

A Contribution to the Psychology of Suicide

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RALPH, aged thirty-eight years, committed suicide by taking an overdose of morphine.

Ralph was descended from a rich family. His father was the owner and manager of an old established manufacturing business well known throughout Germany. His mother was a very intelligent woman of a still richer family. Ralph was tall and appealing, but in his youth was considered as a problem child. He was put up at boarding schools from time to time. His parents were orthodox religious. His father was an autocrat, and as the head of an orthodox-Jewish family took a commanding attitude towards his wife and children.

Early in childhood Ralph moved to and fro between two poles. On the one side was the austere father who looked after his children strictly as to education and discipline; on the other side, the tenderhearted mother with whom the child sought and always found protection against the stern father. Whenever Ralph's father objected to him in any way—and as Ralph told me, his father was always finding fault with him—his mother felt impelled to compensate for these naggings by appeasing the child or by presenting him with small gifts, and the like. These educational methods, severity on the one hand and pampering on the other, intensified Ralph's feeling of inferiority to a considerable extent and shook his poise incessantly. Thus the parents of a boy, who was luckily not affected with any bodily infirmities, laid a twofold foundation for a neurosis which ended fatally in a suicide.

Let us examine the ways in which Ralph tried to solve the three great tasks of life: the occupational, the sexual, and the social problems, or, more correctly, how he failed to do so.

1. Work. Ralph had completed his high school work, and afterwards acquired knowledge in many sciences without preparing himself for any specific profession. He merely experimented in this regard. For a time he attended a school for actors; for a time he took an active part in politics. These very kinds of endeavor offer us the first insight into his private life plan. He was not satisfied with being an "average man," but rather determined to become a "star." As he could not succeed in the dramatic art, he made a try in politics. Here it is worth noting that Ralph joined a radical faction after the war, such political activity possibly involving a revolt against the austere

method of upbringing applied to himself by his capitalistic father. For he was at last enabled to oppose his father's authority, though guardedly, since for reasons of expediency he could not openly resist his father as long as he lived in his parent's house.

Ralph's father, seeing his son had failed in both experiments of professional activity, founded a branch of his factory in Switzerland to be carried on by Ralph, together with an experienced business man as his partner. Ralph's way of working was typically neurotic. He started working with a lot of energy but soon lost his drive and slackened more and more. This manner of working originates in a sense of weakness. For he who feels himself to be a match for his task need not try to solve it impetuously, but works with an even temper, calmly and continuously, up to a good end. Persons, however, who are oppressed by an inferiority complex, being aware of their weak points, approach the tasks of daily life with great effort and are soon disposed to throw up the sponge when they meet with resistance. It may be interesting to note that Ralph liked to post letters a moment before the mails were closed, and to catch trains at the very last moment. He enjoyed having come precariously in time, and thus celebrated imaginary triumphs.

2. Love, Marriage. Ralph's inferiority complex was evident in his relations with women. Though he was an engaging man, well educated and refined, he did not believe he could really be loved by any woman. Whenever he was shown tenderness by a woman, he suspected this to be the woman's wish for some material advantage or to be dictated by other egoistic purposes on her part. He was not willingly disposed to admit this suspicion to himself, however.

Ralph was married, and left behind a son of his own, ten years of age. He did not fall in love with an unmarried woman, as is usual for a young man, but fell in love with a married woman of his own age, and by completely alienating her from her husband, he eventually won her love, and married her. He thus appeared to himself to be a conqueror and could laugh up his sleeve in view of his virile superiority over her first husband. Later he was on good terms with his wife's former husband, who used to visit Ralph's home from time to time to see his own child whose custody had been given to the mother.

Until the time of his marriage, Ralph had had sexual intercourse mostly with fashionable prostitutes, but afterwards too, he sometimes spent his spare time with such girls. For, owing to his erroneous feeling of weakness, he felt the need for degrading his sexual partner as much as possible. It was with scaleable girls only that he could gratify his craving for superiority: such girls did not resist him in any way. He could imagine himself to be in a superior role, as in his opinion the partners were not

comparable at all. The frequent repetition of these contacts and the gay choice of the sexual partners demonstrated to him again and again the full value of his virility.

