

Hate Kills: A social justice response to “suicide”

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(This article is framed from a keynote address delivered in October 2011 by Vikki at the CASP [Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention] National Conference: New Conversations on Suicidality. Jennifer White offers her reflections and critique in the margins.)

Thanks for welcoming me. "Suicide" is not an issue on which I'm an expert at all. I'm not speaking in the domain really of what gets called suicide, I'm here more as an activist in the social justice movement, in which there are no experts, and a whole bunch of workers. I greatly appreciate being invited and I'd like to thank Dammy Albach for meeting with me for coffee and welcoming me to your community. When the committee invited me to speak I said "I'm not sure you want me. I'm going to say "shit", I have tattoos and I'm going to talk about justice - this usually isn't comforting stuff". Everybody always says they want you, so I said "No, you need to meet with me and make sure I'll be of use". You want to go places where you're in the right place - so I'm convinced that we're all in the right place, and we're all doing the same work. I want to be clear that I'm using the language of social justice not in a righteous way but in an inviting way, and I hope this talk will connect well with your own frames of reference. Many of you I know are social justice activists and you may already well use an anti-oppression frame. I might articulate things a bit differently for some folks.

My voice is shaky and I've been thinking about you. I'm nervous about this keynote in a nice way, in a way that has me wanting to attend to accountability, for all the people we've lost to suicide. My voice will shake because my heart is broken. The thing I love about us is we can have broken hearts and continue to walk and do this work. So I'm holding close all my dear ones and lost ones, people that I've lost to what gets called "suicide"- in particular young queer kids who did not kill themselves but I truly believe were murdered by hate. I want to be accountable to them in the work that I do and what I'm saying today.

There are many paths to doing this work. When I was a clinical supervisor working with survivors of torture, I supervised a psychiatrist from South America who did Rorschach tests, and he was a fabulous therapist who really helped people lessen their suffering (Reynolds, 2010a). I never thought I'd find solidarity with that work. It's not necessarily the tools we're using but the ethics we bring to the work that matter (Reynolds, 2009). While I might be speaking about something that doesn't feel familiar, I want to remind you that I have respect for what you're doing. I'm not presenting a model or a way of working that's right, necessarily. It's just been super useful for me and in line with my ethics of justice-doing.

Here are the objectives of what we're going to try to attend to today:

1. Consider an anti-oppression analysis of what gets called suicide,
2. Engage with critical language practices, and
3. Look at the wider social responses to "suicide".

I need to start by acknowledging that we're on First Nations land, and that this is Indigenous territory. Because we're in British Columbia this land was never ceded, that means never surrendered. Because our Prime Minister took it upon himself to apologize on behalf of all settler people for "residential schools", I need to take more space to say that he didn't apologize on my behalf (Coates & Wade, 2009; Richardson & Reynolds, 2012). That non-apology is one of the examples of the kind of language that silences dissent. The purpose of that apology was to tell people to "shut up already, we've done this,

Comment [JW1]: The placing of the word suicide in quotation marks effectively disrupts its taken-for-granted quality. I understand this to mean that suicide is not a single, stable, nor self-evident reality. It is interesting to consider how reading this text (instead of listening to Vikki speak it) offers a different vantage point for making meaning.

Comment [JW2]: I welcome the day when the field of suicidology might get re-imagined as one in which "there are no experts, and a whole bunch of workers." I like this idea and take it as an invitation to be curious about how our field of suicide prevention is steeped in "expert knowledge" and consider how it might be otherwise

Comment [JW3]: What a great way to recognize our solidarity, even though we might be "imperfect allies" (to quote Vikki)

Comment [JW4]: I was at a meeting this past week where a colleague quoted this line from Vikki's talk. This is a wonderful example of resonance and what Michael White (2011) refers to as "transport" - these ways of putting it *do* things; they take us places!

Comment [JW5]: When we speak about "suicide" in these terms - "murdered by hate" - a whole new range of possible future responses is made available. No longer is the responsibility for change located in the individual person (as in traditional psychotherapy practices) but our attention is drawn to the social and historical conditions that enable oppression, cruelty, hatred and domination to take hold

Comment [JW6]: This type of analysis is generally underdeveloped in the field of suicidology and it is ripe for further exploration

we've done our thing". I work at WAVAW (Women Against Violence Against Women) an anti-violence centre, and when men say "I'm real sorry honey" we don't say "put the kids in the car, you're going home, he's sorry, it's good". We're not all good. So as a settler I want to say to any Indigenous or First Nations people here and who we work with, that my settler people didn't sit down and decide what we did, what we were sorry for, how we wanted to make repair, or what our plans are to never do this again. That is what I hold a man to if he has perpetrated violence against women. And that's what I want to hold myself personally and my settler people collectively to. I want to acknowledge my commitment to work with other settler people to organize around these things and to try to bring some accountability for this violence and oppression, and I'm sure many people here feel the same.

I'm looking at "suicide" from a frame of social justice activism which is profoundly collaborative. I need to acknowledge that I have been taught by everybody I've worked alongside who has struggled with suicide, by everybody who has died by suicide, by all the families and therapists and teams that I "super"wise. Also by social justice movements, by my work against the death penalty, my work with refugees and survivors of torture, and by my work at WAVAW, and the team at PRISM, where we work with queer/trans/two-spirit folks¹. So all of these domains contribute to my understandings of this work, and most particularly, my father's teachings on dignity, my extended family, and my Irish Catholic/Newfoundland/English culture. So I'm speaking from a domain of social justice activism as part of this conference's theme, which is I think why I could be invited, "New Conversations on Suicidality" and I'm talking from an ethic of justice-doing (Reynolds, 2010b, 2010c).

