BOOKS: MENTAL HEALTH

So That Others Might Also Live

Leon Eisenberg

Night Falls Fast is an extraordinary book by an extraordinary person. Kay Jamison, a professor of psychiatry at Johns Hopkins University with an international reputation in the field of mental health, coauthored the standard text on bipolar (manic-depressive) disorder. Her impressive professional credentials may serve to guarantee her scholarship, but her academic distinction does not prepare the reader for the felicity of her literary style. Her lyric passages convey with remarkable immediacy and sympathy the inner life of human beings so despondent that taking their own lives seems the only way to end despair. Moving (and sometimes humorous) poems are interleaved throughout the book. Substantial sections are less poetic; lucid and straightforward, they convey essential facts and figures about suicide. But I know of no other book that tells us what we need to know—and all too often do not want to know—about a topic many prefer to avoid, while vividly recreating with such immediacy the world of those contemplating death.

Night Falls Fast
Understanding Suicide
by Kay Redfield Jamison
Knopf, New York, 1999. 446 pp. $26. ISBN 0-375-40145-8.

Jamison effectively describes the extent of the public health crisis that suicide represents. The crisis has recently been highlighted by David Satcher, the U.S. surgeon general (*1*). He notes that in 1996 (the most recent year with complete data), suicide resulted in nearly 31,000 deaths in the United States. It was the ninth leading cause of mortality, exceeding the numbers of homicides (around 20,000) by more than 50 percent. Even so, reported suicides substantially understate actual suicides. Families may implore physicians and coroners not to add to their grief by listing suicide as the cause of death. Many suicides are classified as "accidents" (one-car fatalities, falls from heights, overdoses) because no suicide note was found. Among adolescents and young adults, suicide rates have nearly tripled over the last 40 years; more of them now die from suicide than cancer, heart disease, AIDS, birth defects, stroke, pneumonia, influenza, and chronic lung disease combined. Rates of suicide increase with age and, in the United States, are highest among white males 65 and older.

What can be done to prevent suicides? Biological analyses and neurological imaging techniques being developed now may someday, Jamison hopes, allow us to identify potentially suicidal brains and provide a means of preventing suicidal actions. But in the meantime, as she notes, we could do far more than we do at present.

Public health data suggest that restricting access to deadly methods makes a difference. Suicide rates in England and Wales declined during the 1960s and 1970s when the carbon monoxide content of domestic gas was drastically reduced by switching its source from coal to natural gas. In the United States, suicides attributable to barbiturates decreased after major restrictions on the prescription of these drugs were imposed. Specific serotonin reuptake inhibitors are less toxic than tricyclic antidepressants and thus make suicide less likely. Firearms account for 59 percent of all deaths from suicide in the United States. Wintemute *et al.* (*2*), analyzing data from California, report that among women (but not men) who purchase handguns, suicide proved to be the leading cause of death within the following 12 months. Would such individuals have been less likely to commit suicide had they been unable to purchase a handgun? Or would they have simply chosen another method? No one knows for sure. Debate also continues over the effects of publicity given to suicides by prominent persons or by unusual methods. Media coverage results in increased suicide rates in the weeks following. But is there a real increase in the number of suicides? Or are these deaths that just "moved forward in time" and would have taken place later?

Detail from Edvard Munch's woodcut *Evening* (also known as *Melancholy*), 1896.

CREDIT: SCALA/ART RESOURCE, NY

Most suicide victims have communicated their intentions to kill themselves (to doctors, family, or friends) before doing so. This warning provides an opportunity for intervention, if the threat is taken seriously. Unfortunately, contact with mental health services does not ensure that the risk of suicide will be perceived. In a U.K. study, Appleby *et al.* (*3*) found that about one-quarter of all suicide victims had had contact with mental health services during the year before their death. Alcohol and drug abuse were common among these patients, and many had histories of previous attempts. Only for one in six victims was the risk perceived, although half had seen a professional in the week before death. Even when the risk was recognized, problems of communication among agencies sometimes led to failure to respond. Appleby *et al.* emphasize the importance of training in risk assessment for all mental health workers and the use of patient "passports" to carry information between services.

Above, I mentioned the author's academic credentials and her literary style. These are the primary reasons for the spectacular quality of her book. There is another reason: As Jamison makes clear at the beginning of *Night Falls Fast*, she suffers from bipolar disorder. At the age of 28, after a "particularly prolonged and violent siege of depression, [she] took a massive overdose of lithium." Jamison "unambivalently wanted to die and nearly did." Her experiences provide her a view from the inside to complement what others can only discover from the outside. But, just as suffering from heart disease does not make the sufferer a cardiologist, this perspective is a subsidiary qualification. It takes courage to acknowledge mental disorder and to risk having one's ideas dismissed as "symptoms" of illness.

Kay Jamison provides a sterling example of the possibilities for creativity and contribution by those who may be vulnerable to mental illness but check its many frustrations by using all means available to avert recurrence.

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In her epilogue, she movingly describes the aftermath of her own serious suicidal attempt. She concludes, "I do know...that I should have been dead but was not—and that I was fortunate enough to be given another chance at life, which many others were not." *Night Falls Fast* demonstrates that Kay Jamison is determined to offer that chance to others.

