

Suicide, Connection, and Community

by wylbur

On 20 April 2017, my friend and occasional BM campmate Will Moore wrote a characteristically provocative and thoughtful essay. He scheduled it to be posted a few hours into the future. Then he committed suicide.

I was deeply saddened, but not surprised. Will and I had discussed suicide, walking through the deep playa late at night, between marveling at creativity and engineering and debating what intimacy means. Will was on the Asberger's spectrum, which he wrote about frequently. He was profoundly analytical about his place in the world, and his distance from others. As an academic political scientist, he thought constantly and seriously about the social world and about his place in it. He was self-critical, humane, considerate, and he did his best to include everyone around him in work and life. His intellectual passion was fierce, sometimes abrasive, and he was at the same time a relentless defender of fundamental American freedoms. While he loved reasoned argument, he did not enjoy conflict or controversy, but he rarely shied from a debate.

This essay is not a eulogy for my deeply missed friend. There have been a number of powerful reflections about Will's life by students, colleagues, and friends. There's at least one other memorial to him here in the Temple which talks about the amazing performance art Will did on the playa to provoke intimate conversations and deep political reflection. To remember Will in all these ways: it is meet and right so to do (I write this phrase with a brush of self-mockery and a drop of foreshadowing).

This essay is something different. I want to use Will's death to reflect on the epidemic of suicide among middle-aged white men. In the US, non-Hispanic white men aged 45–65 kill ourselves at about 39 per 100K per year (the category “non-Hispanic white men” comes from the Center for Disease Control and the Bureau of the Census). Only Native American men and older non-Hispanic white men commit suicide at anything like that rate—it is triple the rate for any other gender or ethnic group.

Let's put that in the most local context: from my barely-informed guess (from the BRC Census) about the demographics out here on the playa right now, about *fifteen* of the men among us will kill ourselves before we come Home in 2018.



WILL PRETENDING TO BE CANVASSING FOR SCHWARTZENEGGER IN 2003

Who am I talking about?

This essay does not falsely generalize. Middle-aged, middle-class, non-Hispanic white men are *not* the default category for American society. I reject argument that makes that reductive, marginalizing assumption.

But I'm in this category, and so was Will, and so are the other men I'll write about here. Other social groups face many obstacles, prejudices, violence, and exclusion both personal and institutional. Like Will did in his life, I honor those struggles for justice. Also like Will, with my politics, my donations, and when I can, with my professional labor, I support efforts to identify and mitigate injustice.

But in this writing, I mean to be very specific about the demographic slice to which I belong.

I argue that Will died from social isolation. I'll review his writing, and consider some of the philosophical and economic factors that make suicide a curious effect of the combination of social privilege and social ideas held especially by middle-aged, middle-class white men.

I will not propose more hot lines, more accessible counseling, restrictions on gun ownership, or longer waiting periods for gun purchases, more medications for depressed people, or advocate for police intervention to restrict the depressed person's

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liberty. I think those attempts to treat symptoms are sometimes effective, but may in some cases be actively harmful.

Even at their best, these approaches focus on the acute moment when one person is most at risk. These are not the right responses to the systemic, structural problem in our world that is leading so many non-Hispanic middle-class, middle-aged white men to kill ourselves.

I'm going to argue below that the toxic, isolated, atomistic world we're in now is hurting all of us. I'll trace the philosophies, the moral codes, and the professional environments that I think drive us all into unconnected boxes.

Where I'm going with this

Then I'll offer an idea, a mechanism for organizing ourselves to reaffirm our moral values. In physically-connected real space, we will gather to acknowledge our community members' births, coming of age, marriages, and deaths (note bene: rituals!) so that each individual's transformations are welcomed and balanced by the stability and consistency of the group. We'll come together to support people when they experience tragedies, long-term illnesses, and other challenges. Most importantly, we congregate regularly to celebrate in joy together, with music and food.

This idea is, of course, a "church," or a mosque, synagogue, temple: a congregation.

But I'm an atheist, and I'm pretty unshakable in that position. My proposal therefore is a church without a divisive debate about doctrine and divinity. A church without [Gg]od(des)(s)(es).

A half-decade or so ago, I got lucky, I mean really, really lucky. I married into an intentional community that has evolved from a group of friends having kick-ass parties into a kind of congregation. Over the years, it has changed me, deeply and I hope permanently. I think the world would be a happier place with more congregations.

