

## Death by Texting?

VOICE: “Sticks and stones may break my bones,” people often say. “But words can never hurt me.”

PROF.: But a judge ruled that words had not only hurt, but *killed* someone – in a case one reporter calls “*death by text.*”

FORMAT: THEME AND ANNOUNCEMENT

VOICE: Michelle Carter and Conrad Roy III were 15 and 16 when they met in 2012. From that point on, their relationship largely consisted of text messages – including some *deadly* ones!

PROF.: Texting gives some people a sense of anonymity and safety. They often share secrets and emotions in the virtual world, that they would never tell anyone in the real world. Michelle confided that she had had a very troubled past – with eating disorders, deep insecurities, and talk of suicide.

So Conrad felt free to discuss his depression, and they exchanged thousands of messages. He often wrote about wanting to kill himself and made several attempts.

In July 2014, he succeeded. He sat in his truck, and inhaled carbon monoxide.

VOICE: Following the death, a judge examined their voluminous on-line correspondence. It exposed the interior lives of two troubled teenagers, displaying their thoughts, their secrets and their extremely low self-esteem.

PROF.: On June 16, 2017, the judge decided Michelle was responsible for Conrad's death because she had repeatedly encouraged him to end his life. He will announce the sentence on August 3. The *New York Times* reported, “The verdict...was a rare legal finding that, essentially, a person's words alone can directly cause someone else's suicide.”

VOICE: Both teens felt nearly worthless. But why would she encourage him to end his life?

PROF.: For one thing, Michelle suffered from depression and took an antidepressant that targets the brain's frontal lobe, which controls empathy and decision-making.

VOICE: So medication had reduced her ability to think clearly, or to have concern for other people.

PROF.: Yes. Secondly, even with her brain somewhat impaired, when he told her that he was seriously considering suicide, she told him he had a lot to live for and urged him to seek help. She wrote, “I'm trying my best to dig you out.”

He replied, “I don't wanna be dug out.” Later he added, “I WANT TO DIE.” By early July 2014, Conrad had said many times that he was miserable and wanted to die.

VOICE: She may have really thought that he would be happier dead. So she would be doing him a favor by persuading him to stop vacillating.

PROF.: He had attempted suicide twice, but lost his courage and decided against it. But on July 12, 2014, Michelle texted, “You can't think about it. You just have to *do it*.” They were many kilometers away, but he drove alone to a parking lot and improvised a pump to bring carbon monoxide into the cab of his truck.

When the fumes sickened him, he stepped out of the truck for fresh air. On the phone, Michelle ordered him to “get back in.” He was found dead the next day.

Prosecutors argued the text messages were evidence she caused his death by recklessly helping him poison himself.

VOICE: Doesn't the law consider suicide to be the result of a person's free will?

PROF.: Usually. Judge Moniz admitted that Conrad had done a lot to cause his own death. He had researched suicide methods and gotten equipment to deliver carbon monoxide to the driver's compartment of his truck.

VOICE: So Michelle's text messages and phone calls were not the *only* things that caused Conrad's death.

PROF.: No, but they were a *major* factor. Strongly and repeatedly, she encouraged him to end his life. The two talked at length about how to kill himself with carbon monoxide. She researched details and wrote, “If you emit 3200 ppm [parts per million] of it for five to ten minutes you will die within a half hour.”

VOICE: So she told him *how* to do it.

PROF.: Yes. The judge stated, “She instructed Mr. Roy to get back into the truck, well knowing his ambiguities, his fears, his concerns. This court finds that instructing Mr. Roy to get back in the truck constituted wanton and reckless conduct..., creating a situation where there is a high degree of likelihood that substantial harm will result to Mr. Roy.”

He asked her to stand as he concluded: “This court, having reviewed the evidence, finds you guilty on the indictment with involuntary manslaughter.”

VOICE: What is “involuntary manslaughter”?

PROF.: The trial occurred in the U.S. commonwealth of Massachusetts. Its laws define involuntary manslaughter as an act that causes the death of another person when engaging in reckless or wanton conduct that creates a *high degree of likelihood of substantial harm*. She should have known what the result would be.

