

## The Ultimate Termination: A Dialogue

*Whenever therapy ends with the death of a client by suicide, the story continues until everyone involved with the client has achieved some level of understanding and acceptance. Never before or since have I had a client who decided to end his life (and therapy) in such a violent way, with such finality. Two weeks passed before I was able to get beyond my own denial, to begin to deal with this event. I had to find some way to ask the question for which there is no answer. What better way than to have the client come in for a follow-up session, to conduct a dialogue? My conversation with Henry clearly delineated the fine line between denial and acceptance. Understanding is something with which I still struggle.*

### By Danny R. Dixon

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### PROLOGUE

During my doctoral internship at a rural Department of Veterans Affairs medical center, I worked with Vietnam veterans who came to the VA for outpatient psychotherapy. What follows is the story of an event that occurred in one of those cases, and my reaction to that event. It was not difficult to put into words, but like many critical aspects of a person's life, you had to be there to get the full message.

Henry and I developed a close therapeutic relationship over the three months we worked together. He brought pictures into the sessions, as well as his combat medals from Vietnam. He also brought more baggage than most, more heart, and more pain. Looking back, I now realize we became fellow soldiers, fighting one battle after another, as he had done all his life. The event is told much as it happened. The dialogue is my own creation, my way of dealing with the pain, the disappointment, the shock. Any therapist who has ever been through this experience knows that there must be closure, there must be some gain from the loss. This is

necessary, if one is to continue in this line of work.

For me, this was also a way of learning from an unforgettable experience. There was no choice. I had to write this.

### THE EVENT

President's Day was just another Monday, a holiday like many others. The banks were closed, and certainly all the federal offices. Of course, the grocery stores were open all the time now, which was not the case when Henry was a young man, growing up in the small south Georgia town.

For some reason, the grocery store was on his mind. Yes, that was probably the best way. When the answer came to him, there was instant realization. He knew.

Henry was a large man, weighing over 400 pounds. He had always been large, but not quite this heavy. Whenever anyone wanted to pick a fight in the local bar, Henry always rose to the occasion, and was always the victor. He was proud of this feat, primarily because of the respect that seemed to follow each victory.



But that had been over four years ago. Respect was something that was lacking in his life, something that seemed in the far distant past. He thought he would be respected for going to war, but things hadn't turned out that way. When he lost his job as supervisor of a machine plant, the first real depression began. Henry told how he had quit the job, but his wife knew the truth. The job quit him, basically. He wasn't needed anymore since he had gained so much weight that he could no longer move among the equipment with ease. It was inconvenient to have a supervisor who was the butt of so many jokes, most of which were in bad taste.

Life had not been overly kind to Henry in the last few years. Oddly enough, things had gotten worse after he quit drinking. First his health began to fail. The doctors all said the same thing, that he had to eat the right foods and to exercise. The panic attacks had started to worsen after he lost his job. When the nightmares and flashbacks became so intense and frequent that he sought the help of a psychiatrist, he finally learned that the other problems were not as unusual as he had suspected, and that others were experiencing some of the same symptoms. He learned about a problem called post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Another problem.

Last week he received notification from the Internal Revenue Service that he owed \$4,000, and Henry knew he only had \$7,000 in the bank. Nothing was going right. All the therapy and medication in the world couldn't help. He'd tried all that, and still saw no hope that anything in his life would improve. He was miserable. He

was not good. So he wanted to sleep, but he was afraid to sleep. Talk about frustration.

I had been surprised when he seemed almost happy in a recent session. That's because the therapist didn't know what Henry knew. Nobody did. Henry was thinking about how his father had died, 13 years ago, and the anniversary of his father's death was just a few days away. Henry had made a decision, and it had been easy. The relief had been immediate. He was still depressed, and life had nothing for him. The despair was still overwhelming. But somehow, making that decision, knowing what had to be done, and knowing with certainty that it would be done, made things right.

So, on President's Day, the thirteenth anniversary of his father's death, when Henry's wife said she was going to the grocery store, everything fell into place. She asked if he needed anything, and Henry asked her to bring him two cans of fruit cocktail, the low calorie kind, for people who need to watch their weight. And he told her to take the money from his wallet. His wife said she had the money, and went to the front of the house to get her purse.

Henry went to his bedroom and opened the closet door. The shotgun was already loaded, the note prepared. There was no reason to fool around any longer. He sat on the edge of the bed and looked around in time to see the digital clock register five o'clock in the afternoon. The shotgun felt cool in his hands, and the stock seemed like velvet as he turned it and placed the end of the barrel in his mouth. He sighed. He felt a tear begin to run down one cheek.

