INTRODUCTION

Elvis Presley was being interviewed again by the same person who interviewed him as he began his musical career.

The interviewer asked:

“Elvis, when you started out in music, you said you wanted to be rich; you wanted to be famous; and you wanted to be happy. You sure are rich, and you’re very, very famous. Are you happy, Elvis?”

Elvis replied:

“No, I’m not happy. I’m as lonely as hell” and six weeks later he was dead.[3]

After he had won the Wimbledon tennis championship for the second time, Boris Becker surprised many when he admitted his deep struggle with suicide. [4]

These examples point to a core of the youth suicide problem that is rarely discussed. After 24 years as a marriage and family counsellor and the last 5 years specialising in youth counselling, I am seeing an increasing disillusionment among our youth.

There may be multiple causes of youth suicide and many solutions. Most often we try to address suicide in “personal, social and economic terms: unemployment, homelessness, family conflict and breakdown, educational pressures, problems in personal relationships, child abuse, psychiatric illness, drug addiction.” [5] Youth suicide is one of the hottest topics in the media at the moment.

I will continue to help people identify suicide symptoms and to reach out to try to prevent suicide. But there is a deepening crisis in our culture that will not be solved by governments providing more money for health, even mental health, and welfare services.

Since 1991 [to 1997], more Australians have died by suicide than by motor vehicle accidents. [Over 2,000] deaths per year in Australia, or approximately 1.9 percent of all deaths are by suicide. For every death by suicide, it is estimated that an additional 60-100 attempts are made. For young males aged 15-24, 25 percent of all recorded deaths are by suicide: three times the rate of thirty years ago.
No social class or age group is exempt from instances of suicide. The rate for males in rural areas is known to be higher than for males in urban areas. Suicide rates for males over the age of 75 are increasing. . .[6], [7]

As an aside, Family World News reported that “at least 21 doctors have committed suicide in NSW in the past five years” (prior to 1997). [8]

I believe that science writer and social analyst, Richard Eckersley, is getting to the core of the matter when he says that “modern western culture arguably fails to meet the most fundamental requirements of any culture, to provide a sense of belonging and purpose, and so a sense of meaning and self-worth, and a moral framework to guide our conduct.” [9] Eckersley “has studied the attitudes of children and teenagers for over a decade.” [10]

The youth suicide epidemic, as I see it, is being propelled by three factors. First, many young people are experiencing a

A. LACK OF MEANING/PURPOSE

1. Brendan Nelson

In an excellent letter to the Weekend Australian, in January 1997 [11], former Australian Medical Association National President, Dr Brendan Nelson, who became the Federal Member for Bradfield in the Commonwealth Parliament of Australia, said that “the thematic currency of youth suicide is our failure to transmit a sense of belonging and meaningful purpose to young people… The price of our shallowness is being paid for by our children.”

2. John Smith

John Smith of Care and Communication Concern, who has spent most of his adult life working with street kids, especially in Melbourne, Australia, is a straight shooter in nailing the problem:

Most sociologists in our society today are radically secular, so therefore anything that even begins to speak to the spiritual nature of the human being is ipso facto non-existent. Therefore one must find a cause which is social, socio-economic, political, structural and all the rest. On the issue of youth suicide, for example, the politicians say that if the Government doesn't fix up unemployment we are going to see much more suicide.

If you don’t accept that suicide is a mark of a loss of any sense and meaning of purpose and soul, which is all a bit ephemeral for academics that have to be able to show figures for causal relationships, then you have to invent something and you target unemployment, and if that doesn’t work you target something else, and if that doesn’t work you keep playing the game. [12]

3. How do kids see it? In 1990, the Sydney Morning Herald [13] surveyed one-hundred-and-twenty (120) 11-year-old Sydney school children and asked them to write down their perceptions of Australia’s future and how they thought Australia would fare in the next millennium. The Herald chose bright, normal, healthy youngsters, young enough, they thought, to be untarnished by cynicism. Here’s how the Herald viewed the results:

Yes, we expected a little economic pessimism, some gloom about the environment and job prospects and perhaps even a continuing fear of nuclear war. But nothing prepared us for the

depth of the children’s fear of the future, their despair about the state of our planet and their bleak predictions for their own nation, Australia. [14]

In other cultures, children aged 11 would be told stories that would help them construct a coherent world view, a cultural framework, to help them understand who they are, values, what to believe in—a context that would facilitate a confident outlook on life. Not so here. I believe we are in a cultural environment where a generation of young people is suffering an upheaval of values that has catastrophic implications.