VOICE: Michelle Carter was not present at the scene when Conrad Roy III inhaled the carbon monoxide.

PROF.: But the *result* was the same. He was at the crisis point between deciding to continue his life or to end it. Her texts and phone call nudged him in the wrong direction.

VOICE: Conrad Roy III wasn't the only person troubled by “his ambiguities, his fears, his concerns.” Many people wonder who they really are, whether they are important, and whether anyone really loves them.

PROF.: One on-line reader reacted to the guilty verdict, “...We need to accept the realization that on-line (even anonymous) comments can cause great harm...if we behave so carelessly and so unfeelingly towards others. I read some of the comments people make on Facebook to total strangers and am appalled. When did it become OK to be so uncivil towards one another?”

VOICE: Someone on the receiving end of a “put-down” or insult can doubt that life is worth living. That feeling grows stronger when they get a poor grade in school. It can become intense when they lose a job, or when a boyfriend or girlfriend breaks up with them.

PROF.: Someone in California wrote, “Depression is a serious medical issue, and our words and actions can [help or harm] someone in need. Especially teenagers who – due to so many pressures, growing bodies and minds – can feel so alone and uncared for.”

VOICE: Susan reacted from Paris that “...in France, ...the fact that she did not summon help as her boyfriend was dying in his truck, would, I suspect, make her liable to prosecution...under the statute of ‘**non-assistance to a person in danger,**’ which is taken very seriously here.”

PROF.: That idea of failing to assist a person in danger reminds me of one definition of sin.

VOICE: Isn't sin just doing something bad? The Bible says, “Sin is the breaking of the law,”<sup>1</sup> meaning violating one of God's laws.

PROF.: Yes, but the Bible also says, “Anyone...who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins.”<sup>2</sup>

VOICE: (SURPRISED) Wow! That's a requirement I don't remember reading before – “Anyone...who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins.” Is that really in the Bible?

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1 I John 3:4.

2 James 4:17.

PROF.: Yes, in the book of James, chapter 4, verse 17.  
But *something beneficial* may come from this terrible incident. One woman observed, “The only good that can come out of this painful tale is that young people might understand more clearly that *words have meaning*, actions have consequences, and they are *responsible for what they say and do.*”

VOICE: That's true of our on-line contacts. But people at school and at work also have “ambiguities, fears, and concerns.” So does the clerk at the store.

PROF.: That's why I've resolved recently to try to encourage people that I meet. The smile that people wear in public, often hides a heavy heart.

VOICE: I just give a friendly smile. Sometimes the person recognizes that I'm willing to listen, and he or she “opens up” and tells me what's bothering him, and we can pray together.

PROF.: That reminds me of words my grandmother used to sing with me:  
“Down in the human heart, crushed by the tempter,  
Feelings lie buried that grace can restore;  
Touched by a loving heart, wakened by kindness,  
Chords that are broken will vibrate once more.”<sup>3</sup>

VOICE: I love that thought, “Touched by a loving heart, wakened by kindness,  
Chords that are broken will vibrate once more.”  
That's something that Conrad Roy III didn't get. So his “broken chords” stayed broken – until someone snapped them.

PROF.: The Bible book of James was written centuries before email and texting. But it contains a warning that still applies.  
It says, “The tongue...is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.”<sup>4</sup>

VOICE: Yes, our tongues do tend to start fires. So we need to submit them daily for God to control.  
One Bible verse helps me to remember to use my tongue – and my electronic devices – in non-incendiary ways. David wrote to God, “May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Verse 3 of “Rescue the Perishing” by Fannie Crosby, who was born in 1820. Now in public domain.

<sup>4</sup> James 3:5b-6.

<sup>5</sup> Psalm 19:14.

PROF.: When we screen our thoughts and words by the standard of being pleasing in God's sight, our tongues and texts will benefit everyone around us.

FORMAT: THEME AND ANNOUNCEMENT

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