His wife heard the blast and knew instantly. Her life had just changed, and her husband had just died.

## THE INVITATION

This was my first. Never have I had a client who decided to end his life (and therapy) in such a violent way, with such finality. Oddly enough, this has occurred during a time in my



couldn't sleep. He could definitely eat, but sleep was another story. As if that wasn't bad enough, when he did get to sleep, he would dream. That



doctoral education when I am taking a course in professional ethics, in which client suicide is one of many topics. Using this event as an opportunity to learn (and to bring closure), I hope to extract something positive from this experience.

For two weeks after the suicide, I did not look at this client's file, which included notes from our sessions. I realize now that I *could* not. However, one month has now passed, and the psychological autopsy was completed this past week. I have talked with the patient's wife, with other mental health professionals from several disciplines, and with other people whose opinions I value. It would seem I have spoken with everyone except the one person who could answer all my questions. I have not spoken with Henry. I have extended an invitation for this purpose, and I see Henry coming down the hall, with his by now familiar walking cane. His eyes seem different. He shakes my hand. We enter the office and take our seats.



ever hurt you again? I don't have to take medications anymore. I don't have to worry about my weight. I don't have nightmares or flashbacks. Hell, I'm not even depressed! I could take that damned depression inventory you gave me and my depression wouldn't even register! So you see, while I didn't get better by coming here for treatment, my own personal method of treatment worked...it provided fast relief. I just don't hurt anymore."

"But you are dead!"

"It beats the hell out of the kind of life I was living! I told you I had no fear of death. You remember that, don't you? Hell, the biggest fear I had was a fear of life. When I made my mind up..."

"When was that, Henry?"

"When I came in to see you before Christmas, when you said I seemed happier, I was smiling and talking. I knew then what I was going to do. I just didn't know when."

"Why didn't you say something? Why didn't you give me some indication that things had gotten that bad? Why didn't you give us a chance to help you through this?"

"Because if I had done that, you know what would have happened, don't you? You and everybody else here would have tried to stop me. And you probably would have, at least that time. But when I made my mind up to end it all, that was it. Remember how I used to whip all those guys in the bar, when I was younger and stronger? I would win every time. Well, I haven't won in a long time, and this time I decided I would call the shots. I would win, so I played by my rules, not yours. See, you want to do 'the right thing;' you want to do what is right from your own ethical standpoint. If you just read your books, you'll find some of the answers there, like the fact that moral arguments don't mean much to someone who has decided to do away with himself."

"Henry, I won't waste your time with moral arguments, since you've already decided they don't interest you. And I certainly don't pretend to know whether your action was right or wrong. But let me ask you some questions about ethics anyway. For example, do you think you had a right to destroy yourself?"

### CONVERSATION WITH HENRY

Instead of caving in to the perfectly understandable desire to rush ahead and ask the question for which there is no answer, I just sit there, waiting, fascinated, not quite sure what to do or say. Then I remember what Henry said in our first session: "I like for you to ask the questions, and I'll provide the answers." I take a deep breath, and begin.

"Henry, I didn't know. Maybe I should have. If I had suspected something like this was at hand, I would have done everything in my power to stop you from doing this. I have asked myself so many questions, some of the same questions your wife is probably asking. These are questions I thought I would like to ask of you, but now that you are here..."

Instead of trying to follow my somewhat convoluted line of thought, Henry surprised me: "Can you imagine what it feels like to solve all your problems at once, to know that nothing will



Henry was quiet for a minute or so. The eyes were more intense than before, but there was still something there that I couldn't grasp, something that seemed important, something I should recognize. He said he was no longer depressed, but when he spoke, there was a hint of sadness, similar to the old Henry, yet different in some unfathomable detail. "What does it matter? I made the decision, and I think I had the right to do what I did. It wasn't a decision to die; it was a decision to no longer live."

"What's the difference?"