In a 1992 Ph.D. thesis that surveyed 650 NSW upper secondary school students, it was found that “many respondents experienced `a strong sense of negativity, helplessness, despondency and even anguish’ about the anticipated problems facing our society and the world. They expressed concerns and feelings about relentless, mechanistic changes in which human feelings, self-esteem and aspirations are too readily sacrificed.” [15]

Another survey of Sydney teenagers, conducted by Loud Advertising, found that the “average adolescent thought the world was ‘going down the gurgler.’” [16]

Australia’s ABC-TV’s youth program, “Attitude: showed 57% of 14-[to]-24-year-olds felt their world was worse than the world their parents grew up in,
less than a quarter believed their world was better.” [17]

4. M. Berman

American historian and social critic, M. Berman, studied the problems that characterise life in Western industrial nation. This researcher came to the situation with the view that the problems were social and economic, but became convinced by the evidence that a whole dimension had been overlooked — the “fundamental issues facing any civilization or any individual are issues of meaning.” [18] Berman concludes:

I began to feel... that something was wrong with our entire world view. Western life seems to be drifting toward increasing entropy, economic and technological chaos, ecological disaster, and ultimately psychic dismemberment and disintegration... Historically, our loss of meaning in an ultimate philosophical or religious sense—the split between fact and value which characterizes the modern age—is rooted in the Scientific Revolution of the 16th and 17th centuries.” [19]

5. Richard Eckersley points to the Public Health Movement, saying:

Once again the convulsions of rapid societal change are seriously harming human health and well-being, only this time the hazards are not infectious diseases such as cholera and typhus, but

profound social and spiritual alienation. [20]

He believes that you in the health professions “have a crucial role in changing the situation. They are in the front line of the issues [he has] discussed.” I agree. He states that

It is imperative they recognize the problems as more than problems of individual pathology or dysfunction and do more to confront the broader social, cultural and political implication of the deterioration in our well-being. [21]

6. Children in the Macquarie Primary School in Canberra published a collection of student poetry and other works in 1992, called The Spinning Tree. [22] The title poem reads:

We are based upon one tree,
all my friends and me.
The wind is blowing strong.
I’m not lasting long,
the dying tree is red,
it’s spinning in my head.
Time is going fast.
I know I’ll never last.

Another poem is called ZED St:

On the side of Z street, grey mould
buildings on fire, children left on the bitumen cold,
the trees as naked as a flower
stripped of its beauty.
Everyone is dying, everything is dying.

On Z street, there’s a crystal ball in a fortune teller’s hold.

These primary school children are expressing their concern about their world. It is not pretty. Young people are fighting with meaning in our culture.

From my counselling experience in Bundaberg and District, I must agree with Brendan Nelson when he says “the price of our shallowness is being paid by our children... Life is one of despair, hopelessness and aggression directed against themselves and others.” [23]
Hugh Mackay, Australian social critic, writes that "young people believe moral values are declining and, unless they are religious, find it hard to identify an accepted moral code within society." [24]

My anecdotal evidence in my youth and family counselling office joins with the 1992 research by Zika and Chamberlain that shows the clear link between meaningfulness in life and psychological well-being. [25] I believe the lack of meaning in our Western culture, although difficult to quantify, is a core factor in youth suicide. Some youth are wanting to escape reality into altered states of consciousness, hence the increasing use of illicit drugs and alternative therapies of the New Age Movement.

