

Darkness

by Michael Barker | Jan 24, 2017 | Featured, Suicide | 3 comments



This essay is not about Mormonism.

This essay might make you uncomfortable to read.

Last summer, after a day of mountain biking, my two friends and I were driving to a pub to grab some dinner. As we entered the onramp of the expressway, traffic suddenly stopped. We saw hazard lights blinking. Must be a car accident. We saw no first-responders so we hopped out of the car. We first saw a man next to his bicycle in pain; his ankle was pointing the wrong way. He was talking so we continued to run forward. We saw a motorcycle to the side of the express way. We looked for its driver. Two men were standing next to a woman on her back. Neither of those men appeared to know what to do. The three of us are Physician Assistants; my two friends work in heart surgery and I in orthopedic surgery. We started CPR. She breathed agonantly. Eventually a police officer arrived. We put on the defibrillator.

Shock...no pulse

Continue chest compressions

Shock again...no pulse

Continue chest compressions.

Again...again...again...again...again...She died.

We found out soon afterwards that one of the men standing by her when we arrived was her husband. He saw her get rear-ended by a car. He saw her body fly through the air and suddenly come to an abrupt stop when she hit the road. He watched us try to save her life. He saw her die.

For several nights I had a hard time sleeping. I kept picturing her lifeless, rubber-like body laying on the road. I've seen death before, but this was somehow different. I later sent a text message to my two friends to see if they were having the same problems I was. One of my buddies responded:

"About the accident

It seems like a surreal simulation. I do ACLS [advance cardiac life support] and BLS [basic life support] every 2 years- it felt oddly like that. Then I think that it was a young 25 yo woman cut down and we were there for the last moments of her life and completely helpless to alter the outcome.

I just keep saying to myself there was nothing we could have done to change anything. Another random accident that we caught the fringe of.

Things you hear on the news every day from somewhere.

I talked about it today with a couple of people. I think that helps. I would recommend it.

Events like this just reinforce how fleeting life can be and help to remind us to live each day the best we can."

What he wrote perfectly described my feelings. Eventually I was able to get a full nights rest. And honestly I hadn't even thought about it until I decided to write this essay. But that story – the story of us trying to save a young 25 year old woman's life isn't what this essay is about. I share that story just to establish a baseline of how my body has reacted in the past to a stressful event.

I'm not sure really why I'm writing this essay. I've asked myself several times if this essay should be written and if I'm sharing this from a place of goodness and wholeness. The latter I can answer. It's not from a place of wholeness.

Tonight is Sunday, January 22, 9:45 pm.

I'm not sure when this started, but...

About two weeks ago I felt like I was on the brink of getting sick. Maybe you are familiar with the symptoms: a little tickle in the back of the throat, the temples of the head feeling "tired", no aches, but things just feel "off". So I tried to get lots of sleep. I'm an active person. I go to the gym about five times a week. I box two to three times a week, and when the weather is nicer, I'm a competitive mountain biker. But two weeks ago, I decided I would take it easy. No exercise, just lots of sleep.

I was worried because the weekend that was coming up was a weekend in which I was going to be on orthopedic trauma call. I was worried about taking call while I was sick, but I managed to make it through okay. It wasn't a particularly difficult weekend of call and yet I was exhausted the following Monday. Now that I'm in my early forties, I just don't seem to have the endurance for call that I once had. It can be exhausting mentally. I think that's why I'm always tired the Monday following a weekend of call. The idea that I might have to roll into the ER because some poor elderly woman has broken her hip; or because someone's twelve year old niece broke her arm jumping out of the second story apartment complex because her uncle just caught the apartment on fire when he was cooking meth in the bathroom; or because that one guy has a hand full of pus pouring out from injecting meth into the back of his hand; or that poor teenage girl who was hit in her car because some idiot was drunk while driving his.

But honestly, I don't really actively think about that stuff when I'm on call. I just dig in and do my job. I think it must always be looming in the back of my mind though. When you are on orthopedic trauma call you don't really see the best of humanity. And because of that you develop a very morbid sense of humor to deal with life. I can't imagine what it's like being a police officer, but it must be worse.