Neither the problem nor my proposal is new, but for me, they're newly urgent. In the last ten or so years, I've lost as many friends to suicide as I have to disease, accident, or homicide, and I suspect that among my friends, there are others are near the edge.

Will died of isolation

As news of Will's suicide spread, people came up with theories about his death, mostly connected to the toxic world of academic life. And while it's true, academic life is toxic, there are lots of toxic work environments, so that's not a sufficient explanation. For the most part, these theories ignored what Will wrote himself.

So yes, there are lots of toxic workplaces, but few that force people to move around so much.

Academics in particular suffer this repeated social fragmentation through each move from undergraduate, to graduate, to postdoc, to assistant professor, and thereafter moves that advance one's career. Each move reduces a person's community. We sometimes talk about having friends "all over the world." But what we mean by a long-distance friend, no matter how intimate, is much less than a friend we can see regularly, with whom we can be physically present, and on whom we can call spontaneously to complain, celebrate, mourn, or kibbitz.

Of course, depression influenced Will's decision, though in my conversations with him, he argued that he was not conventionally depressed (relevant because I was sometimes depressed). But in this particular case, there's a closer explanation at hand.

In his note, Will wrote that he didn't fit in. He wrote that he never felt understood, never felt heard. He wasn't complaining, he was explaining why he felt that his time was up. He wrote that he had wrapped up his social connections: he raised his kids, he helped his students, he separated from his wife. He had honorably discharged his obligations.

Will's separation from students, colleagues, family, and friends – voluntary but driven in part by his neuroatypicality – is a useful lens into a more general discussion of isolation versus community.

Isolation is part of privilege

I think this voluntary separation from social connections is key to understanding why men like Will (and like a hell of a lot of us out here this week) commit suicide so much more frequently than other people in our world. Will was a full professor at a good university. He had sufficient financial and social resources to withdraw from others. By no means am I criticizing Will by noting this privilege – he would have been among the first to agree, and then to complicate the discussion.

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Unlike men in the middle (or upper-middle) class, people with less resources are forced to rely more on others, whether they want to or not. People with less money, more onerous jobs, or more repressive treatment by the rest of the world are more often forced by circumstance into shared housing, communal decisions about food and transportation, and jobs which ensure (often unpleasant) interaction with others. Rightly or wrongly, women often end up with a disproportionate responsibility for children, which is at the same time an unfair burden on women, and a powerful human connection that some men lose. Wealth, sexism, and our ideas about personal independence and autonomy enable white men to withdraw—and to suffer the consequent social isolation.

I'm going on kind of a deep dive into the history of theories about social virtue. If you want to skip ahead to the "What community means" section, you won't miss much.

Social theories and moral codes

I'm going to try to stay high-level on this. Any number of book-length treatments of this argument are available, and I'm painfully aware that everything I'm saying here has been debated pretty much *ad nauseam* over the last several hundred years, but FWIW: the key ideas in European and North American ("Western") social theory about what it means to be "human" pretty much all reinforce the privilege-based ideas justifying social withdrawal I outlined above. I'm going to give three examples – from the center, the left, and the right – to show how similar they are. The point is to explain why social isolation has such a strong pull on non-Hispanic white men, and to take a step toward an alternative.

Center, Left, and Right

Most Americans' ideas about just government and the citizen's appropriate role therein derive more-or-less in a straight line from John Locke's seventeenth-century political philosophy. Locke's theory of mind and his theory of government take us to the same place: that man [*sic*, srsly] is born as an empty slate, and that he is shaped by his interactions with the world. In particular, Locke emphasized that the legitimacy of government derives from the free consent of the governed, and that there is a contract between citizens and the state. The state guarantees certain rights, and in return, we accept the state as legitimate. This is called the social contract.

The key pieces of this theory of mind and government I want to highlight are that (i) each citizen is making individually reasoned decisions on his (and I think we can agree that Locke meant *his*) own terms. And that (ii) duties owed in return for rights are also individually owed to the state, not to others. Thus the notion of individual virtue, the pursuit of a good life, essentially means making good individual decisions. Each person gains through reasoned, free exchange with others, and all assumed to have some independent autonomy that allows them to make these deals on a roughly equal basis.

It was no accident that these ideas flowed directly into the contract-centric ideas that Jefferson and Madison embodied in the United States's founding documents.

