

# **ATTACKING THE STIGMA OF MENTAL ILLNESS**

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## **Sermon - Attacking the Stigma of Mental Illness**

I believe the world is inherently good, an incredible blessing. Rather than believing in original sin, I agree with Mathew Fox and believe in original blessing. Our very first Unitarian Universalist principle is the inherent worth and dignity of every person. It is said that one of the differences between Unitarians and Universalists is that Unitarians believed that we humans are too good to be damned and that Universalists believed that God is too good to damn anyone. Fortunately, both come to the same point that we all have worth, no matter what our condition. Our being has worth. Regardless of our physical condition, our financial condition, our mental condition, or our emotional condition, we are part of one interconnected web.

Historically, religious liberals have fought against prejudice and disenfranchisement. Unitarians and Universalists served as leaders in the abolitionist movement, for women's suffrage, in the civil rights movement, and in making congregations welcoming to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people. We are now doing the work of antiracism and anti-oppression and are becoming ever more aware of the danger of ageism. Yet, there is a very large group of Americans, I dare say in our very midst, who continue to be stigmatized and segregated. This group includes men and women, African Americans, Hispanics, Asians, Native and European

Americans, and people of every ethnic identity. This group includes gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender folks. The age of these people can vary from the very young to the very old.

Twenty percent of Americans suffer from clinical depression, schizophrenia, and other mental illnesses. Psychiatric disorders are the number one reason for hospital admissions here. People who suffer from a mental illness are the most stigmatized of any group. When asked to rank twenty-one disabilities, Americans put mental illness at the very bottom. It should come as no surprise that new Surgeon General reported that two-thirds of Americans suffering from mental disorders never seek treatment because they fear the stigma. Too often, those with mental illness are made to feel like they have a character flaw. "Crazy" behavior brings a terrible stigma.

My mother was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. Mom died four years ago, but she might come back to haunt me tonight because she would be terribly embarrassed and angry at me for mentioning it. She was confused and knew something was wrong, but she did not want anyone else to know. This very weekend, Alison, my wife, went to be with her father. His dementia intensified rapidly this winter, and he is no longer able to stay alone. His wife was going to be out of town.

Dementia is not commonly considered a mental illness, but it carries a similar stigma.

More people suffer from a mental illness than those with cancer, diabetes, heart disease, or arthritis. Not so very long ago, society believed those with a mental illness was possessed by the devil or an evil spirit. Others saw it as a curse or a punishment from God. More recently, people with mental illness were thought to have a character flaw or lacking enough willpower to pull themselves together. They were seen as too weak-willed to withstand the normal rigors of life. However, medicine today assumes that mental illnesses are largely the result of functional abnormalities in the brain.

Most education about mental illness 30 years ago, when I was in the seminary, is now obsolete. Today we understand that mental illness is a malfunction of the neurotransmitters of the brain. It is a biochemical imbalance, not moral weakness in the heart or soul. Yet, ignorance continues to fuel prejudice and reinforces stigma. We need to accept that a mental illness is an illness. We have become aware that an imbalance in our bodies and in our minds can increase the likelihood that we will have an illness like diabetes or heart disease. It is time that we understand the same is true for mental illnesses.

A sufferer wrote, "Mental illness is biochemical. It comes in many different ways. You can hear voices, be totally paranoid, and be afraid to talk to somebody. You can be so scared to walk outside your door that you want to die." Another person wrote, "It is not demon possession. It is just a chemical imbalance you can't control without getting the right help for it." When people heard about today's subject. Many suffering from mental illness sent emails and notes. One person who has dealt with depression wrote the following poem.

*No Color In Shadow*

For a long time I thought the worst malfeasance of fortune would be to lose my vision.  
But then I perceived that blindness might be more than the loss of sight and that I have been blind.  
It would be tragic not to see beauty in the world or even cruelty,  
But then I have often not seen the world as beautiful.  
To be in constant hunger is a misery, yet I am haunted by appetites that I cannot appease  
To be deaf would mean losing music, the thunder's mouth, the voice that whispers I love you.

But for how long have I failed to listen?

I decide that to be struck dumb would be awful only because I could no longer voice my complaints

Without odor or flavor food is perfunctory, unpalatable

There are no colors in shadow, are there?

Here is my curse: to find little joy in waking, in walking through the day,

Left to seek relief in sleep where there's refuge in senselessness

Who wants to reside in a house of pain? No one, and so in this house I live alone

After days on end of weather gray with un-featured leaden skies

A rift opens through which the obscured sun streams

And it seems possible that I could learn to dream of brighter seasons.

During the civil rights movement in the late fifties and sixties, people started to think that maybe the mentally ill might also have civil rights. More recently, the emergence of new medications has enabled people with mental illnesses to gain more control over their lives. Still many old myths about mental illness continue to exist.

Myth: Mental illness does not affect the average person.

Reality: No one is immune. 35 million Americans have some form of mental illness in any given six-month period.

Myth: Most people who struggle with mental illness live on the streets or in mental hospitals.

Reality: Two thirds of such Americans live in the community.

Myth: Children do not get mental illness.

Reality: 12 million children and adolescents suffer diagnosable mental illness.

Myth: Mentally ill people are dangerous.

Reality: Mentally ill people are more often the victims of violence than the perpetrators.

Myth: If you have a mental illness, you act crazy all the time.

Reality: People suffering from even the most severe mental illness are in touch with reality as often as they are actively psychotic. Many quietly bear the pain of mental illness without ever acting "crazy."

