

What's Driving America's Suicide Problem?

"Why Is America So Depressed?" was one of the first headlines I saw as I jumped back into work after the holidays.

"Well, there's a cheery way to start the new year," I thought to myself as I read through the *New York Times* [op-ed by Lee Siegel](#).

Such a headline is not the optimistic stance I normally like to take towards life, but I have to admit that it's true. The stats that Siegel cites are bleak: anxiety "rose 36 percent" between 2016 and 2017, while America's "suicide rate increased by 33 percent between 1999 and 2017."

Siegel attributes these bleak statistics to a number of things, including (among others) the current political climate, worries over mass shootings and climate change, and ballooning debt. "The frightening environment helps cause depression, depression causes catastrophic thinking, and catastrophic thinking makes the environment seem even more terrifying than it is," Siegel says.

That nutshell statement perfectly describes the account of attempted suicide that I read about yesterday as I finally finished Whittaker Chambers' autobiography, "[Witness](#)."

Chambers, a former Communist spy, participated in an arduous trial in the late 1940s, testifying that Alger Hiss, a high-ranking government official, was one of many Communist spies endangering the American way of life. Although Chambers had left Communism behind and was determined to prevent its philosophy from spreading in the country he loved, his resolve did not make it any easier to testify against former friends like Hiss. Alone, discouraged, and feeling like the worst person on earth, Chambers decided to end his life.

He bought the needed poison, wrote loving letters to his family and the nation consumed in the Hiss trial, set up a contraption to gas himself, then fell asleep in the engulfing fumes.

Fortunately, the smothering towel fell off his contraption while he slept, enabling him to awake the next morning violently sick. His mother found him, guessed what happened and cried, "Oh, how could you, how could you?"

"The world hates a quitter," she added. "They would never forgive you."

Chambers moved on from the botched suicide, sickened by what he had tried to do. Yet, as he implies, his action stemmed from "a spiritual exhaustion" and "dryness" in which he felt alone and struggled to find God. While he knew his actions were wrong, he was thankful for God's grace and the way the Almighty had used the situation to encourage him and deepen his resolve to press on despite difficulties:

Probably no act less extreme than mine that lonely night could have disciplined me for the public ordeal that I was to undergo in the two Hiss trials. For it disciplined me in a deeper sense. From it, I took away an indispensable certainty, the knowledge that all we ever have the right to pray to God for in the end is a strength equal to our necessity. I no longer felt absolutely alone. I no longer felt estranged. I felt a sense of gentlest solicitude playing around me, as if a father had pushed his son, for his own good, too far, as fathers will, as I have sometimes done with my own son, only to suffer at the first sign of his real weakness, self-reproach, taking form in a special tenderness.

Reading Chambers' experience and comparing it with the depression Siegel sees in America today is an enlightening exercise. Chambers attempted suicide in large part because he felt alone and unable to connect with God. America today is

abandoning religion and faith in God *en masse*. Yet we wonder why depression and suicide are on the rise.

As Saint Augustine tells the Lord in his famous *Confessions*, “Thou has made us for thyself and restless is our heart until it comes to rest in thee.” Perhaps it’s time we recognize that faith in God is more vital to a thriving life than we’ve cared to admit.

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[Image Credit: pxhere]