Well one of the good reasons to be around smart people like Johnny Morris is they give you good books like Ian Marsh's *Suicide, Foucault, history and truth* (2010). Marsh uses a Foucault analysis (1972) of suicide which offers a lovely groundbreaking framework for understanding suicide on which this conversation is built. Marsh outlines the movement of understandings of suicide from issues of morality to being understood as issues of criminality, through the present understandings of suicide as mental illness.

One of the things that makes it hard to get the word suicide across my lips is the idea that it's constructed so individually. When we look at suicide from a social justice perspective we resist the individualism of suicide. This isn't something that happens to one person, and it's not something that one person does. Nobody kills themselves – these things do not happen in isolation. But always, things are in a context and because we live in a society that has not delivered on the promises of social justice,

¹ "Queer" has been adopted by groups of people I work with as an umbrella term for some people who do not identify as strictly heterosexual. I use this term to speak of lesbian, gay, bisexual, Two-Spirit, and queer identified people, acknowledging that this is a problematic term for many reasons (Fassinger & Arsenau, 2007). People I work alongside who identify as queer may be in any of these groups, but primarily identify outside of heterosexual normativity, which refers to discourses which promote and police heterosexuality as normal. People who I work alongside who identify as transgender or trans do not identify strictly with the gender they were assigned to at birth, and may transition culturally, socially and/or physically to a gender in which they feel more congruent, which could be something other than male or female (Nataf, 1996; Devon McFarlane, personal communication, 2011). Many people do not identify their gender in any way, and others identify as gender variant, gender non-conforming or gender queer, meaning something different than trans and outside of the normative gender binary (Janelle Kelly, personal communication, 2011). All of these terms are problematic, contested and evolving. I am using these terms for clarity and because groups of folks I work alongside have settled on this imperfect phrasing for now (Reynolds, 2011a).

Comment [JW7]: With this paragraph, I see Vikki locating herself as a member of the "settler group." This reminds me of the work of other anti-racist scholars and practitioners who insist on the importance of naming and acknowledging the dominant "practices of whiteness" that often go unremarked on (see for example Donna Jeffrey's work 2005). In my experience, the mainstream study and practice of suicide prevention has taken an uncritical view of culture, typically thinking of culture in terms of racialized categories and binaries, where whiteness is assumed to be the (unspoken) normative center against which all "others" are compared.

Comment [JW8]: Another great way to show how playing with words leads to novel meanings and possibilities

Comment [JW9]: In this way, all suicides are "assisted suicides." This is a theme I am currently exploring in my own work and writing. The inspiration to write more on this topic came when I recently attended an international meeting on suicide and a colleague declared that there were two types of suicides: those that were "externally driven" and those that were "internally driven." When I asked him to provide an example of the latter category he offered the example of the lone man who goes off in a field somewhere to kill himself – as if this person's suicide could be entirely explained without reference to context, history, relationships, cultural norms, etc. I must confess that I cannot imagine such a person!

which we are well qualified and able to deliver, we always have to structure into our analysis of a person's death, the context of social injustice in which they lived. One of the things I resist is trying to put the issues of social injustice inside the minds of clients, in particular in terms of Marsh's frame of suicide being understood as mental illness. I want to be really careful that while I do believe in mental illness and that people struggle with different things, and that all suicide is not entirely an issue of social justice, at times we can do injustice, or replicate oppression by locating social problems like social injustice issues inside the minds of people (Gergen, 1989). I truly believe that hate kills, and hate is not a metaphor (Richardson & Reynolds, 2012).

I'm informed by Canadian anthropologist Erving Goffman, particularly his writing on stigma from so long ago that have been so important (1963). In the 60's Goffman talked about human beings as activists for their own lives (1961). When he talks about stigma, what he is talking about is the need to "other" people. Our children are born perfect: Our children are not born wrong. There is nothing wrong with people. What is wrong is that we create structures of what is "normal". Categories always exclude and there are people that are not *belonged*, and these categories are always organized by power (Crenshaw, 1995). So people are "othered" (Sampson, 1993). Goffman talks about the fact that you have to attack identities, you have to spoil identities, there is nothing wrong with a kid until they go to school and find out they are not normal. Remember when you went to school and found out you were a freak? I didn't know everyone didn't share socks with their sisters- that everybody owned their own "stuff", and you were supposed to be really invested in that.

Family Services of Greater Vancouver has a poignant, heartbreaking poster that does visually everything that I'm trying to do with words. It's a picture of a young man who is homeless and it's very easy to think this kid might struggle with substance abuse. It might be easy to tell yourself this kid is depressed, suicidal, but if we look at what this kid is standing in front of we see a graffiti mural in the background, with the words "faggot", "homo" and a picture of an angry father with a raised fist saying, "No son of mine..." This kid is not homeless, there is a home for him, and he has been kicked out of that home. He's parentless, not homeless. I think the brutality and violence of the context is all there. But we are invited to talk about this kid as if, in the interior of his brain there is some depression happening. I think this wider picture does a much better job of explaining what is actually going on from a social justice lens.

When I talk about a critical engagement with language I am particularly informed by the work of Canadian response-based therapists Linda Coates and Allan Wade (2007, 2004). They teach about how language is used in relation to violence to do some really powerful things. They outline these four operations of language:

1. Obscuring violence
2. Hiding the victim's resistance to violence
3. Obscuring the perpetrator's responsibility, and
4. Blaming the victim.

I'm going to walk us through all four of these operations of language specifically in relation to survivors of torture and what gets called suicide.

Like all of you, I'm not talking academically. I mean I have a PhD but that's not what qualifies me for this work. When I talk about survivors of torture I'm talking about real people that I've worked with and been in solidarity with in Canada and other places: Tibetan refugees in Nepal and India, being in Chile along with survivors of torture and their families, in Australia and New Zealand. These good people have taught me that people don't kill themselves when they have survived torture.

