

## Suicide: The lonely path

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### Abstract

Most contemporary discourse on suicide in New Zealand is framed in either epidemiological terms, or as a medical problem internal to the individual. Epidemiology focuses on statistics, and has consistently over-emphasised teenage suicide numbers, obscuring the fact that suicide permeates all ages and is a significant problem in New Zealand. It necessarily rewrites individual case histories in terms of shared features, risk factors and ‘effective’ (statistically proven) general interventions. The medical approach frames suicide as an individual dysfunction, a ‘mental health’ problem, so that it becomes a manifestation of an ‘internal’ or ‘underlying’ issue affecting an individual. We argue here that suicide can neither be adequately understood through epidemiology, nor individual pathology. An adequate account needs to address the interrelational and socio-political structures that frame an individual’s life-world. A sustaining and sustainable life-world grounds an individual within an *ēthos* that provides meaningful opportunities in which to dwell, and which is able to affirm and empower a person to live well with others. Conversely, the alienating and fiscally driven neo-liberal discourse of individualism that we have come to inhabit is failing to anchor people in a meaningful and sustainable life-world, as it erodes genuinely caring and supportive social structures. One of the more visible and tragic fall-outs of this takes the form of suicide, a possibility that we see being actualised by more and more people in our country.

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### Introduction

The phenomenon of suicide brings into stark relief the fragility of human life and the realisation that its sudden loss exists as a possibility for all of us. Recognising the existential abyss reflected and recreated by a suicide makes it important to try and understand how we are held in the world, and the ways in which we might come adrift and fall out of it. Suicide can be seen as an ethical or existential response to how one finds oneself ‘in-the-world’. It cannot be adequately understood by viewing individuals principally as isolated functioning units subject to biological variations, some of which are dysfunctional. We need to restore the idea that we are all irreducibly enmeshed in complex interrelational activities, into and through which we responsively

construct ourselves as ‘beings-in-relation’ [1]. Who we become and what we do cannot be isolated from the socio-political discourse that structures the world in which we are embedded, and which constitutes the possibilities open to us. As ‘beings-in-the-world-with-others’, hyphenated to emphasise that we are enmeshed in a shared discursive world [1], our embodied cerebral circuitry is structured, affected and recreated through situated interactions with others during childhood and youth. This is the setting within which support and help can (or cannot) be found for the crises of life that we must learn to face [2]. Therefore, in order to live well, we need communities that can help us find our feet, hold us ‘in the world’ and guide and sustain us in ways that are humanly important.

We begin by sketching the way in which an empowering discursive structure works to hold us to the world, providing us with ‘a place to be’. We then articulate how neo-liberal discursive practices reduce human ‘Being’ to an instrumental functionality, making it more and more difficult to live well. We argue that such practices alienate us from responsive, embodied human engagement [3; 4]. We next critique the framing of suicide within this discourse, and put forward a way of responding to situations of suicide that is more in keeping with our human condition. We argue that in order to reclaim our ‘life-world’ and live well, we need to build and dwell within communities that can hold us in being and sustain our humanity.

### Shaping a sustainable life-world

Our human way of ‘being’ is a particular kind of Being: we are creatures who must interpret and make sense of themselves and their world as finite, vulnerable and fallible creatures collaboratively learning to inhabit a world that we share with others [1]. A sustainable human ‘life-world’, or culture, realises this shared existential situation. It embeds practices and codes of conduct that can bind people together in fitting and sustainable ways, nurturing their members as ‘beings-amongst-other-beings’. In New Zealand, the Māori concept of *whakapapa* – connectedness to the world and to others, such as forebears and descendants (sometimes translated as genealogy) – recognises this existential situation [5, 6]. The rich and complex tapestry of a cultural life-world is woven from the stories that are shared. This cultural *mythos* informs a world of relationships and bonds that can endure. Such stories bear a normative structure, and provide us with ways of understanding that are significant and valuable within our lives. They shape a place in which to stand, convey paths of achievement, and indicate forms of living that will produce worthwhile ends. Our stories preserve and convey our intricate concerns and activities, exemplifying the complexity of our life-world and the tensions inherent in its multi-faceted and convoluted relationships. López [7] notes the importance of living a worthwhile narrative:

“Remember this one thing”, said Badger. “The stories people tell have a way of taking care of them. If

stories come to you, care for them. And learn to give them away where they are needed. Sometimes a person needs a story more than food to stay alive. That is why we put these stories in each other's memories. This is how people care for themselves.”

