

THE DAILY ASTORIAN

Founded in 1873



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What did we miss?

Recent suicide raises many questions for the community

The suicide in April of 54-year-old Carrie Barnhart is only the most recent and obvious of many such family tragedies that happen in our county and region, year in and year out.

Sorrow, pain and a lingering social stigma continue to impede our intervention in and reaction to suicides and suicide attempts. Barnhart's family is right in seeking better answers than they have received thus far.

It is natural for families to second guess years worth of behaviors and clues leading up to these personal catastrophes. "What did we miss?" "What could we have done differently?" "Who could we have asked for help?" And simply "Why?" All these questions and more crowd the minds of families and friends. Sometimes, there are no answers. But sometimes, lessons can be learned, some of which may invisibly blossom into saving a life years, decades or even generations later.

At a minimum, a thorough examination of facts and feelings can aid a family's mourning process. Even better, it can help a whole community improve its understanding of serious depression, brain diseases in general, and how our institutions might better safeguard individuals in the grips of crisis.

Helped by retired Wyoming police officer Norman Tutton, the Barnhart family is prodding the county to take a closer look at how Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare handled this specific case. Tutton is correct in stating that patient confidentiality should not serve as a permanent "cloak of invisibility" for agency actions. Meaningful oversight requires, at a minimum, that the county insist on a process of professional and independent case review to audit whether procedures were followed and whether those procedures need to be changed.

None of this should presuppose that CBH or the county did anything

wrong. A person who is thoroughly determined to commit suicide is hard to stop. Meanwhile, CBH and all other health and social service agencies operate in a seriously constrained budgetary framework that makes active, ongoing case management into a frustrating exercise of constantly stretching too few resources to cover too many needs.

In addition to making sure mental health care is effective, there other recognized ways to protect against suicide. These include strengthening connections with family members, the community and social institutions; helping those at risk by improving their problem-solving skills; and educating everyone about warning signs such as an expressed loss of purpose in life, changes in sleeping patterns and increased alcohol or drug use. There nearly always are some warning signs — in Barnhart's case, her own suicide threats were a loud and clear warning siren.

A genuine advance of the modern age is we now understand that responsible discussion of suicide does not increase the risk. Silence and pretending an illness might get better if we simply ignore it aren't effective. It's clear what we all must do if someone we love shows signs of suicidal thoughts — listen, show you care, be direct but nonconfrontational in asking about feelings and plans and seek professional assistance. The same goes for local society as a whole — this is a subject that warrants ongoing discussion and active efforts to improve our response.

CBH operates a 24-hour crisis intervention program that tries to assist people at imminent risk of suicide. The crisis line is 503-325-5724.

Anthrax goof gives real pause for alarm

Lack of real oversight could put many in danger

It may superficially seem like the plot of an end-of-the-world movie — for more than a year the U.S. Army accidentally shipped a deadly disease from a Utah laboratory to nine other states and South Korea.

In such a movie or a Stephen King novel, the pathogen would have jumped the fence and started rampaging through the innocent civilian population. Thankfully, real life was more forgiving. But we can't always count on such good luck.

Live anthrax like that sent around the nation by the Army is highly dangerous, but not contagious in a traditional sense, so this particular blunder between March 2014 and this April was never capable of igniting a widespread pandemic. But the U.S. military and its international allies and foes are also stewards of numerous germs that would be able to spread from person to person.

The always-valuable *Guardian* newspaper provides frightening context to the anthrax mistakes. Quoting experts:

• "The incident involved exactly the same chain of errors as the

CDC shipments of live anthrax bacteria in 2006 and 2014."

• "This seems to be a problem that happens pretty regularly."

• "There are approximately 1,500 US laboratories authorized to work with fully active, fully virulent, biological weapons agents. This number is too large by a factor of 10 to 20."

• "Oversight is critical in improving biosafety and ensuring that high-containment laboratories comply with regulations. However, our work has found that aspects of the current oversight programs ... depend on entities' monitoring themselves and reporting incidents to the regulators."