I want to allow the parents of a young man who committed suicide to speak. Jon and Sue Stebbins of "The Compassionate Friends," a self-help group for parents and siblings of young people who died, had an 18-year-old son who committed suicide. They say he was

A delightful, warm, intelligent and gentle person, sensitive and caring of others. He showed an intense awareness of issues and imperfections in the world; a keen sense of right and wrong; an aversion to violence, war, etc.; an awareness of environmental issues and a love of nature and animals; and a strong creative streak.

The Stebbins note that "almost all parents of suicides describe similar characteristics and qualities in their children." Of their own son, they note his "deep unhappiness and his lack of confidence about himself and a future." A relationship break-up preceded his death by a few weeks. Their strongest feeling about their son’s life was "a deep concern for his inability to find a positive direction in life." [26]

In the midst of this 300% increase in youth suicide in the last 30 years” [27], we have this promotion of euthanasia. As Brendan Nelson put it, “At the same time, well-meaning but misguided advocates of euthanasia project a subliminal message that death is a legitimate solution to what we think are insurmountable problems.” [28]

The medical profession, counsellors and ministers see this meaninglessness and despair more vividly than most. Chuck Colson says "the culture in which we live is nearly lost.” [29]

Many of our young people are where the writer of the Book of Ecclesiastes was: “So I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.” [30] Youth suicide is an example of cultural cancer in Western society.

Where does this lack of meaning lead to for our young people?

Second, youth suicide, I believe, is being propelled by:

**B. NOTHING OTHER THAN THE SELF TO BELIEVE IN**

I see it in youth who say, "Mum and Dad have split; my girlfriend just dumped me. My mates are never there when I want them. Who can I depend on?" I had a 15-year-old say to me the other day: "Mum sucks, school sucks, life sucks."

Dr. Brendan Nelson saw it when he wrote, “We have created a culture in which young people frequently feel they have nothing other then themselves to believe in.” [31]

I agree with Eckersley. We are

Increasingly leaving people with only their own personal resources to deal with life. These flaws mean young people who are establishing their identities, values and beliefs, lack a social and spiritual context, a set of clear reference points, to help them make sense of life and their place in the world. They have no ideal to believe in, nothing to convince them to subordinate their own personal interests to a higher common goal.

*Our Culture offers little beyond self-interest to believe in and live for*

... For most people and for societies that is not enough. [32]

In the McCann-Erickson report of 1994 on 18-to 29-year olds, one young man, Paul, spoke for his generation when he said that "they have the belief that their actions will not change things." [33]

Let me summarise. I believe this youth suicide pandemic has at its core, a *lack of meaning or purpose* for the young. This forces them back on themselves as the only reliable ones to believe in.

A third contributing factor is
C. THE DISMANTLING OF VALUES

Brendan Nelson says that “the mesh of values that held Australian society together 30 years ago — ‘God, king and country’ — has been systematically dismantled… In recent years, it has become fashionable to marginalise churches, demean the importance of parenting, push kids to the zeniths of educational achievement and discount voluntary work as the domain of the ‘do gooder.’” [34]

Sydney psychiatrist, Dr Jean Lennane, in a penetrating article in *The Weekend Australian*, in January 1997, wrote that during the 1970s and 1980s “there has been a marked decline in formal religious observance and the support and comfort it previously offered.” This has coincided with a decline in the “ideals of public service and helping others and the flowering of ‘greed is good.’” [35]

There is moral confusion and moral doubt amongst the young. [36] What kind of framework for moral values does the humanistic ethic give? I sat in a group that was formulating what became the Human Relationships Education program in the state school system in Queensland in the late 1980s. When I asked what value system would be promoted, the leader said, “I must do what’s right for me.”

Yet, when youth want to shoot up illicit drugs, sexually abuse others, attempt suicide, we want to oppose such. However, what youth want to do is logically consistent with humanistic ethics. The problem is with the basis of such values. I well remember having to deal with a 14 year old who had sexually abused his 11- and 7-year-old sisters. He saw nothing wrong with it. And there isn’t if we follow humanistic ethics.

