

Suicide Survivors

A Follow-up Study of Persons Who Survived Jumping from the Golden Gate and San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridges

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Interviews with seven of ten known survivors of jumps from the Golden Gate and San Francisco-Oakland Bay bridges showed a unique association between the Golden Gate Bridge and suicide. The study went beyond exploring the nature of suicidal jumps and shed new light on the experience of nearly dying. All the survivors described this experience as tranquil and peaceful. None of them experienced life events or distant memories passing through their minds or before their eyes. However, all of them experienced transcendence and spiritual rebirth phenomena. Suggestions for preventing suicides from the Golden Gate Bridge are discussed, including the construction of a suicide barrier.

"After all, it is no more surprising to be born twice than it is to be born once."

—VOLTAIRE

A SUICIDAL LEAP from either the Golden Gate or the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge is almost invariably fatal. Only 1 percent of persons jumping from these bridges survives. This paper is a summary report of a two and a half year follow-up study of these survivors. The research project initially had two objectives: (a) To determine the whereabouts and present condition of the ten known survivors and (b) to interview this rare group to learn more about the nature of suicidal behavior by jumping and its alleged

impulsive and ambivalent qualities. I also hoped to answer the following questions: (1) Why the choice of the Golden Gate Bridge? Why is it the number one location for suicides in the world, now with over 535 known suicides since it opened in 1937? (2) Can these persons recall the suicidal jumps and the experiences of nearly dying? (3) Did their life's memories pass through their minds or in front of their eyes? (4) Did they lose consciousness? (5) How have the survivors subsequently handled such an upsetting traumatic event—an experience so close to death? (6) What have been the long-term effects of such events on their lives?

The potential benefits for suicide prevention resulting from a clearer understanding of attempted suicide by jumping and its effect on the individual person seemed to the author to outweigh any possible risk to the subjects involved in this study.

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Methods

Although it has proven difficult to locate the ten survivors despite using systematic follow-up techniques,¹ it has been possible to interview six of the eight* Golden Gate Bridge survivors and one of the two San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge survivors. The initial contact was made by telephone whenever possible. If the subject was under the care of a psychiatrist, permission was sought and obtained from the psychiatrist before interviewing the survivor. The interviews were carried out in accordance with established psychiatric ethics, and care was taken not to pursue matters which the person did not wish to discuss. Each person was made aware that he or she could refuse to answer any of the questions during the interview, and assured that anonymity would be preserved. The goals of the project were explained to each survivor and it was emphasized that their participation was entirely voluntary.

The Golden Gate Bridge Survivors

Demographic characteristics (at the time of the jump)

The eight Golden Gate Bridge survivors were composed of seven men and one woman. The average age was 24 years old and the age range was from 16 to 36 years. One survivor was married, one was divorced and the rest were single. Three out of the eight survivors were in psychiatric treatment (one was an inpatient out on a pass).

Choice of Bridge

All six of the interviewed Golden Gate survivors' suicide plans involved *only* the Golden Gate Bridge. Four of the six said they would not have used any other method of suicide if the Golden Gate Bridge had not been available (for instance, if there had been a suicide barrier).

One survivor associated the beauty of the bridge with death and jumped from it because "I was attracted to the bridge—an affinity between me, the Golden Gate Bridge and death—there is a kind of form to it, a certain grace and beauty. The Golden Gate Bridge is readily available and it is connected with suicide." Another survivor denied that he even attempted suicide by jumping from the Golden Gate Bridge. He associated

jumping from the Golden Gate Bridge with entering the "golden doors" in order to leave his body and the material realm and enter into the new spiritual realm. "It was the Golden Gate Bridge or nothing. I believed it was the way."

Another survivor said jumping from the Golden Gate Bridge was "a romantic thing to do," and that it assured "certain death in a painless way." A different survivor described suicide from the Golden Gate Bridge as "easy" and a "sure thing." Another said the Golden Gate is "the only sure way." The remaining survivor said the extensive press coverage and the "notorious fame" that surround the Golden Gate Bridge suicides, plus its "easy accessibility," made it the "only method" of suicide for him.