Ralph's wife was a person who might be evaluated as an average wife and mother. As long as she looked up to her husband, he felt all right with her, attaching great value to the accentuation of his superiority. As he was anxious to appear absolutely perfect in her eyes, it was important that she should not discover any weak points in him.

3. Problem of Community. Ralph adopted various attitudes towards his fellow men, according to whether they were superior or inferior to himself in rank and honor in society. Toward the former he applied himself to a conduct quite faultless and unobjectionable. In a certain measure he pulled himself together in order to take effect. To be sure, he aspired but little for intercourse with people on a par with or higher than himself, because with this class of people he was unable to obtain always his much desired feeling of superiority. He liked, rather, to have social intercourse with people who were in some condition of dependency upon him; this was mostly an economic one. It always gave him great pleasure to be called "Sir" by these people. Ralph, like all neurotics, felt most comfortable in his own small domestic circle. There, all forms of criticism were quite eliminated (as, for example, with his mother); if there were some resistance, it was slight and easily overcome. There Ralph could realize his vantage ground, since the competition was a protective one.

Ralph was at heart a good natured man who had sympathy with the failures of his fellow men, perhaps because he thought himself to be weak in many points. He liked to distribute small presents, tips and the like, abundantly, thus enjoying some kind of a preponderance.

But how far his social feeling in the proper sense was impaired may be judged from the wish he sometimes expressed: to live locked up in some establishment. Explaining he would add: "In such an asylum, you are relieved of all troubles." We may assume he meant the tasks of life; for having plenty of money at that time, he did not worry about necessities. We see that this world was no longer his: that in an ominous way the process of his isolation was looming large; he was potentially suicidal.

Ralph's tendency to depreciate other people was great. Since the struggle in him, as we know, was to gain personal superiority, when he could not succeed in surpassing others by achievements, it was necessary that they should be belittled.

On one occasion, Ralph commented to the writer, as follows: "A prominent physician some years ago was treating me for a long time, but he had finally to declare that his life would not

last until he could succeed in curing my nerves." I regard this remark as the most serious blunder a physician could make with a patient such as Ralph. Looking backward, I believe this doctor's **factum** became his patient's **fatum**, and especially since our unfortunate friend in his last will wished his suicide to be regarded as his "fate!" For, as the objectionable remark came from high authority, Ralph, discouraged as he was, obtained a legitimation for his neurosis; that is to say, now he had succeeded in shifting the responsibility for his neurotic doings.

From this moment forward, his discouragement, which was but the result of an erroneous inferiority feeling, irresistibly led to the negation of life and to his tragic end.

Ralph had a particular interest in poisons. As far as I know he always had some on hand. Maybe he had been pondering for years on the thought of escape by suicide from all the personal difficulties and handicaps in life. To get rid of the vexing inferiority complex by one simple act! But playing with the poisons gave him, besides, a peculiar delight, that of having a means at hand by which he, like God, could dispose of life and death!

In the last two years Ralph had to struggle to earn sufficient funds to maintain himself in his accustomed way. But not having received the proper training in his youth to enable him to overcome difficulties, he did not have the self confidence necessary to get through them. His paternal inheritance had melted away in consequence of the inflation and the economic crisis in Germany following the war. Spoiled in childhood by the warmth of his mother and the wealth of his father, Ralph had now to find his way in the raw climate of life, and he proved to be unequal to the struggle for life! He did not venture to run the risk of professional failures, hence financial difficulties were added to the psychic ones. He grew more and more discouraged, since he could no longer keep up appearances and satisfy his exaggerated aspiration for personal influence by spending money abundantly as he had done formerly. He therefore determined on escaping from life with its many frustrations and deprivations which he could not tolerate. "For weeks I was facing death," he wrote in a farewell letter to his wife. We see in this message, first of all, a hero's pose, proving that suicide, too, may serve as a fictitious exaltation of one's self-esteem. For there are few persons indeed who are able to say they have lived on the edge of death for weeks on end!

