

# Slow Suicide and the Abandonment of the World

By [Edward Curtin](#)

Theme: [History](#)

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*“The condition of alienation, of being asleep, of being unconscious, of being out of one’s mind, is the condition of the normal man. Society highly values its normal man. It educates children to lose themselves and to become absurd, and thus to be normal. Normal men have killed perhaps 100,000,000 of their fellow normal men in the last fifty years. Our behavior is a function of our experience. We act the way we see things. If our experience is destroyed, our behavior will be destructive. If our experience is destroyed, we have lost our own selves.” – **R.D. Laing**, *The Politics of Experience*, 1967*

*“The artist is the man who refuses initiation through education into the existing order, remains faithful to his own childhood being, and thus becomes ‘a human being in the spirit of all times, an artist.’” – **Norman O. Brown**, *Life Against Death**

Most suicides die of natural causes, slowly and in silence.

But we hear a lot about the small number of suicides, by comparison, who kill themselves quickly by their own hands. Of course their sudden deaths elicit shock and sadness since their deaths, usually so unexpected even when not a surprise, allow for no return. Such sudden once-and-for-all endings are even more jarring in a high-tech world where people are subconsciously habituated to thinking that everything can be played back, repeated, and rewound, even lives.

If the suicides are celebrities, the mass media can obsess over why they did it. How shocking! Wasn’t she at the peak of her career? Didn’t he finally seem happy? And then the speculative stories will appear about the reasons for the rise or fall of suicide rates, only to disappear as quickly as the celebrities are dropped by the media and forgotten by the public.

The suicides of ordinary people will be mourned privately by their loved ones in their individual ways and in the silent recesses of their hearts. A hush will fall over their departures that will often be viewed as accidental.

And the world will roll on as the earth absorbs the bodies and the blood.

“Where’s it all going all this spilled blood,” writes the poet **Jacques Prévert**.  
“Murder’s blood...war’s blood... blood of suicides...the earth that turns and turns with its great streams of blood.”

Of such suicides **Albert Camus** said,

“Dying voluntarily implies you have recognized, even instinctively, the ridiculous character of that habit [of living], the absence of any profound

reason for living, the insane character of that daily agitation, and the uselessness of suffering.”

He called this feeling the absurd, and said it was widespread and involved the feeling of being an alien or stranger in a world that couldn't be explained and didn't make sense. Assuming this experience of the absurd, Camus wished to explore whether suicide was a solution to it. He concluded that it wasn't.

Like Camus, I am interested in asking what is the meaning of life. “How to answer it?” he asked in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. He added that “the meaning of life is the most urgent of questions.” But I don't want to explore his line of reasoning to his conclusions, whether to agree or disagree. I wish, rather, to explore the reasons why so many people choose to commit slow suicide by immersing themselves in the herd mentality and following a way of life that leads to inauthenticity and despair; why so many people so easily and early give up their dreams of a life of freedom for a proverbial mess of pottage, which these days can be translated to mean a consumer's life, one focused on staying safe by embracing conventional bromides and making sure to never openly question a system based on systemic violence in all its forms; why, despite all evidence to the contrary, so many people embrace getting and spending and the accumulation of wealth in the pursuit of a chimerical “happiness” that leaves them depressed and conscience dead. Why so many people do not rebel but wish to take their places on this ship of fools.

So what can we say about the vast numbers of people who commit slow suicide by a series of acts and inactions that last a long lifetime and render them the living dead, those whom Thoreau so famously said were the mass of people who “lead lives of quiet desperation”? Is the meaning of life for them simply the habit of living they fell into at the start of life before they thought or wondered what's it all about? Or is it the habit they embraced after shrinking back in fear from the disturbing revelations thinking once brought them? Or did they ever seriously question their place in the lethal fraud that is organized society, what Tolstoy called the Social Lie? Why do so many people kill their authentic selves and their consciences that could awaken them to break through the social habits of thought, speech, and action that lead them to live “jiffy lube” lives, periodically oiled and greased to smoothly roll down the conventional highway of getting and spending and refusing to resist the murderous actions of their government?

An unconscious despair rumbles beneath the frenetic surface of American society today. An unspoken nothingness. I think the Italian writer **Robert Calasso** says it well:

“The new society is an agnostic theocracy based on nihilism.”

It's as though we are floating on nothing, sustained by nothing, in love with nothing – all the while embracing any **thing** that a materialistic, capitalist consumer culture can throw at us. We are living in an empire of illusions, propagandized and self-deluded. Most people will tell you they are stressed and depressed, but will often add – “who wouldn't be with the state of the world” – ignoring their complicity through the way they have chosen compromised, conventional lives devoid of the spirit of rebellion.