References

1. *The Surgeon General's Call to Action to Prevent Suicide* (U.S. Public Health Service, Washington, DC, 1999); www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/calltoaction/calltoaction.htm
2. G. J. Wintemute *et al.*, *N. Engl. J. Med.* **341**,1583 (1999).
3. L. Appleby *et al.*, *Br. Med. J.* **318**, 1235 (1999).

BOOKS: LAND USE

Paying for Disasters

Roger A. Pielke Jr.

Imagine that you live in a country where police officers give out crisp $100 bills to drivers caught exceeding the speed limit. This country's Automobile Insurance Administration offers subsidized insurance rates, which will not increase regardless of how many accidents you've had. And if you chose not to have insurance, you are still in luck: the (separate) Department of Automobiles promises to help you buy a new car, whether or not your wrecked car was insured. But the department's Office of Driving Safety has a conflicting agenda: it has been mandated to halve the governmental costs of auto accidents within five years through educating people about the risks of fast driving. Although no agency tracks how many accidents occur, nevermind the associated costs, one is charged with conducting a vigorous program of research that strives to understand why the rate of automobile accidents is growing and what sorts of policy changes might be implemented to reduce it. Groups participating in debates over accident policies include the "Right to Drive Fast" political action committee, a public that increasingly feels entitled to car accident benefits, and politicians who not too subtlely encourage voter sentiment by emphasizing their support of the $100 reward for speeding and the automobile-replacement subsidy.

What sort of bizarre imaginary world is this? Perhaps it is a lost creation of Lewis Carroll or Joseph Heller? No, it characterizes Rutherford Platt's depiction of the real-world structure of disaster policy in the United States in *Disasters and Democracy*. In this erudite and eye-opening book, Platt (professor of geography and planning law at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst) and his collaborators (colleagues and former students) address the question: "To what extent does the likelihood of general federal assistance serve to diminish the natural caution that individuals, communities, and businesses might otherwise exercise in adjusting to natural hazards?"

Disasters and Democracy
The Politics of Extreme Natural Events
by Rutherford Platt et al.
Island Press, Washington, DC, 1999. 343 pp. Paper, $35. ISBN 1-55963-696-3.

In their quest to answer this question, the authors discuss three informative case studies: coastal erosion at Fire Island, New York; the 1993 flood in St. Charles County, Missouri; and earthquakes and fires in the San Francisco Bay area. They demonstrate that federal disaster policy in toto—strategies, laws, agencies, and programs combined in "a legal edifice of byzantine complexity"—is deeply flawed and amounts to "driving with the brakes on." Disasters offer plentiful benefits for many. Federal agencies gain unexpected funds through supplemental appropriations and can hire additional staff and contractors. Politicians find enhanced reelection prospects. And, as Platt notes, even he and other academic researchers "benefit by way of government grants." It does not seem unwarranted to label such generous federal assistance the "nouveau pork" or "almost perfect political currency."

The authors laud efforts by the Federal Emergency Management Agency to shift the perspective on disasters. Formerly, the federal government simply reacted by aiding the recovery from the effects of extreme natural events. More recently, proactive steps have been taken to encourage states, local communities, and the private sector to anticipate and avoid disaster losses. But these positive steps are lost in a schizophrenic policy environment. As the authors comment in their discussion of Fire Island, the federal government is the most important source of disaster assistance and the principal champion of hazard mitigation. At the same time, a variety of federal incentives, subsidies, and ad hoc projects lead—whether intended or not—to increased building and rebuilding in hazardous coastal areas.

The book neglects the possibility that federal disaster policy is just another example of the "luxuries" of inefficiency made affordable by the fabulous wealth of the United States. (Perhaps disaster policy is in a class with subsidies to extractive industries, entitlements to the middle class, and protectionist trade policies.) And no matter how the losses are tallied, disasters in the United States are small—even trivial—compared to those experienced in most countries around the world. But this argument simply highlights the fact that disasters will always have greater impacts at the local, rather than national, level. Thus it reinforces the authors' recommendations to diminish the federal role in disaster subsidies.

As Platt and his collaborators observe, "The issue is not whether federal assistance is fundamentally inappropriate, but rather when it should be provided, of what type and magnitude, and at whose cost." *Disasters and Democracy* provides compelling evidence that the answers to these questions lie in reducing the federal role and increasing local and individual responsibility and control—a stance sure to be unpopular with politicians, federal agencies, and the general public.

CREDIT: JOAN MYERS/FROM *SALT DREAMS*

BROWSINGS

Salt Dreams. Land and Water in Low-Down California. *William deBuys, with photographs by Joan Myers.* University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, NM, 1999. 337 pp. $35. ISBN 0-8263-2126-7.

California's Salton Sea was formed by accident when the 1905–1907 floods of the Colorado River flowed through poorly constructed irrigation works. As deBuys relates, its subsequent history has also been dominated by unintended consequences. The region's aridity and agricultural exploitation of the adjacent Colorado Desert have led to an environmentally troubled sea—and to intense debates over how, or whether, to save it. The author's narrative highlights the stories of people who have dwelled in this stark, transformed landscape. Myers' photographs were chosen "to illuminate past events with contemporary images."

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