and Nothingness*, 303.

28) Laing, *The Divided Self*, 82.

29) Jamison, *Night Falls Fast*, 93.

30) Laing, *The Divided Self*, 81.

individual, a change occurs in the action. A person no longer views their actions as being meaningful. The process begins with the self acting, but the action is futile. The futility is reflected in the perception of how the other views us. No action can make a difference in the world of the suicidal.



The ontological petrification of hopelessness is made most evident in the suicide note of a seventeen-year-old transgender girl Leelah Alcorn who died by walking into oncoming traffic on a busy highway. After a brief consolation for those mourning, Leelah proceeds to claim, in her note, “The life I would’ve lived isn’t worth living in ... because I’m transgender.”<sup>31</sup> The world in which Leelah would live could not change in a way possible for her to deem it worth continuing. She goes on to detail the struggles she faced as being transgender, particularly with her parents and lack of friends. As the isolation grew, so did the petrification of the world around her. In the penultimate paragraph of her suicide note, Leelah uses the word *never* six times. She concludes the paragraph with a declaration of the only possibility of her fate.

I have decided I’ve had enough. I’m never going to transition successfully, even when I move out. I’m never going to be happy with the way I look or sound. I’m never going to have enough friends to satisfy me. I’m never going to have enough love to satisfy me. I’m never going to find a man who loves me. I’m never going to be happy. Either I live the rest of my life as a lonely man who wishes he were a woman or I live my life as a lonelier woman who hates herself. There’s no winning. There’s no way out. I’m sad enough already, I don’t need my life to get any worse. People say “it gets better” but that isn’t true in my case. It gets worse. Each day I get worse.<sup>32</sup>

Here we see the way in which the world is petrified being reflected onto the person, as she concludes: “It gets worse. Each day I get worse.”<sup>33</sup> It is worth noting that Leelah Alcorn’s experience is not an isolated instance, as a study compiled by the National Center for Transgender Equality and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force showed that forty-one percent of transgender persons in the United States have attempted suicide.<sup>34</sup> As Leelah Alcorn’s suicide note depicts, this world is an unquestionably difficult thing for transgender individuals to live with, and their relationship with their world will be shaped as such.

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31) Leelah Alcorn. “Suicide Note.”

32) Ibid.

33) Ibid.

34) Grant, et al. “Injustice at Every Turn A Report of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey.”

A video played by Thomas Joiner (received from the King County, Washington Sheriff's Office) shows a man, former military, before a murder-suicide (as Joiner tells us, before the suicide, but after the murder of his daughter and wife) claiming that trying to "live as a civilian...freaks [him] out."<sup>35</sup> He claims to need excitement and cannot worry for his wife and daughter. In this way, he depicts the ontological petrification in which the self is unable to be changed for the world. Even after attempting to change to fit in the world, in the killing of his family, he still kills himself, as he could not possibly find a way to be with the world.

### Splitting of Self

When we narrate ourselves, we are splitting ourselves between the subjective and objective self. The splitting of the self is a prevalent theme in the discussion of suicide. The thesis is that we split our identity into two pieces. We must desire to preserve one piece and seek to kill another piece. We kill what we have become to save what we were, what goodness we had. This theory began with Sigmund Freud who sought to answer the question: *given that our disposition is always one of narcissistic self-love, how could one kill one's self?*<sup>36</sup>

In "Contributions to a Discussion on Suicide," Freud claimed that the closest one could come to understanding suicide is through its relation to melancholy. In melancholy, a person loses (or believes to have lost) a love-object to which they are attached. The love-object is then internalized to become part of the self. In this instance, the suicidal person – whom Freud claims must be a melancholic – internalizes the problem of having lost the love-object and views their own ego as being problematic. This is the *disturbance of self-regard* as referenced before. The melancholic views their ego as unworthy and themselves as needing punishment. Through this, a narcissistic identification with the lost love-object can burgeon. This identification can be placed on the individual's ego. From this point, a sadistic attack against the self may occur.

