

# AMANDA TODD SUICIDE: The Web Has a Lot to Answer For

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"I can never get that photo back, it's out there forever."

Forever has outlived Amanda Todd.

That photograph she regretted so profoundly, the image that haunted, can't hurt her anymore.

The dead don't cry or cringe.

Friends and strangers weep for her now, of course they do. Perhaps there is also remorse among those who tormented the girl — but more likely, more honestly, alarm that they will be exposed.

The cabal of bullies which badgered the teenager into suicide has left its spoor on social media. And, as Amanda elliptically reminds, their fingerprints are out there forever — on a hard drive, a Facebook wall, the Twitter detritus — and can be retrieved.

The cursed Web has a lot to answer for.

It is an inanimate thing, hardly even an object, more a fourth dimension where just about anything goes, no matter how vile and possibly even criminal. Courts have barely started to catch up with the phenomenon of cyber menace, parameters of privacy laws, execution of search warrants for Internet subscribers.

If there was a bridge previously too far to cross ethically, at least among the masses who don't consider themselves brutes because they never laid a hand on anybody, didn't stalk, it's been breeched on the Web.

A whole generation has grown up lacking the restraint demanded by face-to-face encounters. They've embraced the concept of non-accountability, of slugging without consequences. That makes them no different from adults who go online to slime, yowling into cyberspace. But teenagers hurt more deeply, have fewer coping skills to deal with rejection and humiliation. They even think suicide is a kind of holding purgatory for lost souls, not grasping the finality of self-destruction.

For Amanda, the 15-year-old girl who took her life on Wednesday, just weeks removed from posting a heartbreaking video on YouTube about social alienation and shattering unkindness, the preying was not merely online. Her clot of pestering pursuers, youths who wouldn't let her be, attacked in person as well, ambushed her on the way home from school, left her moaning in a ditch.

But the malice began years earlier, online. And she couldn't escape it, not by changing schools, not by moving cities, and not by crushed attempts to reinvent herself, be born again as a girl different from the one who'd made some mistakes, youthful errors of judgment. A past that was not really so very objectionable hounded her in the present, and in the ether presence, of harassers.

I wonder what those abusers think now. I wonder what, if anything, they'll tell their grandchildren years from now, about the time they drove a fragile girl to kill herself. More probably they'll never speak a word of it, bound only to each other by evil secrets. And when the outrage dies down, I suspect they'll be forgiven, because they were young and rash and didn't mean to do such grievous harm. But they did mean it, surely; they're not children, they weren't just passively provoking.

When I cover trials of young offenders who've committed serious crimes, I always wonder: Where did they come from? What made them this way? Where were the parents and teachers and more right-thinking friends? But these are quantifiable crimes — a youth with a gun or a knife and so often palpably damaged themselves.

On social media, the harm slithers between the cracks of self-confidence, it undermines and eviscerates. Apart from the victim and the culprits blasting missives — sometimes from the realm of anonymity, sometimes as identifiable aggressors — who among us even knows when a child is suffering from cyber bullying? Many are not inclined to tell, though Amanda did.

She told everyone in that forlorn, nine-minute YouTube posting, shuffling her thick clutch of flash cards, the camera capturing only brief glimpses of her face, such a pretty face, while "Hear You Me" by Jimmy Eat World plays softly in the background.

At that point, Amanda had already once attempted suicide by swallowing bleach, had transferred schools, moved from one parent's home in Maple Ridge, B.C., to another parent's home in Coquitlam.

The ache without end is clear in the sentences she wrote, phrase by phrase per flash card, documenting years of bullying and shaming. It started in Grade 7 with an ill-advised and embarrassing topless photo circulated to friends, relatives and schoolmates. She'd sent it out, at the urging, apparently, of her friends. Such a minor indiscretion and so common a rite of exhibitionism among teenagers today, but this picture came back to bite Amanda a year later, on the Internet and, later, affixed to a boy's Facebook page.

Harassment continued at her new school and then exploded into vicious taunting, baiting, following a brief involvement with a boy who, turns out, already had a girlfriend. As a pack, that couple and their friends assaulted her, the attack apparently filmed — because everything is preserved on cellphone video these days. Depressed, she took to cutting herself.

Bullies continued to vilify her, posting photos of bleach, wishing her dead. They were remorseless and pitiless.

Yet she was strong, Amanda, until she couldn't be strong anymore. And even then, she displayed a charity that was never afforded her.

"I'm struggling to stay in this world, because everything just touches me so deeply. I'm not doing this for attention. I'm doing this to be an inspiration and to show that I can be strong. I did things to myself to make pain go away, because I'd rather hurt myself than someone else. Haters are haters but please don't hate. . . . I hope I can show you guys that everyone has a story, and everyone's future will be bright some day, you just gotta pull through. I'm still here, aren't I?"

Just a few weeks later – what happened? – she wasn't.

So now the tributes, the condolences, pour in and Amanda's video has gone viral. She'll never know how many people cared, would have cared.

Her legacy is in the aftermath of tragedy. The B.C. coroner announced Friday that an investigation has been launched, warning that it will be long and complex, and the public should not expect instant answers. Barb McLintock said issues ranging from school and mental health support to cyber and social media bullying would be explored before any "reasonable and practical" recommendations could be made.

But how to reasonably and practically suppress the vomitorium of venom on social media? How to recondition teenagers numbed to the splatter of hatefulness?

How to convince them: Look a person in the face.

Social media is a tool without any conscience of its own. Yet it has become, in the hands of juveniles and the embittered, a malignancy.

There's nothing to be done for sad Amanda anymore. Look around, though. Is there an Amanda in your house, in your class, among your Facebook "likes" or — shame on you — "hates"?

And try, for a change, the sound of silence. Not one mean word.

Just hush now.

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[http://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2012/10/12/amanda\\_todd\\_suicide\\_the\\_web\\_has\\_a\\_lot\\_to\\_answer\\_for.html](http://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2012/10/12/amanda_todd_suicide_the_web_has_a_lot_to_answer_for.html)