I think that most Americans feel the pull of this kind of idea, but I suggest that its pull is strongest on (to repeat this category) non-Hispanic, middle-class white men, not coincidentally, the ethnic and gender descendants of the men who formulated these ideas. I'm not in any way judging these ideas, just offering a bit of historical perspective.

So the Industrial Revolution comes along 200 years later, and in his critique of capitalism and industrial production, Karl Marx observes that the concentration of capital in a few hands means that most people (many scholars argue that Marx pretty much meant *men* rather than people) can't make contracts freely. Marx emphasized that the essence of being human was to make things. He called this "species being," and the core of the idea is we express ourselves as human by creating food, art, ideas, and stuff.

Many, many words have been spilled on this idea, and I don't want to get into whether it makes sense. Instead I want to highlight the effect this idea has on what we think it means to be virtuous, that is, to be a good person. Note how the Marxian proposal is consistent with Lockian classical liberalism. Work and production are our expressions of humanity: consider the phrase "species being." We are each alone in the world, and we exist by making.

To amplify these two ideas about the virtue of social isolation, the twentieth century gave us radical libertarianism. In particular, the work of economist Friedrich Hayek has been enormously influential as a rejection of Marxian ideas. Hayek posited that social good comes primarily from limiting the influence of people over other people. In particular, Hayek

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emphasized reducing (nearly to zero) the state's coercive influence over citizens. (Hayek himself was much less anti-welfare-state than his followers have become, indeed, Hayek argued forcefully that the state should provide universal health care, a basic income, and unemployment insurance via compulsory taxation, but let's stay high-level here, mmmkay?) In Hayek's formulation, we are at our most virtuous when we accumulate private property and negotiate social rules for exchanging that property via unconstrained markets. Negotiating as equal individuals, of course.

As before, I'm not judging or choosing among these ideas. Instead, I want to emphasize how each position essentially agrees with others: that people exist as social atoms who combine in a kind of almost-literal chemistry to form "society."

And now that we see their common core, ok, this is the part where I start judging. Each idea (and the one I'll describe below) justifies itself with claims from history, anthropology, and economics, real and imagined, but they're far more ideological claims about social virtue than technically accurate analysis. We don't read Locke for his fables about the origins of human society, which TBH were amateurish even for his day.

Back to my ideological judgment: the idea that people are atoms is terrible, and it's terrible because it leaves people lonely, disconnected, separated from joy and each other. I acknowledge why these ideas came about: they were rejecting the divine right of kings, the oppression of vast & unequal wealth, and the brutality of totalitarianism. I know what Locke, Marx, and Hayek were trying to say.

But we have to be done with this idea because I think it's literally killing us. And by "us," I mean the non-Hispanic white men to whom these ideas are pitched, historically and to some extent even now. It leaves us on the brink of suicide. A drop of jargon: all this contract- and production-based ideology leaves us *egoistic* and *anomic*.

Existing in and through community

The ideas from the center, left, and right taught that a virtuous person works, reasons, and makes contracts and stuff, but in these theories, each person is by himself (as before, I'm using "him" because I think that's what these theorists meant, not as a false universal). Where's the social part of social theory? I used to wonder during my endless years of graduate school. For that, let's turn to my favorite theorist.

Émile Durkheim was a French Jew during France's most virulently anti-Semitic period in the late 19th century. This is the time when French Army Captain Alfred Dreyfus was framed for espionage, and the case against him was widely believed in part because anti-Semitism made the flimsy evidence more plausible. Durkheim's perspective was deeply informed by his outsider status in his society, and, in particular in America in 2017, I think it's useful to remember that often the most insightful perspectives come from people forced to the margins.

In 1897, Durkheim published a brilliant treatise about suicide in which he argued that the difference in suicide rates among two social groups in France was the result of one group being more socially integrated than the other. Durkheim described four kinds of suicide, each of which was the result of either excessive or inadequate social integration or social regulation. Egoistic suicide is the consequence of insufficient social integration, and anomic suicide is the consequence of insufficient social regulation.

What Durkheim meant by these terms is a bit slippery. Social integration is the clearer of the two: it means the connections between people, including shared values, mutual affection, and mutual obligations. Social regulation means the extent to which a person has an idea about what the future holds, a sense of coherence, personal control, and stability.