If the love for the object – a love which cannot be given up though the object itself is given up – takes refuge in narcissistic identification, then the hate comes into the operation on this substitutive object, abusing it, debasing it, making it suffer and deriving sadistic satisfaction from its suffering.... So immense is the ego's self-love... that we cannot conceive how that ego can consent to its own destruction....The analysis of melancholia now show that the ego can kill itself only if, owing to the return of the object-cathexis, it can treat itself as an object-if it is able to direct against itself the hostility which relates to an object and which represents the ego's original reaction to the objects in the external world.<sup>37</sup>

In the Freudian situation, the way in which we view ourselves is as attached and in reflection to another, our love-object.

Emmanuel Lévinas declared that suicide was impossible, as suicide is not the killing of the self, rather that the suicide seeks the destruction of the world. In this way, the suicidal person internalizes the world into the self, and kills the self while destroying the world, their world. "Macbeth wishes for the destruction of the world in his defeat and his death ... or more profoundly still, he wishes that the nothingness of death be a void as total as that which would have reigned had the world never been created."<sup>38</sup> Here, we internalize our world

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35) Joiner, "Why Do People Die By Suicide."

36) Freud, "Contributions to a Discussion on Suicide," 231.

37) Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 251–2.

38) Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 231.



and suicide becomes massacre. We seek to destroy others through our suicide. Though this may be true for some cases, it is not applicable for all suicidal acts. This does, however, demonstrate an ontological relationship that is destroyed in suicide. We destroy others as they exist for us. Lévinas explicates the way in which we internalize the world. This internalization plays a major role in how we narrate ourselves in relation to others.

These thoughts can be seen culminating in the thought of Simon Critchley who claims “Suicide is strictly speaking impossible. I cannot kill *myself*. What I kill is the hated object that I have become... Suicide is homicide.”<sup>39</sup> This homicide is against a self, but the self has been split. In this way, we objectify ourselves to kill that which we turn into an object. We seek the destruction of the self as we build a schism between the parts of the self we create; the subjective and objective.

These insights lead us to see the prevalence of objectification in the suicidal person. In the suicidal person, there is an objectification of the self, but this arises in reflection. “Once you have reached the limits of life... the everyday gesture and the usual aspiration lose their seductive charm.”<sup>40</sup> As we fade away from selves we knew, we look back and turn them into objects. This is not unique to the suicidal situation, as it occurs in everyday life. For instance, remember how we think of our younger selves. They have become relegated to our histories, objects as to how we have gotten to this point. However, we do not think of those selves as being reflective of ourselves. The suicidal person is reminded of how they once were with longing, unable to revive this entity. From here, the internal dialogue shifts. As we once treated ourselves as objectifying our past, we are now objectified by our past. Splitting ourselves can denigrate the way we view the self in our narration. While this split brings us closer to enacting our suicide, it alone cannot. While the self is split in the narration of self, it comes together dramatically in the moments before death. While the suicidal individual is still unable to have meaningful action against the world or others, they have created an object of self upon which they may be able to act.

## Anxiety

Anxiety is the catalyst to action. Anxiety creates the energy needed to bring about one’s death. What separates anxiety from depression is its direction. Depression and despair are directed inwardly. This is its relation to pessimism. In conversation with the author Jamieson Webster explained that “anxiety emerges when depression lifts.”<sup>41</sup> Depression shields us from the anxieties of the world. When depression lifts, a person must face the world. We are no longer able to remain invisible in rejection of the world. The individual’s possibilities with the world which can offer hope or anxiety.

For Heidegger, anxiety is a mood through which our position of being-in-the-world is disclosed to us as being-toward-death. Heidegger opposes anxiety to fear. When one is afraid, it is directed toward an object. There is something which causes the fear, and when the fearsome object is removed, there is no fear. In anxiety, there is no object. “In anxiety one does not encounter this thing or that thing which, as something threatening, must have an involvement.”<sup>42</sup>

This anxiety arises most notably as a situation of possibility. “He who is educated by anxiety is educated by possibility, and only he who is educated by possibility is educated according to his infinitude. Possibility is therefore the weightiest of all categories.”<sup>43</sup> These possibilities can overwhelm the individual.

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39) Critchley, *Suicide*, 46.

40) Cioran, *On the Heights of Despair*, 8.

41) Jamieson Webster, personal conversation, October 2014.

42) Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 231.