Reasons for Jumping

The reasons for the suicide attempts varied and included the following: (1) "Problem relating to people . . . no personal love . . . a loner." (2) "Extremely depressed and felt worthless . . . stuttering was uncontrollable . . . longed for death as a release from my feelings of alienation and hopelessness." (3) "Felt alone and didn't know what to do and I wanted to die." (4) "Rejected by my lover." (5) "Life was not worth living . . . nothing interested me." (6) "Depressed, confused, and failing in school . . . jumping and living—a logical way to keep things silent, to get old things finished and to draw attention to myself and issues."

Two subjects heard voices before their jumps: One of them had taken D-lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD) and the voices directed him to go to the Golden Gate Bridge and jump off; the other was asked by a God-like voice, "Why are you doing this? Why are you giving up?" Two other subjects told of bridge employees rushing toward them and yelling at them. Both of these survivors were angered by the way these men approached them and they said they might not have jumped if these men would have calmly walked up and spoken to them in a gentle manner.

Descriptions of the Fall

The distance at mid-span from rail to water is 250 feet and about 260 feet at low tide and it takes just three to four seconds to travel this distance. The velocity in a free-fall from the Golden Gate Bridge has been calculated to range between 73.6 and 75 miles per hour of impact force in each case.²

*These eight include the most recent survivor (February 1975) who was added after this paper was submitted for publication. He has not been interviewed.

Only one survivor described a distinct sense of falling through the air rapidly. The other five lost their time orientation and said the fall felt like a long time, from "hours" to "an eternity." This apparent slowing of time has also been found to be the most frequently reported phenomenon (75 percent) in persons undergoing sudden accidental near-death experiences (falls or near-drownings).³

The experience of jumping for all six of the survivors was described as tranquil and peaceful and not frightening or terrifying as one might suspect. This is similar to the account mountain climbers give after they have survived accidental falls from great heights.³⁻⁵ One survivor said, "It was a good feeling—no screaming. It was the most pleasant feeling I've ever had. I saw the horizon and the blue sky and I thought how beautiful it was." Another survivor said that at first he had a peaceful feeling and then he felt like he went into a "dream" . . . "I never felt I was dying." One subject stated that he experienced "a sense of relief" and "peace" on the way down. One subject said he "caught a glimpse of San Francisco . . . thoughts of goodbye—leaving San Francisco is like leaving the world. I felt like a bird flying—total relief. In my mind I was getting away from one realm and going to another. I did not struggle. I gave up. I was looking forward to what was to come. Even now I'm symbolically still looking for the better world—I'm still in that place between the bridge and the water." Another reported that his descent was "like eternity—beautiful—I enjoyed the sensation."

Three of the six survivors said they "knew" before they jumped that they would not die. One of these survivors denied any suicidal intent. He was the one who entered the "Golden Doors" to a higher spiritual realm, and he said he was fulfilling a spiritual need. He said, "My jump has more to do with parapsychology than with psychology." Another subject said, "I did not believe for a moment that I would die. The voices said I would not die—and that nothing would happen . . . the voices even said I would be picked up by a fishing boat." One of the survivors left a "suicide" note stating "Why me, can I understand what's beyond death? Is there something outside the realm of understanding to be understood?" He later said, "I never thought I was going to kill myself and die, I knew I was going to survive it. I figured the only thing that separated the ones that lived and died in jumps from the Golden

Gate Bridge was the will to live and I had that very strong inside."

None of the six survivors interviewed recalled experiencing life events or distant memories passing through their minds or before their eyes during their jump. One survivor did experience the phenomenon of seeing the image of his father in an approaching bridge employee. It was his opinion that what he experienced was the feeling that his deceased father was coming for him and trying to communicate with him. Another survivor related that he thought of past events during the day before he jumped. Another subject recalled having some thoughts during his descent of being "innocent," and about how nice his mother was.

All but two of the survivors blacked out just before hitting the water; at least they do not remember hitting the water. One subject who described the first half of his descent as "peaceful, enjoyable and fun," realized that halfway down he was going to hit a concrete piling and he remained conscious to solve this problem. He maneuvered his body so that he only grazed the concrete piling. He then nearly drowned but he feels his prayers to God were answered and he was saved. The other subject who remembered hitting the water said, "When I hit the water I felt a vacuum feeling and a compression like my energy displaced the surface energy of the water. At first everything was black, then gray-brown, then *light*. It opened my mind—like waking up. It was very restful. When I came up above the water, I realized I was alive. I felt reborn. I was treading water and singing—I was happy and it was a joyous occasion. It affirmed my belief—there is a higher spiritual world. I experienced a transcendence—in that moment I was refilled with new hope and purpose of being alive." This person's description of spiritual rebirth and transcendence was experienced in varying degrees by all the survivors.

