

# T H R E E

## Kids Who Kill - Themselves

*I've been bullied. They've taken my money. I will sacrifice myself. Please save other children.*

—suicide note of a 13-year-old boy who hanged himself after being tortured and bullied at school.<sup>1</sup>

*I*magine that in your town a number of teenagers have committed suicide. Would your community do anything about this serious situation immediately? The sad answer is probably not. Certainly not if you lived in Goffstown, New Hampshire. This town only came to the painful realization that there was a serious problem after five teens killed themselves over a two-and-a-half-year period in the early 1990's. One victim shot herself and left a pitiful note saying that she could no longer endure the harassment of her classmates. You would think that after the first one or two suicides someone would have tried to find out what could be making the town's children so distraught that they were taking their own lives. But it was not until five kids died and Goffstown learned that they had a youth suicide rate 40 percent higher than the national average that this town

decided there was a problem.<sup>2</sup> Now imagine that, instead, one child killed four others, then herself. Would people have noticed that? Certainly. The lesson is that suicides just don't seem to get people's attention the way murder does.

For example, not many people remember the name of a thirteen-year-old boy at a small-town high school in Tennessee near my hometown who was bullied and teased so regularly that he finally doused himself with gasoline and set himself on fire. Suicides like this never make the national news, especially if the youth takes his or her life at home or in private. There have been many towns like Goffstown over the years that have buried distraught teenagers who committed suicide. But there is hardly a public outcry when a young person takes his or her life because it is only the victim and his or her family who suffer (and maybe a few friends if the teen has any). As evidence of how little society cares, suicide statistics often take two or three years to become available to the public. You can find out the price of a stock, commodity or mutual fund in seconds, but the latest information on the emotional well-being of our teenagers is not available for years.<sup>3</sup>

What this tells us is that our society places more importance on economic factors than it does on social ones. This two-to-three year lag means that the public does not have information on how teens and kids in our country are doing emotionally, often until it is too late. But just because we choose not to be aware of a growing social tragedy does not mean that it isn't happening. In fact, there are kids who are determined to get our attention even if they have to become infamous in order to do it. In the early 1990's, adults started to pay more attention to teen suicide because now kids were "coming out of the closet" with their depression. Some psychologists say that depression is just anger turned inward; but what happens when teens and kids start unleashing that internal anger onto the outside world? Many more people are affected by their feelings. This is exactly what happened in 1991 when Jeremy Wade Delle spilled his guts (almost literally) in front of his classmates in Richardson, Texas.

## Suicide As A Precursor To Murder

*Jeremy*

*at home... drawing pictures... of mountaintops... with him on top  
lemon yellow sun... arms raised in a V... dead lay in pools of  
maroon below... Daddy didn't give attention... to the fact that  
Mommy didn't care... King Jeremy the wicked... ruled his world.*

*Jeremy spoke in class today*

*Jeremy spoke in class today*

*clearly I remember... picking on the boy... seemed a harmless little  
fuck... but we unleashed a lion... gnashed his teeth, bit the recess  
ladies breast... how could I forget... he hit me with a surprise left  
my jaw left hurtin'... dropped wide open... just like the day... like  
the day I heard... Daddy didn't give affection... and the boy was  
something that Mommy wouldn't wear... King Jeremy the wicked...  
ruled his world.*

*Jeremy spoke in class today*

*Jeremy spoke in class today*

*Try to forget this... try to erase this... from the blackboard.*

*-Jeremy by Pearl Jam, 1991*

Jeremy Wade Delle was sixteen years old in January of 1991 when he fired a .357 Magnum into his mouth and killed himself. Sadly, this alone wasn't all that unusual: many teens kill themselves every year. But their private acts of violence against themselves tend to go unnoticed. It was the not-so-private way Jeremy chose to end his life that brought him national fame (and a really cool song by Pearl Jam). Instead of just being another forgotten miserable teen who didn't make it through his high school years, Jeremy decided to use some creativity in ending his life: He blew his brains out in full view of an English class of thirty students at Richardson High School in Texas.

It seems that Jeremy had missed his second period English class and was told by the teacher to get an admittance slip from the school office. Instead, he came back with a gun. He walked to the front of the classroom. “Miss, I got what I really went for,” he said, and then placed the barrel of the gun in his mouth and fired.

