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Mary Richardson Kennedy's battle

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If difficult divorces caused people to commit suicide, nearly half the adults in America would be dead. If trauma caused people to take their own lives, there would be no Holocaust survivors and Rwanda and the Congo would be practically devoid of their populations.

Not too many years ago, I talked a suicidal friend off the ledge of a New York City high-rise.

"For five years, I've been working among homeless families with the grimmest possible existence," he told me. "Yet no one can say their misery is greater than mine."

He came from an affluent family, was well educated, gainfully employed, and suffered from depression.

Everyone is sad when they lose a race. But people with depression are sad even when they win the lottery. My sister-in-law and best friend, Mary Richardson Kennedy, who died last week by her own hand, was a gifted writer, a straight-A student at Brown University and Rhode Island School of Design. She was so stunning that she once entered and won a beauty pageant just so she could get a free trip to Ireland. She had a wonderful life with brilliant children, a successful career as a designer, and deep and abiding friendships with people across the globe. She had won life's lottery over and over again. She was my best friend for 37 years. But since the day I met her, she battled periodic depression.

Mary didn't ask for this disease, she never deserved it, and she took every step, from those prescribed by doctors to looking to God, to try and find a way out of it. Mary recognized part of her was broken. As her husband, my brother Bobby, who spent years and untold efforts trying to rescue her from her depression, said in his eulogy, Mary would be distressed to know so many of her friends feel they should have done more to save her. But Mary's dear friend Al Styron, whose wisdom comes from a lifetime of grappling with her father's demons, knows better. She wrote, "The only culprit here is the wretched devil of despair."

Mary used her life productively, and she would want us all to do the same, turning first always to generosity, kindness and love. I hope Mary's death will be more than just a devastating personal tragedy for me, for her family and for the legions of friends who adored her. I hope that it will be a wake-up call for all Americans about the scourge of this affliction. I hope Mary's struggles will inspire more of us to join the national efforts to address the causes and cures of depression.

There's a temptation to simplify this issue and classify people as lunatics, villains or victims. Mary was none of the above. Mary was a hero. For six agonizing years, she embarked on an odyssey so harrowing that Dante himself would tremble at the courage of that tender, luminous woman who walked through the mouth of hell. She endured unbearable pain for her children and the people she loved. She fought the impulses and kept herself alive.

When people say there is a "reason" for the depression, they insult the person who suffers, making it seem that those in agony are somehow at fault for not "cheering up." The fact is that those who suffer — and those who love them — are no more at fault for depression than a cancer patient is for a tumor. And the first step is for us to be honest about who Mary was, and try to understand the painful reality of the agony of her depression and her decision to end her life.

Kerry Kennedy, the seventh of the 11 children of Sen. Robert F. Kennedy, and the former wife of Gov. Andrew Cuomo, is president of the Robert F. Kennedy Center for Justice and Human Rights.

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