
What Matthew Shepard Would Tell Us:

Gay and Lesbian Issues in Education

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"We just don't have any gay kids in my school."

—High School Principal

Of the many provocative topics in my undergraduate social foundations of education course, no discussion brings more anger, tears, confusion, and hostility than our readings and discussion about gay and lesbian issues. Within a spiraling curriculum that interrogates race, social class, gender and their myriad intersections, gay and lesbian issues in educational policy and practice remain the most volatile in this class. Knowing such, I continue to experiment with different pedagogical approaches that focus not only on the roots of sexism, discrimination, bigotry, and hate, but also on the ways in which these students as future educators are ethically obligated to confront their own attitudes and beliefs about gays and lesbians in schools—their students, their students' parents or family members, their fellow teachers and administrators.

Current teacher training programs in higher education in the US focus upon discipline-specific competency classes and methods coursework, usually supplemented with one course in educational psychology and one in social/philosophical foundations of education. The vast majority of teacher preparation emphasizes *what* is to be taught and *how* (most efficiently) to teach it. Conversely, foundations courses emphasize for future teachers the *why* of democratic public education, for what purposes, in whose benefit, to what ends. And therefore, the course centralizes the aims of freedom, equality, human dignity, diversity, and social justice. Because students receive only one semester of such coursework, much needs to happen in a very short period of time.

For this reason, I use a multi-dimensional spiral progression, rather than a linear approach to social issues and their intersections with educational theory and practice. The helical structure of the spiral allows critical social problems of race, class, and gender to stand as a central pole, a cylinder around which the students' reflections and questions wind gradually, simultaneously receding from and drawing near, each time (hopefully) more informed. Advancing and retreating in a methodological coil enables students to see not only the interrelatedness and complexity of social constructions of privilege and marginality, but also to reflect upon their own place within these hierarchical structures that inevitably dominant and oppress.

CONFRONTING DIFFERENCE & HATE

Having spent a good deal of class time on issues of sexism and gender inequity in education, we extrapolate more fully the prejudice and bias women experience in US culture and the ways in which dominant patriarchal structures and sexism often lead to homophobia. In order to begin discussion about bigotry and hate directed toward gay, lesbian, and bisexual people, as well as their contemporary manifestations in schools, I turn to the senseless and brutal death of college student, Matthew Shepard. I do so, not so much for its horrific detail or its public notoriety, but because the tragedy moves us as educators to reconsider what our past educative efforts have accomplished and more importantly, where we might necessarily position our labors in the present.

In 1998, Shepard, who was gay, died after being tied to a fence outside Laramie, Wyoming, where he was pistol-whipped, beaten, and then left for dead in the freezing night by his killers. What we can learn from Shepard's highly publicized death, we could most likely learn from any number of others who suffered viciously horrific murders because they were gay: Brandon Teena, raped and shot to death in 1993; Billy Jack Gaither, beaten and set on fire in 1999; Danny Overstreet, gunned down in 2000; JR Warren, gang-beaten and run over with a car in 2000; or Army Pfc. Barry Winchell bludgeoned to death with a baseball bat while sleeping in 1999. I chose the Shepard case not because it was the most brutal or the most senseless, but rather because of its intense national reaction and what can be learned from such response.

I do not focus on the evil consciousness responsible for Shepard's murder, because frankly, that kind of wickedness is beyond my comprehension, and also because attending to such trivializes the significance and power of education. While I in no way wish to diminish the inhumanity of these violent acts of cruelty, I do not dwell on such evil that I simply cannot understand or explain. However, if we look at Shepard's death and all that surrounds it, as a symptom of our larger cultural and educative failures and accomplishments, we are moved to respond, rather than to fall into despair. The national response to this hate-motivated murder teaches us many things about understanding difference. At the same time, the tragedy encapsulates for students the confusion and frustration that accompanies issues of sexual orientation in our culture and the divide this social dissonance deeply cuts in our society and schools.

Following Shepard's death, outrage was voiced throughout the US. Proclamations were made, petitions signed, vigils organized, memorials given, and hate crimes legislation demanded by those who found Shepard's death a needless and senseless atrocity. And at the same time, those in opposition to homosexuality responded with anti-gay protests—picketing rallies and memorial services across the country, posting Internet messages on websites such as, *godhatesfags.com*. Anti-gay protesters at Shepard's funeral shouted epithets at mourners and carried signs reading "Fags Deserve Death" and "Matthew Shepard Burns in

Hell " Some conservative religious leaders offered sympathy, but also used Shepard's death to warn their congregations of the "dangers" of homosexuality.

