

A Stillness in



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It is interesting how words seem two-dimensional, not given the benefit of experience. Simply knowing the definition is not enough. It is only with the benefit of experience, or sharing of experiences, that the words take on a third dimension, which allows true understanding. Perhaps with no other word is there greater truth to this analogy than with the word “suicide.”

My family and I were gathered in the room of a hotel, hundreds of miles from our respective homes. Questions, reflective comments, memories, and silence...most of all, I remember the silence; it seemed to make a sound. We had all gathered in preparation for a memorial service for Vincent, who, at the age of 39, had died as the result of his own deliberate actions. A master sergeant in the Marine Corps, Vincent was an individual with varied interests and many talents. He was one of the finest people I ever have known—he also was my brother.

The call had come early one morning; my brother had died, supposedly of a heart attack. I was on travel in Denver, Colo., and caught the first flight back to the East Coast. The trip was filled with predictable reflections, mostly those of younger years—of four boys growing up in a small town in southern Pennsylvania with their parents. Vincent was my oldest

brother, seven years my senior, someone I liked, someone I always had admired.

After a brief period at home, the long drive followed to the city where the memorial service was to be held. It wasn't until we arrived and had a chance to talk with other family members that we learned Vincent had taken his own life. As details emerged, so did questions—many more questions than answers.

Vincent had been expected at his unit early one weekday morning but never arrived. A member of his unit drove to his house, entered, found him on the dining room floor, and called the police. He had died some hours before.

The last day of Vincent's life seemed to be well planned. This much is known: He wrote five letters and, for reasons unknown, asked someone else to mail them. At some point, he chained his dog outside with ample food and water for several days. He meticu-

the Heart ...

lously sealed the doors and windows of his house, then started the engine of a car in the adjacent garage and opened the door leading to the inside of the house. While sitting at a table in the dining area, he wrote three notes to close friends, in addition to another note (to no one in particular), apologizing for the fact the house hadn't been cleaned in several days. The quality of handwriting in the final note clearly shows the effects carbon monoxide was having on his ability to write. Finally, letters no longer take form, and then there's a straight line—presumably signaling the fact he had lost consciousness.

I occasionally read these notes—why, I really don't know. I suppose it's the only connection to his last moments. I also read the police reports, hoping they will tell me something I haven't read so many times before.

Found on the table was a copy of the base newspaper that featured an extensive article on suicide. No "suicide note" was found (these notes are left only about 20 percent of the time).

From the letters and notes Vincent wrote, it's not clear why he took his life. Those close to him in his battalion stated that, in the days before his death, he was upbeat and in good spirits. This behavior is con-

sistent with that in many suicide cases; a solution to the "problem" has been determined, so it's no longer a problem.

His death, under these circumstances, came as a complete surprise to his family and friends. In the days and weeks following Vincent's death, it was difficult to think of anything else. Coupled with repeated analysis of what is known came speculation—all directed toward arriving at answers, ones that simply wouldn't come.

One of the five letters mailed on the day of Vincent's death was addressed to our mother; she didn't receive this letter until several days after the memorial service. In the letter, he said he was sorry he hadn't turned out to be "what the boys expected"—referring to my other brothers and me. This comment made me particularly sad because I can think of no basis for him to have felt that way. We, in fact, always had felt he was a success, both in his professional and personal life. It's evident he never knew I was proud of him and strived to adopt, in my own life, some of the very fine qualities that characterized his.

I think suicide breeds its own particular form of profound sadness—a kind of stillness in the heart. For those who choose this exit from life, their legacy often

is to have their existence defined by how they died, rather than by what may have been a meaningful and productive life—in many cases, a life of service. I hope this is not my brother's legacy.