Coming back to Will's suicide note, he described problems along both dimensions. His description of how he felt that he never fit in, never felt heard or known, is precisely a lack of social integration. And his inability to be comfortable making small talk expresses a lack of social regulation. Will felt unable to know what other people felt, so he couldn't predict what they were likely to do next. This led him to believe that he was constantly pissing people off. Sometimes he was right.

From description to prescription

Let's start talking about what community actually means. In *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912), Durkheim recounted travelers' tales of Aboriginal Australians and other hunter-gather groups. From this amateur anthropology, he proposed that when people who usually live in small groups get together for a big party, they feel emotions more keenly, they feel exaltation. This sense of being part of something greater than oneself is the root of religious belief, Durkheim argued, and it is the fundamental experience and practice that

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gives rise to all of social organization. The notion of a deity—which Durkheim argued came much later in human development—is a projection people make when they are experiencing connectedness and sharing joy. The sense of divinity we sometimes feel is our sense of being part of something greater than ourselves, and that something is community.

As with the other social theorists, I think it's not very interesting to ask if Durkheim was "right" in the sense that his empirical analysis would meet our contemporary standards for peer-reviewed social research (short answer: probably not). But also like the others, Durkheim's ideas continue to be read and debated because they're interesting as a kind of moral proposal, an idea about how the world should be.

From Durkheim, I propose that to prevent suicide, we need to seek a balanced amount of social integration and social regulation. We need to participate in community, we need moments of shared exaltation and joy.

What community means

Many of us remember college fondly, and I think the key reason is that college is a time of deep community. People who go away to college are, in that moment, open to new relationships, new ideas, and new ways of interacting with others. Many people amplify those connections with clubs, sports, fraternity/sorority participation, and other mechanisms for closer connection. That was my experience, and I think the richness and depth of friendships in college is a common memory of halcyon days for people in America's middle class. It's a moment of intentional community.

By contrast, non-college educated Americans express their yearning for community a little differently. I am frequently reminded of Obama's inartful remark during the 2008 presidential election: that people in America's small towns are clinging to their guns and religion. The remark was understood as contemptuous, and was widely derided as evidence that Obama is an out-of-touch elite liberal. But there's another read, closer to my experience with people from America's small towns: Obama wasn't being contemptuous, and he was right.

Let's ask what people mean by guns and religion. I think most American gun owners invest their weapons with their ideals about personal autonomy: security, independence, freedom, and a sense of controlling one's destiny (note: I'm taking no stand whatsoever on the debate whether guns are good or



bad, I'm just laying out what I think the guns signify for their owners). And religion means community: connections with each other, shared values, trust and affection. "Clinging to guns and religion" means a collective effort to establish a balance of social regulation and social integration. These ideas evoke precisely the social needs Durkheim described as the bulwarks against suicide, or conversely, the bases for human happiness.

Disclaimer

Before diving further into the notion of church, I want to re-emphasize that I'm an atheist. I'm horrified by anti-rational appeals to the supernatural for ethical foundations, or as explanations for natural phenomena, social outcomes, or social exclusion. I'm indifferent to evidenceless stories about a mythical past, except inasmuch as the stories tell us about the storyteller's world view (this is how I tried to treat the stories by Locke, Marx, Hayek, and Durkheim). I find it suspicious that people who preach their claims to truth about their particular flavor of the supernatural generally benefit socially, politically, and economically from their god's commandments (show me your veil of ignorance, I say). I'm equally unmoved by less

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explicitly doctrinal arguments about unconscious spirituality.

But regardless of a debate over the existence of a supernatural divinity, we need church. Let me now focus on this point, the practice of community.

Pro-“Church”

What I’m calling “church” is self-conscious organization devoted to the stewardship and promotion of community. Church is the social expression where we create and sustain bonds of community, and it is the institution where we implement the gritty pieces of helping people work and be together. Let’s look first at the experience.

Here are the basic pieces of what I think we do in church:

- In church, we affirm our shared **values**, often by rituals; we teach each other, newbies and converts, and especially children, what we believe is good and right in life.
- Church includes regular, routine **physical presence** and touch: it is not virtual. It is present in handshakes, hugs, eye contact, and children underfoot.
- We celebrate **life transitions**: births, deaths, marriages, coming of age. We affirm that even as each person changes, our community is stable and consistent (rituals are precisely what Durkheim meant by social regulation).
- We provide **mutual support** in crises, in natural or human-caused disasters, and in the US, especially in caring for long-term debilitating physical and mental illness.
- And the most importantly, we self-consciously create practices to **experience joy together**; singing is the most obvious way this happens, but there are many others, from Christmas to Purim to Holi to, well, Burning Man.