The cultural divide widened as attorneys for the two defendants in the case sought to argue what has become known as the 'gay panic' defense, in which straights fearing unsolicited homosexual advances act out of self defense This strategy, one not dissimilar from 'she asked for it' type defense tactics employed for alleged rapists, portrays the victim as provoking and inciting, as in the Sheppard case, his own violently fatal attack.

Public debate often revolved around notions that Shepard brought the attack on himself, or at best "should have known better." Conservative talk radio positioned Shepard's death to reaffirm gay rights as "special rights"—unnecessary and without merit. Although state lawmakers in Wyoming had rejected hate crime measures four previous times since 1995, four months after Shepard was beaten to death, an emotionally charged move to pass a hate crimes bill was thought to surely be ratified; however, the Wyoming State Legislature defeated the measure in early 1999.

The social dissonance in the national response to Matthew Shepard's murder resolves some of our questions, but also gives rise to new ones. As a culture we have an intense sense of justice and solidarity, one that shows both collective support and respect for human life, and the impulse for "the good." While at the same time, the impulse for hate, opportunism, division, self-preservation, and blame (not to mention evil) flourishes in reciprocal fashion. It is within this profound confusion that we must begin to imagine things otherwise, radically different. Because it should be abundantly clear that as a society we are highly adept at simultaneously holding two highly contradictory narratives in our collective heads and hearts.

In tandem, the Shepard tragedy allows students to see the unrelenting power of a society that focuses heavily on difference and the pejorative categorization of such. Discrimination, in a consumer capitalist culture, directed toward those who are different or perceived to be different, develops because the ethical vision of the culture socializes citizens to view difference as a fearful threat, a menace people are obliged to compete with, to commodify, to divide and conquer. Understanding homophobia in this context reveals that these fears may on one level be more about difference and competition in a generic sense, rather than specifically about sexuality, or challenges to heterosexuality. This view of difference, its discrimination and homophobic attitude, is the product of a 'where's Waldo?' enculturation process rooted in rigid categorization, emphasizing dissimilarity and hierarchy. Although seemingly benign, this discriminatory vision of the world is pervasively potent from a very young age. Elmo and his Sesame Street cohorts have taught us well to discern 'which of these things is not like the other?' Given that the voice of Elmo is in reality, that of a gay black male, this kind of socialization is especially incriminating.

DOMINANT CULTURE: HETEROSEXISM & HOMOPHOBIA

Though undergraduate students sometimes comprehend the racist and sexist systems operating in US culture, they rarely, and I might add, then only reluctantly comprehend the heterosexist underpinnings and assumptions characteristic of the world in which they live. Although the murders' motivation for Shepard's death facilitates deeper understanding of the ways in which anti-gay prejudice and heterosexist bias develop socially in the US, I still find it necessary to engage the students on an even more profound level, their own sexuality. To achieve this kind of engagement, I ask students to complete the following survey that I adapted from Martin Rochlin (1985).

Heterosexual Questionnaire

1. When and how did you first decide you were heterosexual?
2. What do you think caused your heterosexuality?
3. Is it possible that your heterosexuality is just a phase you may grow out of?
4. Is it possible that your heterosexuality stems from a neurotic fear of members of the same sex?
5. To whom have you disclosed your heterosexuality? How did they react?
6. The great majority of child molesters are heterosexuals (95%). Do you really consider it safe to expose your children to heterosexual teachers?
7. Why do heterosexuals place so much emphasis on sex?
8. If you've never slept with a person of the same sex, how do you know you wouldn't prefer that?
9. Does your employer know you are heterosexual? Are you openly heterosexual when with your family members? roommates? co-workers? church members?
10. With 50% of first-time heterosexual marriages ending in divorce, and over 60% of second heterosexual marriages also ending in divorce, there seem to be very few happy heterosexuals. Techniques have been developed to change your sexual orientation; have you considered aversion therapy to treat your heterosexuality?