The Monday night after call, I got a good night sleep. I felt better, but still off. Tuesday was the same. Wednesday, I felt a little more tired. And by Friday I was wiped out. It made no sense. The best way I can describe my complete exhaustion is like this. You know when you've been drinking too much Mountain Dew for too many weeks and then you decide to stop? Your body is tired. The temples of your head feel a little achy. Your arms and legs almost have a buzzing or a fuzzy feeling. That is how I felt. I went to bed at 7:00 pm. My wife was wanting to spend time together that evening and I as well, but I just couldn't. I needed sleep. I was surprised at how exhausted I was. And then it dawned on me.

Could I be depressed?

I have never had any issues with mental illness. I've always prided myself on being able to work hard with my mind and body. I gain a lot of self value from my work. I fix people. I get a great sense of masculinity from my job as well. Bones are pointing the wrong way. I pull on the bones and they point the right way. In orthopedic surgery we use saws, hammers, screws, drills. We put rods down people's femurs. Seriously, it is the macho of the surgery world. And surgery is the macho of the medical world. Lots of macho. Mucho macho. An overinflated macho for sure.

I also gain a lot of self worth from my work within the Mormon world. My brothers and I started this blog five years ago. I don't expect you to know this, but it takes a lot of work to run

a blog like this. We are constantly looking for people to write for us. Looking for someone who might be the next perm-blogger for Rational Faiths. We get submissions all the time. It takes time to take someone's guest blog-post and load it up, put all the hyper-links in, etc.

On top of that I do a weekly podcast with Bible scholar Dr. Sheldon Greaves. It takes a lot of work on my part as I am not a scholar, let alone a PhD Bible scholar. It takes me at least four hours a week in prep time. Then there is the podcast recording itself, which usually takes about an hour. That's five hours a week. That is on top of a demanding job, running a Mormon blog, and trying and constantly failing as father and a husband.

Recently I've started another podcast for Rational Faiths. It's with Dr. Darron Smith. The podcast is about racism. Again, this takes a lot of time. This past week (the week after my weekend of call) I decided to start editing the podcasts myself. I don't know how to do that so I got some help from Dan Wotherspoon. Even then, it took me four hours to edit a thirty minute podcast. Then I lost the edit. So I had to redo it. Ya. The first edit I did was this past Friday - the Friday I felt extremely tired.

So, that Friday night, after going to bed at 7:00 - I woke up three times with disturbing thoughts and it scared me. I just wanted to get back to sleep.

I first woke up at 1:00 in the morning and then about an hour later and then about an hour after that. Finally at 5:00 am I just stayed up. Each time I woke up, starting at 1:00 am, I had the same thought: Go get the hand gun and shoot myself.

I was startled. I had never had this kind of thought. I don't know how to describe it but I will try my best. You know when you were a kid and there was that one toy you wanted for Christmas? You thought about it over and over and over and over again. That's how it was. I couldn't understand why I was having these thoughts. I couldn't get them out of my mind. But it played over and over and over in my mind.

It wasn't as if I was thinking that my life is horrible and this is my way out. I have a good life. I wasn't thinking that if I was gone, my daughters' lives and wife's life would be better. It wasn't like that. But there was that persistent thought. An obsessive thought. A romantic thought.

I thought about those times when someone has died by suicide and "no one saw it coming." I was there. On that brink. I kind of understood how "*no one sees it coming.*" Because I didn't see it coming.

When I decided to stay up at 5:00 in the morning, I grabbed the box the gun was in and put it in the chair next to my wife's side of the bed. I was hoping this would provoke my wife to ask me why the gun was there when she woke up. I would tell her, and then she would take the gun out of the house. She did see it there when she woke up. She asked me. I told her, at least in my mind I told her. I asked her to get it out of the house. She didn't know how.

"I don't know how. I can't just throw it away."

I heard that, but it sounded like this to me, "Dude. What's the big deal? You aren't important to my life." I was devastated. I buried my head into the podcast I was editing.

Tired.

Not rational.

That romantic thought again and again and again – this time while I was wide awake. Listen to me!!! Then the self-doubt. Was I really feeling this way or am I making something up so as to manipulate my wife? If I was manipulating, to what end? Then thoughts came again and again and again and again. And the self-doubt of what I was experiencing came again and again and again. It was almost as if I was gaslighting myself.