Here’s how we do it:

- We organize committees for governance, planning, financing, tithes, dues, and fundraising;
- We identify and rally support for charitable causes, consistent with our values, but outside our community;
- We organize a regular series of events where members connect;
- We make collective decisions about acquiring and maintaining goods and real property;

- We organize youth activities and child care;
- We convene and host support groups of every kind;
- We socialize and throw parties, picnics, and fellowship;
- We provide lots of support for community members forging romantic and sexual relationships with each other (which is sometimes experienced as good-natured gossip, but I think it’s positive);
- And perhaps most of all, we share music, which is an especially powerful, and logically, very common aspect of church life.

By no means am I implying that community should be necessarily genteel, sanitized, retiring, or exclusively sacred. That would be boring. The non-divine congregation I’m part of has spun off at least a dozen Burning Man camps over the last twenty years, at least three of them are active this year. I want a congregation that knows how to throw a wild party.

Taking this back to suicide: churches enable people to emotionally regulate themselves by providing values-based stability and trusted confidantes. In the middle of the squabbling and setbacks of everyday life, there’s a home, people and beliefs to return to, in good times and bad.

I think this need for community, more than anything, is at the heart of the often-toxic nostalgia many Americans—especially non-Hispanic white men—are currently indulging in as a reaction to changes around them. We need more churches, more connections, more charity, and more real-time, face-to-face connection, not least to dissolve the hate.

Americans as a body politic, and the sub-group of non-Hispanic white men, all of us are suffering from the lack of church. Let’s build more.

Close

This should be urgent for all of us. Suicide is the fourth greatest cause of death for non-Hispanic middle aged white men in the US.¹ Suicide far outpaces homicide. We’re at much greater risk from ourselves than from the usual bogeymen of terrorists (which scare the right), gun-nut mass shooters or the police (which scare the left). It’s worth mentioning that men from other ethnic groups are at far, far greater risk from the police. But for non-Hispanic middle aged white men, suicide is right

¹ See the CDC’s *National Vital Statistics Report*, v65(5), Table 1, p.27. You didn’t think I’d omit the footnote, did you?

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behind accidents, and it kills more of us than liver disease, diabetes, hepatitis, or pneumonia.

In the last few years, a few men – relevantly, these are non-Hispanic, middle-aged, middle-class white men like Will, and like me – have written courageously and eloquently about surviving paralyzing depression. These men’s writings about depression have really resonated with me because they’re men whose work and ideas have provoked and inspired me for years. And, of course, their words speak to me because they’re a little bit like me, demographically of course, but also geeky and trying our best to make the world a little better.



WIL, KEN, AND ETHAN, PER TWITTER.

I honor the courage and candor of **Wil Wheaton**, **Ethan Zuckerman**, and **Ken White**. Each of them has written about coming through an especially difficult period of deep depression, each explained how they’d done it, and each of them is still here to keep talking about it.

Quoting Ethan quoting science fiction author John Scalzi, “‘straight white male’ is the lowest difficulty setting in the game of life.” We need to use the space we get from privilege to take risks to open conversations about tough stuff. So I want to add my name to this list. Throughout my life, I’ve survived multiple months-long bouts of depression when suicide beckoned as an escape from grinding dysphoria and exhausting anxiety.

I survived in part by coming to the playa and making things. Both experiences are deeply fulfilling, but ultimately still atomistic. Longer-term, I’ve integrated into a non-divine church, and I’ve found joy and connection there. I’m profoundly grateful to the visionaries in my community who articulated our values and built our network, and I offer my support to the people who steward it today.

I really miss Will. I wish I could argue this point-by-point with him, but now we can’t argue anymore.

What is your church?

Are you present with your co-congregants, do you discuss your values, and do you consciously practice joy? How will you worship and celebrate with others? Your life might depend on it. It’s time to talk openly—and connect—so we don’t lose more of our non-Hispanic, middle-aged, middle-class white male friends.

After BM, I’ll post this on my blog (wylbursinnergeek.net) with my default world name.