As one would expect (and as Jeremy no doubt *did* expect), this action wreaked havoc on the emotional lives of those who witnessed his demise. The English teacher was dumbstruck and left standing against the wall crying and shaking. Students who witnessed the event, and even those who heard about it second hand, were ushered into counseling with the school district’s volunteer crisis team.

It came as a surprise to many that Jeremy would do such a thing. One student, Sean Forrester, 17, remembered Jeremy as “friendly with no outward signs of turmoil. He never looked like he had anything wrong with him... he always made a joke over everything.” Others remembered him differently. “He was real quiet and he acted down at times. He acted sad,” said fellow student Koury Kashiem. Few students knew Jeremy well because he had transferred from Bryan Adams High School in Dallas. He was described by most students as a loner.<sup>4</sup> Not long after his public suicide, the musical group Pearl Jam immortalized Jeremy in their popular song, “Jeremy” which put into words after his death what Jeremy couldn’t express in his short life.

Jeremy certainly got his point across. He was sad and desperate about his situation and decided that if he was to suffer, he would not do so alone. This approach is not unusual. Suicide is a violent act, often with its emphasis turned outward as much as inward. Many times, I have seen patients attempt suicide as a manipulative gesture.

In fact, the “you’ll miss me when I’m gone” approach is normal enough, in small doses. Who hasn’t thought from time to time about his or her own funeral and how upset and guilty people might feel if they had not treated you fairly during your life time (whether you deserved to be or not). Planning and

thinking about one’s suicide or death has a certain satisfaction to it for many people. Even the archetypal “normal” kid Tom Sawyer, in the Mark Twain classic of the same name, found pleasure in sneaking into his own funeral and watching the townspeople, who thought he had drowned in the Mississippi, grieve over his “untimely death.” But for most well-adjusted people, thinking about people’s reactions to their death is just fantasy, something they will never carry out. However, the emotional world of the child who commits suicide is often bleak and depressed and may or may not have anything to do with getting revenge. But in the case of Jeremy, choosing to kill himself in front of classmates had a certain sadistic quality to it. In fact, his public suicide can be seen as a transitional event, between quiet acts of private suicide and the vastly more public murder-suicide events of rampaging school shooters. Jeremy wanted to die, but he wanted to leave an indelible mark on those he identified as his tormentors. From there to murder is a short step indeed.

What could have brought him to such a state? Kay Redfield Jamison, a professor of psychiatry, accurately describes the mental state of those who commit suicide in her book, *Night Falls Fast—Understanding Suicide*. It is not just one event or illness that causes suicide; psychopathology is almost always there. Mood disorders such as depression or manic-depression are at the heart of most suicides. Difficulties in life can precipitate a suicide but they do not cause it.<sup>5</sup> It is usually a combination of events and emotional problems that lead people to take their lives. If Jeremy was having problems at home and being picked on by classmates, his depression may have been compounded. By choosing the school as the place he would die a violent death, he could make his feelings known both to his classmates and his parents. He might have spent hours, days or weeks thinking of the revenge he would get on them. By making them witness his death, he would leave many of them feeling guilty and questioning whether they had played any part in his decision. From here to rampaging school shooters, the path is clear. Perhaps in some kids’ minds, it is not

much more of a stretch to make others feel their actual pain physically as well as emotionally.

Now fast-forward to the school years 1997-1999. Gone are the days of the long-suffering nerd who turned his feelings of rage inward and *only* committed suicide. Today's kids have obviously learned that as long as they are the only ones in pain, little will be done to improve the situation. School authorities tend to take the path of least resistance, and since suicide doesn't inspire fear in other kids' parents, it doesn't inspire them to do much. So long as the question is merely one kid's suffering, they move slowly or not at all. I found this firsthand about five years ago when I was a consulting psychologist at a high school where one of my clients was a depressed girl. This fourteen year-old was a self-described nerd and "social outcast" who informed me that she was depressed all right – because a gang of girls at the school were bullying and threatening her on a regular basis. When I informed the school authorities of these findings, their reaction was, unfortunately, typical: Rather than go after this gang of girls (which might have raised repercussions) their solution was to send the depressed girl to an "alternative" school to finish out her high school years. The girl gang, meanwhile, got off scot-free, ready to find another victim. They, along with the school administration, did not have to change a thing. Only the victim suffered – and, quite obviously, nobody cared about her so long as she represented the path of least resistance. In another school-related incident, the victim was not lucky enough to escape her situation with a transfer to an alternative school. Thirteen-year-old April Michelle Himes of Richland, Washington was faced with the prospect of going to juvenile detention or returning to school to face taunting classmates (mainly the bullying was being done by a group of "popular" girls). Kids at school called her fat, threw things at her and pushed her around. They even ridiculed her with rumors that she stuffed tissue in her bra. She attempted suicide in October of 1999 and her parents admitted her to an inpatient mental health program and sought counseling, but said it didn't help. After missing fifty-three out of the required one