The world is full of biological dangers, both man-made and spontaneously appearing in nature. Germ researchers and the agencies that fund them argue, with justification, we must work to understand and develop rapid responses to these potential disasters.

Slipshod procedures and lack of adequate oversight raise the prospect of our own defensive efforts turning on us and igniting a plague. This is an ongoing deficiency in urgent need of serious intervention.

The financially insecure American

By PAUL KRUGMAN
New York Times News Service

America remains, despite the damage inflicted by the Great Recession and its aftermath, a very rich country.

But many Americans are economically insecure, with little protection from life's risks.

They frequently experience financial hardship; many don't expect to be able to retire, and if they do retire have little to live on besides Social Security.

Many readers will, I hope, find nothing surprising in what I just said. But all too many affluent Americans — and, in particular, members of our political elite — seem to have no sense of how the other half lives. Which is why a new study on the financial well-being of U.S. households, conducted by the Federal Reserve, should be required reading inside the Beltway.

Before I get to that study, a few words about the callous obliviousness so prevalent in our political life.

I am not, or not only, talking about right-wing contempt for the poor, although the dominance of compassionless conservatism is a sight to behold. According to the Pew Research Center, more than three-quarters of conservatives believe that the poor "have it easy" thanks to government benefits; only 1 in 7 believe that the poor "have hard lives." And this attitude translates into policy. What we learn from the refusal of Republican-controlled states to expand Medicaid, even though the federal government would foot the bill, is that punishing the poor has become a goal in itself, one worth pursuing even if it hurts rather than helps state budgets.

But leave self-declared conservatives and their contempt for the poor on one side. What's really striking is the disconnect between centrist conventional wisdom and the reality of life — and death — for much of the nation.

Take, as a prime example, positioning on Social Security. For decades, a declared willingness to cut Social Security benefits, especially by raising the retirement age, has been almost a required position — a badge of seriousness — for politicians and pundits who want to sound wise and responsible. After all, people are living longer, so shouldn't they work longer, too? And isn't Social Security an old-fashioned system, out of touch with modern economic realities?

Meanwhile, the reality is that living longer in our ever-more-unequal society is very much a class thing: Life expectancy at age 65 has risen a lot among the affluent, but hardly at all in the bottom half of the wage distribution, that is, among those who need Social Security most.

And while the retirement system FDR introduced may look old-fashioned to affluent professionals, it is quite literally a lifeline for many of our fellow citizens. A majority of Americans over 65 get more than half their income from Social Security, and more than a quarter are almost completely

reliant on those monthly checks. These realities may finally be penetrating political debate, to some extent. We seem to be hearing less these days about cutting Social Security, and we're even seeing some attention paid to proposals for benefit increases given the erosion of private pensions. But my sense is that Washington still has no clue



Paul Krugman

about the realities of life for those not yet elderly. Which is where that Federal Reserve study comes in.

This is the study's second year, and the current edition actually portrays a nation in recovery: In 2014, unlike 2013, a substantial plurality of respondents said they were better off than they had been five years ago. Yet it's startling how little room for error there is in many American lives.

We learn, for example, that 3 in 10 nonelderly Americans said they had no retirement savings or pension, and that the same fraction reported going without some kind of medical care in the past year because they couldn't afford it. Almost a quarter reported that they or a family member had experienced financial hardship in the past year.

And something that even startled me: 47 percent said that they would not have the resources to meet an unexpected expense of \$400 — \$400! They would have to sell something or borrow to meet that need, if they could meet it at all.

Of course, it could be much worse. Social Security is there, and we should be very glad that it is. Meanwhile, unemployment insurance and food stamps did a lot to cushion unlucky families from the worst during the Great Recession. And Obamacare, imperfect as it is, has immensely reduced insecurity, especially in states whose governments haven't tried to sabotage the program.