I keep meeting people who, when I ask them how they are, will respond by saying, “I'm hanging in there.”

Don't common sayings intimate unconscious truths? Hang - among its possible derivatives is the word "habit" and the meaning of "coming to a standstill." Stuck in one's habits, dangling over nothing, up in the air, going nowhere, hanging by a string. Slow suicides. The Beatles' sang it melodically:

"He's a real nowhere man/Sitting in his nowhere land/Making all his nowhere plans for nobody/Doesn't have a point of view/Knows not where he's going to/Isn't he a bit like you and me."

It's a far cry from having "the world on a string," as **Harold Arlen** wrote many years before.

Maybe if we listen to how people talk or what popular culture throws up, we will learn more through creative associations than through all the theories the experts have to offer.

There have been many learned tomes over the years trying to explain the **act** of suicide, an early and very famous one being **Emile Durkheim's** groundbreaking sociological analysis *Suicide* (1897). In thousands of books and articles other thinkers have approached the subject from various perspectives - psychological, philosophical, biological, etc. They contain much truth and a vast amount of data that appeal to the rational mind seeking general explanations. But in the end, general explanations are exactly that - general - while a mystery usually haunts the living whose loved ones have killed themselves.

But what about the slow suicides, those **D. H. Lawrence** called the living dead (don't let "the living dead eat you up"), those who have departed the real world for a conscienceless complacency from which they can cast aspersions on those whose rebellious spirits give them little rest. Where are the expert disquisitions about them?

We've had more than a century of pseudo-scientific studies of suicide and the world has gotten much worse. More than a century of psychotherapy and people have grown progressively more depressed. Large and increasing numbers are drugged to the teeth with pharmaceutical drugs and television and the internet and cell phones and shopping and endless talk about food and diets and sports and nothing. Talk to talk, surface to surface. Pundits pontificate daily in streams of endless bullshit for which they are paid enormous sums as they smile with their fake whiter-than-white teeth flashing from their makeup masks. People actually listen to these fools to "inform" themselves. They even watch television news and think they know what is happening in the world. We are drowning in a "universe of disembodied data," as playwright John Stepping has so aptly phrased it. People obsessively hover over their cell phones, searching for the key that will unlock the cells they have locked themselves in. Postliteracy, mediated reality, and digital dementia have become the norm. Minds are packaged and commodified. Perhaps you think I exaggerate, but I feel that madness is much more the norm today than when Laing penned his epigraphic comment.

Not stark raving screaming madness, just a slow, whimpering acceptance of an insane society whose very fabric is toxic and which continues its God-ordained mission of spreading death and destruction around the world in the name of freedom and democracy, while so many of its walking dead citizens measure out their lives with coffee spoons. A nice madness, you could say, a pleasant, depressed and repressed madness. A madness in which people might say with T. S. Eliot's J. Alfred Prufrock (if they still read or could

remember):

“I have measured out my life with coffee spoons...And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, / and snicker, / And in short, I was afraid.”

But why are so many so afraid? Everyone has fears, but so many normal people seem extremely fearful, so fearful they choose to blend into the social woodwork so they don't stand out as dissenters or oddballs. They kill their authentic selves; become conscienceless. And they do this in a society where their leaders are hell-bent on destroying the world and who justify their nuclear madness at every turn. I think Laing was right that this goes back to our experience. When genuine experience is denied or mystified (it's now disappeared into digital reality), real people disappear. Laing wrote:

In order to rationalize our industrial-military complex, we have to destroy our capacity to see clearly any more what is in front of, and to imagine what is beyond, our noses. Long before a thermonuclear war can come about, we have had to lay waste our sanity. We begin with the children. It is imperative to catch them in time. Without the most thorough and rapid brainwashing their dirty minds would see through our dirty tricks. Children are not yet fools, but we shall turn them into imbeciles like ourselves, with high I. Q.'s if possible. From the moment of birth, when the Stone Age baby confronts the twentieth century mother, the baby is subjected to these forces of violence, called love, as its mother and father, as their parents and their parents before them, have been. These forces are mainly concerned with destroying most of its potentialities, and on the whole this enterprise is successful. By the time the new human is fifteen or so, we are left with a being like ourselves, a half-crazed creature more or less adjusted to a mad world. This is normality in our present age. Love and violence, properly speaking, are polar opposites. Love lets the other be, but with affection and concern. Violence attempts to constrain the other's freedom, to force him to act in the way we desire, but with ultimate lack of concern, with indifference to the other's own existence or destiny. We are effectively destroying ourselves by violence masquerading as love...We live equally out of our bodies and out of our minds.