43) Soren Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, quoted after Solomon, *Existentialism*, 136.

One is individualized by anxiety “for its ownmost Being-in-the-world, which as something that understands, projects itself essentially upon possibilities.”<sup>44</sup> One is oppressed by such possibility. “What oppresses us is not this or that, not is it the summation of everything present-at-hand; it is rather the *possibility* of the ready-to-hand in general; that is to say, it is the world itself.”<sup>45</sup> In self-reflexivity, one is struck by their possibility. In the position of the suicidal person, we are overwhelmed by all which we may become, and that we must become something.

The relation to anxiety is validated by those working with suicidal patients. Research indicates that more than half the patients who kill themselves in psychiatric hospitals had been described by nursing or medical staff, just before their suicides as “clinically improved” or “improving.” Indeed, nearly 50 percent of those who commit suicide while on a ward, or immediately after discharge from the hospital, had been assessed as nonsuicidal at time of admission. The days early in hospitalization and those leading up to discharge are particularly high-risk periods for suicide.<sup>46</sup>

In the hospital, one is protected from many of the pressures of the outside world. This lessens the strain that the hopelessness stemming from ontological petrification – of having a schism with the world. When preparing to return to the world, one often regresses to past experiences of isolation and anxiety.

“Often caught in the dilemma of being too well to be in the hospital but not well enough to deal with the realities and stresses of life outside... patients sometimes feel utterly hopeless and overwhelmed, and kill themselves.”<sup>47</sup> As one progresses beyond depression alone, one is faced with the world. One is no longer able to hide behind the curtain of pessimism. Forced into a new relationship with the world, after separating and degrading the world, we are caught in anxiety. In a position of extreme anxiety and rabid hopelessness, one’s sole respite is seeking voluntary death.

Anxiety manifests in the “potentiality-for-Being – that is, its *Being-free* for the freedom of choosing itself and taking hold of itself.”<sup>48</sup> Not all are in the position to come down from this position of anxiety. Consider it in conflict with freedom, which for Heidegger, requires embracing possibility. In freedom, one embraces and accepts the ownership of possibility. For the suicidal individual, recognition of these actions as lacking impact despite ownership can be devastating. Viktor Frankl developed his method of logotherapy in searching for meaning and embracing one’s individual meaning. “One should not search for an abstract meaning of life. Everyone has his own specific vocation or mission in life to carry out a concrete assignment which demands fulfillment... logotherapy sees in responsibility the very essence of human existence.”<sup>49</sup> If one does not have the propensity toward life due to the petrification of the relationship between the self and the world, they will not be able to engage with such freedom and find the meaning which Frankl describes. After all, Frankl’s method chooses to focus “on the future, that is to say, on the meanings to be fulfilled by the patient in the future.”<sup>50</sup> In this case, the individual’s ontological breaks have fractured them from a future of meaning (save for this action) in spite of the life’s many possibilities.

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44) Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 232.

45) *Ibid.*, 231.

46) Jamison, *Night Falls Fast*, 152–3.

47) *Ibid.*, 153.

48) Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 232.

49) Frankl, *Man’s Search For Meaning*, 108–9.

50) *Ibid.*, 98.

Freedom and possibility are the inverse of death. In death, there is no freedom to choose, nor is there possibility. Between life and death, the individual in a state of ontological petrification recognizes few possibilities in their world. Freedom to choose and possibility for action have lost their impact. One is in a state of recognizing one's immeasurable potentiality but is struck by its futility on their self, their others, and their world.

## Optimism

Cioran declared "Only optimists commit suicide, the optimists who can no longer be ... optimists."<sup>51</sup> Suicide is an optimistic action. It proposes help for that which ails. For the suicidal individual, as opposed to the passivity of apathy or resigned sorrow, suicide is a positive action. Suicide declares a self. The act of suicide is a decision toward a solution.

This optimism summons one to action, as opposed to the futility instilled in the pessimist. In the pessimist, what we find is a repulsion toward action. We see this through the lens of ontological petrification. In a world in which one's actions have no effect, there is no use in acting. This pessimism is powerful enough to merit a rebuttal of suicide. Cioran declared "The refutation of suicide: is it not inelegant to abandon a world which has so willingly put itself at the service of our melancholy?"<sup>52</sup> This is expanded upon by Critchley who claims "[Suicide] would be far too optimistic an act. Nothing would be saved by our suicide"<sup>53</sup> and "True pessimists don't kill themselves. Is that not enough? It is enough."<sup>54</sup> For the *true pessimist*, this response may suffice. However, suicide need not be an attempt at saving anything beyond the individual.