But while things could be worse, they could also be better. There is no such thing as perfect security, but American families could easily have much more security than they have. All it would take is for politicians and pundits to stop talking blithely about the need to cut "entitlements" and starting looking at the way their less-fortunate fellow citizens actually live.

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The pursuit of a small, happy life

By DAVID BROOKS
New York Times News Service

A few weeks ago, I asked readers to send in essays describing their purpose in life and how they found it.

A few thousand submitted contributions, and many essays are online.

I'll write more about the lessons they shared in the weeks ahead, but one common theme surprised me.

I expected most contributors would follow the commencement-speech clichés of our high-achieving culture: dream big; set ambitious goals; try to change the world. In fact, a surprising number of people found their purpose by going the other way, by pursuing the small, happy life.

Elizabeth Young once heard the story of a man who was asked by a journalist to show his most precious possession.

The man, Young wrote, "was proud and excited to show the journalist the gift he had been bequeathed. A banged up tin pot he kept carefully wrapped in cloth as though it was fragile. The journalist was confused, what made this dingy old pot so valuable? 'The message,' the friend replied. The message was 'we do not all have to shine.' This story resonated deeply. In that moment I was able to relieve myself of the need to do something important, from which I would reap praise and be rewarded with fulfillment. My vision cleared."

Young continues, "I have always wanted to be effortlessly kind. I wanted to raise children who were kind." She notes that among those

who survived the Nazi death camps, a predominant quality she noticed was generosity.

"Perhaps," she concludes, "the mission is not a mission at all. ... Everywhere there are tiny, seemingly inconsequential circumstances that, if explored, provide meaning" and chances to be generous and kind. Spiritual and emotional growth happens in microscopic increments.

Kim Spencer writes, "I used to be one of the solid ones — one of the people whose purpose was clearly defined and understood. My purpose was seeing patients and 'saving lives.' I have melted into the in-between spaces, though. Now my purpose is simply to be the person ... who can pick up the phone and give you 30 minutes in your time of crisis. I can give it to you today and again in a few days. ... I can edit your letter. ... I can listen to you complain about your co-worker. ... I can look you in the eye and give you a few dollars in the parking lot. I am not upset if you cry. I am no longer drowning, so I can help keep you afloat with a little boost.

Not all of the time, but every once in a while, until you find other people to help or a different way to swim. It is no skin off my back; it is easy for me."

Terence J. Tollaksen wrote that his purpose became clearer once he began to recognize the "decision trap": "This trap is an amazingly consistent phenomena whereby 'big' decisions turn out to have much less impact on a life as a whole than the myriad of small seemingly insignificant ones."



David Brooks

Tollaksen continues, "I have always admired those goal-oriented, stubborn, successful, determined individuals; they make things happen, and the world would be lost without them." But, he explains, he has always had a "small font purpose."

"I can say it worked for me. I know it sounds so Midwest, but it's been wonderful. I have a terrific wife, 5 kids, friends from grade school and high school, college, army, friends locally, and sometimes, best of all, horses, dogs, and cats. Finally, I have a small industrial business that I started and have run for 40 years based on what I now identify as principles of 'Pope Francis capitalism.'"

Hans Pitsch wrote: "At age 85, the question of meaning in my life is urgent. The question of the purpose of my life is another matter. World War II and life in general have taught me that outcomes from our actions or inactions are often totally unpredictable and random." He adds, "I am thankful to be alive. I have a responsibility to myself and those around me to give meaning to my life from day to day. I enjoy my family (not all of them) and the shrinking number of old friends. You use the term 'organizing frame' in one's life. I am not sure if I want to be framed by an organizing principle, but if there is one thing that keeps me focused, it's the garden. Lots of plants died during the harsh winter, but, amazingly, the clematises and the roses are back, and lettuce, spinach and tomatoes are thriving in the new greenhouse. The weeping cherry tree in front of the house succumbed to old age. I still have to plant a new tree this year."

This scale of purpose is not for everyone, but there is something beautiful and concrete and well-proportioned about tending that size of a garden.

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