

Did Christian Parents Drive Their Child to Suicide?

The headline alone is painful to read: "Transgender teenager, 17, leaves heartbreaking suicide note blaming her Christian parents before walking in front of tractor trailer on highway." The story itself is even more painful to read, while the loss of life is absolutely tragic.

Is there blood on the hands of these Christian parents?

What makes this story all the more heartrending is that the teenager, born Joshua Alcorn but who used the name Leelah to identify as a female, left a suicide note that was scheduled to be posted in the event of his death. (If you are a transgender advocate and are already furious with me for using the male pronoun for Joshua-Leelah, please hold your fury long enough to finish reading the article.)

In the note, Joshua explains how he began feeling that he was a girl at the age of four, writing, "When I was 14, I learned what transgender meant and cried of happiness. After 10 years of confusion I finally understood who I was.

"I immediately told my mom, and she reacted extremely negatively, telling me that it was a phase, that I would never truly be a girl, that God doesn't make mistakes, that I am wrong."

Did the mother respond in the right way, or did her lack of understanding lead to Joshua's death?

Joshua says that his parents sent him to Christian therapists who allegedly told him that he was "selfish and wrong," and on his 16th birthday, "when I didn't receive consent from my parents to start transitioning, I cried myself to sleep."

He added, "I'm never going to be happy. Either I live the rest of my life as a lonely man who wishes he were a woman or I live my life as a lonelier woman who hates herself."

Not long after composing this note, on Sunday night, Dec. 27, he walked into the path of a tractor trailer and ended it all.

There has been an immediate outpouring of support in his memory (along with condemnation of his parents), while a new Facebook page has been launched, called "Justice for Leelah Alcorn," receiving more than 12,000 likes almost overnight. The page links to a petition on entitled, "Enact Leelah's Law to Ban Transgender Conversion Therapy." By the evening of Dec. 30, it had received almost 20,000 signatures.

As conservative Christians who believe in the Scriptures, how do we respond to a tragedy like this? And should we oppose the concept of "transgender conversion therapy"?

Without a doubt, we must recognize that issues of transgender identity often run very deep and cannot be trivialized or taken lightly. Although I have often been dubbed "transphobic" because of my strong opposition to many aspects of LGBT activism, often focusing on transgender issues, at the same time, I have constantly drawn attention to the depth of struggle experienced by many who identify as transgender.

I interacted at length with one man who now identifies as a woman, asking him why he would destroy a 37-year marriage and become alienated from his own children. He explained to me that after decades of trying to resolve his issues, it was either suicide or sex-change. He opted for the latter and says he is very glad he did.

Another man, whose story I know well, decided to come out as a woman in his mid-to-late 60s, also affecting his marriage. (I'm not sure how things stand today with his children.) He explained to me that I had no idea the pain he lived with all his life. I don't believe he was making any of this up.

And there are the many stories of children trying to hide or even mutilate their genitals, growing increasingly agitated as they come into puberty.

Surely, this cannot be taken lightly, nor can we look to glib clichés or superficial fixes. And parents need to do their best (with the help of professionals when possible) to spot signs of depression and potential suicide. In other words, handle with extreme love and care.

But that is not the end of the story.

I personally know individuals who once identified as transgender and who no longer do, and they are so thankful to God that they found a better way. They emphatically discourage parents from affirming their children as transgender (while even more emphatically urging those parents to show unconditional love to their kids). Should we ignore what they have to say? (For more on this, see the important, recent article, "Trouble in Transtopia: Murmurs of Sex Change Regret.")

Some of these individuals remained suicidal even after having sex-change surgery, and in some notable cases, which I mentioned in my article "Sex Change Regret," some have committed suicide after coming out as the opposite of their biological sex.

Don't their deaths count as much as the death of Joshua-Leelah?

Why are people so free to condemn Joshua's parents when they wouldn't dare criticize doctors who performed (or recommended) sex-change surgery on someone who then killed himself or herself, unhappy with their new identity? Shouldn't all these suicides give us pause for thought?

According to a major, 30-year study of "sex-reassigned" persons in Sweden, and as cited in an op-ed piece in the Wall

Street Journal by Dr. Paul McHugh, formerly chair of the Johns Hopkins psychiatric department, “their suicide mortality rose almost 20-fold above the comparable nontransgender population.”

And so, while the suicide of Joshua-Leelah is absolutely tragic, and while I understand the passion of those who want to ban so-called transgender conversion therapy, I respectfully submit that wisdom and compassion call for a better path, one that invests more time and energy into looking for the root causes of transgenderism, as we encourage therapists and counselors and psychologists to listen and learn even more, with the goal of finding non-surgical ways to help them find wholeness.

In short, rather than having an emotional, gut-level response (which is quite understandable, given this heartbreaking story), let us seek to do what is right and best. That is the way of love.

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