Solid values are being dismantled.

D. WHAT HAS THIS LEFT?

Brendan Nelson says, “Only a vacuum.” What would you expect under what Nelson calls, “the incessant materialist imagery of BMWs, mobile phones and fashionable clothing”? [37] Blaise Pascal associated the vacuum with content when he wrote, “There is a Godshaped vacuum in the heart of every man, and only God can fill it.” Or in the words of St Augustine, “You have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee.” [38] Great thinkers have warned us through the centuries that a departure from God exposes human beings and “results in the death of meaning.” [39]

The crisis is deepening; the culture is decaying, even though it seemed gradual at first, it is now at a galloping pace. The quality of life will get worse. While our young people commit suicide in terrible proportions, the mass media seem to be giving us a deluge of sex, violence, and concocted values that push culture further into the mire.

There is such hypocrisy in our society. We have a strong anti-smoking campaign, but what about alcohol? Health ministers supporting a prescription trial of a dangerous narcotic, heroin. We oppose paedophilia, but there are few complaints about late night movies and sex, sex and more sex. What about the Channel 10 program in Australia, “Sex/Life” that left little to the imagination? I watched a little late night TV during the French Open Tennis Championships and there were the seductive ads for titillating sex contacts–phone for a sex sensation.

Look what we have done with guns following Port Arthur. The problem is not with guns, but people.

Watch popular TV shows such as “Neighbours”, “Home and Away”, “The Simpsons”, movies, etc., and see the disrespect towards one another that is modelled. Why should youth show respect for each other, parents, or anybody else when adults and others don’t do it on TV?

There’s such a lot of promotion about “safe sex”, but nowhere have I seen publicity about the failure rate of condoms. Sex is more than a physical act, but I don’t hear about that.

Then there are parents who cheat on the boss, flog his goods, cheat on taxes, take sickies when they want, but rebel when youth buck the system.

HYPOCRISY! HYPOCRISY! Our secular values are shot. Do we realise how deep in the cultural muck we really are?

E. WHAT IS THE WAY BACK?

Brendan Nelson, in my view, points in the right direction when he says, “Our national vision should be based on fundamental value that not only will we care for one another, but every person has a place in society and even if unemployed is expected to make a contribution… In the end it is not the economic indices… that will determine our destiny, but rather our beliefs, values and how we see ourselves in the world.” [40]

I believe we need to go further than that. Eckersley recognised it when he wrote that
The modern vision of the future is grim... This vision has emerged at a time when many people have lost a strong belief in anything that transcends the material world and that might sustain them in the face of its dangers and disappointments. [41]

Young people are left with themselves. Our culture is losing belief in the Transcendent One. There is nothing left to rise above the materialistic. Western culture is now marked by "the erosion of religious and communal values and the elevation of individual, secular and material values." [42]

Secular historians, Will and Ariel Durant, wrote: "There is no significant example in history, before our time, of a society successfully maintaining moral life without the aid of religion." [43]

I am calling for a return to the values stated at the beginning of the Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act (9th July 1900), the Act to constitute the Commonwealth of Australia:

WHEREAS the people of New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, Queensland, and Tasmania, humbly relying on the blessing of Almighty God, have agreed to unite in one indissoluble Federal Commonwealth under the Crown of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, and under the Constitution hereby established. [44]

The Psalmist stated it this way: "It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in man. It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in princes" (Psalm 118:8-9).

We have moved a long way from these foundational values. I believe the problem runs much deeper than the manifestation of youth suicide. If our culture is going to be turned around, it will mean a change of beliefs and values. I agree with Eckersley: "It will mean repudiating the moral priority given to the individual over the community; rights over responsibilities; the material over the spiritual; the present over the future; style over substance; the ephemeral over the enduring." [45] The New Testament Book of Romans puts it this way:

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. [46]

As far back as 1969, Christian apologist, Francis Schaeffer, issued a solemn warning of where this was taking Western culture in his penetrating book, Death in the City. [47]