Ralph made the preparations for his death with special care. To all those who were near to him, kith and kin, he wrote some dear lines in farewell. In his last hour, too, he wished to leave behind a good impression. His caution in taking an absolutely effective dose of morphine corresponds altogether with his life

style; for had he survived the poison he would have considered such a survival as a personal defeat. Those who know Ralph's attitude towards his relatives and some of his well-to-do friends may agree with me that some thirst for revenge on those who had failed to support him plentifully also influenced his resolution to escape life. Somehow he imagined that they ought to feel obliged to support him; and believing that his death would raise in them some feeling of guilt, he afflicted them with a grief. This form of revenge may have produced in our unhappy friend the sensation of a last triumph. Satisfied that his tragic end would be, for a time at least, paramount in the minds of all those with whom he thought he had lost prestige because of his destitution, he indulged again and for the last time the ideal of his imaginary personal superiority.

Ralph in his testament said, to begin with, that he had resolved to put an end to his life because he could not adapt himself to the community as he ought to do, giving utterance to his attitude towards the world around him in the following significant words: "The world is too good for me - I am too good for the world! In the long run I could not bear fluctuating between these two poles." With these words Ralph disclosed to us his basic psychological mechanism - two levers, i.e., Feeling of Inferiority on the one hand and Want of Prestige on the other, both of which in their interaction display the figure of the discouraged neurotic person moving to and fro between two poles. For in its first constituent part: "The world is too good for me," his formula reveals nothing but the sense of weakness, while in its second component part, "I am too good for the world," it expresses the striving for superiority, a feeling well known to us as a counter balance devised to compensate for the inferiority complex. We are not surprised at Ralph's confession given to us in his last hour, since we saw him starting to swing between two poles in early childhood: on the one side the father, a hard man with a strong sense of duty who kept the child under pressure by strict advice and fault finding, and on the other side the pampering mother with whom the child could satisfy his need for love, his desire to be found equal or superior to other children.

Again in his testament, Ralph emphasized a balance of a small sum of money to his credit, from commissions earned in the last months as an agent with an insurance company. Considering that Ralph had been accustomed in his life to calculate with far higher amounts and even in times of pecuniary trouble could defray his subsistence with bigger sums, we might make psychological use of his laying abnormal stress on such a minor money-making. That is to say, his activity with that insurance company was his last experiment in solving the problem of work. By pointing out the balance in question he wanted to prove to his

friends who had helped him in getting the job that he knew very well how to earn his livelihood. Although in his last will he added, "I never perceived any shame in not being able to earn money," he yet reveals another aspect to his inferiority complex, which in many men has its origin in the lack of ability to get on as a breadwinner. Such persons feel themselves to be somehow slighted because of this imperfection in themselves. Besides, by the remark in question, Ralph wanted to deny the supposition that his suicide was conditioned by financial needs and hence similar to usual cases of suicide. Like all his doings in life, his suicide, too, must contrast somehow with actions of the same kind in others.

In conclusion I would like to state that the physician's error was in losing sight of the fact that encouragement is one of the principal aims of psychology. To treat individual-psychologically means not only to make the patient aware of some psychic connections, but more, to disclose to him his secret faulty life plan and to stimulate in him an active optimism. For the therapeutics of Individual Psychology aim at the remodeling, that is, the educating of the patient to objectivity by eliminating the aims of personal superiority. The extravagant expectations and claims to life standards are traced back to the proper limit; the ability of social contact is elevated to the right standard - a sense of real fellowship. The Individual Psychologist brings home to the patient the groundless disturbances in his self-reliance and reveals to him that his endeavors for compensation have failed because he aimed violently or even morbidly at prestige.

REVIEWS

An experiment in the treatment of promiscuous girls, by Lion, E. G., Jambor, H. M., Corrigan, H. G., & Bradway, K. P. San Francisco: City & County of San Francisco Department of Public Health, 1945, P. 68.

This is a study of 365 promiscuous girls and women of 20 years average age, who, generally, had been referred routinely by a venereal disease clinic to the psychiatric service which operated in conjunction with the clinic. Included in the group were an unstated number of single women who had engaged in sexual relations with one man more than twice during the preceding six months. Uncontrolled interviews were used for securing data and for treatment. Frequent background factors were: broken homes; unstable inter-personal relationships; uneven physical, intellectual, emotional and social maturation; and general neurotic tendencies. Motivational factors of 239 patients were classified as follows: affectional group (not more than two partners) 12%; episodic group (out of spite, to overcome loneliness, etc) 24%; dependent group (lacking self-sufficiency and mature judg-