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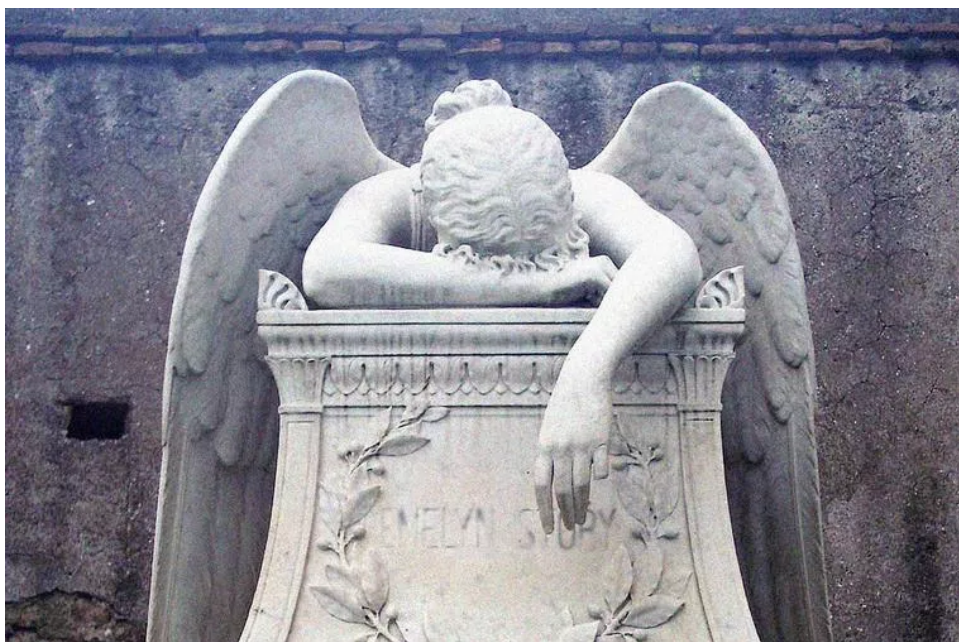
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## Why on Earth? A Psychiatrist, Philosopher, Comedian and Theologian Discuss Darkness, Suicide and Hope

All of human experience — including its most tragic elements — needs to be brought into the light so we can better understand that we are created in love, fallen in sin, and redeemed by an all-loving God.



'Angel of Grief,' sculpted in 1894 by William Wetmore Story, serves as the gravestone of the artist and his wife Emelyn at the Protestant Cemetery in Rome. (photo: LuciusCommons / Public Domain)

Margarita Mooney (https://www.ncregister.com/author/margarita-mooney) | Blogs (/section/blogs) | February 18, 2021

Why on earth would anyone agree to spend Valentine’s Day chatting with a psychiatrist, and existentialist philosopher, and a comedian about suicide?

Suicide rates in the United States have been going up at least since 1999. I was heartbroken when a student I mentored at Yale took her own life. The social isolation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has only made a bad situation worse. I was speechless when one of my best friends lost her husband to suicide in 2020.

When the organizers of the New York Encounter, an annual meeting sponsored by Communion and Liberation, the ecclesial movement started by the Italian priest, Father Luigi Giussani, asked me to moderate a panel on suicide (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h1uYtHkm-wQ), I agreed. The three panelists with whom I met on Feb. 14 were Aaron Kheriaty (https://www.firstthings.com/article/2017/08/dying-of-despair), professor of psychiatry at the University of California at Irvine School of Medicine, Mary Townsend

(<https://hedgehogreview.com/issues/the-post-modern-self/articles/the-walking-wounded>), assistant professor of philosophy at St. John's University in Queens, New York, and Jeremy McClellan (<https://catholicherald.co.uk/confession-is-no-substitute-for-therapy-or-vice-versa/>), an international stand-up comedian and recent convert to Catholicism.

I've written several scholarly papers focusing on moral agency of the mentally ill, the importance of narratives to heal from trauma, the reasons people give for turning to illegal drugs or alcohol to cope with mental illness, and how prayer and meditation can relieve some symptoms of mental illness. Like my own work that aims to integrate philosophy and theology with social sciences, each of the panelists brought his personal faith and theological insights to the discussion.

Before taking the stage at New York University's Sheen Center, I knelt down before the tabernacle in the chapel and asked God to guide me. Still nervous, I gulped down too many pieces of Valentine's Day chocolate and drank nearly double my normal daily caffeine load.

Then I grabbed the microphone and stepped out on stage wearing black pants, a white shirt and pointy red high heels. Staring into the stage lights, trusting there was a camera streaming my words, I welcomed the thousands of virtual participants to a painful yet crucial discussion on suicide.

Some of the questions we addressed included: How do we understand the interplay of various factors that cause mental illness? When and how can medicine and therapy help mental illness, and how can prayer and confession help us grow in the virtues that strengthen our will?

Can discussing the reality of rising rates of suicide with our friends, students and loved ones open up a basic existential question: Why did we come into being in the first place? If my life is imperfect, is there a perfect being out there? How can people of faith communicate hope to people plunged in darkness?

In many of our universities, even Christian ones, when a student commits suicide, there is virtually no forum to take seriously the very question: Why is it good that I exist as opposed to not existing? Pondering this question can be the beginning of a deep philosophical inquiry that can lead to hope in a perfect being who fulfills our deepest desires.