Our stories contribute to sustainable lives that are dynamic, alive, and responsive to people and places in evolving ways. The interpretive re-telling of these stories offers guidance concerning the difficult situations we encounter collectively and individually. As such, they elucidate and reinforce ways of acting that enable people to flourish. Sharing these stories is part of communal life; people learn to listen carefully and make thoughtful, nuanced contributions so that our problems are understood as communal problems, not isolated, individual problems. Thus, we learn the implicit lesson that we are valued and respected, within a fabric of mutual ‘being-with’ that makes each of us unique and irreplaceable [8]. These living and liveable practices provide us with a place to ‘be’, a shared place of significance and belonging that orients our actions and grounds our identity, so that we know who we are and where we stand in relation to a particular situation [1, 9].

However, current neo-liberal ideology and its practices undermine and devalue shared cultural ways of knowing, particularly those of indigenous groups, in favour of an alienating discourse of individualism [10]. Neo-liberal discourse situates people as self-contained ‘entities’, each with their own ‘internal economy’, translating the complex phenomena of ‘Being’ human into functional accounts of ‘the human subject’ as a hedonistic consumer. That reductive, instrumental view yields an impoverished understanding of our human situation, and as a corollary, it structures unliveable spaces for us, where even ‘biology’ (*bios = life; logy = an account of*) gets reduced to an abstract functionality. Thus, ‘life’ itself becomes uncaring and disconnected - a metaphysical and existential abyss [11].

### Eroding communities as ‘places to be’

Exploring the apparent link between neo-liberal ideology and an erosion of the human conditions for sustaining persistence, identity and self-worth shows that there is a plausible philosophical link between an

emphasis on market mechanisms and alienation, and societal disaffection. The neo-liberal self-oriented (and disorienting) framings of humanity focus on personal preferences and their satisfaction - preferably immediate. Taken together with the nihilistic subjectivism that is embedded within the model, so that 'nothing is worth anything except the value I assign to it,' the neo-liberal view severs vital connections between human beings and a sense of shared and interconnected worth. Such shared tenets underpin liveable practices that sustain life in the face of personal doubt, by enacting a value to 'life' that even the person living it might not see. In contrast, neo-liberalism sends the message that "my life is a locus of self-contained worth not inherently related to anything else". It is a way of thinking that abandons the idea that we are essentially beings-in-the-world-with-others and it may have contributed significantly to actualising the human potential for suicide in indigenous groups.

Neo-liberal individualism marginalises cultural communities and their stories so as to establish a 'New World Order' of consumers, and an à la carte menu of private goods [12]. It has imposed a highly controlled, superficially efficient and functionally organised consumer society, based on the idea of the independent individual pursuing their own self-interested preferences, which *accommodate* and even make use of, but are not intrinsically connected to others. Portraying such a society as a 'rational' creation, where 'rationality' is seen as prudent self-interest, it is organised along the lines of a legal contract where individuals have rights upheld by the political body. For Hobbes, its instigator, this contract is based on power, fear, competitiveness and the defence of human greed [13]. Further theorised by John Locke, the rule of law in defence of "life, liberty and estate," was consolidated, along with limited forms of government to allow individuals the freedom to make a profit without any regard for the intrinsic harms of inequality [14; 15].

The instrumental institutional structures and mechanisms that result have penetrated all our social practices, such as healthcare, childcare, education, food preparation, and the work of the artisan, turning them into economic practices ordered by corporations or governments to serve private agendas. This benefits a powerful and privileged elite who can 'choose' how

to exploit the stable social order that is needed to maintain inequity, the loss of belonging, and disparities in health and well-being [16]. However, this is not a choice that is available to all, as the way of life being perpetrated hides the reality of our existential situation, so that for most, choice becomes attenuated – narrowed by the realities of alienated social pathology.

