

The Williams effect: A belated funeral song

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In June of 2013, one of my best friends attempted suicide.

"Jason" called me early on a weekday afternoon, while I was tapping out an article in Bilo's internet café.

"Hey, can you come over?" His words were frayed at the ends.

"Yeah. What's up?? Are you okay?" My stomach churned, and I snapped my laptop shut.

"No. Just come over. I'll explain when you get here."

I sped down highway 64 in my rusty maroon beater, my mind shooting blanks, and parked on the slope of his driveway. Ten minutes had passed, and I felt each one like the beating of a drum. I entered his house without knocking.

He was balanced in the center of the living room, eyes blood-shot, hands trembling.

"What's going on?" I wrapped my panic in the soft of concern.

Jason lumbered in uneven steps to the kitchen counter, and pointed to the three bottles, arranged in an innocuous row. He had swallowed the contents with a swig of hard lemonade.

I dialed 911.

At the hospital, they pumped his stomach, but they could not pipe out the depression that polluted his judgment. Thankfully, he survived. Many do not.

According to a nationwide survey conducted by the Center of Disease Control and Prevention, suicide is the third leading cause of death in 10-24-year-olds. Clinical depression is often the little understood culprit, a disease so silent and pervasive that it can go unnoticed by friends, colleagues, and even family.

When Robin Williams committed suicide, thousands mourned the loss of Pan, of Mrs. Doubtfire, and of the haunted madman in "The Fisher King" who discovered, but could not reach, his Holy Grail.

Thousands more mourned the loss of a great man, philanthropist who, even off-screen, emanated a rare combination of personal warmth and intellectual brilliance.

If Shirley Temple was America's Sweetheart, Williams was the godfather of an orphaned

country. His empathetic, relatable persona rendered him an untraditional icon of masculinity in a culture plagued by disillusionment.

Following his suicide, the public dialogue about mental illness was suddenly personal to the collective mind. Depression had received an unexpected mascot: a man that would never again receive a standing ovation from a live audience. The media swelled with new updates; the conversation became a chorus, and the dialogue, a funeral song.

Katie Hurley, a licensed psychotherapist, wrote a viral, but controversial article for the Huffington Post titled, "There's Nothing Selfish about Suicide."

"People who say that suicide is not selfish always reference the survivors," she said. "[But] they do think of the survivors... Until you've stared down that level of depression, you don't get to make those judgments."

Hurley poignantly described herself as a "suicide survivor." She did not say when her father ended his life - only that he did. For those left behind, the trauma is ever-present.

Like my friend Jason, most who struggle with depression and suicidal thoughts do so without a glamorous social identity. Many would, upon their death, receive only a paltry funeral and a blurb in their local paper.

In college students, depression is an understated illness that quietly draws patients out of the academic world. They don't always die. Many simply withdraw, lacking the energy to persist through years of intellectual labor. Some regroup and return, having devised coping strategies.

According to the UCLA Loneliness scale, designed by Dr. Dan Russell at Iowa State University, College Freshman are the statistically loneliest people on the planet. It makes sense. They've just moved to a new location and shed their previous identity. They're in transience, with nothing on hand but a dorm room of essentials: Textbooks, cleaning supplies, and framed photos of high school friends. By this measurement, they trump single parents, high school loners, and other groups that are stereotypically associated with loneliness.

It's rarely who you think it is.

Thankfully, BC is well equipped with a mental and physical health center, located in Mary



Robin Williams

Frances Stamey, the narrow building located between Dunham and Beam.

Dee Dasburg, a national certified counselor, holds her sessions in a modest, pristine office at the top of the stairs. "I have been in this profession for 21 years," said Dasburg. "It's not uncommon for students to seek counseling support when they're having thoughts of suicide or worried about a friend. Over the years I've known a number of students who have lost friends and family members to suicide."

Dasburg continued by citing a recent suicide that shook the town of Brevard to the core. Quinn Harris, son of Mayor Jimmy Harris, ended his life on March 9, 2014. He was 17-years-old. At his service, his father said, "If he had just waited 30 minutes or an hour that day, the feeling would have passed. But he didn't, and his family didn't know."

"Most people who feel suicidal don't really want to die; they just want to stop feeling how they feel," added Dasburg.

Williams' death discouraged many. He was the proverbial sad clown, the hero who was able to inspire hope in all but himself. But his death has spurred a remarkable social movement towards the recognition and the treatment of mental illness in a system where mental health care is stigmatized and often inaccessible. Hopefully, it will also serve as a reminder: depression is different than other medical conditions in that the sufferer ultimately controls the outcome. You can choose to live, even if life seems synonymous with the struggle. You win by living.