Although students have a fair amount of difficulty answering many of the survey questions, their understanding of heterosexual bias and heterocentric assumptions that characterize the culture in which they live greatly expands in attempting the exercise. In order for future educators to understand the nature of this kind of marginalization, and gay issues more specifically, I find it helpful to outline the manner in which the dominant culture not only organizes political, social, and economic privilege for some, but also separates, discredits and discriminates against others.

Simply put, when we refer to the dominant culture and its ideology we are referencing the assumptions, ideas, concepts, and values that prevail in the central ways in which we organize our lives. Although usually associated with the 'taken-for-granted' socio-political realm, or more plainly, people and their relationship to power, dominant ideology powerfully colors societal opinion, behavior, and worldview. At the same time, the unquestioned nature of dominant culture allows a commanding control that unfortunately benefits some people at the expense of others, in this case at the cost of gays and lesbians.

Friend (1986) defines the systemic practice of valuing and privileging heterosexuality as superior over homosexuality as heterosexism. Heterosexist prejudice holds a bias in favor of heterosexual people and discrimination against bisexual and homosexual persons. Gay men and lesbians encounter discrimination, stigmatization, prejudice, and violence based upon their sexual orientation, or perceived sexual orientation. Oppressed segments of the population often serve as falsely depicted stereotypes, unjustly ridiculed scapegoats, and blameworthy villains solely by virtue of their perceived cultural and social differences. As a system of domination and discrimination, pervasive heterosexism shapes the political, economic, social, religious, familial, and educational spheres in American culture. Jung and Smith (1993) contend that at the center of heterosexist preju-

dice is the organizing belief that heterosexuality is the normative form of human sexual relations. As such, the standard measurement used to evaluate and judge all other sexual orientations is defined as heterocentrism.

Homophobia, as first defined by sociologist Weinberg (1972), is the irrational fear and hatred of homosexuality, either in one's self, or in others. A more expansive understanding of homophobia advances the definition to include disgust, anxiety, and anger directed toward homosexuality (MacDonald, 1976). Herek (1984) asserts that homophobia is frequently considered appropriate and utilitarian by individuals who possess it, in as much as homophobia is frequently a primary defining characteristic of contemporary masculinity in our culture. Boys learn from a very young age that there is no worse slur or taunt than being called a sissy, fag, or queer. What's more, young children who use these epithets rarely know what the words actually mean, other than their expressly pejorative connotations.

Though often precipitated by heterosexism, homophobia does not fundamentally or logically indicate a relationship between the two. Whereas heterosexism is similar to racism and sexism, homophobia is analogous to racial bigotry and misogyny. Without critical examination, fear and hatred of homosexuality often reproduces exponentially. In addition, pervasive homophobic prejudice, customarily associated with heterosexuals, negatively affects all persons, institutions, and cultures.

More specifically, homophobia and homophobic discrimination often emerge from the dominant cultural construction of heterocentrism, and therefore all persons, heterosexuals, gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered persons to some degree and in various contexts, experience the hegemony (or unquestioned ruling power) of the heterocentrist center. Because heterocentrism 1) defines the ways in which people regard homosexuality, 2) frames routinely performed heterosexist biases, and 3) maintains a myriad of disparaging moral judgments about gay men and lesbians, the underpinnings of heterocentrism and heterosexual hegemony situate gays in the marginalized fringe.

While forms of resistance have and continue to challenge preponderant controlling ideas, such as the civil and human rights movements, feminism, environmental groups, and the gay and lesbian movement, the prevailing influence in American culture remains largely based on 'white' masculine, heterosexual values and practices. Furthermore, the nexus between gender, power, and authority gives rise to subsequent inequities manifested in sexism, racism, and heterosexism. As such, dominant culture normalizes this narrow perspective as a widely held worldview and thereby carves its socially accepted center, subsequently situating or marginalizing 'others' (women, racial minorities, gays) on the cultural fringe. Like sexism and racism, systems of heterosexism reinforce dominant ideological assumptions and messages that constitute the characterization of sexual minority groups.

