

Mental Health...



Part 5 Out of the Shadows: Something to Think About

by Lois Mitchell

“...what if mental illness really is more break *through* than break *down*?”

Many years ago I heard or read something which has stuck with me. It was this: “**mental illness may not be so much break down as break through.**” Think about it. We talk about someone having a “break down” when they come to the point where they can’t function appropriately in our society. And, in our fast paced, productivity-driven social world, break down simply is not acceptable. The person experiencing the break down is sidelined – out of the game – but the game goes on. Whether they get back into it or not depends on whether or not they can get back to “normal”.

Patsy Clairmont has said that “**normal is just a setting on your dryer.**” I love that! But face it – that’s not the way the world works. We talk about creativity and nonconformity and most of us (well, me anyway) admire rebels who defy social pressures to “be themselves”, but honestly, the parameters of acceptability are pretty narrow. A little stretching of the boundaries is okay when it comes to fashion, personal habits, hygiene, etc., but there are lines that ought not to be crossed. Enchanting quirks can be tolerated, but bona fide mental illness? Well, that’s another story. And to be fair, social order requires some allegiance to “normal”... doesn’t it?

Then there’s the movie *A Beautiful Mind* which won four Academy Awards in 2002, including Best Picture and Best Director (Ron Howard). Based on a true story, this movie brilliantly portrays the thin line between genius and madness as mathematician John Nash battles with schizophrenia and its effects on his wife, friends and career. I well remember seeing this movie for the first time and feeling a mixture of emotions, including deep compassion, admiration, frustration, anger. It prompted a burst of wrestling with my own thoughts concerning mental illness.

I have a confession to make. I am boringly NORMAL. It’s not something I’m particularly proud of. In fact, I find it frustrating in that I recognize that my “normalcy”, while it’s “safe”, means that I’m not very original. I’m always in the middle of the pack, never on the cutting edge. I’m analytical and rational, rarely impulsive, spontaneous or creative. I follow directions and keep the rules (well, almost always). You can count on me. I don’t rock the boat. Maybe this sounds good to you. But there’s a trade-off. I’m not an innovator and any potential flashes of brilliance are seriously suppressed by my propensity for analysis. I really do admire people who are less “stable”, less “predictable”, less “normal”.

Some of you may feel that I’m either romanticizing mental illness or minimizing the pain of NOT being “normal”. But what if mental illness really is more break *through* than break *down*? What if “normal” just means “average”? What if brilliance and genius really are close cousins to mental illness, so called? For many people, we’ll never know. We’ll never know how their minds work or what realities they see and feel that are out of reach for people like me? Why? Because we put such a premium on “normal” that those who are on the fringes – whether they have periodic bouts of depression, some form of schizophrenia or bipolar disorder, panic attacks, an eating disorder of some kind, etc. – are an embarrassment to “healthy” society and are sent to the shadows where they don’t disturb or disrupt. If they can get treatment which helps them be more “normal”, they can get back in the game, but only as long as they can fit in.

One of my best friends is a librarian. We enjoy comparing the environments of churches and public libraries – two places in communities across the country where everyone should be welcome. The reality is that public libraries are often more welcoming environments for those on the fringes of society than are churches. Think about it. Libraries are open most days of the week and so long as patrons aren’t rude or disruptive, they can spend hours in the relative comfort of the library. No questions asked. Hmm. Well – you might say – churches have more to offer because we really CARE about people and sometimes that means prying and holding people accountable. True. But how much do we really care about the mentally ill? Do we actively invite those in our communities who have some form of mental illness to come out of the shadows and into our churches? And, when they do come, do we accept them as they are, as people who see and experience the world differently than we do but who therefore might have something to teach us? Something to think about.

If you’re interested in these questions, check out the resources the Rapha Initiative working group is putting on our Convention of Atlantic Baptist Churches (CABC) website at:

<http://www.baptist-atlantic.ca/departments/witness/rapha>

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