Comment [JW10]: I am wondering how this helps us to make sense of the fact that statistically speaking, the vast majority of suicides are among middle-aged, straight, white men. This is a group that we would all tend to agree enjoys many privileges in our society. They are not typically the group that comes to mind when we speak of having lived experiences of social injustice. At the same time, I think it is important to consider the ways in which narrow notions of masculinity and other practices of patriarchy, not only limit possibilities and access to resources for women and people of colour, they do not seem to be serving men very well either.

Comment [JW11]: Yes, Ian Marsh talks about this as a "compulsory ontology of pathology" which I understand to mean that in our contemporary times, we cannot think of suicide without thinking about it in terms of it being a consequence of mental disorder.

Comment [JW12]: I agree with this and think it is important to be explicit about. Borrowing from Ian Marsh's work, I think that suicide is never just one singular, stable thing that remains the same over time. Just as it can't always be completely understood through the singular lens of psychopathology, it also cannot always and everywhere be understood solely as a response to social injustice. At the same time, suicide as a response to social injustice is a fruitful and underexplored conceptualization that can provide us with an additional platform from which to address it.

Comment [JW13]: This is a good example of the medicalization of suffering.

1. When a survivor of torture dies by "suicide" the violence that is obscured is the violence of torture itself. What is talked about is the how depression killed them, or anxiety killed them, perhaps it was pills. The violence of torture is absent and disappeared.

2. The language of suicide hides the victim's resistance to the violence of torture, which is politicalized violence. All of the people that I work with survived the torture, got out of the countries in which that occurred, (unless they are the people I work with who have survived residential schools), found me, came to therapy, and participated with me. I mean, they fought full on for their lives. Whenever people are oppressed they resist, and the language of suicide lies about that (Reynolds, 2010a, 2008; Richardson & Wade, 2008). The fact that they lost that battle against torture speaks to the power and inhumanity of their enemies, it doesn't say very much about them as the victims of torturers. So hiding the victims' resistance to violence is something that the language "commit suicide" does that I can't fit within my frame of social justice.

3. The language of suicide hides the perpetrators' responsibilities. When people who survived torture have lost their lives to what gets called suicide the person is held responsible for killing themselves. This exonerates the actual people who tortured this person, the government that gave sanction to the torture and trained the torturers and ensured that they had political impunity - that they would not be held criminally responsible for this violence causing death. The corporations who funded those governments to do these things, to make the country good for profit and open for business and on board with neo-liberal economics of exploitation are off the hook. There are many people who have blood on their hands and yet the language of suicide only blames that survivor of torture.

4. The language of suicide blames the victims of torture for their own murders. Look at the language, to "commit": You commit crimes, you commit suicide. When someone commits suicide we can, like Goffman says, create a spoiled identity of a failed person. They failed as human beings and of course all of us know that is not true. That is a lie. That is so dishonouring of the person. They did not kill themselves, their lives were stolen. From a social justice stance we cannot side with insidious practices of blaming the victims.

My voice is shaky because it's heart breaking and these are real human beings we are talking about. Torture is happening in the world and our country is implicated.. I mean we had Dick Cheney, the former Vice President of the United States, here in Vancouver a week ago selling his book on why torture is a good idea, and claiming he had the moral courage to bring torture back to polite conversation. And our police assisted people paying \$500 a ticket past non-violent protesters sitting with inter-linking arms, so that this perpetrator of crimes against humanity could profit from torture.

Political violence is particular and it's important that we look at the specific contexts of political violence in which any suicide occurs. For example, when we look at Aboriginal and First Nations communities and Indigenous people where levels of what are called suicide are enormous. What needs to be considered as the context of any suicide in these Indigenous communities is 500 years of occupation, 500 years of resistance, genocide, land theft, residential schools - schools that had grave yards and very little education (Hill, 2010; Regan, 2010; Harris 2004, 2002; Miller, 1996). We must consider the apprehension of children which is ongoing, because we don't have the social structures to keep those families together- not because social workers are bad. We must consider Canada's hesitancy to sign the United Nation's Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People.² When we use the

² The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) is a non-binding document which recognizes Indigenous people's basic human rights and rights to self-determination, language, equality and land. It was adopted by the General Assembly of the UN in September 2007.

language of suicide we can construct not only that individuals as failed, but that their cultures are failed, their families are failed. This again lines up with ideas of being critical about the language we use. And critical about ideas and practices that keep us from looking at the wider contexts of injustice to understand things, instead of inviting talk about the faulty interior of the minds of oppressed persons. Oppression doesn't happen to people in their minds, it happens in the world (Reynolds, 2010b).

I'm greatly concerned by state killings. I'm greatly disconcerted when a government that calls itself a democracy kills their own citizens. I find this alarming, and it does not fit with democracy. State killings, such as the recent execution of Troy Davis, have led many people to new thinking that we have to resist state killings and executions. The language of the death penalty is very different than language that says the state is killing its own people. Troy Davis said that he didn't give up his appeals even though he knew he was going to be killed. He didn't give up his appeals because he wanted everybody in this room to know what happened to him. This is part of his activism. Troy resisted his death with moral courage and on behalf of everybody, not only in the United States, but around the world, where state executions are happening, and this country where there are ramblings that the government wants to bring state killings back.

Canada hasn't executed anyone since 1962 and I personally do not want to see us kill again. I worked on behalf of prisoners on death row in the USA in particular with Amnesty International's campaign against the death penalty. In the USA when someone finally gives up their appeals they loosely talk about it as a "state assisted suicide". You can see how atrocious this language is. This is at best a "prisoner assisted homicide": At best. But you can't hold a person responsible for choosing death if they don't get to choose life. This is the kind of unethical language that is insidious in political violence.

Let's look at what is called "political suicide", for example, the death of Bobby Sands and the hunger strikes of Irish Catholic political prisoners against the Britain government. The purpose of their hunger strike was to become recognized as political prisoners so that they would have the Geneva Convention brought in so that they would have rights as political prisoners, and so they couldn't be tortured. They used the hunger strike as a tactic because they had no other access to power. Constructing these deaths by hunger strike as suicide and as an issue of mental illness or criminality or morality misses entirely the mark of their autonomy, their moral courage, their resistance and intelligence. The language of suicide obscures the political situation in which those deaths as well occurred.