Claiming that its ideas, categories and ways of doing things are 'natural', and superior to former ways of living and thinking, and indispensable to 'progress' [17], this ideology has liberated some of the previous victims of greed. However, it has also replaced bonds of affection, commitments and obligations with anonymous contractual relationships – 'service providers and consumers' - sustained by bureaucratic processes that perpetuate its instrumental, profit-oriented agenda. Any human values 'implemented' must be able to be measured in exploitable financial terms, for example, gross domestic product, tax breaks when you marry, and paid parental leave [18]. It disjoins the patterns of 'being-with' and 'belonging' that create vital connections within a more long-standing and informally interdependent form of life.

### Undermining caring practices

The production and consumption ideology creates a throw-away society, through the mass production of products that utilise cheap labour and poor quality materials. It undermines the skills involved in making durable things of quality; provisions by means of crafts that embody caring, thoughtful practices. These crafts, such as sewing, gardening, cooking, knitting, carpentry and so forth, involve care, skill and commitment and are now done in voluntary groups. They have been traditionally under-valued in western ideology and became the domain of exploited workers. Indeed, one can say that the exploitative drudgery was the harbinger of the creation of worthless pseudo-worth driven by profit. Thus, we have been alienated from practices of production and personal satisfaction by being employed somewhere in this functionally organised politico-economic machine. This alienation is compounded as we are often displaced from family and friends due to the availability of work, and the fact that we can be

rendered ‘replaceable’ - just cogs in the machine. Thus, patterns of life and belongingness - a crucial indicator of interpersonal connectedness - [19], can easily become disrupted by financially enforced social and geographical mobility, undermining the growth of stable communities of care and support. Communities can also become ‘ghettoised’ when gaps in socio-economic status differentially affect ethnic groups [20]. When self-worth is linked to financial productivity as a disposable item in an anonymising context, it is easy to see how someone’s personal worth can be undermined in contemporary, economically enforced urbanisation.

As many people occupy unskilled, and therefore not really valued, places in this order – which they can lose through no fault of their own, but as a result of changing political and economic power relations – it becomes increasingly difficult for people to meaningfully articulate or invest in the course of their life, and the everyday value of the things that constitute it and contribute to health and well-being [16]. A person whose value is not organically and intrinsically connected to others can only give subjective value to their own life, and that person’s hold on reality can become less and less secure as it becomes more and more subjective. This creates an existential situation in which self-worth and responsibility are eroded, so that a sense of helplessness and – if things go wrong – burdensomeness, increases [19]. Such satisfactions as are available are accompanied by the status of being a mere instrument in a system that both generates and contains our expanding ‘needs’, or utility-based functions, in a pre-established direction, but does not offer us genuine belonging or value [21].

Thus, the social context that is generated by dominant contemporary socio-political discourse drains life of the meaningful possibilities to obtain a sense of self-worth, which arises from our interpersonal reality. In a post-colonial world such as New Zealand, or that of indigenous North Americans, such alienation can and has affected many. For example, for Māori in New Zealand, the connection to the places in which their ancestors dwelled and structured their lives have been tragically disrupted, as they have for those who have immigrated and lack the historical meaning and groundedness in place that informs the life of a real community[22]. Those disruptions leave both

colonised and colonisers adrift from their organic living roots and connections, and from their sense of connectedness with others. When combined with socio-economic gaps created by political fiscal policies, schisms are formed. Thus, the seeds are sown for highly divisive ideas that begin to lay down social pathologies arising from isolating paths of self-definition and unsustainable forms of life.

In an individualistic and existentially disconnecting context, political and commercial hegemony is maintained through constructed ideologies of ‘success’, which are transient, superficial and flimsy: youth; fame – narrowly circumscribed by celebrity status and usually associated with TV/film actors, sports figures and popular musicians; monetary wealth; and beauty, linked to youthful celebrity images. Their transience and superficiality affirms the ‘throw-away’ mind-set that increases demand for consumption and novelty and, combined with a form of individualism, implies that our own persistence can only be justified by our own desire to remain in existence. When that desire then wavers or fails to find subjective confirmation in the image-creations of the moment, our hold on life and existence - one’s standing as a unique thing of action and value - is in jeopardy.