I had the completely irrational thought of going upstairs to our bedroom. Grab the gun. Put one bullet in it. Open up the bathroom window. Take out the screen and shoot the gun into the grass of the backyard. That would get her attention. She would then really know I was being serious about getting the gun out of the house. It makes no sense. I didn't do it because I was afraid to touch the actual gun. I didn't trust myself.



That Saturday was the Saturday of the Women's March. My wife and daughters decided they would March. I recorded video and took pictures. I was overwhelmed by all the woman who marched in downtown Ashland, Oregon. I was inspired by my wife and two daughters. So inspired that I finally had that one hat made that I've been wanting ever since Trump made his "*bad hombres*" comment in the Presidential Debate. You see, I'm hispanic. The image at the top of this essay is my new anti-Trump hat. My hand is obscuring "bad", you can only see *hombre*. But right now I don't feel like a man. And right now I feel worse than bad.

Because still that thought. I couldn't get it to stop. There it was again and again and again and again.

We got home and I confronted my wife about her response. I expected to hear an apology. No apology. I was infuriated. I wasn't thinking clearly. As I look back, I think all of this was such a shock to her. Never had she heard anything so bizarre come out of my mouth.

I took our eleven year old daughter out to get supplies for her school science experiment. While out, I sent a horrible and mean text message to my wife. She insisted I come right home. She was worried. I wasn't being rational.

I wanted that gun out of the house. She let me know it was well-hidden. That wasn't good enough for me. It needed to be out. It had to be out. Gone. My mind couldn't rest. That thought. I was desperate. In my desperation, I texted my brother Paul. I asked him to call my wife and tell her to get the gun out of the house. I told him about my thoughts. I called my wife in a rage. I hung up. I then called my mother- in- law who lives around the corner.

I told my mother- in-law about my thoughts. I asked her to go to my house and get the gun. She pleaded that I not do anything. "Think about your daughters Mike and what this would do to them."

"I'm not going to do it. I just need the gun out." But what she was pleading made no sense to me anyways.

There was my eleven year old sweet daughter. She was looking up at me in horror. Why hadn't I made that phone call outside the car with her waiting for me inside the car? Now my eleven year old was left with that burden. What was wrong with me?

On our way back to the car I asked if she wanted to talk. She told me yes, but not until we got into the car.

She asked me if what I had told her grandma was true. She cried. Hands covering her eyes.

"I would never do that. I love you. I would never do that."

She cried.

"Don't tell your sister about this. She can't know. I will have mom talk to you. Don't you ask mom about it. "

What a mess I am. What a mess I was making.

I got home.

The gun was gone.

The thoughts immediately stopped.

My wife Cathy had me come upstairs. And I yelled. No. I screamed. I then crumpled on the floor. I was broken. I felt scales falling off of me. I was utterly naked. I wept. I was in a rage. I was worried. I was dark. What was wrong with me?

Cathy had me call a suicide hotline. That's the decision she and Paul had concluded after talking with each other on the phone. She knew that I would never allow her to take me to one of the local ERs. Everyone knows me there. What would they think?

I felt emasculated. I still do. My mind has always worked. My body has always worked. I've always been able to do hard things. I've always prided myself in being able to do the hard things others couldn't.

I spoke to the man on the phone. It helped a great deal. I knew I was out of harm's way. The thoughts stopped as soon as I knew the gun was gone.

My brother Paul sent me some text messages and I called him when I was done speaking with the kind man on the other line of the suicide hotline.

Right now, as I think of my brother, Paul, I am crying. His goodness. His love. Our common stories. Our common struggles. Speaking with him helped.

What was and is wrong with me?

I called in sick for the following Monday - the 23 of January, 2017. In the fifteen years I've been working as a Physician Assistant in orthopedic surgery, I've never once not come to work because I was sick. How embarrassed I am. I have always been strong. Even when sick, I've been strong.

Cathy reminds me that I shouldn't be embarrassed and ashamed, but I am. I don't feel like a man. I feel weak. I have friends – male friends – who suffer from depression. I know depression has nothing to do with one's masculinity. I understand that. Regardless of what I **know** this is what I **feel**. I don't know if that makes any sense, but this is my story.