A recent survey finds that nearly 70 percent of lesbian, gay and bisexual students face verbal, sexual, or physical harassment or physical assault while at school (*Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network*, 2001) and nearly half of all gay and lesbian youth suffer violence from their families, peers, and strangers (Edwards, 1997). Unfortunately, many gay and lesbian students, unable to escape the pervasive nature of heterocentrism and homophobic prejudice in American culture and schools, internalize negative feelings about themselves (Gonsiorek, 1987). In its most recent study, the *American Journal of Public Health* finds that teenagers with same-sex attractions are twice as likely as their heterosexual counterparts to attempt suicide. Massachusetts Safe Schools Program for Gay & Lesbian Students has shown important statistical links between levels of student harassment experienced and attempted student suicide. According to the Human Rights Watch, a non-profit advocacy and research

organization, millions of gay teenagers may be subjected to such widespread harassment and teacher indifference in US schools that they do not receive an adequate education.

Plotting the margin (gays, women, minorities) and center (straights, men, whites) in this manner allows students to address more thoroughly 1) the important links between socio-cultural attitudes about homosexuality/homophobia and recurrent manifestations in educational practice and policy, and 2) each student's own relationship to, and role in the dominant ideology of margin and center. Given the sobering assessment of current school climate, teacher indifference, and the tragic consequences that ensue for gay and lesbian youth, a fundamental shift in the way we view ourselves and our students, as difficult, controversial, and painful as it may be, is not only necessary, but obligatory given the highly problematic world in which we live and teach.

GAY & LESBIAN YOUTH

Whether educators' work is rooted in K-12 instruction, school administration, higher education, research, counseling, or policy, it is absolutely crucial to realize that gay teens and young adults are in our schools and programs. As educators, our opportunities for making a better, more just world and eradicating hateful prejudice remains before us. To be sure, speaking openly with children about sexual orientation is perceived as problematic in the homophobic culture in which we find ourselves, although research shows that children and adolescents have far less difficulty accepting alternative family structures and sexual difference than might be supposed (Chasnoff and Cohen, 1996). A recent study of US high school seniors finds that 85 percent of seniors believe that gay men and lesbians should be accepted by society (Gilbert, 2001). Despite the apparent support for gay students, however, the survey found that US high schools remain a largely hostile environment for gay and lesbian youth. What is more, many parents, teachers, and administrators are frequently uncomfortable even in the limited discussions our culture currently presents. These obstacles, though certainly tangible and substantial, should not diminish or trivialize our deepest commitments and sincerest concerns for developing humanizing pedagogies that prioritize the safety and well-being of all students.

Regrettably, even when we are made aware of profound injustices and abuses, we frequently distance ourselves from the real dilemmas at hand—explaining away the necessary and ethically responsive action as someone else's problem—in someone else's classroom or school. For example, a high school principal, aware of my research interests, recently said to me, "we just don't have any gay kids in my school." Research, of course, strongly suggests that the principal's assessment of his student body is statistically impossible (Besner and Spungin, 1995). Common sense would indicate that although no students have publicly identified themselves as gay or lesbian, in all likelihood a school of 1000 pupils would have, by conservative estimates, a minimum of thirty non-heterosexual students. Other estimates might put the number of gay, lesbian, and bisexual teens in his school as high as 100. Unfortunately, this kind of dominant attitude assumes that discussion of sexual orientation has as its sole aim the support of gay and lesbian people only, without any benefit or of interest to, heterosexual persons. This perspective, which universalizes heterosexuality, or more simply, assumes that everyone is heterosexual, eliminates the need for discussion of gay issues, and in doing so also eliminates vast possibilities for greater understanding of sexuality and sexual difference, the reduction of prejudice, and the confrontation of bigotry and hate.

For those in K-12 environments, as well as those teaching and researching within academia, it is of utmost importance that we realize the significant impact that addressing sexual

orientation issues in our own locales—our own classrooms, our faculty meetings, our communities, and through our authority positions as teachers and role models, can have. By not only acknowledging, but also acting upon the educative potential schools hold for reducing homophobia and anti-gay stigmatization, the profession has the ability to play a profoundly important leadership role in re-shaping our culture's negative messages about difference and prejudice.

In particular, young boys' avoidance and denial of their homosexual orientation is facilitated by countless diversions perpetrated by a pervasively heterocentric culture, especially when considering the overwhelmingly ridiculed status of sissy boys in American society. While there is vast individual variation, young gay males tend to begin homosexual activity during early or mid-adolescence; similar feelings and activity for lesbian females does not begin until around age twenty (Lipkin, 1994). For male K-12 educators—straight, gay, or bisexual—this profound opportunity for confronting homophobia in middle and high schools seems particularly cogent, especially when we take seriously the vulnerability of gay and bisexual male teens.