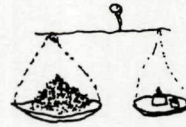
"I'm not sure I want to answer that. I'm not sure you want to know. But I guess there's a reason I'm here, and maybe this is part of it. A decision to die is a thing of beauty, an act of courage. When I was in Vietnam, I saw people who made that decision. I know it sounds trite, but I actually saw one man throw himself on top of a hand grenade because he knew it would kill and maim several of his buddies. He made a decision to die. In that instant, he became a hero. There was a certain bravery. What he did took guts. What I did was different, but still right. I wasn't a hero, and I didn't save anybody. It didn't take courage or bravery. You want to talk about ethics, so think back to the fellow who jumped on the grenade. Was his choice rational, or impulsive? I mean, did he take the time to consider all the consequences of his action and then come to a rational decision, or was his action just an impulsive response? You can't know one way or the other, can you? And you know what else? It doesn't matter, does it? Not because there was a reason necessarily, but because of the consequence! There was a payoff for other people. There was something good that came out of this. Do you see what I mean?"

"Henry, I understand that. But what about you? What about what you did? You say it was right, but what possible good could come from this act?"

"You're the one studying ethics. You should know the answer to that question. 'Good' is a relative term. There are different types of 'good.' What about quality of life? My life was not good and certainly no longer meaningful to me. The good that resulted from my act, from my suicide, was the end of something bad!"

Well, at least I wasn't the only one using convoluted logic. "Henry, we aren't talking just about relativity or typology, we must also discuss degree! And we must consider balance! Was your suicide, the act itself, better than the alternative of living longer and continuing to try to find answers, solutions? You say the good that resulted from your suicide was the end of something that was bad. And I will give you that, there is undeniably both good and bad in this equation. Look at it from my angle for a minute. If I agree that the end of something bad, for you, is good, what effect does this have on your wife, your daughters? Is that not bad? By the very act of ending your life in such an abrupt and

unpredictable manner, didn't this result in tremendous harm for those who were closest to you? How do you balance this harm against the relief you bought for



yourself?"

"There you go again! If I didn't know better, I'd swear that you were trying to convince me that what I did was wrong! Sure, they will miss me for a while, and they will cry for me. But I was a burden to them. I know that in the long run they will be better off without me, and they won't have to waste all that effort trying to make sure I get my needs met. And don't you think for one minute that I didn't lose sleep wondering what they would think, what they would feel. But I am telling you, this act was not about them, it was about me. I didn't kill myself to meet the needs of someone else, or to extract revenge upon anyone else. I did it for me! If it affects other people, whoever, that's not my problem. I bought relief! And I just don't give a damn..."

"What? What is it you don't give a damn about, Henry?"

Henry had a strange feeling, like he had been here before. He even felt the tear begin to run down his cheek. The sadness he thought he had escaped, he had taken with him. And I began to see part of what I had missed earlier. I was beginning to recognize what was familiar, and to



tease out what was different, in Henry's eyes. He was right in saying that he didn't feel the same depression. That part was easy to see. No one outside his family could ever hurt him again. They couldn't even disappoint him again. But there was something familiar about the sadness. Henry knew. Henry understood more about self-determination than most people ever would. He understood autonomy. He knew he was free to make decisions and carry them out. But he knew something else. He realized there was a price to pay, either way. And he knew that I knew.

"There is a price to pay, either way. I stay alive, I continue to hurt. I die, someone else feels the pain. Those were the two choices. I decided I had hurt long enough." He looked directly into my eyes for a minute or two, and I knew what was coming next. "Have you ever hurt that badly? Have you ever considered taking your own life, destroying yourself?"

There's not much sense in lying to a dead man. "Henry... Yes. I doubt if there is anyone alive who hasn't considered suicide as an option at one time or another. I have, you obviously have, and I suspect every man, deep in the innermost private recesses of his heart, has told himself that this would relieve all the pressure, take away all the pain. But I also suspect there is no taking away all the pain. I would go so far as to say that taking away

all the pain would not necessarily be a good thing. There is a reason for pain. And I'm not saying that what you did is a sin, or a cowardly act. However, I would not be worth my salt as a therapist if I didn't tell you that I personally think that what you did was wrong. I know I said earlier that I didn't know whether it was right or wrong. But I do know what I think personally, and I think it was wrong because you had other options. Of course, you decided not to consider the other options any longer. I guess I have to respect that, but I don't like it."

"No one asked you what you liked! And I don't want to hear about options. I opted to end the pain, the misery. And while you are at it, what about considering my option to end treatment, to refuse treatment? I opted for that, too, and

there is nothing anyone can do about it. See, I'm not terribly concerned about the effects this had on my family, and I am definitely not concerned about the effects it has had on you. Besides, I know you. You are a young man, relatively speaking, and being a perpetual student, you will seek out the good that can be redeemed from this case. You will learn something from it. You will know what to ask next time, and what to look for. You knew those things already, but the next time someone mentions suicide, or a plan, you won't let it pass as easily. You will lock onto their statements, and they'll have more trouble trying to make you let go than a one-armed man trying to get a piece of tape off his hand. You knew there was a chance I would kill myself. But you didn't have enough evidence to try to put me in the hospital, did you? You believe in the least restrictive environment. That puts the responsibility right where it belongs, as far as I'm concerned. The responsibility was mine. I am responsible. Or, I was..."