Contrary to the pessimistic rebuttal, Mitchell Heisman thought his suicide was, paraphrasing Schopenhauer, "an experiment in nihilism"<sup>55</sup> (though Schopenhauer called suicide as an experiment "clumsy"<sup>56</sup>). The meaninglessness of life left him with a single option for finding meaning, and that is in death. He felt that because there was no meaning in life, the only hope for meaning would have to be found in death. In this way, Heisman found hope for meaning in suicide.

Optimism and pessimism allow a person to transform their world. Sartre discusses this "magical transformation of the world"<sup>57</sup> in describing emotions. However, his description is most adequate for the disposition with which one has with their world. The way in which one relates to the world transforms the world for them. The pessimist views the world as being inadequate. Much like Aesop's fox, who is unable to reach the grapes and thus views them as sour, the pessimist views the world as being "sour." From this perspective, the impact of the world is less drastic than it is to the optimist. For the optimist, the world is idealized. For the optimist, the rejection of the world is far more devastating, and the optimist may seek solace through suicide. Psychologist Antoon Leenars published the journal of one of his patients who attempted suicide:

I was so desperate, I felt, My God, I can't face this thing, going out, and being thrown out in the street. And everything was like a terrible sort of whirlpool of confusion. And I thought to myself-

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51) Critchley, *Suicide*, 68.

52) Cioran, *All Gaul Divided*.

53) Critchley, *Suicide*, 69.

54) *Ibid*.

55) Heisman, "Suicide Note," 20.

56) Schopenhauer, *On Suicide*, 50.

57) Grene, "Sartre's Theory of the Emotions," 97.

there's *only* one thing I can do, I just have to lose consciousness. That's the *only* way to get away from it. The *only* way to lose consciousness, I thought, was to jump off something good and high.<sup>58</sup>

The pessimism of severe depression can act as a shield against suicide. The combination of passivity and hopelessness leaves us unable to act. Depression leaves a person without the energy to take their life. Buried in passivity one may feel as Dazai wrote in *No Longer Human*, "I was leading the life of a half-wit, and I had quite lost even the energy to think of suicide."<sup>59</sup> The energy needed to take our life is lacking in the passivity of depression.

By losing the veil of depression one gains a new awareness of the world. As previously stated, "a well-known piece of clinical lore cautions that there is a window of heightened suicide risk as people emerge from depression."<sup>60</sup> Emerging from depression places the individual in a new world, one in which they are reopened to the stressors of the world. Additionally, as the depression is lifted "they have the energy and cognitive clarity to act on long-standing suicidal ideas."<sup>61</sup> When this rush of energy appears, we are faced with the world.

Of what is one optimistic? For what is one hopeful? Change. Suicide becomes the only chance at liberation from the ontological petrification from which they suffer. It is the lone action we have with impact. Leelah Alcorn (referenced in the section titled Hopelessness) demonstrates this. There was no plausible way to improve her situation. Suicide offered the opportunity to transcend that problem. Additionally, she could find meaning in taking the role of martyr by uploading her suicide note to aid others going through her struggle along with improving the perception of other transgender persons. Suicide is the method with which one transcends their hopelessness. The optimism of suicide is the ability to emerge from the sufferings of their world, and perhaps, create meaning.

## Part Two – The Answer

Thus far we have worked through the situations leading someone to the position in which one desires not to be.<sup>62</sup> Moving forward, we will endure the necessitating pieces which move us from the passivity of rather-not-be-alive to the situation in which we bring about our own death. One must have a requisite fearlessness to stare death in the face and embrace it. One may need to overcome both mental and physical fears. We will then attempt to understand the ultimate moments before death, whether it be notes, methods, opportunity, symbolism or beyond. These final pieces will bring some discomfort, along with a voyeuristic desire to peak behind the curtain. At times, this may complement the exhibitionist desires of those completing the act. We will be led through this section by examples and clinical experiences. What we must continue is our attempt at vicarious experience as a way toward introspection and empathy.