In his younger years, Vincent was active in his church, serving in many capacities. To his brothers and friends, he was a good-natured and giving person, someone who was fun to be around and who would give you anything he had. During his career in the Marine Corps, he volunteered for counselor duty at the Navy's Drug

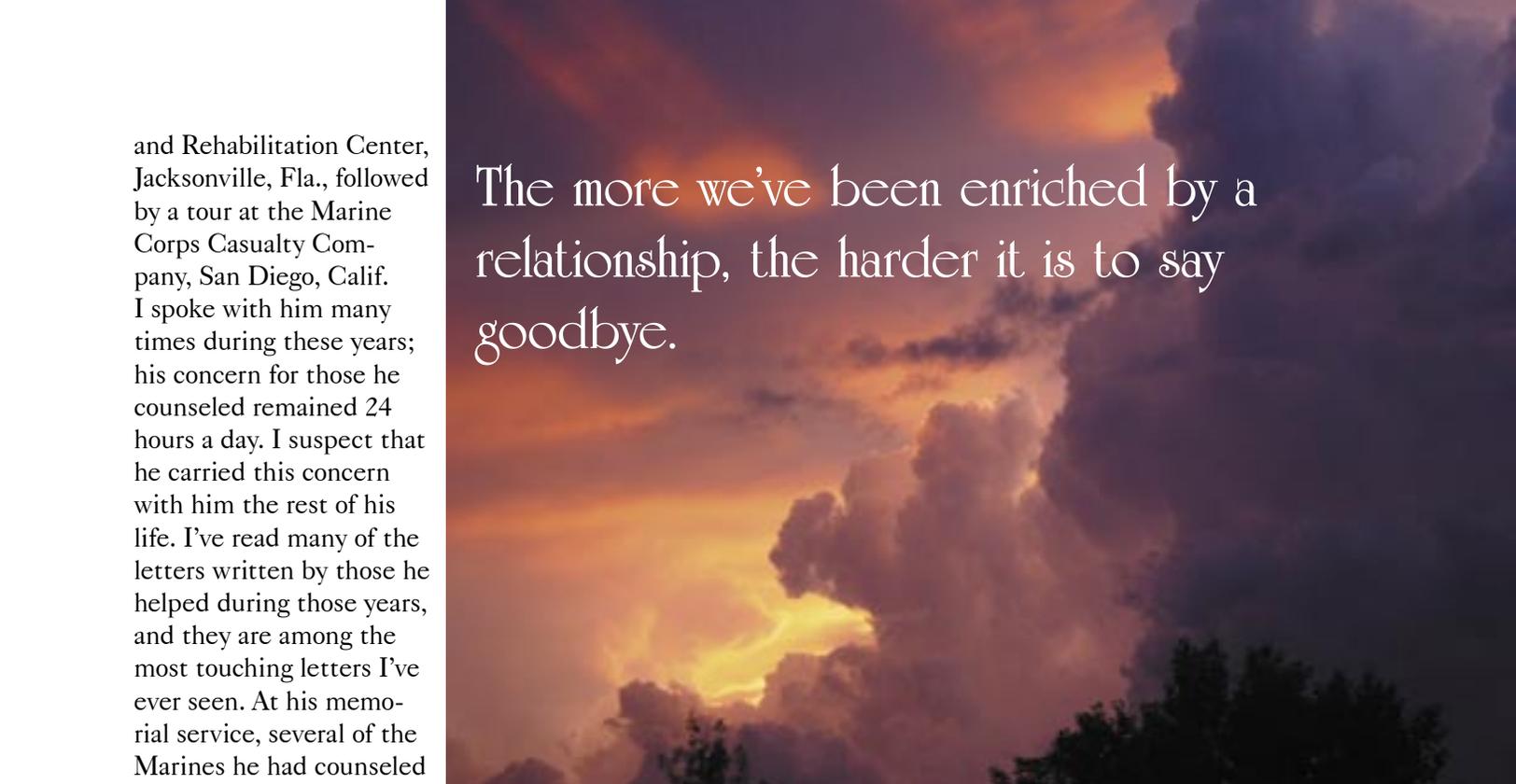
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and Rehabilitation Center, Jacksonville, Fla., followed by a tour at the Marine Corps Casualty Company, San Diego, Calif. I spoke with him many times during these years; his concern for those he counseled remained 24 hours a day. I suspect that he carried this concern with him the rest of his life. I've read many of the letters written by those he helped during those years, and they are among the most touching letters I've ever seen. At his memorial service, several of the Marines he had counseled traveled considerable distances to attend.

