

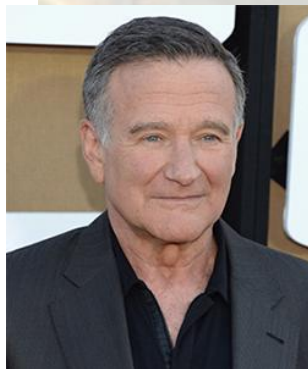
## AFTERSHOCKS: THE DEATH OF ROBIN WILLIAMS

What went wrong? How could Mork from Ork slash his wrists, then hang himself with a belt at his Tiburon home? If money and fame don't buy peace of mind, what hope is there for depressed people who are neither rich nor adored by millions?



BY SUSAN ROBISON

It seems that Robin Williams battled fear and depression, as well as his addictions, for his whole adult life. In the performing arts, you're only as good as your last joke or movie role. If the interesting parts were drying up and the comedy routines didn't meet William's expectations of himself, his mood must have worsened. Being newly diagnosed with early-stage Parkinson's disease could have been more than he thought he could bear.



Williams was best known for his rapid and fluid improvisation. Yet many of those wisecracks were actually created and memorized beforehand: Williams put a lot of thought into cataloguing his material, even paying other comics for lines he admired.

He does not seem to have done much planning for the act of killing himself: he did not cut himself deeply enough to die, and the belt was his final improvisation. If someone had interrupted him, his doctors would have sought treatments to lift his despondency. Chance and timing failed the great comedian and his loved ones for a moment.

Many suicidal people can be swayed. "Razors pain you/Rivers are damp...You might as well live." wrote poet Dorothy Parker after a failed suicide attempt. There is a study of long-term survivors of Golden Gate Bridge jumps. Years later, the majority were still alive. Most said they were glad they lived. While these responses might sound as if they came from "It's a Wonderful Life" and were intended to make the researchers feel better, the survivors' actions speak for themselves: they didn't just find another bridge or try a different method of killing themselves. (For some people, that particular bridge is the ONLY acceptable way out of their misery: the San Mateo Bridge, say, isn't even worth considering. Those anti-jump nets below the walkways are long overdue.)

Religion and popular opinion have judged suicides very harshly. Dante placed them in the seventh circle of Hell, with murderers and blasphemers. Despair has been called the unforgivable sin, with suicides denied burial in hallowed ground. Under those circumstances, who would blame people for hiding their intentions, even if the prospect of damnation deterred some from killing themselves?



One who was not deterred was my uncle Herbie. Gifted at languages and music, he liked to disrupt his English class by reciting the “Rime of the Ancient Mariner” from memory. (Coleridge’s poem is a story about sin, despair and penance, in which the Mariner only gains relief by telling his tale to strangers. I do not believe Herbie chose this poem randomly.)

Grandfather wanted his only son to play football. Instead, Herbie spent his childhood tagging along after my mother, an adventurer who vastly preferred exploring the woods and pinning copperheads to the ground with a forked stick to babysitting timid Junior.

After serving in World War II, Herbie sought treatment for his depression – an unusual move in those days. He may have said he was ‘shell-shocked’ – a term for what we now call PTSD. His therapist was misled about how seriously ill Herbie was. By the time the doctor grasped the depth of his despair, Herbie had taken a fatal overdose. Some family members just shrugged off his death as the final screw-up of a weakling who lacked the backbone to cope with his life. Cruelty born of ignorance still enforces secrecy and shame.

The terrible death of a gifted and well-loved star just might reduce the stigma attached to seeking help. The EAP is just one resource we have for coping with emotional issues. We can look out for those close to us. We can be each others’ guardian angels.



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# GOOD WILL HUNTING