## Before the Act

The completion of the act is often reflected in the suicidal ideation had by the person. The location, timing and method are often limited by opportunity. However, in times when the limitation allows for options, visualization and ideation can be shown, as can, in certain instances, symbolism.<sup>63</sup>

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58) Leenaars, *Suicide Notes Predictive Clues and Patterns*, 135.

59) Dazai, *No Longer Human*, 98.

60) Joiner, *Why People Die by Suicide*, 58.

61) *Ibid.*

62) Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 313.

63) Lester and Stack, *Suicide as a Dramatic Performance*, 28.

Édouard Levé killed himself ten days after submitting his manuscript for a piece of fiction titled *Suicide*. “To write a book about a suicide, to call it *Suicide*, and to then take your own life before its publication is, whatever else it is, a way of exerting an overpowering influence over how that work is received.”<sup>64</sup> While the publishers pushed the voyeuristic thrill in its marketing, Levé removed the possibility for metaphor or ambiguity. Whether he was at peace after writing it or hoped to shape the reception of his final piece, he shaped what would come after him.

Ashley was an eighteen-year-old girl who, before completing her suicide, sent 144 tweets. In these tweets, “There was a trend toward a decrease in the use of the pronoun ‘I’ and a significant decrease in all references to the self over time. There was also a trend toward an increase in terms reflecting positive emotions. Although this may seem surprising, a similar trend was observed in two tape recordings made by a young man before he died by suicide.”<sup>65</sup>

### Suicide Notes

When asked about the difficulty of writing, the sportswriter Red Smith declared “Writing is easy. I just open a vein and bleed.”<sup>66</sup> While not particularly easy, I find the image to be unparalleled than when discussing suicide notes. Onto the page, the author drains themselves for the final production of their self to the world.

Presentation of the self is a key element in the note. The note allows a final chance for us to direct the image of our self and/or our action. The suicide note is an attempt at communication. Whether the attempt is to console, explain, blame, attack, seek revenge, give advice, or confuse, the final communication can be achieved in the note. Regardless of the direction of the note, these two intentions are found within the note; the presentation of the self and the communicative position of the writer.

[Communication attempts have] as a rule, some kind of implicit or explicit audience-directed thinking that precedes the act. Given this communicative condition, suicide is a type of symbolic action similar to other human actions, but suicide is distinguished by the way in which a suicidal person imagines the audience for whom suicide will take on some intended expressive significance. A deeper understanding of suicide becomes possible when viewed as a symbolic action directed toward and audience (real or imagined).<sup>67</sup>

While the oldest extant suicide note is estimated to be four-thousand years old,<sup>68</sup> the suicide note became common in the eighteenth century England, where they were published upon discovery.<sup>69</sup> Were there not suicides in the gap of millennia? In antiquity, suicide could be a public act. Viewed as honorable by some and detestable and unethical by others, it lacked the taboo which has carried it through the contemporary discussion. This taboo came about from the rise of the church and theologians, such as St. Thomas Aquinas, who felt it was an ultimate rejection of God to take your life, as of course it is not your life but God’s. This caused suicides to be hidden or disguised. Additionally, “Suicide notes became more common after newspapers in Europe started

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64) O’Connell “Edouard Levé’s ‘Suicide’ and Edouard Levé’s *Suicide*.”

65) Lester and Stack, *Suicide as a Dramatic Performance*, 26.

66) Berkow, “RED SMITH, SPORTS COLUMNIST WHO WON PULITZER, DIES AT 76.”

67) Lester and Stack, *Suicide as a Dramatic Performance*, 51.

68) Jamison. *Night Falls Fast*, 75.