I caught up with folks from the Canada Tibet Committee and one of the recent developments that is extremely alarming I'm sure some of you here are aware of, is the self-immolation of Tibetan monks. This is not something that has gone on historically - it's a new thing where monks and nuns have been "committing suicide" by self-immolation, setting themselves on fire. This is a sign of how desperate people are in a country that is experiencing genocide and widespread torture that has been going on for over 50 years. The China government is effectively wiping out the nation of Tibetans. And so you see these kinds of responses, such as political suicides, escalating. Understanding these deaths as issues of mental illness of any of these particular young men and women is missing the political context in which their sacrifice occurs and obscuring their activism, effectively silencing their dissent. A social justice stance requires us to resist understanding their deaths within the realm of psychology and mental illness, and instead situates these deaths in the political world where genocide and torture are

Comment [JW14]: Yes and this is why phrases like "Aboriginal suicide" or "gay suicide" bother me so much since they pathologize persons, groups and cultures. I wonder about the usefulness of other phrases like homophobia-induced killing or colonization-assisted suicide? Also, why don't we ever hear references to "white suicide" or "straight suicide?"

Comment [JW15]: We in the field of suicide prevention would be wise to keep this idea in the forefront

Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the U.S. were the only four countries to vote against it. In 2010 Canada endorsed it. Retrieved Nov 13, 2011 from <http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/story/2010/11/12/indigenous-declaration.html>.

happening.

A recent headline in a Canadian newspaper reads: "Eritrean refugee in Halifax commits suicide after losing case to stay in Canada". We can say this person died of suicide, depression or anxiety but I think in reality we have to understand the context of this man's death. Our country has been implicated in torture, we all know this. When questions of Canada's complicity in torture were asked of the federal government the Prime Minister prorogued parliament in response. He suspended democracy to not have to answer to the claims brought forward by Jack Layton and the opposition. So when we say this refugee claimant committed suicide we have to show this wider picture - that he had very real reasons to believe that he would be returned to be tortured. In fact I would say the torture begins as soon as you think you are going to be returned to a country where you face torture. We always have to think about the real context of people's lives in which these deaths that get called suicide occur.

We are living in a rape culture where one in three Canadian women is sexually assaulted in their lifetime. In this province, in 2002, 100% of core-funding to sexual assault centres was cut by the provincial government. The stat of 1 in 3 women is from 1993, and the reason for that is that all of the funding for research for the National Status of Women was cut that year. To ensure funding you have to have solid research that proves the social necessity of your work. So the girls are using bad numbers. These are examples of the kinds of structural violence against women we're up against. When I say it's a rape culture, I'm referring to this kind of stat from a recent study in the USA where 60% of college men said that if they could get away with it they would commit rape. That is truly **alarming**. When we think about misogyny and the hate of women, we need to think of which women, and in this city, in Vancouver we are talking about women in the Downtown Eastside, disappeared women, and women living in situations that lack social justice and safety. At WAVAW, when women "commit suicide", we understand this as connected to the violence of sexualized assault, and resist blaming this victim for her own death.

Comment [JW16]: Yes.

Sometimes the word suicide obscures violence, but sometimes other language does similar things. I worked as an addiction supervisor in the Downtown Eastside and I still work with lots of teams there where the language of "overdose" works much the same way as suicide does. The language of overdose offers us a medicalized reason for death. You can put overdose on a death certificate, but nobody dies of an overdose, I mean physiologically they do. But people don't wake up and say "I think I'll get a heroin lifestyle". Things happen to people in their lives and when we use the language of overdose we obscure the violence of people's lives. We medicalize it and give it a scientific cause. Why isn't our enquiry "What the hell is going on that all these people are dying here - that women are being found in dumpsters? What is going on, are women jumping out of buildings?" You know, these are the things we have to get curious about. We can't let words like suicide and overdose let us accept these as legitimate and normal causes of death.

"Natural causes" is also problematic from a social justice stance. Some of the doctors I work alongside have told me about the spiritual pain they experience when they're required to use the language of natural causes to describe what I'd call deaths by social injustice. When a 38 year old woman doing survival sex work with no teeth, drug addicted, HIV positive, Hep C positive and homeless dies of the flu it's not a natural death. There is nothing natural about any of those circumstances, nothing natural about this death. From the frame of social justice this medicalized language, while required for the structures we are in; obscures a lot of violence and ends our enquiry. Medicalized language also seduces us to abdicate our social and collective obligations to change the context in which these kinds of deaths occur. I think about these deaths as connected to violence, poverty and homelessness, all of which are not natural.

Indian physicist and eco-feminist Vandana Shiva wrote a book called “Earth Democracy” which has inspired me (2005). Shiva implies that the murder of Mother Earth, the earth that we are living on, might really be better understood as collective suicide. You know we are killing the planet we live on. The language of suicide isn't used in relation to this often, but might actually invite some useful inquiry. And it's missing other places where it might get us to turn our heads and say, "If we weren't killing the earth, then what would we be doing?"³

When I think about responding with a social justice frame, it invites me to respond to suicide with solidarity and in my work as a practitioner that's what I do. I engage practices of social justice activism and solidarity, and bring people together with an ethic of justice-doing. We need to hold an analysis of the social context, of the structures of injustice and oppression, understandings of abuses of power and commitments to resisting individualism. I never sit alone with suicide, I never sit alone with torture, I never sit alone with terror. And I was a bit nervous about this talk because it's about speaking truth to power in a sense, and so I purposefully invited Jennifer White and Jonny Morris to sit alongside me up here, and to have their voices woven into this keynote. I know that while our work is different there are collective ethics we share and important points of connection in our work (White 2009, 2007; White & Morris 2010); and I know they've worked to build a space that this talk can be spoken into, so I'm standing on their shoulders. I'm also shouldered up by my Solidarity Team, the folks I carry with me to be in solidarity with me to do the hard things (Reynolds, 2011b). I don't individuate myself or do any of this work alone: We are meant to do this work together. What I am talking about is the creation of networked communities (Lacey, 2005), that hold us together in these non-hierarchical ways that defy individualism, and for me they are a step up against despair (Reynolds, 2011, 2009).