I don't believe governments will lead the way back. It should be our spiritual leaders who are ringing the alarm bells. They seem to be strangely silent. Perhaps they are not seeing what you and I are seeing with disillusioned youth. We need "new John Bunyans to point out what occurs when [people] turn to Vanity Fair." [48]

F. CONCLUSION

When Elvis Presley's body was found the morning following his death, his half-brother told how Presley was found lying on the floor with a Bible and a book on the Shroud of Turin open beneath him. He had a longing for meaning, even beyond the grave. [49]

One of the most famous thinkers of this century must surely be philosopher and ardent atheist, Bertrand Russell. He was very wealthy, extremely successful, had many wives (9 of them, I believe). Karen Tate, his daughter from one of his unions, wrote this:

Somewhere at the back of my father's mind and at the bottom of his heart there was an empty space that had been filled by God and he never found anything else to put in its place once he had thrown God out. [50]

Ravi Zacharias was born in New Delhi, India, and is a leading lecturer and defender of the Christian faith on university campuses around the world. At one of his lectures, a woman sat in the front row taking frequent notes. Later in the week she and her family invited him to lunch at their home.

He learned of a terrible tragedy that had overtaken the family, a tragedy for which this woman could get no rest until she had some answers. She told Ravi of her husband who was a professional man, with an exalted reputation as a pioneer in his field. His whole life exuded "contentment, success, and influence." Then came "events of one fateful night" that she could not explain.

She heard an awful sound that woke her. Her husband was not beside her. She found him "doubled over at the kitchen table—dead—with a suicide note, "Some people die natural deaths. Others, unable to face life anymore, choose to cut it short." Then followed a "heartfelt apology with a plea for forgiveness for this betrayal."
Zacharias, even though he was a stranger to the family, felt “the terrible burden of this heartrending experience.” As he was told the story, the wife would say, “I cannot understand it. Why did he do it?” This was the “cry of a forsaken wife who now felt the greatest rejection of all.”

While Zacharias could not answer the “Why?” he told her, “For many in this high-paced world, despair is not a moment; it is a way of life.” [51]

For many of our youth, despair is not a moment; it is a way of life.

Extra notes:

1. The core etiology (cause) of what’s happening in our society came from Jesus Christ. He said, “For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander” (Matthew 15:19). But our secular society doesn’t want to hear this diagnosis because the cure is spiritual — a renewed heart and mind through an encounter with the living Christ.

2. Karl Menninger was a Freudian psychiatrist. His book, Whatever Became of Sin? gets to a fundamental issue that is ignored in our secular society.

Endnotes:

1. The content of this paper was first given as a presentation to the Australian Medical Association (AMA) Forum on youth suicide at the Don Pancho resort, Bargara, via Bundaberg, Qld., Australia on 9 August, 1997.

3. Told by Michael Green in his address to the ARMA Conference (i.e. Anglican Renewal), Canberra, 26-30 August, 1991.


7. A graph comparing the increase in suicide when compared with deaths from motor vehicle accidents is found in ibid.

8. Ibid.


18. In ibid., S18.


22. Both of the following poems are quoted in Eckersley, 1995, 12.


30. Ecclesiastes 2:17,


42. Ibid., 15.


46. Romans 1:21-23.

Jesus Christ said, “For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander” (Matthew 15:19).

48. Ibid., 43.
51. Told in Zacharias, 1994, 70-71, emphasis added.
Community (20)
Computers & Internet (7)
Email (3)
Fluoride (9)

Counselling (49)
Adoption (1)
Alternate therapies (1)
Christian counselling (4)
Sexuality (3)
Dementia (2)
Divorce (1)
Domestic violence (2)
Drugs – illicit (3)
Marriage & the Family (22)
Polygamy (1)
Masturbation (1)
Suicide (3)
Assisted Suicide (1)

Cults & Heresies (14)
Christadelphians (1)
Gnosticism (1)
Jehovah's Witnesses (2)
Mormonism (1)
Prosperity Gospel (1)
Seventh Day Adventist (4)
Unitarianism (1)