Because adolescents are only beginning to possess the capacity for abstract thought and formal reasoning skills to cognitively integrate their sexual experiences, educators must realize that gay male adolescents are extremely vulnerable to gendered criticism, homophobic attitudes, anti-gay slurs, and the absence of positive gay male role models. Young gay males may also suffer from internalized homophobia learned throughout childhood in which self-hate, low self-esteem, destructive behavior, and further confusion characterize their underlying attitudes and conduct. Moreover, gay adolescents and teens often have far fewer resources available to them for understanding homosexuality and same-sex attraction in a balanced and unbiased manner. Social support networks for the young gay male are rare. What is more, the embarrassment, humiliation, and contempt of being labeled the pansy, the fag, or the queer, demand that he actively "prove" his heterosexuality over and over again. This kind of environment is stressful and often threatening, particularly since these are young people struggling to claim and affirm their sexual orientation in a frequently hostile social atmosphere. Teachers, aware of it or not, have a profound impact on this environment.

Certainly these issues are in no way limited to the education profession. However, these concerns should compel each of us as teachers to ask ourselves about the choices we make consciously or unconsciously, the behaviors we tolerate or ignore, the [in]actions we take or avoid, and the world we create by doing so—for what purposes, for what ends? Not talking honestly and genuinely about sexual orientation, prejudice, and anti-gay violence not only nurtures a suspicious cultural perspective of sexual difference, but also makes matters worse by unnecessarily magnifying issues of sexual orientation more than is worthwhile or appropriate. Minimizing such in secrecy and denial energizes a deleterious and discriminatory homosexual mythology, one that is harmful to all in education. In order to make our schools and our teaching more humane, let us instead confront sexual orientation pedagogically, mine the larger social ramifications more candidly, and learn from our lessons more sincerely, as taught to us by Matthew Shepard's senseless death.

WHAT CAN EDUCATORS DO?

The approach I urge students to contemplate asks them not only to consider seriously their actions in the world, but also that they believe their actions do actually matter, and therefore, have the potential for making a more just and liberating world in the here and now. Although

I in no way forecast a quick and painless end to our deeply rooted social problems, I attempt to communicate this approach with a fervent sense of support on one hand, but also with a profound sense of urgency on the other. From this renewed questioning and our response to such, we are compelled to commit ourselves to take action against these and other oppressive practices. There is much to be learned by questioning our own complicity with the domination and privilege of the white, middle class inner circle. The internal contradictions and dissonances we harbor, when attended to and pestered further, may be in actuality our utmost source of energy and hope.

Unfortunately, the enormity of our social ills all too often paralyzes our daily capability for considering and creating a better world. In undergraduate teacher training programs, courses in social foundations are particularly at risk for producing socially conscious yet deeply discouraged pre-service teachers—more fully aware, but equally as numb. It is essential that cultural workers in educational foundations not only help their students “describe the world, but to take a stand in shaping its construction” (Hyttén 1998, 253). Given the extent of continued discrimination, bigotry, hate, and its violence, as well as the difficult nature of contemplating the need for such vast cultural change, I offer students some insights on how this kind of approach might sensibly unfold for themselves and their schools.

Invariably, the frustration that many of these future teachers experience by the middle of the semester is accompanied by a desperate need to know what specifically can be done to help gay, lesbian, and bisexual students/colleagues as the course draws to a close. Before offering the students some particular suggestions for confronting anti-gay prejudice and harassment in schools, I attempt to make clear that this overarching framework emerges from identifying one’s intimate connection to the whole of these critical issues in education. Exhuming one’s “taken for granted” assumptions about the world is often characterized by intense struggle, sometimes-disheartening limitation, but always one of ethical obligation. Praxis—critical reflection and responsive action—requires that educators consider seriously their actions in the world and that they believe their actions in schools actually have the potential for making a more just and loving world, in the here and now. Having said that, I recommend some concrete suggestions in this arduous, yet compelling task. I briefly present them here for further contemplation and informed action (Griffin 1995, 61–63).