I felt better Saturday night. My head was clearer. Cathy and I went out for a small dinner. But before we went out, I had my eleven year old crawl in bed with me and we snuggled and chatted. I told her to ask me any question she wanted. She pinched her nose because I had bad breath. I teased her about it. She asked me hard questions. I answered them.

"Dad, did you say the f-word when you were on the phone?"

"Ya."

"Did you say it when you were talking to mom?"

Sigh, "Ya."

She smiled. I reminded her of how much I love her and that I would never take my own life. We talked more. She pinched her little nose more. She asked me some more really tough questions.

This morning (Sunday) I woke up after a good night's rest. And I helped our eleven year old with her science project. Things weren't going as planned. I felt myself getting tired. I listened to my body. I must be getting overwhelmed. But with an elementary school science project? I laid down and tried to sleep.

When I woke up, I cried. If I can't handle a small science project, how can I handle work? How will I be able to support my family? Utter emasculation. Cathy came upstairs into the bedroom. I told her my thoughts and then I cried again. She hugged me. Reminded me of how important I am to her and reminded me that we would get help.

The previous week – the week before the inauguration, was the week when we all learned about the General Authorities' stipends. For some reason, it really bothered me and so I closed my account on Face Book. I needed a break. It was too much for me. Now as I sit here and type, I have to wonder if the blog, the podcasting, online Mormonism in general, is too much for me. To think I can't handle such small things just makes me feel dumb and weak.

Later on today (Sunday) I took our fifteen year old to youth symphony practice. She loves to listen to Dave Matthews. On our way to her practice, the song *Gravedigger* came on. I finally understood this line:

"Gravedigger, when you dig my grave will you make it shallow so I can feel the rain?"

Dave Matthews - Grave Digger



As I was looking back at my thoughts of that gun, I did have one fleeting thought that I quickly pushed out. If I did this thing, then somehow I would be more alive. My family would miss me but I would be more alive in their memories. Somehow death would make me feel again. It would make me alive. It would let me feel the rain.

I started writing this Sunday night. It's now Monday morning, 9:20 am. I slept well last night. I'm waiting for my doctor's office to call me back. As I think about this past weekend, I realize that I have written from a place of great privilege. I have a supportive family who loves me. Not all people have that. I have a good job through which I have good health insurance. Not all people have that. I have paid close enough attention to the discussions around depression and suicide that I was aware that something was wrong with me. Not all people have that. And despite me knowing what I know about depression and anxiety and suicide, I still feel emasculated. I have a platform to write about this dark moment in my life and you are reading it. Not all people have that privilege.

As I look back over the past week, I have to wonder if me closing my Face Book account was similar to how those who contemplate suicide will start giving important things away to friends and family. That is, they start distancing themselves from friends and family. Had I unconsciously done the same thing when I closed my account? I don't know.

Now I ask myself again, why have I written this? That's a hard question. I have several thoughts and I don't know which is the right answer. Maybe there is no answer to that question.

- **I need the attention**

There have been times when I have written a blog-post and I keep going back to see how many people have read it. It can be intoxicating and delusional. You begin to think you are more important than you are. Today, I don't feel that. So I don't think that is why I have written today.

- **I just need to write**

I think this is partially true. I believe the greatest writings and art come when we are in our darkest places. Perhaps I am writing this out of catharsis for me and me alone. Actually, I do want to write this while I'm in the middle of the ditch digging. I don't want to write this after I am feeling better. I need to write this through this darkened lens.

- **Privilege**

As I wrote earlier, I am writing from a place of privilege. But acknowledging one's privilege is never enough. It is only the uncomfortable beginning. I must also be willing to give something up. So in this circumstance, what could I possibly give up? Only one thing comes to mind. I must give up some of my privacy. Unfortunately that means giving up some of my family's privacy too. This is deeply embarrassing for me to write about, but it is the only way I can think of giving up something.

