

W. Eugene Smith

a personal snapshot

Bill Jay

In the autumn of 1969 W. Eugene Smith thought that his life -both creatively and literally - was over. He was 51. He believed he was ready for death and that suicide was the honorable way out. He felt that he was ugly, unloved, unappreciated and incapable of further work. He was wrong on all points.

It was an appropriately stormy November night (Gene embraced melodrama) when I was woken up at 3 a.m. by the incessant ringing of the telephone in my English village home. Stumbling out of bed, down the stairs and into the kitchen, I picked up the receiver to hear Gene's hesitant, incoherent voice crackling over the wires from New York City. He told me he had mailed a package of original prints to be used as his obituary in my magazine Album. "By the time you receive them, I will be dead," he said. He insisted that he was going to commit suicide, "Maybe, tonight."

I begged and pleaded, to no avail. "Keep my prints as an epitaph," he insisted, while I urged him to call a friend in New York ("I have none") or come to England for a vacation ("I would only drag you down in despair"). I screamed at him that he was loved, even revered, and that he could not do this thing to us all. But he broke the connection. I called him back, only to exchange the same conversation. Gene was going to die.

I spent the rest of the night frantically trying to contact mutual friends in New York, in a frenzy every time I received a discontinued line or no answer. At last, a contact. He listened to my panic and told me not to worry, I was overreacting and that Gene was exaggerating. I hung up confused and hurt, convinced that the call confirmed the New Yorker's callousness and cruelty, not knowing in my naivety what his closer friends understood all too well: that Gene was probing, pleading for affection.

A short time later the package of original prints arrived. They were a mixed lot, odd sizes and formats, old favorites and previously unpublished images, some very personal. There was an intimate shot taken by Gene in the act of sexual intercourse and a bizarre erotic image featuring a meat grinder ("My one bitter and nasty and vengeful photograph which I savagely made as a Valentine, or an ad for the anti-man

SCUM or WITCH," he wrote). They were all mounted onto black card.

On 17 January 1970 a three-page, single spaced letter arrived. It, too was full of agonizing personal turmoil and repeated intentions to "com mitt [sic] suicide." In part, it reads:

In the fog of tiredness I was under when I sent those prints off to you I believe I scribbled something and promised you a letter. This may or may not be the letter. I have slept for many hours, I still am tired and confused as to what the situation is. And I know I have to scramble "practical" things if I am able to cope with the financial onslaughts of today.

One of several reasons that I now waver so close to suicide is that I know I am becoming more and more self-unreliable. I held sacred my promises - deadlines (if agreed to) among them - and I fiercely fought my professional obligations. Yes, I fought deadlines - I fought such as the hysteria of deadline being applied to the pyramids. I fought useless and arbitrary headlines. When I agreed to a deadline for some valid reason I too often worked my heart and gut out and hurt things and situations very important to me to prove my word to responsibility.

In poverty and in sickness and in times where I have had to divert my attentions to make sure I still had electricity for the enlarger - these have been the times I have become so split and weak that I have not been sure I could even try to continue towards a deadline.

I am unreliable now - and since I really allow myself no excuses is one of the reasons I think I should move towards suicide. I think I have been lousy towards you. And I sadly cherish the kindness you have shown me. And deeply apologize for the spots of trouble I may have placed you in.

I should be stronger than this. I often have been. But I'm sick and battered and financially broke - and ... I am riding a tangled parachute of despair ...

I think these are reasons enough for me to com mitt suicide and not hang up those who still somewhat believe in me. My being alive is no importance (other than detrimental) if its effect is to demean all of those efforts, beliefs, and crusades to which I so long and so completely have given the dedications of my life.

I doubt I can find another [love of a woman] to keep me alive. I doubt if I can find other individual strength. I know how battered and ugly my body is - shot up, crippled, so disfigured. I change not in my present agony any belief that I would have fought for a different journalistic-photographic validity. I might wish I have managed it with a greater intelligence - but if I have to pay this terrible

agony for that fight. Let me pay it. That I have lost that love, have hurt my family as it has cost me. I must pay, I guess - but it is damnation.

What can I ask now, of those who call me as friend, other than that when I am unloved and battered and alienated from comfort - and in that vital fact of being unable to maintain those standards and that integrity for that kind of journalism I feel is essential to the worlds survival -what can I ask now, other than that to those I have meant something to that they will really attempt to understand why I must in failure to maintain my standards - why I must com mitt suicide ...

I see clumsy and confusing sentences above. I am too tired to correct them. I guess this is one of the symptoms of needing death.

But - to celebrate any sorrow at my death - remember how much I do love life, how I have exalted in it, and in the fact that I am seldom bored.

So few changes could mean the differences between my producing and living - but that is like a snapping of fingers.

And life is as easily snapped off.

There was more, much more of the same, written in a tone of desperation. I have also omitted large chunks which refer to a woman whose love he had lost. He ended with the insistence that "I am really wavering so close to suicide. I say it not as melodrama..."

The days later another letter arrived, a "P.S." as he titled it. After some talk of his images, and of his lost love, he ended on a more positive note:

Dear Bill,

P.S.

If I could beat this depression - if I could fall in love - if there were at least someone around to make me eat semi-healthfully - if I could get six months rest. It is not that my belief and zest for living has disappeared - it is, I must repeat, that I feel I am demeaning those standards I most believe in, and am further imprisoned by my poverty.

But life, fierce (not against others) but in its self fire - in love and belief and desire. It is all still here, even if flipped a bit off the track.

*Again, my warmest regards,
Gene*

The letter was prophetic. "If I could fall in love ...," he wished. And he could, and did. There was a new woman in his life and life itself was transformed. Within three months of embracing suicide he was rushing towards life and joy. And he asked for all his prints to be returned. They would no longer be needed, at least for an obituary. Gene learned that he could be loved, "ugly" as he claimed to be, and that yes, indeed, he was needed. There is a very old saying: a man dies when his house is finished. Gene's house was not finished. One task remained ...

With a surge of well-being he did what he, and all great photographers, did best: he objectified his state of grace by taking and employing his pictures in order to elevate others.

Within a year he was in Minimata Bay, Japan, with his second wife Aileen, where, from 1971 to 1975, they exposed the agonizing human cost of industrial pollution. Gene was severely beaten up by company goons but, although bloody, he was unbowed. He was capable of further work of humanistic power and social relevancy.

Minimata finished his "house". W. Eugene Smith died in 1978.

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