69) Critchley, *Suicide*, 44.

publishing them in the eighteenth century.”<sup>70</sup> The publication of notes may have also led to an increase of note writing, as is theorized by Critchley and Joiner. “Expecting their suicide notes to appear in newspapers, [they] saw that they had access to a mass audience, and suicides could craft their suicide note so as to achieve sympathy or revenge, or perhaps to project an image that others would remember.”<sup>71</sup>

Suicide notes can offer a glimpse into the final moments. However, Edwin Shneidman explains the problem of using these notes as the ultimate research tool. “Suicide notes often seem like parodies of the postcards sent home from the Grand Canyon, the catacombs or the pyramids – essentially pro form, not at all reflecting the grandeur of the scene being described or the depth of human emotion that one might expect to be engendered by the situation.”<sup>72</sup> The suicide note often suffers from banalities or lacks explanation entirely.

The suicide note is an attempt at communication. While this is not the only way that we may attempt sending a final message it is the most evident way in which we try. Other ways can be location of the act, method of suicide, clothes wearing upon death, among many more. While those left after a suicide will attempt to find meaning in all pieces of a suicide, it is not always left. The following will offer different ways in which meaning may be given before we complete the act.

What the note does show is some insight into the narrative the suicidal person has created. Within a person’s narrative, they may not wish to write a note, others may not have the opportunity. But from those who do, regardless of the message, it will be reflective of the narrative they have crafted. The position in which they view themselves, others, those pieces are reflected in the note. “Individuals present various images on a daily basis as a result of their different roles and corresponding functions they perform. We are used to switching from one image to another and choosing the image to fit the occasion, and there is no reason to doubt that is true when we die.”<sup>73</sup> The image can vary vastly. Many suicide notes have instructions of what to do upon finding the body. Others offer consolation. Some, such as Leelah Alcorn and Nobel Prize winner Percy Bridgman, cast themselves in the role of martyr, hoping their death will create social change. Other notes can attack or blame others, seek absolution, create beauty through poetry, among other possibilities. Regardless of what the note seeks to accomplish, it presents the self to the reader.

“Many suicide notes express their inability to communicate with others, to be heard in the just the right way...The self-interference necessary for the possibility of a search for ‘right words’ is a determination, or a deeply felt sense, that one’s audience is deeply unresponsive.”<sup>74</sup> The suicide will communicate that which the words lack.

With this inspection of the note, what are we to make of the fact that fewer than half of suicidal persons leave a note? Leaving a note is not always a choice. Often, the person does not have the opportunity to leave a note. Although there are many distinctive notes by artists, writers especially, Ernest Hemingway did not leave a note, and it is noteworthy that his suicide had been rushed as his wife had stepped out quickly. The choice to not leave a note may be due to her imminent return, and not having the time. This is, however, pure conjecture, as the question has no one answer. The only correlation with those who wrote notes, as opposed to those without, is that those who wrote notes were more likely to have made suicidal threats in the past and were more likely to live alone.<sup>75</sup> This could indicate the ability to write without fear of being interrupted, as in the Hemingway

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70) Lester and Stack, *Suicide as a Dramatic Performance*, 15.

71) *Ibid.*

72) Shneidman, *Voices of Death*, 58.

73) Lester and Stack, *Suicide as a Dramatic Performance*, 13.

74) *Ibid.*, 64.

75) Callanan and Davis, “A Comparison of Suicide Note Writers,” 558.

case. However, this cannot be the case in all suicides. For some, there may be nothing left to say. They may have been overcome by writer's block. The fearsomeness of the task may have been overwhelming, and the act had to be completed without distraction. Answers can be nothing more than speculations.

Paralleling the suicide, the suicide note seeks to achieve something. In the case with the aesthetically inclined individual, the note can take the form of a suicidal work, such as *Suicide* by Édouard Levé. In this case the work is meant to be a culmination of self. In Levé's piece, however, there is an added sense he reaches for, as he hauntingly uses the second person talking to "you" of "your death" which places the reader in the position of the person who had died from their shotgun. Mitchell Heisman completed a work titled *suicide note*, his 1,905-page opus magnum, which was a philosophical refutation of finding meaning in life. He declares "There is a very popular opinion that choosing life is inherently superior to choosing death. This belief that life is inherently preferable to death is one of the most widespread superstitions. This bias constitutes one of the most obstinate mythologies of the human species."<sup>76</sup> Calling the fear of death equivalent to xenophobia, he seeks to uncover this misunderstanding philosophically and historically through his "experiment in nihilism."<sup>77</sup> Upon completion of this work, he donned a white tuxedo and shot himself on the steps of a church in Cambridge, Massachusetts.<sup>78</sup>