None of this will change unless we change our attitudes--unless we work to change society. It takes time to get used to those we experience as different. We may feel uneasy, frightened, and not sure how we should act or what we should say. We may even get frustrated when what we try does not seem to work. Let us remember, however, that those who suffer from a mental illness have far greater fears. They are often frightened of doing the wrong thing in public. They know that their behavior may cause them to be shunned or hurt.

I am a member of an interfaith clergy and lay leader outreach group. We meet monthly at the psychiatric hospital in Trenton. One of our central purposes is to try to decrease the stigma that surrounds mental illness. Our ministry makes us aware that mental illness too often does strike close to home.

Family, friends, neighbors and employers reject people with mental illness. Sufferers feel devalued in their roles as mother, father, husband, wife, worker, sibling, or child. One sufferer said that the feeling of loss predominates. Each of us can and must attack the stigma of mental illness. We need to begin building bridges to connect ourselves with those who have these diseases. Yet, the challenge seems so daunting we often cannot see how and where to start.

The challenge of building the original bridge across the Niagara Gorge in 1848 illustrates the problem of how and where to start. It was to be an extremely new design, one of the first major suspension bridges. This bridge is still in use. Two massive cables hang between high supports with a roadbed between. It carried rail traffic between Canada and the United States. Its building was a major challenge attracting a great deal of attention. The first problem was getting the suspension cable across the gorge. There were steep cliffs on each side with the swirling water of the Niagara between them. A boat could not cross the gorge. Many engineers doubted whether such a bridge could ever be built.

Charles Ellet had a creative solution. He held a kite-flying contest. A boy from Niagara Falls, Ontario won. On a windy day, he flew a kite across the gorge on a long, silk thread. With enough wind, flying the kite was easy. The real skill came in getting the kite to descend into the arms of Ellet and his colleagues who waited in Niagara Falls, New York. A New York work crew then tied strong twine to the silk thread and signaled. A crew in Ontario pulled the doubled line back across the gorge. The Ontario crew then tied a single strand of steel wire to the twine and signaled that it be pulled back across. The crews repeated the process over several months until the silk thread had grown into two huge steel cables, strong enough to carry a suspended roadbed and two railroad lines across the Niagara gorge.

Let us remember that the same long-term patience needed to turn the silk thread into the two massive steel cables is required in our work to remove the stigma of mental illness. We must start today, because mentally ill people are in our families, congregations, and everywhere in our communities. Miller Williams put it: "Have compassion for everyone you meet, even if they don't want it. What seems conceit, bad manners, or cynicism is always a sign of things no ears

have heard and no eyes have seen. You do not know what wars are going on down there where the spirit meets the bone." Let us remember that the stigma associated with mental illness must be bridged. Let us further remember that there may very likely be times when we and those we love will have to wrestle not only with mental illness, but also with the stigma associated with it.

We must build these bridges with even greater patience and creativity than the one built over the Niagara Gorge. I challenge us as individuals and as a congregation to reach out and respond to this need regardless of which side of the bridge you happen to be on today. The Spirit of Love and Compassion calls people on both sides to reach out and give the process all that it deserves.

Happy Summer Solstice and Father's Day. Hello, my name is Ray Kinserlow and I am a schizophrenic. Approximately, one person out of a hundred suffers from the disease. I am fortunate in that I have never heard voices or seen significant or really frightening visual hallucinations. I have had a considerable amount of difficulty with paranoid delusions and depression. My actual diagnosis is schizo-affective which I suppose is a milder form of the disease.

Why am I up here talking about schizophrenia? In part, I do so to introduce you to someone who has had some success at dealing with the disease and that we are not all homicidal maniacs and criminals. As to why I have been fortunate enough to successfully deal with my mental illness I attribute to four things: the realization on my part that taking my medications in spite of their side effects was absolutely necessary; leading a healthy lifestyle with good diet, supplements, and exercise; a good support group based on a very supportive group of family and friends; and a personal philosophy that abhorred violence with heroes like Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. By the way, research shows that substance abuse not mental illness is a far more accurate predictor of violence.

I spend a lot of time Internet chatting with other schizophrenics from all over the world. I will tell you the Americans do a comparatively bad job of taking care of their mentally ill. I believe the United Kingdom has the best system. Unlike the United States where mental health crisis are typically resolved with the police, Tasers and guns, the U.K. has crisis management teams which provide support to people in a fashion designed to anticipate these problems. One fact which absolutely floored me was in the UK the mental health nurses come to the homes of the mentally ill to help them, a fact you can really appreciate if you have ever been paranoid and afraid to leave home. Over the Internet, I watched as a lady was brought into the hospital with

her cooperation largely due to the constant monitoring by the home mental health professionals in the U.K. She is now out of the hospital without any aggravating incident in the whole process.

Rather than rave about how bad our system is, I prefer to say in the spirit of the modern administration led by President Obama we should study successful systems like those found in the UK, Denmark, Australia and other countries and make changes in our own system to improve it. Perhaps we need to consider the idea of letting health professionals of all fields actually go out into the communities to help Americans. We most certainly and urgently need to make access to medical care available to everyone in our nation regardless of class, race, or national origin. More emphasis needs to be put on preventing disease rather than curing illnesses. And finally, we need to overcome the general prejudices sometimes found against people with illness. Things like mental illness, cancer, or any disease are not moral issues and deserve no shame to its bearer. Thank you for listening to me today.