So yes, I do think most people are victims. No one chooses their parents, or to be born into poverty, or to be discriminated against for one's race, etc. No one chooses to have their genuine experience poisoned from childhood. No one chooses to be born into a mad society. This is all true. Some are luckier than others. Suicides, fast and slow, are victims. But not just victims. This is not about blame, but understanding. For those who commit to lives of slow suicide, to the squelching of their true selves and their consciences in the face of a rapacious and murderous society, there is always the chance they can break with the norm and go sane. Redemption is always possible. But it primarily involves overcoming the fear of death, a fear that manifests itself in the extreme need to preserve one's life, so-called social identity, and sense of self by embracing social conventions, no matter how insane they may be or whether or not they bring satisfaction or fulfillment. Whether or not they give life a meaning that goes deep.

But for those who have taken their lives and are no longer among us, hope is gone. But we can learn from their tragedies if we are truthful. For them the fear of life was primary, and death seemed like an escape from that fear. Life was too much for them. Why? We must ask. So they chose a life-in-death approach through fast suicide. Everyone is joined to them in that fear, just as everyone is joined by the fear of death. It is a question of which

dominates, and when, and how much courage we can muster to live daringly. The fear of death leads one to constrict one's life in the safe surround of conventional society in the illusion that such false security will save one in the end. Death is too much for them. So they accept a death-in-life approach that I call slow suicide.

But in the end as in the beginning and throughout our lives, there is really no escape. The more alive we are, the closer death feels because really living involves risks and living outside the cocoon of the social lie. Mr. Pumpkin Head might seize you, whether he is conceived as your boss, an accident, disease, social ostracism, or some government assassin. But the deader we feel, the further away death seems because we feel safe. Pick your poison.

But better yet, perhaps there is no need to choose if we can regain our genuine experience that parents and society, for different reasons, conspire to deny us. Could the meaning of our lives be found, not in statements or beliefs, but in true experience? Most people think of experience as inner or outer. This is not true. It is a form of conventional brainwashing that makes us schizoid. It is the essence of the neuro-biological materialism that reduces humans to unfree automatons. Proffered as the wisdom of the super intelligent, it is sheer stupidity.

All experience is in-between, not the most eloquent of phrasing, I admit, but accurate. Laing, a psychiatrist, puts it in the same way as do the mystics and those who embrace the Tao. He says,

“The relation of my experience to behavior is not that of inner to outer. My experience is not inside my head. My experience of this room is outside in this room. To say that my experience is intrapsychic is to presuppose that there is a psyche that my experience is in. My psyche is my experience, my experience is my psyche.”

Reverie, imagination, prayer, dream, etc. are as much outer as inner, they are modalities of experience that exist in-between. We live in-between, and if we could experience that, we would realize the meaning of life and our connection to all living beings, including those our government massacres daily, and we would awaken our consciences to our complicity in the killing. We would realize that the victims of the American killing machine are human beings like us; are us, and we, them. We would rebel.

Thoreau said a life without principle was not worth living. Yet for so many of the slow suicides the only principals they ever had were those they had in high school. Such word confusion is understandable when illiteracy is the order of the day and spelling passé. Has anyone when in high school ever had Thoreau's admonition drummed into his head:

“The ways by which you may get money almost without exception lead downward. To have done anything by which you earned money merely is to have been truly idle or worse.”

Of course not, since getting a “good” living is never thought to involve living in an honest, inviting, and honorable way. It is considered a means to an end, the end being a consumer's paradise.

“As for the means of living,” Thoreau added, “it is wonderful how indifferent men of all classes are about it, even reformers, so called – whether they inherit, or earn, or steal it.”

Is it any wonder so many people end up committing slow suicide? “Is it that men are too much disgusted with their own experience to speak of it?”

What the hell -TGIH!

I believe the story has it that when he was in jail for refusing the poll tax that supported slavery and the Mexican-American war, Thoreau was visited by his friend Ralph Waldo Emerson, who asked him, “Henry, what are you doing in there?” To which Thoreau responded, “Ralph, what are you doing out there?” Today, however, most folks don’t realize that being outside their cells is being in them, and such imprisonment is far from principled. That’s not a text message they’re likely to receive.

I recently met a woman, where or when I can’t recall. It might have been when walking on the open road or falling in a dreaming hole. She told me “if you look through a window, you can see the world outside. If you look in a mirror, you can see yourself outside. If you look into the outside world, you can see everyone inside out. When the inside is seen outside and the outside is seen inside, you will know what you face. Everything becomes simple then,” as she looked straight through me and my face fell off.

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