hundred and eighty days of school, she was told she would have to return to school or appear before a truancy board which could then send her to a juvenile detention center. She decided the better alternative was to go in her bedroom and hang herself with a belt.<sup>6</sup> Notice that the school did not do a thing—they did not go after the other girls who were making April's life a living hell. In times past, she could have just dropped out of school but now kids like her are trapped by compulsory education. The unpopular feel no one cares about their plight and they are left to suffer on their own. This of course, has been the fate of nerds since time immemorial. But something has changed. Now the formerly suicidal are taking others down with them.

There is a fine line between suicide and homicide. Many of the school shooters in recent years have expressed a wish to die or have taken their own lives. Kipland Kinkel (the Springfield, Oregon shooter) told one of the boys who wrestled him to the ground to "Shoot me." Michael Carneal (the Paducah, Kentucky shooter) was said to have uttered the words "Kill me now" to a classmate who wrestled him to the ground.<sup>7</sup> Kids like Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold knew that they would not survive their rampage, and seemed perfectly comfortable with that. These kids were showing us that if they are going to die, they will take make sure that their death does not go unnoticed. Harris and Klebold, who killed thirteen students and themselves at Columbine High School in Colorado, are extreme examples of two kids who wanted to be noticed in death. Schoolmates had been said to have tortured them with jeers and taunts about their trench coats and jocks had called them "fag" and "gay." But in a video made shortly before their attack, they bragged about how film makers like Quentin Tarantino and Stephen Spielberg would be fighting for the rights to their stories. That's even better than a cool song by Pearl Jam.

In the United States between 1980 and 1992, the rate of suicide in children ten to fourteen increased by 120%.<sup>8</sup> The Centers of Disease Control and Prevention also found that children aged ten to fourteen committed suicide twice as often in

the 1990s as they did in the 1980s.<sup>9</sup> Suicide statistics from 1992 show that thirty-four percent of Latina high school girls and twenty-four percent of white high school girls in the United States have considered suicide in the past year.<sup>10</sup> However, boys are more likely to actually kill themselves. Parents and school authorities should also be aware that boys and girls use suicide for different reasons. Girls often attempt suicide but do not usually follow through as often as boys. Perhaps girls use suicidal gestures and self-destruction as ways to achieve power or to coerce others, very much like boys use threats of violence against other people. “Do this or I will hurt myself.”<sup>11</sup> It is much more socially acceptable for girls to say they will do something self-destructive than that they will harm someone else. Sometimes, even after girls or women hurt or kill others, they will say they did so because they were trying to kill themselves, even when that is pretty obviously not the case. For example, Susan Smith, who killed her two children by putting them in a car and plunging them into a lake said that she had “meant to kill herself.” It could be that girls feel they cannot act violently towards others so they try to convince others that they meant to hurt themselves. But whatever the reason for suicide or suicidal gestures, the underlying emotions are important for us to understand if we are to get to the heart of why so many teens feel the need to commit violent acts against themselves or others.