One of the things that social justice has brought to all of my work, paid and unpaid, activism and what get called community worker or therapy, is an *ethic of belonging* (Richardson & Reynolds, 2011; Reynolds, 2002). I work towards a context of social justice in which everyone believes they are welcome on this planet. It sounds so basic, it's what my mother taught me at our kitchen table, everybody gets to eat, everybody gets a plate, despite our behaviour we all belong. Just like the death penalty, people are so much more than the worst thing they have ever done. Everybody belongs on this planet. People who are *othered*, whose identities get attached and spoiled, get very serious messages that they do not belong in this world. I've worked with men on the Downtown Eastside that have served 20 years in jail and survived it. They have hurt children and hurt women. They come out of prison and they are seeing me about drugs or alcohol, but what they struggle with is what gets called suicide. What's really going on is that they feel that they should enact a death sentence society has put on them. We need to have this ethic of belonging that says everybody belongs in this world and in the human family: I'm not just talking about the good guys. We need to have a way for men to be welcomed back into the culture of accountable men. We need to stop sectioning off who deserves to belong.

When I worked with survivors of violence and refugees, there was a poster on the wall in my office from Amnesty International on refugee work in Eastern Europe called "The return". It's a sepia-toned picture of a dozen people at the moment of embrace, people stepping towards each other with open arms, coming together upon finding each other after the separation of war and political violence. The sense of belonging, joy-filled re-connection and love is palpable - it takes my breath away. There's one man in the foreground in a dark coat who could be a survivor I worked with. We never got his family out. He never killed himself: I guess people say we were successful as his death was a near thing. But this belonging and re-connection in Amnesty International's poster is what we wanted to deliver. This is justice, this is belonging. In our imperfect way, we delivered therapy and we used medication and we brought everything we had to the table to help this man - but we couldn't deliver the possibility of

Comment [JW17]: This is often very difficult to do in a service delivery and policy context that promotes evidence-based practices (including “manualized practices” that are specified in advance) which typically do not include strategies and responses that place social justice or solidarity at the centre

³ As I'm writing (December, 2011) our Prime Minister is working to withdraw Canada from the Kyoto Agreement. Shame.

return to his home country, reconnection, accountability, justice. And this is what I want to try and hold myself to in trying to deliver on an ethic of belonging.

I am inspired by activist communities' resistance to the disappearance of victims of political violence. We all remember the type of political violence of repressive governments who murdered people in extrajudicial executions, and then "disappeared" these victims. Activists and other organizers would just disappear and there was no accountability for their murders, no bodies were returned to families and there was no legal accountability for these killings. The purpose of political disappearance is to terrify and to torture the whole society so people won't take acts for justice and overtly resist oppression. Activist communities resist these disappearances, remembering their dead loved ones openly, calling for political accountability and refusing to accept the disappearance of the victims. This resistance against disappearance informs my work and activism. Activist traditions of remembering the disappeared and not letting people who are killed by hate and political violence be silenced have a profound influence in my work. As activists we witness people who are disappeared to dignify that they were here, that they matter and this activism informs my therapy and in particular what are called re-membering practices. These traditions come from lots of places, but one is narrative therapy, and in particular from the teachings and writings of Michael White (2007), Stephen Madigan (1997), and Lorraine Hedtke and John Winslade (2004)⁴. These therapists are informed by the creative work of American anthropologist, Barbara Myerhoff (1982), who wrote about ideas of people re-membering who they were in their lives, who they had been and who they preferred to be in what she called identity projects.

This is how re-membering practices show up in my supervision of solidarity work.

I work with counsellors who work with queer, trans and two spirited folks, and we are all up against a lot of death, deaths that get called suicide. All those folks are subjected to hate, and I believe hate has a huge role in their deaths. Recently, another of our clients died from suicide. I met with the therapist within a group as part of a supervision practice I call a Solidarity Group (Reynolds, 2010b, 2010c). When I respond to suicide as a supervisor I want to see my therapist within a community, not alone. I resist isolating and individuating an individual counsellor to help them "get over" this "suicide". We are not going to get over this, which is, I believe, part of our resistance to oppression. We are not going to accommodate ourselves to feel better about somebody being killed, especially when their death is connected to hate, because we have ethical obligations to do something about the social context in which that hate occurs and in which that death occurred, right?

When I met with this team I interviewed the counsellor, who I'll call Elliot, in front of the team. I didn't start the interview with questions of how Elliot's client killed themselves. Or how are you doing or do you have vicarious trauma? Instead I asked the counsellor to introduce us all to this person, because we are meeting about a human being, right, this isn't a "case". I used these questions:

- Teach me who Joe was. What did you respect about Joe? What did you appreciate about Joe?

As a therapeutic supervisor with a social justice ethic, I can't move on and talk to this therapist about the disappearance of a person if I disappear them by not bringing them fully into the room as a human being, as one of the actors in what is going to be talked about. I'm sure, we all have similar practices, this is just the way that I do it.

- How did you honour Joe's resistance to oppression and hate in his life?

This is very different than, "How did Joe die?" Instead I'd say, "Joe resisted homophobia and hate, and attacks and gay bashing. How did you bring forward these sites of Joe's resistance?"

⁴ Also see Lorraine's website that outlines these ideas in practice www.rememberingpractices.com.