The loss of caring social practices further cements our disconnection from ‘being’ and ‘belongingness’. When face-to-face interactions are replaced by the imposition of increasingly fast-paced technologies, we are seduced by the idea of being ‘connected’ as we become more and more distanced from one another. When conversations are not interpersonal encounters, but are instead tweets, text messages and sound bites that are not supported by physical, face-to-face interactions, friendships become commodified and measurable, for example, by the number of people you have on your Facebook page. Such ‘friends’ can of course ‘un-friend’ you at any given moment, or even transform into cyber-bullies in a faceless and disengaged way. Real worth, read in the face of another as they respond to what you are saying, is harder and harder to find and be nourished by. With that loss, the means to answer life’s significant questions become atrophied, and our interpersonal stories attenuated.

When a rich, engaged communal life is reduced to a generalised, anonymous ‘public’ realm, with information disseminated to isolated utility consumers, using impersonal principles of attention capture, brevity, freshness of ‘news’, lack of connection between ‘news’ items, ‘novelty’, and a linguistic style that isolates events from the faces we present to each other in affective exchanges [23], we lack a responsive forum for struggling with issues of concern. As anonymous recipients of disseminated material we are rendered powerless, rather than being empowered and ‘held in being’ by those with whom we affectively exercise our intersubjectivity [24]. When we also consider that many media items contain images of brutality and death quite removed from our immediate experience, so that they can serve to desensitise the voyeur, we are plausibly setting ourselves up with distorted and unsustainable understandings of our shared human condition, as well as providing unhelpful responses to humanity’s predicaments as they beset us in real life.

### **Alienating us from embodied human engagement**

Increasingly, due to the way our contemporary world is constructed, young people are removed from the embodied, multi-sensuous, grounded nature of lived engagement and belongingness that implicitly remind us of both the danger to, and the value of, all life. Such things as: climbing trees; playing outdoor games together; sharing toys; playing in sand, soil and sea; walking in the hills or on the beach; caring for an animal; playing music; sharing stories with adults and one another; preparing food; making artefacts, and so forth, are all activities that enable us to participate in living as a being-in-the-world-amongst-others [1].

However, increasingly in our current age, individual technologies requiring little physical involvement, imagination or effort, absorb our waking hours. They create cheap and immediate satisfaction for us, but they do not inscribe in us the real-world understanding of self and others needed to successfully participate in a web of affectivity and responsiveness, in which no-one else can replace us. Even *interactive* technologies such as Wii games cannot do this. As they are virtual interactions, they do not reproduce the existential

responsive ‘feel’ of the activity; whether that be playing music, playing cricket, or driving a car. Consequently, one’s own unique presence or absence makes no difference.

Thus, the patterns of activity into which we are increasingly being assimilated distort human flourishing through their distancing of one another and their focus on ‘independence.’ Furthermore, they fail to nurture the co-cooperative ways of coping with life’s challenges that enact and make real what we mean to each other, and through which we cultivate responsiveness and learn to be response-able towards one another. An ideology of disposable consumerism does not teach us to cherish each other as vulnerable beings inhabiting a shared world, but distances us from responsive engagement with one another. Proper human engagement is, to use Lévinas’ term, enigmatic; it cannot be summarised or encompassed in terms of a description, but unfolds in time and through serendipity, so that no moment can be repeated. That fragility underscores the irreplaceable value of every human moment of life, rather than commodifying it.

