

A heroic life lived

I find it infuriating that Craig Wishnick's life was reduced to a few lines in newspapers last week - "The man who jumped to his death from the Walkway Over the Hudson has been identified by state park police as Craig R. Wishnick, 27, of New Paltz." This is the sixth suicide that I can recall in New Paltz. Each case involved different circumstances, different motivations, although the family pain was the same. Four of these cases, like Mr. Wishnick's, involved young male adults.

Mr. Wishnick was already talking about suicide before he knew the word or understood the concept. He was five years old when he asked his mother and father why people have to live even if they don't want to. Until he was two years old he was a happy, normal child and then the difficulties began. He stopped cuddling with his parents or allowing himself to give or receive affection. He did not play with toys. According to his mother, Fran, he was always "outside the circle" in pre-school. Nevertheless, he taught himself to read before he entered kindergarten. At nine years old he won an essay contest that explained why he chose to become a vegetarian. He maintained that diet all his life.

Mr. Wishnick's diagnosis was autism of the Asperger's variety, severe clinical depression and several medical malfunctions of his immune system.

Diagnoses are just words. Reality is something else. Imagine for an instant that the part of your brain which can interpret literature and film, read facial expressions, understand emotions, recognize them correctly and especially allow the ability to interact appropriately with all other human-beings, was non-functioning. Life would be continually confusing. All efforts at making contact would seem to fail. Depression would be unrelenting. Yet Craig tried all his life to overcome these limitations, with poignancy, at times heart-breaking, at other times totally charming.

In an effort to uncover the depth of truth behind people's words and actions, Craig wrote to his mother and his therapist,

"I'm realizing more about myself and how I usually seek people's approval not in words but in gestures and the need for people to approve of me through their gestures is huge and cannot be overstated. If I don't receive the approval in gestures when I'm around others in a social environment, then I feel like a complete failure until I remove myself from that environment. Just one second of giving a light, pleasant facial gesture to me I say something that feels good, sounds thoughtful, or is positive for the other person goes a very long way, unless the gesture is exaggerated or strong in my mind, in which case I'd get scared.

"I was hanging out in a local café type environment and someone I knew from Quaker meetings came by and said, 'Hi.' At this point, unless other people lead the conversation (i.e. tell me if they came over for a specific reason or just to chit chat and for how long), I'm not sure how to respond. I just excitedly said, 'Hi' back and he asked me if I'm going to the Quaker services tomorrow. I said, 'Yes' and he said, 'Probably.' What could I say next? I asked him what he's doing here (not sure if that's the right wording) and he said he's hanging out with his friend. He started slowly backing away, so I said I'd see him at the meeting tomorrow. I really don't know what else I could have/should have said. Any advice?"

Throughout Craig's life he made herculean, minute-by-minute efforts to become or at least appear normal.

He endured three neuropsychological extensive testings. During his life he saw at least nine therapists and psychiatrists. He voluntarily placed himself multiple times into the hospital. He tried neurofeedback, massage and acupuncture many times. Craig was always searching for ways to feel



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better.

Congruent with all this heartache were also triumphs. Craig went to McDaniel College where he majored in political science and international relations and minored in Spanish. There he won many awards for excellence in his field of study. He graduated Summa Cum Laude.

His mother told me that the little bit of joy he experienced in his life was when he traveled to countries where he explored the indigenous populations, walked the streets and for once really was legitimately an outsider. It was a relief for him to truly not belong in a foreign land when all his life he was mocked, rejected and considered an outsider where he was supposed to have belonged.

Craig was not without the power to affect and change the lives of people he encountered, including his parents. It takes some level of charisma to have accomplished this result. As told to me by his mother:

"One college break he had one of his best conversations with Ken, his dad. Craig asked him what his values were when he was in college. Then Craig asked him why his values had changed so much from what he believed when he was his age. Craig's questions made Ken think a lot and that evening Ken asked me if there was any good reason why we couldn't sell our house and spend a few years volunteering at a residential farm that helped young adults with mental illness? I was startled because we had never ever discussed doing something like that and Ken was usually not that spontaneous! I thought about it. I remembered how much Craig's life had been improved by his stay at Gould Farm (a residential treatment facility). So, we did it! Sold the house and went! First, we moved to Mill Spring, North Carolina to volunteer at CooperRuis for about a year and then to Monterey, MA to work and volunteer at Gould Farm for about a year and a half. These experiences changed our lives. We learned to love the clients at both places and saw their struggles and heroism - just like our son's. Although Craig could not express it directly, I know he was proud of us."

Although Craig had spoken intermittently of committing suicide all his life, the actuality blind sided his parents. They had seen him go through so many episodes of deepening despair, adjust his medications and somehow survive. They assumed this would have the same eventual outcome. It did not.

Craig left two notes. Referring back to his love for animals that was his inspiration for becoming a vegetarian at age nine, he asked his therapist to use animals to treat mental illness and autism like his own.

He also wrote a note to his parents, telling them that he had unused Trailways tickets in his apartment. He wanted his parents to have the tickets.

Craig's mom told me that there was not one minute of one day in Craig's life after his second year that she and her husband were not worried about him. I know what that feels like. So do all parents. It's that cold empty panicky feeling in the pit of the stomach. I can't imagine how his mom and dad endured this for his lifetime. How did they love a child who would not allow them to touch him or who could not express positive emotions towards them?

A parent's unconditional love is mysterious, sometimes flawed, often as close to divine love as we will know in this world. For the Wishnicks, the worry is finally over, but the love will continue forever.



Craig Wishnick.