

SUFFERING SILENCE

When Kenneth W. Starr, the Whitewater special prosecutor, issued a report confirming that Vincent Foster, the White House aide, had committed suicide, I wrote a column about it for the op-ed page of *The Washington Post*. I said a number of things about the investigation and about the meanness of partisan politics in Washington, but I did not mention what had occurred to me when I first read the report: that it was only incidentally about Whitewater. It was really about men.

Here was a man, an intelligent and well-educated man, whom a doctor described in retrospect as “clinically depressed” around the time he killed himself, and “perhaps subclinically even before,” according to the report. Here was a man who had told his sister four days before killing himself that he was depressed. A man who that same night had cried at dinner with his wife. Who had told his mother a day or two later that he was unhappy, that work was a “grind.”

He committed his unhappiness to writing and slipped these musings into his briefcase. He called a physician and said he was depressed and had an antidepressant prescribed. (He seems to have taken only one dose.) In short, he was a man who gave every indication that he was teetering on the edge, someone in the sort of pain (is that the right word?) that for many of us is unknowable—not the agony of a broken bone, but a dull smothering of the will to live, a slow asphyxiation of all joy.

Where does it hurt, our mothers used to ask?

Everywhere. It hurts everywhere.

But on the day before he died, Foster talked with Associate Attorney General Webster L. Hubbell, whose own troubles were already brewing. The two men were “best friends,” Hubbell later told investigators. They were both from Little Rock and the Rose Law Firm, friends of Bill and Hillary Clinton’s and in Washington on their account. They had just vacationed together on the Chesapeake Bay.

“Hubbell said that he was not aware that Foster was experiencing any type of stress,” investigators wrote shortly after the suicide.

“Hubbell answered no to all questions concerning any noticeable changes in Foster’s appearance, physical ailments, headaches, loss of appetite or any kind of stomach trouble.”

Imagine: On the last weekend of his life, Vince Foster went down to the Eastern Shore with his close friend. There, that July of 1993, was one man who was perilously depressed and another whose former law partners were investigating his billing practices, and I’ll bet neither one told the other how he felt or what he was facing. They were not only friends, but best friends. And real friends—male friends, that is—tell each other nothing. It could ruin the friendship.

Many years ago, I wrote a column saying that men don’t have friends. They have buddies and they have pals. They have people with whom they play sports or cards and colleagues with whom they work, but they confide in no one. Sometimes I think sports were invented so men would have something safe to talk about. God knows, they—I mean we—will never confess an insecurity, an insufficiency.

Not much has changed since then. Now men meet on the Mall by the countless thousands just to confess their need to confess. They turn communicating into a stadium event—an event for crying, for hugging, for confessing the most banal of concerns (which is to say they are bedeviled by sex). But my guess is that when the tears have dried and the hugging is over, the men retreat, like turtles that have taken a peek, back into their shells, where, if they had the words, not to mention the guts, they would scream that they are lonely. Being a man isn’t so tough once you get over the loneliness.

Recently, I’ve had some conversations with women who are in commuting marriages—Los Angeles-New York, New York-Washington, wherever. The men, it turns out, are no good on the phone. They simply will not talk about much. They can make plans, and they can conduct business, but if asked how their day was, they reply, “Fine,” as if there were nothing more to say. As far as they are concerned, there really is nothing more to say. The wives do not understand. Over the phone, at some distance

and after some separation, their status and role have changed: They have become their husbands' friends.

Once it was thought—at least I thought—that men would change over time. I don't think so anymore. I think this reticence, this inability to express emotion, served men well in the bush when they came face to face with a saber-toothed tiger—but now we're stuck with it, evolutionarily mal-adapted. Whatever the cause, whatever the reason, I think this

reluctance is deep, imprinted on the genes. It's not that we don't want to talk. We do. We just feel intensely that we have nothing of transcending importance to say.

So there was poor Vince Foster on the Eastern Shore with his best friend. He was hurting, and yet not offering his buddy the slightest hint that he was, as it turned out, dying. This is the way men are with their friends. If you like a man, you don't want to burden him with your problems.

Richard Cohen, The Washington Post Magazine