Death-Rebirth Experiences and Spiritual Transcendence

One subject stated, "It was strange because I thought suicide was the right thing to do. Before I jumped I was an agnostic—no real belief in God. After the jump I became fully Christian, I believed in God and Jesus Christ." This same person also said "Christ became a living reality for me." (He felt Christ and his disciples were around him.) "It is still going on. I'm now in a

period of painful growth—of being reborn.” Another survivor went to the Golden Gate Bridge with thoughts of being with God. He wished he could visit with God. He thought if God understood and accepted him he would go to “Paradise.” This same person, after surviving the jump, said his “will to live had taken over” and he felt that there was “a benevolent God in heaven who permeates all things in the universe.” He said we were all members of “the godhead—that great god humanity.”

Another survivor said at the time of his jump, “I thought I would go to heaven and I asked forgiveness regarding my committing suicide.” Another person said he had a “strong life drive” and his “whole life was reborn,” that he “broke out of old pathways” and he can now “sense other peoples’ existence.” An additional survivor said that he now “loves God” and that he wants to “do things for others.” Another said he was glad he didn’t die and that after his jump he felt closer to God and he thanks God that he didn’t die. A different survivor said, “I was refilled with a new hope and purpose in being alive. It’s beyond most people’s comprehension. I appreciate the miracle of life—like watching a bird fly—everything is more meaningful when you come close to losing it. I experienced a feeling of unity with all things and a oneness with all people. After my psychic rebirth I also feel for everyone’s pain. Surviving reconfirmed my belief and purpose in my life. Everything was clear and bright—I became aware of my relationship with my creator.”

Medical Injuries

Only two of the six interviewed survivors had serious medical injuries (for example, ruptured spleen and multiple fractures) after their jumps. The others sustained minor injuries (for example, bilateral clavicle separations) and one had no injuries at all.

Snyder and Snow² studied the necropsy reports for 169 suicides from the Golden Gate Bridge and found that only eight persons (5 percent) “died from drowning and not as a result of impact trauma.” They also stated that, “These individuals appeared to have impacted in the foot to head orientation.” This is very interesting since all six interviewed survivors jumped feet-first and the two who were conscious on impact reported that they landed feet-first as well.

Subsequent Suicidal Behavior

Only one of the six interviewed survivors has made subsequent suicide attempts, and these were by drug overdose. Two of the six survivors were working, two others were planning to obtain some kind of employment, and the remaining two were receiving disability payments.

Suicide Prevention

All six survivors favored the construction of a suicide barrier on the Golden Gate Bridge. Some of their reasons were as follows: (1) “It would be helpful—it would discourage suicidal persons and it would enable people to think about it and possibly change their minds.” (2) “It would make it less accessible. Even if it saved one person’s life, it would be worth it.” (3) “It would make it harder to commit suicide. It would let people struggle through the experience to the bottom of their soul and then maybe they would want to serve people and God.”

Other suggestions regarding suicide prevention in general and specifically concerning the Golden Gate Bridge were as follows: (1) “Newspaper editors should voluntarily stop all press coverage of the Golden Gate Bridge suicides—extensive press coverage put the idea into my mind,” and (2) “A new church is needed where there is one wise person who could tell people suicide is not where it’s at. God should instruct that it is better to serve. Like in my case, God played a hand in it.”

The San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge Survivor

The two known survivors of jumps from the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge are both women, ages eighteen and thirty. The survivor whom I interviewed jumped from the Bay Bridge because it was the nearest bridge to her home. She said if she would have not been able to jump from this bridge she would have driven to the Golden Gate Bridge and jumped there. She had been upset and depressed because her children had recently been taken away from her. She wanted to commit suicide because she was depressed, felt worthless and useless and without a sense of direction. She had impulsively left her home, driven to the bridge, stopped her car on the bridge, got out and jumped off with the conscious goal of dying. She had been seeing and hearing

her deceased father and she wanted to join him.

When she jumped she thought, "This is the end." She thought she would die and she did not struggle against it. She felt "a tremendous sense of peace." Past life events and memories did not pass through her mind or before her eyes. She remembers hitting the water, "It felt real good—I like to dive. I knew I was alive. At first I felt angry and disappointed I hadn't died. I remember going far down under water and wondering when I would come up. I came up and I didn't feel hurt. After I was picked up by the Coast Guard, I blacked out." She had a serious medical injury (fractured pelvis) which necessitated her remaining in bed for several months.