A fixation with practices based on the atomistic utility that can be packaged and sold in a market disassembles people’s lives, creating an isolation or lack of belonging that greatly increases the risk of suicide [25]. It also leaves us with no recourse to shared, sustaining and supportive practices through which, when faced with life’s challenges, the apparent emptiness of the world, and our own dispensability in the scheme of things, we could access life-affirming stories from which to draw, or faces who will miss us when we are gone. In such an existential situation, suicide can seem like a possible solution to fraught circumstances. One need only add a crisis in which a person is ill-equipped to cope, isolation from a point of support or connection to others, and a promoting factor (such as access to means of suicide or an event to copy) to produce a tragic cascade [26]. For a case in point, in New Zealand, drinking alcohol has been marketed as an essential ingredient to enhancing any social occasion, many of which lack any cohesive structure or embeddedness within more meaningful frameworks. Thus, the alcohol becomes the focus of the event, and when isolated from contexts of engagement, activity becomes centred on individual thrills. One such activity is the ‘choking game’ in

which people are encouraged to put a rope around their neck and tighten it, to “see what it feels like” (personal communication in a confidential discussion). Clearly, recognising the existential state of which it is symptomatic, this activity can turn into something dire. When one’s self-worth depends upon participating in such activities in order to receive recognition from one’s peers, and when that depends upon how far you are able to ‘take it’, the precarious line between ‘suicide’ and ‘accidental death’ vanishes.

### The framing of suicide within neo-liberal thinking

With the focus on the isolated individual and preference or utility satisfaction, experience is reductively construed according to the way events affect the individual. This leads to suicide being politicised and medicalised in individualistic psychiatric terms as something to do with ‘personal mood’, ‘happiness’ or ‘emotional state.’ A functional reading of the isolated individual medicalises suicide and potentiates a set of individually oriented mental health interventions that dominate the menu of possible responses. As a medical problem, those who end, or attempt to end, their own lives fail to conform to a dominant social norm, whereby people, as productive social units, generate income and so are of worth to society, whilst making minimal demands on health and social services. The “looping effect of human kinds” implies that we are likely to internalise that way of seeing ourselves and our worth [27].

The medical framing of suicide is further problematic as it sometimes uses the language of ‘contagion’ and ‘cluster’, thereby disempowering at-risk individuals and those associated with them. Its discourse abstracts suicide from sites of human engagement, and conceals the genesis of the problem in the breakdown of networks of belonging and interpersonal value. As we try to make sense of our own trajectories, we live and move and have our Being within the stories made available to us in a milieu of mutual concern. Thus, each person’s path implicates others who have brought them into the world, made a contribution along the way, and witnessed their development. Individualising suicide takes the focus away from our contemporary socio-political practices, which have

structured our lives in ways that can be detrimental in terms of individual well-being, the spirit animating and motivating each of us as one among others in a nexus of meaning, and sustainable conceptions of self-worth [2].

In this way, the medical model serves to uphold ‘victimhood’ and ‘internal dysfunction’, as its ‘treatments’ are often pharmacological. This model overlooks and thereby does nothing to strengthen the individual through a community of resilience, connectedness and care. A human being alone, adrift, and helpless, with others exempted from the responsibilities and obligations that we all share for nurturing and supporting one another, creates a space of freedom from those obligations and may relieve us of certain demands. However, it also leads to a loss of personal significance and an inability to direct one’s own future in the light of values underpinning an arena of co-constructed lives, in which one can ‘be somebody’, with a place to stand in a locus of shared meaning.

The medicalisation of suicide flattens the complexity of the human situation and, if the current philosophical analysis has any merit, may produce misguided attempts at ‘suicide prevention’, whereby groups or committees are set up by a health institution to prevent the ‘spread’ of suicide (working with the language of contagion). Such attempts often focus on the types of individuals (according to clinical epidemiology) who are affected, rather than the structures that relationally hold us in being. As the work of such groups or committees is reactive and structured in terms of general epidemiological features, rather than the complexity of individual circumstance and the factors affecting cultural efficacy and continuity, it often misses the mark [10]. Following a suicide at a rural New Zealand secondary school, a multi-agency ‘postvention’ strategy was put in place, and a group of ‘targeted’ young men noted that “it seems to be more about the bureaucrats ‘reassuring themselves’” (personal communication in a confidential discussion). Consequently, working in this way does nothing to hold and sustain people to the world, which is a micro-sociological phenomenon for an individual, and a socio-political reality for cultures under threat.