Drugs (10)
Alcohol (2)
Marijuana (4)

Education (5)
English Grammar (2)
Seminaries (1)
Sexual Abuse (1)

Ethics (49)
Abortion (7)
Adultery (1)
Alcohol (1)
Assisted suicide (2)
Censorship (1)
Euthanasia (7)
Homosexual marriage (3)
Homosexuality (14)
Moral relativism (1)
purity (1)
Stealing (1)
Evangelism (9)
Sex (20)
Homosexuality (11)
Paedophilia (1)
Pornography (1)

Theology (220)
Anthropology (nature of human beings) (2)
Arminianism (55)
Atonement (4)
Bibliology (9)
Canonicity (1)
Canon (1)
Canon of Scripture (1)
Inerrancy (2)
Calvinism (57)
Christology (4)
Church (2)
Creation (3)
Downgrade/False teaching (5)
Eschatology (7)
The Rapture (3)
Tribulation (2)
Evangelical (4)
False teaching (3)
Free grace theology (1)
Free will (10)
Fundamentalism (1)
Grace of God (2)
Hermeneutics (12)
Allegorical Interpretation (1)
Literal Interpretation (2)
Holy Spirit (19)
Baptism with the Holy Spirit (4)
Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (1)
Gifts of the Holy Spirit (6)
Tongues (5)
Liberalism (12)
Life after Death (30)
Heaven (1)
Lord's Supper (1)
Lordship salvation (1)
Music (2)
Pelagian, semi-Pelagian (1)
Predestination (2)
Religion (1)
Roman Catholicism (3)
Perpetual virginity of Mary (1)
Salvation (30)
Apostasy (3)
Election (2)
Justification by faith (1)
Perseverance of the Saints (4)
Propitiation (2)
Sin (9)
Sunday worship (1)
The Sabbath (2)
Total Depravity (1)
Unorthodox (3)
Women in Ministry (13)
Word of faith (2)

Truth (9)
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April 2019 (1)
March 2019 (6)
February 2019 (1)
January 2019 (1)
December 2018 (2)
November 2018 (2)
October 2018 (1)
September 2018 (4)
August 2018 (3)
July 2018 (4)
June 2018 (2)
May 2018 (4)
February 2018 (1)
January 2018 (2)
November 2017 (1)
April 2017 (1)
March 2017 (1)
February 2017 (1)
January 2017 (1)
October 2016 (4)
September 2016 (1)
August 2016 (10)
July 2016 (3)
June 2016 (4)
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America's youth is greatly affected by suicide. Suicide is the 3rd leading cause of death for young people aged 15-24, and the 2nd leading cause among college students. More young people die from suicide than cancer and heart disease combined. Bio-Psychological Risk Factors:

- Mental disorders, particularly mood disorders, schizophrenia, anxiety disorders, and certain personality disorders.
- Alcohol and other substance abuse disorders
- Hopelessness
- Impulsive and/or aggressive tendencies
- History of trauma or abuse
- Some major physical illnesses
- Previous suicide attempts
- Family History

Cultural Continuity and Suicide in First Nations Youth. Because they are generally hardy and otherwise hard to kill, death among young persons, including Indigenous youth, is very often self-appointed. Beyond auto accidents, suicide is broadly recognized to be the major killer of young persons, Indigenous or not (Statistics Canada, 2001).

4. some commitment to one’s own future prospects. Without some sense of personal (not to mention cultural) continuity, it would appear, life is easily cheapened, and the possibility of suicide becomes a live option. Even under the best of developmental Youth suicide has risen in most developed nations over the past 50 years, especially among males, but the increase remains to be explained. Statistical analyses were used to examine associations between youth suicide rates in 11-21 mainly Western, developed nations and 32 socio-economic and cultural variables. The central hypothesis was that suicide rates would be correlated with various cultural measures of social attachment and integration, especially individualism. Socio-economic variables were included in the analysis to demonstrate the relative strength of the cultural associations.

Why is this happening to me?