Finally, as top sergeant in his battalion, Vincent was a mentor and friend to his fellow Marines. To define his life by how he died would be unfair to his life's work and achievements. For those left behind, the sadness of losing someone to suicide is lifelong, and it's never very far from your daily life. Maybe it's the inevitable thoughts of our own role in someone's life and how our contributions, as well as those of other friends and loved ones, weren't enough to ultimately make a difference. Or, perhaps it's the notion that someone, at some point, could have detected behavior changes that would have triggered a "life-line"—the list goes on and on.

I'll never forget when the space shuttle Challenger exploded shortly after launch. The mission clock was allowed to continue, clocking the time for a mission that wouldn't take place. The clock in my family's lives continues, counting the unfulfilled promise of Vincent's life. I would hope that, were he with us today, he would have realized the promise and fullness of life that were there for him. I only know that those who were close to him forever will live with fond memories, too many unanswered questions, and, sadly, the thought that he should be here with us today.

I'm sharing this story in keeping with the spirit of caring that characterized Vincent's life. I know he would not have wanted others to travel the road he ultimately chose, and I hope that sharing this story serves to show how each life affects so many others. Suicide doesn't just take the life of the person who



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commits the act; it also takes a part of the lives of those who were close to that person.

I ask each of you to pause for just a few moments in your life. Consider those who travel the streets of despair, the back alleys of a disconnected existence in worlds of their own making, unable to regain touch with the "plus side of their ledger"—those things that give life true meaning. And, in pausing, I think you'll be driven to give hope to those in need, regardless of the circumstances or the inconvenience of the time and place.

I recently attended a joint-services workshop that was geared toward developing a curriculum for training frontline supervisors to identify and assist those in various forms of distress. This workshop underscored the Department of Defense's commitment to suicide prevention. In this workshop, the idea of "the hope option" was conceived—the thought that, regardless of how dire a situation seems, there is always hope. It is each person's responsibility to provide "the hope option" to those who have lost touch with hope.

One final thought: I suppose that the magnitude of our sorrow and pain is in direct proportion to the bond we have with the ones we lose. The more we've been enriched by a relationship, the harder it is to say goodbye. I only wish I could have said "goodbye" to Vincent and to have thanked him for the richness he gave to my life. Today, I would give anything just to have one more conversation with my brother. Vincent died in 1986, and I still miss him today as much as ever. ■

While the rate of suicides in the Navy and Marine Corps is well below the national average, the loss of even one person is very painful, unnecessary and preventable. Nationally, suicide ranks among the top 10 causes of death across all ages, with more than 30,000 victims each year. It usually ranks as the second- or third-leading cause of death among active-duty Sailors and Marines.

The U.S. surgeon general has called suicide a serious public health threat to our nation. In his Call to Action Report, he pushed for development of strategies to prevent suicide and the suffering it causes. In response, the Navy and Marine Corps joined forces to develop a plan to better address suicide-prevention efforts.

The philosophy of watching out for fellow Sailors and Marines is a key factor in these efforts. The acronym

“AID LIFE” is a reminder about what to do if you suspect someone may be in trouble:

A – Ask the person if he/she is thinking about suicide.

I – Intervene immediately.

D – Don’t keep it a secret.

L – Locate help.

I – Inform the chain of command.

F – Find someone; don’t leave the person alone.

E – Expedite; get help right away.

For information on Navy policy, training and research in suicide prevention, go to this website:

www.npc.navy.mil/CommandSupport/SuicidePrevention/.

For information on Marine Corps suicide awareness/prevention, go to this website: www.usmc-mccs.org/perssvc/prevent/suicide.asp.—Ed.