She did not experience a union with her father as she had hoped. However, she did report experiencing a spiritual rebirth and transcendence: "I felt chosen because I didn't die, I said this in front of the congregation. I was thankful. I cried in front of them. I wanted to help others. I pointed out how sovereign and powerful God is and how little we are and that it's not up to us. I was pure and cleaner inside. I thought somehow I was helping others in the spiritual realm. Others were helped by my testimony—I thought I could save others. I spoke in tongues twice and asked for the church to be united and for everyone to love each other more."

This woman had another spell of depression six months after her suicide attempt and she was admitted to a state hospital. She responded well to the treatment and she has not had a relapse since that time. Also, her children were eventually returned to her. She strongly recommended the construction of suicide barriers on both the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge and the Golden Gate Bridge so that these two bridges would be not accessible for suicidal jumps.

Comment

Noyes^{5,6} has outlined three phases which people commonly undergo while going through the experience of nearly dying: (1) *resistance* (recognition of danger, fear, struggle and acceptance of death), (2) *life review* (rapid review of clear images and scenes from the person's entire past) and (3) *transcendence* (state of mystical consciousness or state of ecstasy and spiritual rebirth phenomena). The accounts of the seven survivors differ from the reports of people who have nearly died from sudden accidental causes. The suicide

survivors did not experience the phases of resistance and life review. It may be that the volitional aspects of suicide account for the differences. The person who has planned his own death has most likely worked through a lot of the resistance and this may have something to do with why there is no reported struggle against oncoming death. The planned aspect of suicide may also be related to the fact that these survivors did not experience a life review phase. In sudden accidental encounters with near death, a person would probably try to orient himself by matching the acute current traumatic event with past events, and there would be an automatic check or review of his filed memories of past life events. In contrast, for the suicide survivor the event that brings him close to death was planned and rapid orientation and matching to prior experience would not be required.⁷

However, the "suicide" survivors did consistently experience the transcendence phase of near death. This may have occurred because the majority of the survivors fully expected to die yet they lived. Most reported a feeling of submission or surrender, as if they were guided or controlled by God or a higher power. The survivors reported emotions of extreme calm and peace or ecstasy. They have gone through a unique experience of surviving planned and almost certain death. All the subjects reported in varying degrees spiritual rebirth experiences which are similar to previous reports of religious and transpersonal experiences.⁸⁻¹² Most of the survivors, during and after their jumps, experienced mystical states of consciousness characterized by loss of the conventional senses of time, space and self. And they experienced a sense of oneness or unity with other human beings and the entire universe.

The suicide survivors' death-rebirth experience represents both an ego-death (a feeling of total annihilation) and a rebirth (with feelings of love and salvation).⁹ I believe it is this experience of ego-death and subsequent spiritual rebirth that is behind the survivors' unified and firm position on the need to construct a suicide barrier on the Golden Gate Bridge. This is probably a projection of a change that has taken place within the survivors, for none of them have gone on to commit suicide. Grof has reported¹⁰ the disappearance of severe suicidal tendencies after patients have experienced final ego-death. This study corroborates Grof's statement, "After the ego-death the individual sees human existence in a much broader

spiritual framework—no matter what the personal problems are, suicide does not appear to be a solution anymore.”¹⁰

It has been reported¹³ that the ingestion of hallucinogens lessens the fear of death. This is pertinent, since one of the survivors reported taking LSD just before jumping from the Golden Gate Bridge.

The six Golden Gate Bridge survivors' suicide plans involved *only* the Golden Gate Bridge. For all of them, this bridge had a special and unique meaning. Often this was related in a symbolic way to the association of the Golden Gate Bridge with death, grace and beauty. The fact that the Golden Gate Bridge leads the world as a location for suicides should be knowledge enough for us to begin to *deromanticize* suicide, specifically as it relates to the Golden Gate Bridge, but also in a general way.¹⁴ In addition to *deromanticizing* suicide and death especially as they relate to the Golden Gate Bridge, these findings point to a need to do something practical in order to prevent further suicides from that structure. I underscore

and concur wholeheartedly with the survivors' unanimous recommendation that a suicide barrier should be constructed on the Golden Gate Bridge.

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