Within the individualistic, medical (or deficit) model the responses of those affected by the loss of a loved one through suicide is also pathologised, and spaces in which people can engage in meaningful, thoughtful consideration of life's questions and tragedies are closed off. Thus, when an individual is confronted with the suicide of a loved one, there may be no forms of life that can allow the loss to be attended to and storied appropriately. This is illustrated by the situation of a 15-year old woman, ushered into a counsellor's office by her mother, who was convinced that her daughter was 'mentally disturbed'. On several occasions she had caught sight of her daughter sitting in front of the mirror, repeating the name "Patrick, Patrick, Patrick," as she stared into the glass. Patrick was the name of her dead brother. After showing concern for the way her frantic mother forcibly dragged this young woman into his office, the counsellor spent some time talking with her. It became apparent that the young woman's brother, Patrick, had ended his own life and the family did not speak of him or what had happened. For the young woman, saying his name over and over again was the only way to hold the reality of her brother's existence and make some sense of the situation. She had no other space available to her but solitude, in which to speak of and attend to her relation with him and what he meant to her (story given in a confidential discussion).

### Re-thinking our approach to suicide

Others have recognised the need to provide a "richer model of suicide and related acts" by trying to understand suicide more insightfully [28]. By attending to the lived phenomenon of suicide, whether attempted, completed, or preventive, we can see that it is not about confronting and treating an individual as someone with an internal psychological dysfunction. It requires attention to the breakdown between the person and their life-world, in which a set of distorted relations have enmeshed them in an unsustainable existence. Suicide is to be understood as the response made by a person in distress. She may have lost the meaningful connections that hold her in the world, or been denied the opportunity to learn the embodied techniques of life that enable one to go on when all seems bleak and hopeless. That possibility of

isolation, vulnerability and despair should forcefully remind us that human life is dangerous, fragile and valuable.

Many contemporary societies have left (or are being encouraged to leave) behind long traditions of thoughtful stories and a fabric of social engagement that can provide a context for intelligently discussing life and death and their meaning. We are all "men alone," blind to the relational threads of being that maintain our tenuous contingent being. This contemporary human predicament of isolation in a world in which economic, military and political forces drive a more cohesive social structure into collapse, is sensitively revealed in the aptly titled New Zealand novel *Man Alone*, by John Mulgan [29]. It is a situation in which it becomes more and more difficult to voice and share the stories that bond us together, create mutual recognition, and make it possible for those stories to affect, enter into, and sustain our lived experiences, enriching them in a way that catches us up into a life worth living and celebrating together. In an atomistic, isolating society, there is a lack of awareness about the importance of sustaining relationships within a broader and more venerable context of meaning that informs people's self-understanding and self-worth. Instead, we have created a restricted space that is unable to provide strong, supportive networks for one another.

The situation of Ben shows us something of this existential predicament. Ben is a boy of 12 years, the only son of a mother and father who are at the top of their fields in law and financial investment respectively. Both parents work away from home for several days each week, and Ben has the continued care of a highly trained caregiver. Ben has had long-standing problems at school; bullying other children and refusing to cooperate with teachers. He has recently started to vandalise school property. The school have threatened to suspend him if his 'delinquent' behaviour continues. Ben's parents are increasingly concerned by his behaviour, especially as he will be heading to college next year, and they think that things could get much more difficult for him if he does not come to see the error of his ways. Ben's parents have asked his caregiver and his teacher to keep a list of Ben's misdemeanours so that they have a record of his wrongdoings. That way they can consistently take him to task, explaining why his

behaviour is unacceptable. As Ben is an intelligent child they feel that by methodically analysing his behaviour, he will soon change. They are convinced that he would be a success if he applied himself to his school work and improved his behaviour.

Not surprisingly, focusing on Ben's 'deficits' and isolating them as something internal to him, and partitioning his life into 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' components, does nothing to inculcate a sense of worth, a 'place to be' or a life worth living for Ben as a whole person for whom there is a source of discontent in his being-in-the-world-with-others. The partitioning and pathologising approach is unable to reassure Ben of his place in the hearts of his family. Nor is it able to position him in stories of belonging that show his unique and inexpressible value in the world, or to recognise that Ben's way of being is interwoven with the relationships and way of life that he inhabits; intersubjective patterns that have shaped him. Ben died after a drug overdose five years after these events.