That struck a nerve. I've read all the material about whether a person who commits suicide is really in his right mind, really mentally competent, capable of making this kind of decision. And the issue of whether the rights of the individual are violated if a therapist intervenes to protect the patient from death at his own hand. Somehow I think such a paternalistic act would have only strengthened Henry's determination, his resolve. Still, he definitely

seemed to know where this was headed. So I had nothing to lose.

"Henry, any talk of responsibility at this point is probably moot. I guess you are aware that we conducted what is known as a psychological autopsy this week. The question to be answered in that session was whether there was something we should have said or done, something that would have prevented your suicide. Of course, there is another unspoken question that assumes importance in this kind of meeting: 'Is anyone to blame?' And of course, no one was found guilty. The conclusion was that since there did not seem to be reason to suspect imminent death (in other words, intent was not

### **'IS ANYONE TO BLAME?'**



apparent), your act of suicide would have surprised anyone. But I still have to answer a question in my mind, one that bothers me. I have to ask myself where my responsibility as a therapist ends..."

"Let me answer that. First, let me remind you that I am the only person who can answer that, and I think I already have. I could have told you what I planned to do. I could have called you on the phone, and you would have had time to try to figure out a way to stop me. But, you see, if I had done that, I would have been giving the responsibility back to you. That would not have been the right thing to do, not in my situation. I've given up too much responsibility in the past, and I'm tired of doing that. That takes away my sense of being in control. And you know how important that is to me, don't you? No one else was in control when I put that shotgun in my mouth. I made the decision, I called the shots (so to speak), and I paid the price. You have a responsibility to your other clients, the ones who are still around. But they have many of the same options I did. You need to remember that. They have to choose their options. And if they decide to commit suicide, if they really decide, you won't be able to stop them. You don't have the responsibility to make that decision for them. You don't even have the right. If you see it coming, you do have a responsibility to make them aware of other options. But the choice is theirs. That's between them and God. You're not God. You're good, but you're not God. Remember that."

I knew our time was up. It seemed odd that this didn't make me sad. Actually, there was a sense of relief, of letting go. I looked at my former patient, who was leaning forward with both hands on his cane, the walking cane that had belonged to his father. "Henry, I appreciate your patience with me. I'll never forget what you've taught me. I guess some lessons are easier than others, and some have higher prices. I only have one more question. Why fruit cocktail?"

For the first time ever, I witnessed something that will be with me always. Henry, who never exhibited signs of joy or pleasure, threw back his head and laughed, with that deep-throated bellow that can only come from someone of his size. He was still laughing as he walked

off down the hall. I'll never forget the sound of his laughter.

I sat there for a few minutes, unable to stand, not wanting to move on to the next mundane activity. Of course, life must go on. Finally, I rose, walked to the office door, and reached for the doorknob. I stopped. My heart stopped, my breathing stopped. There in the corner stood the familiar walking cane.

## EPILOGUE

Clearly, the dialogue you've just read never took place. There are times when I wish it had. What did I hope to gain by writing this? Processing the event in writing has always been enlightening, providing insights I would most likely have missed had I not gone to the trouble to get it all on paper, to look at it that closely. The dialogue explains much of what I wanted to accomplish, much of what I sought.

The psychological autopsy was interesting and revealing. I now understand why it's referred to as an autopsy. Much like an actual physical autopsy, the patient is figuratively opened and evidence is examined to answer questions about his life and how he came to this place. This is all part of the effort to understand what actually caused his death. I am content with the findings.

I spoke with others (social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists) as much for their feedback and support as for help in understanding what had happened. By talking with them, I developed a clearer picture in my own mind of how the event unfolded, but not until I wrote the dialogue did I begin to feel some actual relief, and again, a sense of closure. I understand that this happened because Henry made a decision, a deeply personal and secret decision, shared with no one. That is the difference between a suicide and a suicide attempt.

For me, this is a catharsis, a cleansing. I only hope that another practitioner will read it and take it to heart. The family is allowed, even encouraged, to grieve. Therapists must also express their emotions in some way, instead of keeping secrets. As Henry and I both discovered, secrets can kill. ☐

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