Teachers can:

- Evaluate and monitor their own attitudes and actions about homo/heterosexuality. Stop behaviors that either encourage a prejudiced or hostile environment for gay and lesbian students, or condone any antigay actions by any student.
- Inventory their own heterosexist beliefs, assumptions, and actions that unnecessarily and unintentionally create an environment of shame, humiliation or embarrassment for gay and lesbian students and teachers.
- Refrain from assuming that all students are heterosexual. Some probably are lesbian, gay, or bisexual. Others may be questioning their sexual identity.
- Realize the fact that learning about gays and lesbians does not cause young people to become gay, though it might encourage those who are struggling with their sexual identity to feel better about themselves. Present positive gay and lesbian role models.

- Use homophobic remarks in class and in after-school practices as 'teachable moments.'
- Understand the necessity of *age appropriate approaches* to sexual orientation and alternative lifestyles. View the award-winning documentary film, *It's Elementary* for guidance.
- Be available and prepared to talk with students or other teachers who are (1) questioning their sexual orientation, or (2) expressing homophobic beliefs. Many closeted gays use homophobic slurs and antigay epithets to buttress an outwardly heterosexual persona.
- Identify and readily make available pertinent resources for students and parents who need them, such as Parents and Friends of Lesbians & Gays (PFLAG, www.pflag.org); the Gay Straight Alliances (GSA), an extension of the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network (GLSEN, www.glsen.org).
- Develop support networks with other teachers, parents, and administrators concerned about the well-being and safety of gay, lesbian, and bisexual students.
- Request that teachers' associations provide programs about homophobia and how to meet the needs of lesbian, gay, and bisexual students.
- Invite a guest, former student, counseling professional, or current faculty member who is gay or lesbian to speak about gay and lesbian issues for their students.
- Post informational items that address gay and lesbian issues in your classrooms. Display, in a place of visual prominence, the Pink Triangle—universally associated with safe zones for gay, lesbian, and bisexual people.
- Understand more fully your authority and power as a positive role model for students, and the respect you inherently garner from your students. Contemplate the fact that what you don't say is just as important as what you do.
- Challenge *Zero Tolerance* policies that do not address sexual orientation, anti-gay harassment and hate-based violence in schools.
- (For gay, lesbian, and bisexual educators.) Try to be as open and candid as you safely can about who you are. All youth need to know gay adults who are leading satisfying, productive, and meaningful lives.
- (For heterosexual educators.) Give unwavering support for your gay and lesbian colleagues by speaking out against antigay attitudes, actions, and policies.

Encourage administrators to:

- Establish non-discrimination and anti-harassment policies that include sexual orientation. Ensure that all teachers, parents, and students understand what actions are unacceptable, and what procedures are to be followed when the policies are violated.
- Establish non-discrimination and anti-harassment policies in the local, regional, state, and national education organizations that govern educational programs.

- Provide teachers with anti-homophobia education and gay and lesbian issues programming focused on the needs of gay, lesbian, and bisexual students.
- Initiate and develop strategies for addressing homophobia among parents.
- Be open and forthright in their attitudes, behavior, and conduct that openly address the physical, mental, and spiritual safety and well-being of gay/lesbian, and bisexual teachers, staff, and students.

Encourage parents to:

- Know their child's school or university program—its teachers, administrators, department head, and faculty. Inquire about its policies on discrimination, harassment, and sexual orientation. Talk to other parents.
- Challenge their own prejudices and biases about gay, lesbian, and bisexual people, and evaluate how they condone or reaffirm antigay prejudice in their children.
- Understand that for adolescent boys and male teens, there is an especially great deal of social stigmatization and harassment for those who do not conform to cultural norms of masculinity. Explore the ways in which they support or discourage their son's interests and aptitudes, regardless of gender norms.
- Understand that a teacher's sexual orientation does not determine his or her ability to be an effective and respected professional.
- Contact a local chapter of Parents and Friends of Gays and Lesbians (PFLAG) if necessary for information and support.
- Contemplate the difficult and arduous struggle their child suffers and endures as a gay, lesbian, or bisexual person.
- Show sensitivity, caring, and support, regardless of their personal belief system, if their son or daughter comes out to them as a gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Remember that sexual orientation is a leading and contributing factor to teen depression, drop out rate and suicide.

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