Comment [JW18]: I love the way Vikki provides very concrete and accessible examples of what this type of work can look like on the ground

Comment [JW19]: I appreciate this shift in focus away from practitioners' so-called vicarious trauma towards an honouring of the person who died

And here is the question I think is the most important in relation to our sustainability as workers:

- What difference might you have made in Joe's life?

When you think about it, here is a person who has been disappeared, killed by hate, not seen as a person, not seen as a human being.

- Did it matter that you actually witnessed who he was? That you talked about how he was treated as a kid? That you took a position on that and said that's wrong. Did it matter? What difference might you have made in Joe's life in terms of dignifying him, treating him as a human being, treating him with respect?

As an act of accountability, and honouring our clients as our teachers I asked:

- What difference did knowing Joe, being a witness to his acts of resistance and his life make for you? For your life and your work?

I know I have learned my work on the backs of my clients and it's the people who have struggled with suicide and lost their lives to suicide that have informed me. They have offered the most useful teachings that I hold.

And this last question is informed by activist practices of remembering the disappeared:

- How will you keep what Joe taught you alive in your life and in your work?

And if you stick around with me long enough, eventually you'll hear stuff like, "You know, a Persian man taught me this". Sometimes it's a guy who lost his life to what gets called suicide but really died from torture. I always acknowledge my teachers. I reference academics and I reference activists too because our influences are broad and rich. We can reference our teachers as a practice of witnessing and resisting their disappearance, bringing to life the teachings of people who have taught us this work on their backs and to our benefit, right?

So these are the kinds of questions that I asked Elliot in front of a group of counsellors and then I interviewed all the witnessing counsellors about what that was like, and asked them to connect with where they have lost people and where they connected with Elliot.

So, Joe is the person who has died, Elliot is Joe's counsellor, and Sarah is one of the counsellors who was one of the witnesses to Elliot's struggles. (These names are fictional, the accounts are not).

Elliott's reflection as the Interviewed Counsellor in the Solidarity Group

(Read by Jonny Morris)

Our "Remembering Joe" session today was healing for me as a counsellor and as a person. It allowed me to value my work with Joe in a human, non-"clinical" way. I've been trained to examine my reaction to clients in order to provide effective and ethical service. However, none of my training has prepared me for the intense, sometimes overwhelming nature of working with a population of highly marginalized, oppressed clients struggling with mental health and addiction issues. I've often felt my work is a "drop in the bucket" of help and support clients need and deserve. The witnesses reminded me of how precious our relationships with clients can be, how dignity matters. Remembering Joe's amazing strengths and his resistance against oppression left me with an honouring view on his life, rather than focusing on the tragedy of the loss of such a beautiful person. Your questions about Joe's gifts, what he taught me, combat my feelings of helplessness and this session is going to help me in my work with all my clients.

The structure of the witnessing today (you interviewing me, then the others in the room, and then connecting back to me) allowed me to start feeling my emotions rather than holding on to the safety of numbness. As the supervisor, your transparency helped solidify how important it is to resist over-editing our responses in the guise of being "professional". The witnesses shared their responses of pain in their lives and work and this validated my struggle losing Joe. The group helped quiet my inner over-critical voice.

On my jog home (more like a walk with a hop than a jog really...) I saw Joe's physical features in many people passing me by, and it was a very positive, spiritual experience.

Sara's reflections as a Witnessing Counsellor in the Solidarity Group

(Read by Jennifer White)

The witnessing exercise Vikki lead us in created a space to honour and re-member a client in all his greatness. As I listened to Elliot talk about his client Joe, I was aware how this stranger transitioned into a man with an identity, soul and passion -- I wished I had known Joe. Vikki asked Elliot if there was a way that this client's life could enter into Elliot's work so that his death was not forgotten, which reminded me how important it is to honour the intimate knowledge we get from our clients.

My mind wandered to how I bring Brenda, who committed suicide last year, into my clinical practice by sharing what she taught me with clients to combat the blame game of stigma that our clients are labelled with.

When Vikki turned to me and asked what arose for me from this remembering process I was overcome with emotion about how real the work we do is and how we as counsellors offer moments of truly seeing our clients for who they are and acknowledging their struggles. I was struck by the privilege of learning from clients and how it has shaped my life and shifted my values.

I was saddened that we didn't make more room for Joe to be in this society because of prejudice. The act of witnessing allowed me to safely question how I fight for marginalized populations and look for acts of resistance in the face of oppression and violence. It reminded me that it is okay to hold the faces I love and have lost in my mind in order to fuel and encourage my work.

Thanks Vikki and Elliot for being present and creating a sacred space of remembering for Joe. I am grateful for the work you both engage in.

Sincerely,
Sara

The purpose of this Solidarity Group and this re-membering practice is not to get an accurate account of the crisis, or to guard my therapists against vicarious trauma. It's to bring the person who has died to the conversation, to really honour their life and their teachings. Whenever I lose a client in any way I always ask myself:

- What difference might I have made in their life?
- What difference did they make in my life? My work?
- What is my commitment to bring their teaching to other clients? To keeping their teachings alive? To acknowledge them as my teacher?
- What is required of me as a citizen, as a social justice activist, to change society so there would have been more room for this person?

This re-membering kind of work doesn't stop our hearts from breaking, but for me it stops the bleeding. You know, I can continue to work with a broken heart, but I can't be pumping blood. Doing this re-membering work in a Solidarity Group, in a networked community of others, fosters our collective sustainability, and dignifies our client with a witnessing of their humanity. These are the reasons I'm not that interested in an individual kind of supervision work, but believe a group is almost always more useful in these moments.