The advent of social media has drastically changed the suicide note. While the traditional note form is often left, the internet boom has created new methods. Amanda Todd held up squares of paper with sentences written on them. She went through these cards in a black and white recording, detailing her "never ending Story" which led her to suicide.<sup>79</sup> The final four pieces appearing on screen went as follows: Written on paper: "I have nobody ... I need someone [drawn frowny face]. Written on paper: my name is Amanda Todd. A picture of her wrist with cuts across and knife with blood on screen. A picture of her arm with a tattoo reading *stay strong*."<sup>80</sup> After the video was completed, she uploaded it to YouTube and completed her suicide. Amanda, who was previously mentioned, used Twitter in a similar fashion. She tweeted 144 times in the hours leading up to her death. Using this method, she, too, told the story of her life, the narrative which led her to this moment. She described sexual abuse within the family and relationships outside of it. The tweets concluded with the apathy she endured from receiving a phone call from Child Protective Services informing her that "Sorry but there isn't enough evidence."<sup>81</sup>

Ashley had over five-hundred Twitter followers who were able to view these and react in real time. A friend of Ashley said that "She made a decision that this was what she was going to do to get attention if she was not going to get justice."<sup>82</sup> Todd's video has been watched over twenty million times. The *Amanda Todd Legacy Society* has been created to combat cyber-bullying and raise internet awareness. In each of these cases, the suicide gave meaning that was unable to be found in life. What gives it meaning is the expanse with which their message can travel because of social media. Had they left these in a note, they would lack the necessary accessibility to reach others.

Within the use of social media, a growing number of live-streamed suicides occur. Livestream suicides are those in which a person live-streams both their note and their death online, usually through social media sites. The earliest known of these was in 2008 on a relatively unknown website. More recently, with Facebook,

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76) Heisman, "Suicide Note," 22.

77) *Ibid.*, 20.

78) Abel, "Book Details Motives for Suicide at Harvard."

79) Amanda Todd Legacy Society, "Videos – Amanda."

80) *Ibid.*

81) Lester and Stack, *Suicide as a Dramatic Performance*, 26.

82) "Why Did No One Help Her?"

Periscope, and others providing live-streaming software, these suicides have become more common. This often includes a note they read aloud. They then complete their suicide on camera. Particularly with Facebook's livestreaming service, a comments section with emoji reactions are available for those watching the suicide occur. In the case of Abraham Briggs, responses included "Instant Darwinism ..." to which a fellow commenter wrote: 'f\*\*king a nicely put.' Others called the teen 'coward,' 'faggot' and 'dick.'<sup>83</sup> The livestream can also put a person in the position of having no way out, as a common comment on these videos before the suicide is completed is "you won't do it."<sup>84</sup> This continues the trend of creating the narrative, as the individual creates meaning from their suicide, one which is best achieved in this form. It is worth noting, however, that in these methods of suicide note, they have been looking to help others and for help themselves, rarely to punish.

Regardless of form, creating a note drains you. It is the final breath you breathe toward the world. While it is outward, for an audience, it is personal. It is a confession to the world, or meant to be therapeutic, acting as a final catharsis. There is a release, a finality in our notes cannot be present in other pieces. When attempting to write a note, Simon Critchley admits, "during the fifteen-minute period in the class when people were writing their suicide notes, I tried repeatedly, but no words would come. I just couldn't write anything down. I don't know why."<sup>85</sup> It cannot be reproduced, mimicked at best. But mimicry seems to lack something present during the sensation of life passing.

### Completion of the Act

The completion of the act is the most independent of all steps. Much of the reason is the circumstances of the act. Aaron Hernandez, a former American football player serving a life sentence for homicide, worked through this process, but due to his situation as being a prisoner, he hung himself from the bars on a window using a bedsheet, after jamming the door closed in his one-person cell.<sup>86</sup> Others, with greater opportunity, can infuse the act with meaning, leaving notes or other performative pieces. But one does follow the steps laid out in one's head, be it having the foresight to jam a door shut or to drive far away from family, so they will not find you. These pieces, beginning as ideations and turned into a plan, are steps followed as one makes their attempt.