From a Catholic perspective, mental illness can never be purely understood as simply biological, nor as simply a spiritual struggle. We are a unity of mind, body and soul. As more people seek out psychiatric medications or therapy to help with mental illness, it's important to remember that Christian hope doesn't come in the form of a pill. Nor can a therapist heal our wounds from sin. Together, medicine, therapy and the sacraments can help us grow in the human and theological virtues we need to experience lasting happiness.

Suicide is not new to the human condition. But given its rise in the last two decades in the United States, it is almost inevitable that each of us will know someone who takes their life. One thing we all shared is that when say when someone you love loses someone to suicide, the most important thing is to be present. Death is not a problem to be analyzed and fixed.

The longer I live, the more I realize that loving and suffering, living and dying, are two sides of the same coin of being human. All of human experience — including its most tragic elements — needs to be brought into the light so we can better understand that we are created in love, fallen in sin, and redeemed by an all-loving God.

Talking about suicide makes me nervous, perhaps because there is no perfect answer to tragedy. But I can't use scholarly description, the eschaton or salvation as an excuse not to look at the darkness that penetrating so many hearts. For some people, our human brokenness is a sign that reality is ultimately chaotic. As a Catholic, I can share with anyone of any faith background, or no faith at all, my hope that despite human fallenness, the basis of all reality is God's merciful love.

The season of Lent, with its penitential practices of almsgiving, prayer and fasting, is a time of entering into the darkness so that the light of Christ can shine on those we encounter. We never know what darkness someone may be fighting, but we do know that we are called to share the hope we have that comes from certainty in the resurrection on Easter Sunday.

Keywords: suffering (<https://www.ncregister.com/tag/suffering>) suicide (<https://www.ncregister.com/tag/suicide>) grief (<https://www.ncregister.com/tag/grief>)



**Margarita Mooney (<https://www.ncregister.com/author/margarita-mooney>)**

Margarita Mooney received her Ph.D. in sociology from Princeton University. She is an associate professor at Princeton Theological Seminary. She teaches classes such as philosophy of social science, resilience and suffering, religion and social theory and intentional communities. In 2016, she started Scala Foundation, a nonprofit dedicated to reinvigorating classical liberal arts education. Her forthcoming book, *The Love of Learning: Seven Dialogues on the Liberal Arts*, examines the importance of friendship, beauty and the love of truth to all fields of knowledge.

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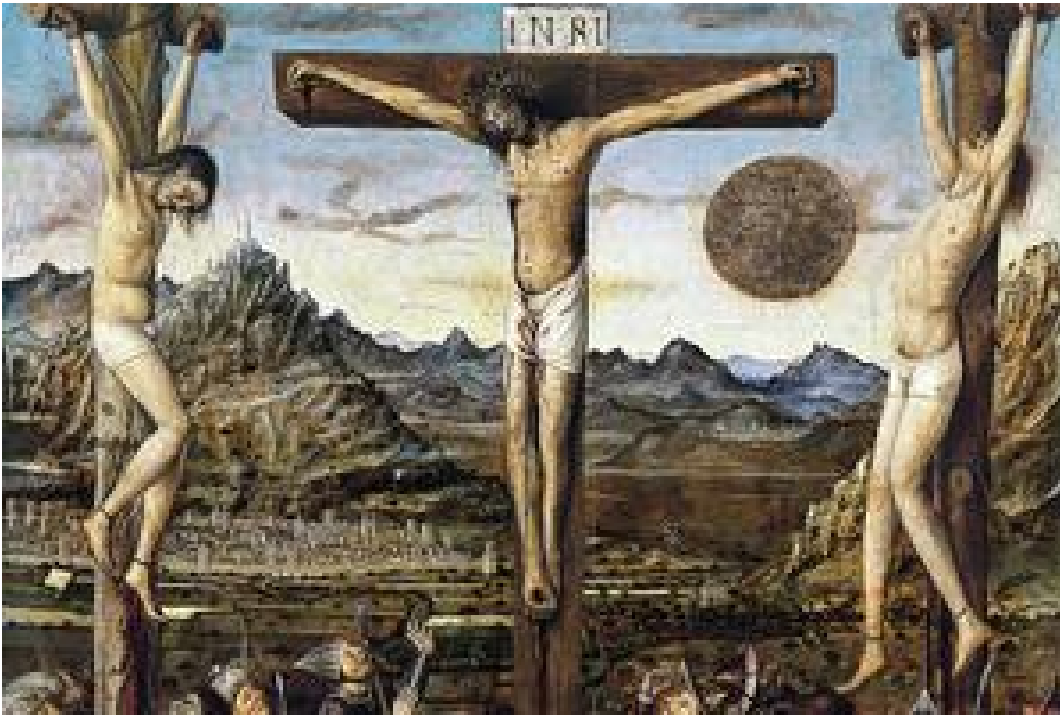


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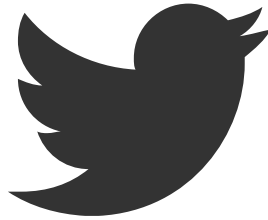
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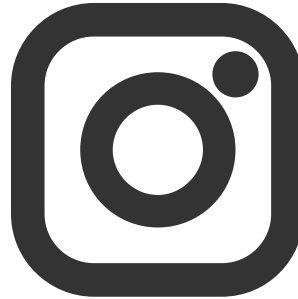
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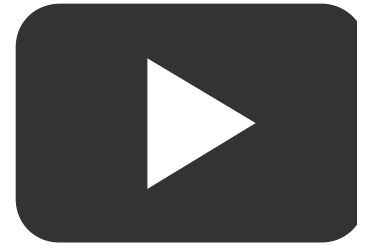
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