

Youth Culture Lesson
Finding Teachable Moments in Culture
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Saluting the Semicolon
A Punctuation Mark Helps People Continue Their Stories
By Paul Asay

What Happened:

The semicolon never has gotten much respect in the world of punctuation. Everyone uses periods and commas because they're necessary, but the semicolon? Not very many people have known how to use it properly—until now.

Semicolons have taken the Internet by storm lately. People are getting tattoos of the long-overlooked punctuation mark and posting the pictures on Twitter, Instagram and elsewhere. It's not that the semicolons suddenly are receiving a lot of love from grammar fans; but through a unique outreach, they are encouraging people to love themselves.

Project Semicolon was started by Amy Bleuel after she lost her father to suicide. It evolved into a mission to help those who suffered from depression, anxiety and suicidal thoughts. "A semicolon is used when an author could've chosen to end their sentence, but chose not to," Project Semicolon's website says. "The author is you and the sentence is your life."

Though Project Semicolon doesn't exclude folks from other belief systems from taking part, it is, at its core, a Christian ministry. "As we set forth in the project, we committed to loving with a Christ-like love those who are struggling," the website reads. On the site, Bleuel talks about how her own faith was rocked through her many trials—from her father's suicide to her rape at age 13.

"There were times that I wavered in my faith and wondered why I had to experience such pain and times when I wondered how could a God of love allow me to go through this," she admits. However, she says, "It is the love of my Savior that empowered me to make a difference and to love the world with a Christ-like love, even when the world hadn't loved me. It is only through God that I am here to tell you my story and empower you all to continue yours."

Bleuel indeed has empowered thousands, if all the semicolons drawn or tattooed on people's wrists can be believed. Some have been tattooed near or even over old, jagged scars. One man included words with his semicolon tattoo: "Your story isn't over yet."

Talk About It

Depression, anxiety and having suicidal thoughts can be really hard to talk about. It's estimated that approximately 350 million people around the world suffer from depression, and very few ever seek help for it. Experts believe 20 percent of youth

between the ages of 15 and 24 have suffered from depression—not just temporarily being bummed or sad—but in a funk that seems impossible to shake.

Have you? (You don't have to answer aloud if you don't want.) Do you know of someone who has? If you've had such feelings but don't anymore, what helped you get better? How do you try to help friends who are depressed?

People sometimes use the word *depression* pretty loosely. Real depression is something a doctor or psychologist should diagnose, but some of the symptoms include: feeling sad or hopeless; losing interest in hobbies or activities; changes in sleeping or eating habits; being tired all the time; having difficulty concentrating; daydreaming about death and/or suicide. Do you know anyone who's dealing with symptoms such as these?

Bleuel says her faith in God made a huge difference in her depression. How can faith help those who are dealing with feelings of depression or suicide? Have you seen God work in someone's life when they were feeling pretty hopeless? How?

If you're feeling depressed and don't want to talk now, please speak to someone about it later. Your youth leaders would very much like to help you, and they probably are able to point you to where you can get more help. You can go to ProjectSemicolon.com to learn more about the program.

What the Bible Says:

“When the righteous cry for help, the Lord hears and delivers them out of all their troubles. The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit” (Ps. 34:17-18).

“For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope” (Jer. 29:11).

“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:6-7).

Paul Asay has written for Time, The Washington Post and Christianity Today. He writes about culture for Plugged In and has published several books, including his newest, Burning Bush 2.0 (Abingdon), available now. He lives in Colorado Springs. Check out his entertainment blog at Patheos.com/Blogs/WatchingGod or follow him on Twitter @AsayPaul.