- **It will help others**

This might also be true but is uncomfortable for me to admit. It makes me feel like I'm setting myself up as some kind of savior. I am not. But I will say this – when Dr. Parkinson and I wrote our study about LGBTQ Mormon suicides, I learned some things that are very important. For those who have survived a suicide attempt, the decision to kill oneself was made very quickly. It was a sudden decision. It tended to not be something they contemplated for a long time. I knew that. *"We never saw this coming."* Now I know why no one ever sees it coming. The person who dies by suicide rarely sees it coming. It is a sudden decision. That is one reason I was able to slow myself down. I knew what the studies showed. Studies have also shown that more people sharing their experiences about why and how they did not take their own lives, can actually be a deterrent to those who are contemplating dying by suicide. Maybe my story will be a deterrent.

So with that, I end my essay. The essay has ended but my story has not ended. I'm still waiting for that phone call from my doctor. I've decided to step away from social media, from podcasting, from running Rational Faiths – at least for a while and maybe forever. Still tired. Still exhausted. Suicide thoughts long gone, but still feeling weak...My ego just completely crushed.

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Michael Barker

Michael is a Guatemalan-American Mormon living in the Northwest with his family. He is one of the proprietors of the Rational Faiths blog.

All posts by Michael Barker

3 Comments



Marion Fust Sæternes on February 24, 2017 at 7:59 am

This was well written, but I am at loss over what to comment. I do however want to comment, because I read breathlessly and am "berörd"(sw) – deeply affected. I see and recognize a similar weariness sometimes. (Current political and

ecclesiastical reality is difficult to shrug of and not be affected by emotionally!) I did not know "why no one ever sees it coming". I will remember this, it is important knowledge in life. Thank you for sharing and writing. May you heal! Both soon and well. Blessings. Reading RF has been important to me many times. Thank you again.

Reply



Gwen Hutchings on February 24, 2017 at 8:44 am

Dear Michael,

Over the past years I have come to respect you and your intellect deeply. What you wrote is powerful and vulnerable. I too have struggled with depression and it's terrifying.

Thank you for your honesty and for reaching out in such a powerful way.

Gwen

Reply



mario zullo on February 24, 2017 at 9:50 am

Michael, You don't know me and I only know you from this wonderful sight that the Lord let me to find on the internet. Sleep is a depressed person's best friend. I am not a therapist but simply a man that has come very close to the Lord because everything that I have worked hard to accomplish in this life was taken away from me these last couple of years. Family, wealth, friends and even my reputation of being the person that people would come to for advice. What replaced this complete void was the Lord. When He enters He will set up residence and will never leave. What has come to my mind right now is that you are burning yourself up. Everything that you feel is important in your life you are doing and your plate is just overflowing and you haven't had time to eat all that is on it. You need to start to slow down and let the Lord catch up to you and let Him guide you. You are taking on too many things and not enjoying the small important things. What you are doing is helping so many people out there find the truth and this is admirable but you need to remember that by sharing your light with everyone might leave you without one. I don't know how you can do this but the Lord knows. He knows how much you can handle. The gun was your ticket to stop doing what you were doing but it was going to be a permanent solution to a temporary problem. Extremes are bad, not enough and sometimes too much of anything is not good. Let the Lord guide you and don't rely of your human capabilities to sustain you. You can be in tip top shape and still feel like crap. It is not about you but about Him. Go back to basics and look inside of you and remember the past when you decided to do what you are doing right now. I

don't know you but I feel a love for you because we are all brothers and sisters in Christ. Let God be in charge and grab your hand and guide you. This article needed to be written by you and even though you might have only a few people that have replied, it doesn't mean that there are not more that are waiting for the right time. You only wrote it for an audience of one and He inspired you to write it, you did it, let Him be the God that He is.

I also have a blog with over 2,000 articles that I have written in just two years and I don't have thousands of people reading them but I am doing it because the Lord wants me to do it for Him and not for myself.

Reply

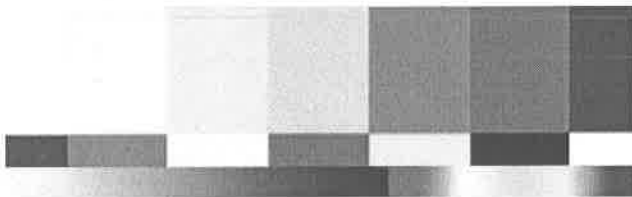
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