

# Eulogy Following A Spiritual Teacher's Suicide

The spiritual teacher Wayne Wirs killed himself in September of 2017.

In the eulogy to Wayne below, I mention his residual trauma from military service. Because his family would see the eulogy and I didn't want to complicate their grief, I didn't mention the fact that Wayne appeared to be carrying early childhood trauma from his difficult relationship with his father. (There were clues to that in the remembrance Wayne posted when his father passed away. Wayne killed himself a few weeks after his father died.)

I'm extremely skittish about teachings that promote the idea that it's good not to exist. In the audience who receive spiritual teachers' messaging are MANY with unhealed trauma who are looking for escape and may misinterpret "You don't really exist/not existing is good" in self-destructive ways.

Another example is, devotees of Lakshmanjoo quote him as having frequently said that enlightened people long for death, enlightened people eagerly look forward to their physical death. Also there is the example of Sadguru's wife who killed herself using a yoga maneuver and has been promoted as an exemplar of great spiritual attainment.

When the news about Wayne came out, an influential blogger posted comments about "conscious choice" endorsing the idea that Wayne had done some great spiritual thing and essentially giving permission for anyone thinking of suicide to follow through and do the deed. I was horrified and wrote the following eulogy to Wayne to try to counter that message.

## Every day in the United States ...

22 veterans commit suicide. Wayne Wirs was a veteran, and he committed suicide. In my opinion, that is the most telling fact about Wayne's passing. He wrote that his military service made him a "trained killer," and that he almost died during that service.

He created an elaborate spiritual narrative about his choice to end his life. It is important, in my opinion, that we not take that narrative at face value, or at least that we not take that narrative to be the whole story. I think Wayne wanted to kill himself because of the trauma he carried from his service.

Again and again, he repeated two catchphrases:

"The smart have their books and the wise have their scars."

"The less there is of me, the more there is of God."

I've wondered about the scars. The word seemed to suggest something finished, healed, but I think the reality was, those were not scars. They were open wounds.

Throughout nondual culture you encounter the attitude that true awakening, enlightenment, involves complete annihilation of the relative person, of the little "me," of the ego.

I don't believe this attitude was the cause of Wayne's demise. Rather, I believe it was a convenient, readymade, compelling argument he could adopt for the powerfully self destructive undercurrent that surged through him and carried him toward oblivion. It was a cloak of invisibility he could don to cover the scars, the open wounds, the raw humanity. In a phrase, it was a spiritual bypass.

That expression is often used dismissively, as a criticism or even an attack, but I think it's important that we understand this without judgment, without condescension. It's unfair to Wayne to say he was deluded or he was lying to himself. He was simply wounded, and he was trying to find a way to address his woundedness.

He wrote eloquently about his desire to merge completely with God. I think his experience of God was authentic and his urge for total unity with God was real. But I also think he was describing an urge to lose himself, to fly free from the trauma he carried, in that merging.

He spoke for years about his intention to kill himself. He set three “tripwires” he would respond to with suicide:

1. Running out of money
2. Losing the van he lived in
3. Pain that did not resolve with a trip to the emergency room

The first two could be solved with a blog post, and the third is absurdly demanding and impatient. A trip to the emergency room is a starting point, not a solution. Wayne’s sciatica was treatable, I’ve no doubt of that. He only accepted cursory treatment, and he consciously acted in a way that made the pain worse. He said driving made it worse, but he kept driving until he could no longer remain sitting. He said he didn’t want to go through physical therapy. He was a strong, healthy man in his fifties. It may be the pain would have resolved if he simply stopped driving for a few weeks. My sense is, he was terrified of having to depend on other people, and he was terrified of being told what to do. And my sense is, he simply wanted to die.

There has been much discussion about “conscious choice.” In my opinion, this framing is problematic and even dangerous. Anyone who wants to die can tell themselves they are making a conscious choice. Those discussions are online, in the open. Anyone can see them, including those who are lost, desperate, looking for a way out, looking for a rationalization. I’m concerned that some may look to Wayne’s way of passing as an example, as a template. I’m concerned that we, in our respect for Wayne as a spiritual person and a spiritual teacher, not become enablers, facilitators of premature death. We must, in my opinion, separate the fact of Wayne’s suicide from the persona of an awakened teacher he presented.

I have seen comments that “He couldn’t have been awakened,” invoking the impossible (and pervasive) paradigm that all human fallibility must have burned away for an awakening to be authentic.

As I knew him and experienced him, Wayne was luminously awake. He wrote brilliantly, beautifully, soaringly about his experience, and he offered insights and encouragements that have inspired and benefitted many who have encountered them.

Wayne was awake, I’ve no doubt of it. And he was human. In his awakesness, he was truly one with God, I’ve no doubt of that. And in his humanness, he was deeply wounded. There is no contradiction in this. For our own sake, for the integrity and authenticity of our own awakening, each of our awakenings, each of us, it is important that we understand and come to peace with that paradox.