I'm going to take a look in one domain right now, but as Jonathan Shay says it's not a pissing contest of who's the most oppressed group (1995), or the hierarchy of pain (Reynolds, 2010a); but there are some really inspiring things happening in the queer/trans/Two-Spirit community that I think are fabulous social justice informed responses to suicide that I want to celebrate. We know that queer and

Comment [JW20]: I felt such a close affinity to Sara as I read her words that day. My own shaky voice hinted at the responsibility I felt to honour Joe, Elliot and Sara in this public reading

questioning youth are three times as likely to attempt suicide as straight kids. And a staggering statistic is that 41% of transgendered people have attempted suicide. We know these stats are low because the trans youth who kill themselves cannot participate in this research. This is a devastating situation for our communities. In response to the deaths of queer youth, Dan Savage and a bunch of other folks got online and made a YouTube video called "It Gets Better". It's not saying, "It gets better, you know, life will be perfect". They're saying "Try to stick around through this, because *my* life got better". If you haven't seen this, search for "It Gets Better", it's inspiring. There's hundreds of thousands of folks who've made It Gets Better videos now. The point of this is a collective social media response to hate and suicide, which I think is fabulous.

These kids are not killing themselves, right? Hate is killing our children. One of the things that Dan Savage says in It Gets Better that I appreciate is "LGBT youth can't picture a future with enough joy in it to compensate for the suffering they're in now". The purpose of the It Gets Better videos is for queer youth to have someone that reflects who they are, and their identity, saying "my life is okay". Young kids who are queer and questioning are told "you're going to be kicked out of your church, you're going to be kicked out of your home, you're never going to have love, you're never going to belong, and you're never going to have a decent life". These folks are giving counter messages that offer queer youth images of people who are reflecting their lifestyles, saying we have decent, okay-enough lives.

Dan Savage says, "The culture says they're ours to torture 'til they're 18, and then they can move to New York City". If queer kids survive high school, then they can go to San Francisco, or Vancouver, where there might be some safety, or possible safety. This is the old deal. If you survive as a queer youth and live to adulthood, that's okay, but you can't talk to queer and questioning youth. Queer adults, queer Two Spirit, transgender, and gender variant adults cannot talk to children. There's two ways that we stop this: one is accusations of paedophilia, and the second one is accusations that they're recruiting sexually. As a straight person, I can mentor children; people don't think that I'm trying to have sex with them. People don't think I'm trying to make them straight. That's a ludicrous attack that wouldn't happen, right? So what's happened in light of social networking and social media is that Dan Savage doesn't have to go to a playground to talk to a 12-year-old. He can put a video up on a website - it's broken these old rules, it's unsettled some of the power, which I think is absolutely fabulous. But Dan's also calling, as is the whole movement, for accountability to use the implements that we have in place to do something about what gets called bullying, to do something about hate. And as Allan Wade would say, "to put words to deeds", which is to call things assault when they're assault.

There's a huge history of resistance if we look deeper. Another of my heroes, Kate Bornstein is important for writing a book called *Gender Outlaw* (1994). But she also wrote a book called *101 Alternatives to Suicide for Teens, Freaks, and Other Outlaws* (2006). The back cover reads, "It gets better". So there are histories of these ideas and there are histories of resistance in every domain of oppression. In Canada we have a B.C. Out in Schools program which is fantastic and has B.C. students make videos, because youth videos reaching other youth are effective. There's also the Trevor Project, there are all kinds of communities picking up this kind of inspiring hope-filled work.

We also have Anti-bullying Day and Pink Shirt Day, which came from 2007 in Nova Scotia. And while I think these are good things, I have real concerns informed by critical language practices. The language of "bullying" decontextualizes and depoliticizes hate and violence. The other thing it does as language is individuates things. The language of "bullying" puts the responsibility for a hateful society on particular young boys, and young girls. I believe that unjustly spoils the identity of those youth who get caught up in bullying. Let's remind ourselves, these kids didn't invent these ideas. I've worked with kids who've got spoiled identities as bullies. They're *othered* too. You know, we can find ways to deny them education and belonging. We're putting the responsibility for injustice, and contexts of hate onto

Comment [JW21]: Again, this is such an important point. Hate, and all the ways it is supported and maintained through institutional and structural practices, needs to become a focal point of our work. This is an example of fresh thinking for suicide prevention.

the shoulders of children and blaming them for these events, right? I'm not saying people aren't responsible for their behaviour, but again, a social justice frame says we always have to look within the social context to understand **events**.

There's a headline from a local paper, "School Teasing Blamed in a Surrey Teen Suicide". This young boy who was teased horribly committed suicide. One activist has called this "bullycide", which is better language than suicide. It's a death, it's violent, it's hate-informed. There are two things wrong with this kind of story: the first one is constructing as mentally ill the young boy who died. I was teased a lot as a kid because I have a big family. It was one of the ways we communicated with each other, it was lovely and affectionate. This youth was not teased. "Teasing" is neutral and misleading language for hate. If you kill yourself as a response to teasing, that's an out of proportion response. That would help construct a story this youth was mentally unstable, right? Secondly, this article names particular boys who teased him as the reason he died. That is totally unjust. Many, many of us failed this child. All of us who didn't transform this society failed this person, not a few youth. I'm not saying they're not responsible for their actions, I'm saying they're not responsible for a society of **hate**.

That may seem like a funny position for a feminist to take, but as bell hooks says, "Feminism is for everybody" (2001). Ani DiFranco, whom I also love, says "any tool is a weapon if you hold it right" (1993). We know that kids who are queer and questioning and trans and Two Spirit are bullied 24/7 because of social networking and media, with cell phones, smart phones, computers, and extensive social media. It's an onslaught. You don't go home and close the door on hate, and of course, as Dan Savage has laid out pretty well, a lot of people close the door and the hate continues. So, there's no safe haven in social media - but social media has also been a fabulous forum for some great things to happen.