What does the individual hope for upon their conclusion? Far too individual to answer here. However, in those decisive moments, along with fear, hope washes over. Cleans you of your world. You are released. Not all are peaceful, some are filled with regret, most notably those who attempt by jumping from high places. While interviewing survivors of the fall from the Golden Gate Bridge, Joiner noted that they all had the same experience regarding fear. In the four seconds of the fall, they began with relief, and fell with relief, until they were about to hit the water, at which point they were overcome with fear<sup>87</sup> (which Joiner indicates is closely related to the biological instinct for life).

Recall Shneidman's patient Beatrice, whom he met after a failed suicide attempt, described her final moments as follows:

I tried to kill myself. I took pills. I stabbed myself. I screamed for someone else to come stab me.  
I sat for long hours with a gun in my hand. I wrote a will, I imagined my own funeral, I cut on

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83) Friedman, "Florida Teen Live-Streams His Suicide Online."

84) Irby, "Why Are People Live-streaming Their Suicides?"

85) Critchley, *Suicide*, 58.

86) O'Connor, "Aaron Hernandez Leaves Us with One Final 'Why?'"

87) Joiner, *Why People Die by Suicide*, 53-4.



myself, tried to starve myself to death, and finally I slashed the vein on my wrists open and bled. I remember watching the Life Blood flow out of me and feeling so relieved and finally relaxed. It was over at last.<sup>88</sup>

While this may not describe the circumstances of all who attempt, she describes the elements of this theory. Although she had previously been involved in the narration and splitting of self, in these last moments there is a great unification of the self. It is a remarkably sensory experience, regardless of method. The hope, relaxation, and a touch of fear, needing the buildup. “‘In a minute, in a second,’ he thought. The ascent stopped. And stone among the stones, he returned in the joy of his heart to the truth of the motionless world.”<sup>89</sup>

## Conclusions

Earl was a seventy-four-year-old Midwest man. He created a successful business, had children and grandchildren with his wife for over forty years. He abided his family’s desire for him to retire. Upon his retirement, however, he fell into an unabating depression. He was forced into treatment after a discovery by his wife.

Deep within Earl’s desk drawer was a “to do” list of everything he needed to get in order before he could commit suicide. The list contained items from his business life, his personal life, and his life in the community. Attached to the list was an instruction sheet for his son on how to handle news of his death in the business community and ideas and suggestions to further expand the business. Also attached was a letter to his wife he was drafting.<sup>90</sup>

Earl was admitted to an overnight clinic, during which he was involved in group and individual therapy in addition to being placed on an SSRI. In this treatment, Earl saw little improvement. His family moved onto proceeding to Electroconvulsive Therapy (ECT). “Earl was simply resigned to their decision. In many ways, he had simply given up...He no longer demonstrated the will to fight for independence or dignity, or anything else.”<sup>91</sup> After ten ECT treatments and continued therapy, there seemed to be improvement. At the behest of himself and his family, Earl went home for a family Thanksgiving. “On Thanksgiving Day, after what was reported later by his family to be a very nice dinner with his children and grandchildren, Earl excused himself to go to the bathroom. Instead he stepped into the garage, opened the trunk of his car, took apart the wheel well, found the gun that he had stashed there months before, and shot himself.”<sup>92</sup>

This concluding case brings together the themes of the suicidal person. The unchanging hopelessness, being frozen in a self and world into which one no longer fits. The longing for what was, and a singular possibility of the future, merely a continuation of the present. The world is transformed, and in its transformation, he went from a prince to a pauper. In Earl, there is a fight for freedom as he is unable to “go out on his terms”. He claimed that he would only kill himself “when the time is right.”<sup>93</sup> The fantasy death, however, was unable to come to fruition. What came instead was Earl taking an active step in his life for the first time since the beginning of his treatment. Moving through the fracture he experienced with his world, he reached for a hopeful move toward a desperate end.

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88) Shneidman, *The Suicidal Mind*, 178.

89) Camus, *A Happy Death*, 151.

90) Granello and Juhnke, *Case Studies in Suicide*, 157.

91) *Ibid.*, 160.

92) *Ibid.*, 161.

93) *Ibid.*

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