### Why Is Suicide So Popular?

There has been a great deal of speculation about why suicide has increased among younger and younger age groups. Dr. Jamison says that one of the most commonly proposed explanations for this increased rate is that the average age of puberty has decreased sharply over the last several decades; related to this is the fact that depression is now occurring at earlier ages. Puberty is now occurring between the ages of twelve and fourteen; it can bring with it a whirl of hormones and an increase in

psychiatric disorders.<sup>12</sup> A study in *USA Today* showed that depression is hitting at younger ages than ever before. Twenty-three percent of our young people report having serious depression before the age of twenty. Defining depression in kids is also tricky and may mean that there are actually more depressed kids in the U.S. than we know about. Some children are unable to express their feelings and, therefore, teen depression can sometimes look like normal behavior.<sup>13</sup> Children who are perfectionists, often try to appear normal, please others and not call attention to themselves. Often, parents are not aware of the depression and suicidal thoughts of their children, which makes the potential for disaster worse.<sup>14</sup>

One trend I have noticed is that while the rate of suicide has increased over the past forty years for younger kids, the rate of homicide and other crimes among *very* young juveniles has also increased. The Office of Juvenile Justice has found that while the overall rate of juvenile crime has decreased, younger juveniles make up a higher percentage of those involved in crimes. One third of all juveniles arrested are under the age of fifteen.<sup>15</sup> One interesting possibility for this increase in criminal behavior comes from what experts call the “maturity gap.” The maturity gap is the discrepancy between biological maturity and social maturity. In other words, there is a long lag between the time young people hit puberty and the time they are assigned adult status. In modern society, this gap is widening significantly: as Dr. Jamison pointed out in her book on suicide, kids are hitting puberty at earlier ages than ever before. Yet they are being treated as children at ages that would have been considered grown-up only a few decades ago.

Consider: at age fourteen, a boy in the Roman Empire was considered to be a man. He could join the Roman legions, make contracts, marry, and hold office. A girl of the same age was considered a woman, eligible for marriage and able to run a household. Similarly, the tradition of *bar mitzvah* recognizes that in ancient Jewish society a boy became a man at thirteen. Even in earlier days of our own society, people in their early teens were treated as adults. George Washington was bossing

survey teams in the wilderness at the age of sixteen; in the Navy, midshipmen aged fourteen were officers, with corresponding power and responsibilities. As recently as the Vietnam war, we saw many underage soldiers – the youngest Marine to be killed was only thirteen (though he had falsified his age). And seventeen-year-olds were legally eligible to fight.<sup>16</sup>

Yet the age of puberty was much higher in earlier years: that Roman fourteen-year-old might have joined the legion, but probably couldn't shave. Today, puberty is usually much earlier than fourteen, but adult privileges and responsibilities come much later. After a crime, of course, society is increasingly willing to try teens as adults. But there is no similar move to treat them as adults in other ways: Young people are told not to have sex at a time when their hormones are raging. They are not allowed to smoke, although their peers from twenty years ago smoked with abandon (interestingly, fewer teens smoked then). Teen curfews, increasingly popular with politicians, keep them cooped up. Imagine your frustration at thirteen when you realize that these infantilizing restrictions will continue until you are 18 (or older) – that is, for a period equal to almost half your life to date. As many teens have told me on my Internet survey (for more details on the survey, see Chapter Five) “adults don't take us seriously, they think we are stupid or something. Or they treat us like we are all criminals.” That sentiment is echoed by many other teens. As the quote from a student after the Springfield, Oregon school shooting at the beginning of Chapter One says, “The only time society pays attention to sixteen-year-olds is when they pick up a gun and start shooting.” And as you will see in the next chapter, this explosion of violence among our young people is clearly what is happening in our schools and communities across the country.

We have made our schools like prisons, with guards, lockdowns, and assaults on students' dignity. Why, then, are we surprised when so many students respond the way prisoners always have: with depression, suicide, and violence? Few adults would put up with the restrictions and indignities that

face the average seventh-grader today. Yet that seventh grader is physically an adult, and would have been treated as one in most human societies over history. These contradictions are at the heart of the problem, and the kids know it.

## Notes

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2. *Bullies and Victims*, page 100-101.
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9. *Bullies and Victims*, page 109.
10. *Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey* (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Health Statistics) 1992.
11. Pearson, P. (1997). *When She Was Bad*. United States: Penguin Books.
12. *Night Falls Fast—Understanding Suicide*, page 202.

13. Elias, M. (1998, August 13). "Childhood depression Rich: or poor, more kids struggle with symptoms." *USA Today*.
14. *Night Falls Fast*, page 90.
15. OJJDP Research: Making a Difference for Juveniles, August 1999, page 14.
16. Dunnigan, J. F. & Nofi, A.A. (1999). *Dirty Little Secrets of the Vietnam War*. New York: St. Martin's Press, page 4.