How many people watched the video of an anti-bullying flash mob? It's fantastic. In Oakridge Mall, Sir Winston Churchill School had a flash mob. The mall is full of shoppers, as malls will be. I'm from Scarborough so I'm well acquainted with mall culture. One girl takes off her coat and she's wearing a pink shirt that says "acceptance". She starts dancing and these other kids watch and they're wondering, what's happening? These kids start dancing. Well, then boys join, and don't you love that? And then there's three hundred kids, with pink shirts on that say "acceptance" dancing in the mall. And who's watching? The youth are educating the adults. This flash mob is important because I had over 10 queer friends send me this video. That's how I know it's important. And they were adults and they were totally inspired by it. And they felt that they belonged on the planet because of it. This is the kind of thing that we can do. This is a moment of what Lacey calls the Social Divine (2005). I would love to have been at that flash mob. Can you imagine just walking through a mall and all of a sudden it just starts, you don't know what the hell is going on. In terms of taking public space creatively and for justice I would consider this direct action activism.

When I talk about the social divine I'm talking about moments where we're connected, where we're profoundly belonged with each other, and where we're all engaging with an ethic of social justice. And for many of us here there's many moments you can think of that embody the social divine. For me a moment of the social divine was marching in the Missing Women's Memorial March. I'm sure many of us here, men, women and trans folks, have participated in the Missing Women's Memorial March. In 2010, somewhere from 5000 to 10000 people showed up quietly marching, led by indigenous elders, as we honoured the dead and made commitments to not have more missing women. It was a profound, sad and hopeful day where we held each other up collectively and took action where our government and society have failed. It was hopeful, spirited and demanded ongoing commitments for change. That was a moment of the social divine.

Comment [JW22]: This reminds me of Eduardo Duran's work with Indigenous people and communities (see for example "Healing the soul wound", 2006). He typically asks those who have engaged in practices of violence a series of key question, "where did you learn to be so violent?" Is this part of your community's beliefs? Where did you think this started? In this way, he helps to begin tracing this history of violence within a paradigm that situates it within the colonial process. Like many narrative practices, this often has the effect of de-individualizing the problem and de-pathologizing the person.

Comment [JW23]: So instead of saying that bullying leads queer youth to kill themselves we should be saying that the social practices of homophobia and compulsory heterosexuality lead GLBTQ to kill themselves; no?

I worked with a young woman from Guatemala 20 years ago who had been told she'd be in psychotherapy for the rest of her life given the extent of the political violence she suffered. She didn't have a lot of truck with all that. She thought I was a pretty good therapist, and I think I'm pretty good at what I do. I swim well, I do therapy well, I don't drive and I don't cook, but I think it's an ethical obligation for us to hold competency in relation to our work. Eventually, this young survivor got frustrated by professional helpers telling her she should stay alone, study and journal. I asked her, "What do you think might be more useful?"

She said, "I want to go to a protest. They told me I shouldn't do that kind of thing. My foster parents are worried, my probation officer is worried. They're worried because they all say, you know, who hangs at those things?"

I was thinking sure; there are all kinds of dangerous people at activist events, like me and some of you folks! She went to the Theatre of the Oppressed, where about 50 refugee kids, some of them children and grandchildren of the disappeared met and did political theatre together in Spanish. She came back. I said, "How did it go?"

"Pretty good."

Then I asked a question I got from Australian narrative therapist Michael White, "You know, you've said our sessions here are pretty good. How many sessions do you think that one political activity was worth?"

She reflected a bit and said tentatively, "Um, probably over a hundred." That's measurable outcomes for you, right? A spirited activist event is worth a hundred therapy sessions. I hold that humbling teaching close.

Comment [JW24]: Wonderful!

We have power. A lot of community workers, therapists and helping professionals spend a lot of time trying to mitigate power, or equalize power in their work with people. I want us to embrace our power and be accountable to it. We have the power to transform society. I believe we have an obligation to contest neutrality. We're not neutral about hate. No one in this room is neutral about hate. For one thing we're Canadians, dammit. Hate's against the law here⁵. Handguns, hate laws, and socialized medicine, these are things that make us Canadian, and beer. But we have the power to move things from private pain, to public issue (Tamasese, 2001; McCarthy 2001; Hanish, 1970), right? To resist the privatization of pain. That's what suicide does. It totally privatizes pain.

We're change agents. We know how to make change. There are two things I believe we need to do. One is to *belong* people who are told they don't belong on this earth by hate. And two, we need to deliver justice to them. We have not delivered on a just society and working towards justice is our resistance against hate and against injustice, right? More is required of us and we'll do more.

There's a poster on the wall in one of the shelters where I've worked with Aaron Monroe and the RainCity housing folks. It's a map of Vancouver that has a stencil on it saying, "Racism, Sexism and Homophobia not permitted in this area". And then the shelter folk decided the heck with it, that's too much fancy language, and people just spray painted on the wall, "No Hate". We've got to take hate on on all fronts. I truly believe that social injustice, hate, stigma and oppression create the conditions that make the horrors of suicide possible. I believe that a just world is a sane world and that actions for justice are actions for sanity. No justice, no peace: No peace of mind. Thank you.

Vikki's Reflection & In-conclusion

It was remarkable to me that this keynote was met with great appreciation and reverence I thought, a

⁵ For now! At the time of this writing the Conservative government is planning to rescind our country's hate laws.

profound and useful discomfort, and a total absence of backlash. As activists, in all anti-oppression work, we structure a response to backlash into our analysis and our work, especially when speaking truth to the teeth of power. So I was humbled by the welcome for this activist decolonizing and anti-oppression analysis, and specifically that genocide, settler accountability, residential schools as political violence, transphobia and homophobia, rape culture, and Canada's complicity in torture could be named without backlash. It let me know that this community has done a lot of work, and that activists in all these domains have done important work that made a space I could speak into. I honour and appreciate that in this keynote I was shouldered up by the important and hard, possibly risky, work of others. It reminds me of a teaching I hold close that there is always more solidarity than we know.

Comment [JW25]: I find so much hope here.

Dedication

For all the people we have lost to hate
& for everyone picking up the hard & necessary work
to *belong* all of our children within the human family.

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