Although there has been a recent call for more discretion from the coroner in releasing details on particular occurrences of suicide, if such information can contribute to public discussion and policy debates, such a response cannot address what is at stake in situations of suicide [30]. While we agree that a lack of information leaves people afraid and disempowered, whilst also consigning suicide to the unknown – a 'dark' realm with all the fascination that this involves – this narrow legal focus neglects both the larger socio-political-economic context and the human context. Socio-politically, the ways in which messages about suicide are conveyed through art, films, novels, music and poetry all serve to inform the contemporary *zeitgeist*, a milieu of motivation and images overlooked by this narrow legislative appeal. Perhaps it is not more 'information' that people need but more inclusion. Information can serve to increase alarm, anxiety, or even acceptability when it is not evaluated and analysed against an adequate ethical framework, and drawn on for insight so that it serves as a reminder of the treasure that is our life together. Those affected by suicide, whether attempted, completed, or prevented, need to be held 'in being' through appropriate care [31]. They need shared stories, rituals and practices that enable them to take up their lives again in a positive way, and give

meaning to the story of the person who has taken their own life. A person at risk needs to be embedded within relational structures that can sustain and empower them at testing and traumatic times. Suicide is not an individual act reflecting a deficit within a person, even though depression may increase the risk of the factors we are naming as having a lethal outcome. Instead, it is a response that arises out of an individual's history, their trajectory of relationships and trials, and it profoundly affects the lives of those who live on. In every setting there are cultural practices that can alleviate the suffering of those affected by the suicide of a community member, but they are often only found at the margins. For instance, the Māori practices of *whakawātea* and *takahi whare* are able to confront the pain of suicide and the situation that shaped it, in order to heal and restore positive relationships [32]. Often in other indigenous communities the detailed understanding of micro-sociology and stories of suicide suggested by the current analysis is not readily available, or is dismissed by scientific publication of results [33]. The practices and forms of life that recognise our being-in-the-world-with-others can plausibly work to lead those affected back into the 'world of light', the everyday realm of shared human activity. Such practices provide profound support and connection with others who share grief and joy, memory, value and expectation in order to overcome (in the sense of passing through and beyond) the trauma of death (in all its forms). But as noted, these practices lie at the margins of the dominant discourse and are not acknowledged or made available to many. The healing activity after such trauma takes time, and it does not forget or numb the event, but slowly and gently transforms it, so that the voice and face of the one that has died is never lost. To take that time and use what is lost to inform future relationships and practices for the better is costly, but such costs imbue life with deep value, in a true sense, and in part by showing the real cost of suicide and the wound that is left.

We should therefore beware of healthcare reforms and institutional practices that have neither time nor fitting spaces for communal confrontation with suicide, and so have no ways of positively carrying people forward in a thoughtfully examined way, in which grief is acknowledged, bowed to, and allowed to transform us. The complexity of the phenomenon of suicide cannot



be adequately addressed except through the ties that bind us to one another, so disestablishing those bonds not only leaves people unable to heal the trauma of suicide, it also leaves them disempowered and fearful. If communities are unable to care for one another they have no way of learning how to recognise and work with the warning signs and possible precursors of a potential suicide. Nor are they able to reform a shared understanding of tragedy and the values it etches in human hearts. That is why we need to oppose the forces that could loosen our social bonds so that we can recover the networks potentiating the healing work necessary to re-build our lives when suicide stuns and stupefies us.

## Conclusions

The complex interdependency of human life underpins our need to dwell within a structure of stories that capture and express shared values linking us to each other. These stories guide our interactions and nourish us, so that our failure to nurture and indwell them means that we are bereft of our ethical capabilities, allowing some of us to fall from the world. It is only when meaningful human engagement thrives within a rich tapestry of intersecting stories that we are empowered to work towards the healing of distressed people within our shared life-world. The power of stories that recognise our being-in-the-world-with-others provide the ground from which our lives can be shared and transformed. It is an ethico-political response in which both the community and the individual are empowered to heal themselves and to learn to take care of each other in ways that really matter.

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