

Part I

Treatment for mental illness has had a long and deep history within Unitarian Universalism. Universalist, Dr. Benjamin Rush signor of the Declaration of Independence, led by his compassionate religious conviction was one of the first leaders who proposed that those who were mentally ill could and should be treated. Although many of his ideas today would seem archaic, admittedly he was experimenting scientifically, but many common sense ideas such as rest, diet, exercise and even a form of primitive talk therapy were way ahead of his time.

The person however who probably had the largest impact on the care of the mentally ill in the United States was Unitarian Dorothea Dix who in the mid 19th century led the charge on caring for and healing mentally ill. One day when visiting the Unitarian church where Dr. William Ellery Channing was preaching. It is said, she heard Dr. Channing preach “that God was love and we are all a part of that love and we are called to show that love to others” she was deeply influenced by William Ellery Channing even becoming a tutor for his children for six months.

Dix later obtained a job teaching at a women’s correctional facility. While she was there she became aware of a group of mentally ill women and upon engaging with them was moved by their plight, seeing the humanity within them despite their being treated in an inhumane way. Dix who was a descendent of travelers on the Mayflower and through such family and Channing’s connections was able to bring light to this issue. She wrote a report to the state legislature of Massachusetts in which she states "I proceed, Gentlemen, briefly to call your attention to the present state of Mentally Ill Persons confined within this Commonwealth, in cages, stalls, pens! Chained, naked, beaten with rods, and lashed into obedience." Dix went on to state “Even when someone's words or behaviors cannot be understood by others, they are still a person who deserve dignity, respect and love.” In her lifetime, Dix travelled to multiple states and even to other countries to inspect and report on the state of the care of the mentally ill, and obtained government funding for hospitals specifically to care for the mentally ill. Some of the hospitals she started are still in existence today. This is what we do as Unitarian Universalists. We let compassion and love grow in our hearts and then we share that in the world we live in, trying to make it a better world for all people.

It is why social justice is at the core of our vision as a Congregation and as an Association. Our vision is not justice for justice sake but because we have love and compassion in our hearts for all people. That is why we share 50% of our collection with a local social justice organization. This month we are sharing our collection with QC Pride. With the topic today I think it is a good reminder just as we see Benjamin Rush as archaic, hopefully our descendants will wonder why it was not until 1973, that the American Psychiatric Association’s Board of Trustees removed Homosexuality from its list of mental illnesses. 1973.

There is still much work to be done in the name of justice. There is still much work to be done in the name of basic awareness of bglqtia acceptance and rights in the world. So please be as generous as you can be. After you have had the opportunity to donate, we welcome you to come forward to like a candle to mark a joy or sorrow in your life. Let this sacred time begin.

Part II

Like sex and money, mental illness often is not talked about openly about in society. Growing up, in my family it was talked about extensively because my mother was a psychiatric nurse and subsequently the head nurse at Bronx State Psychiatric Hospital. (PPT) It is funny, I could not find a picture of the hospital, from back then, it has since been redesigned. But this is a similar hospital in NYC. They all had that same non descript warehouse look. Whether it was designed to be or not, it had a fairly antiseptic feel to it. I only visited the hospital once. As a youngster I was fearful, based on some of the stories my mother told me of the violent patients they had. But I did finally go.

It was bring you child to work day, and I had a French exam that I hadn't studied for, so...it is interesting to think about how our fear of one thing can help us overcome our fear of another. I remember nothing remarkable about the visit, a bunch of men mostly subdued via drugs just wandering aimlessly around a giant room, some just staring out the window. I always wondered whether they were just enjoying the view or if they were dreaming of a freedom outside the walls.

For those who remember the movie "one flew over the cuckoo's nest", my entire family used to tease my mother by calling her Nurse Ratched. If you haven't read the book by Ken Kesey or seen the movie, I highly recommend it. It is on my top 10 list of books that influenced my life. Its very complex, but for me it moved me, mostly because it shows how condemnation of and categorization of humans is so destructive and how working together, and finding out who we are through our interaction with others can lead to healing and if we are in an environment that encourages us, nourishes us to find our best selves, that allows us to focus on our strengths and not our weaknesses we will often thrive and recognize and encourage it in others as well. As well the story dramatizes that what we see in others is not all there is. There was a character the chief, who everyone thought was a deaf mute. He lived his life that way as a way to cope with oppression. And the truth is after a time, he had forgotten his own strength. I think we find this in life. We use a coping mechanism, and if we live it long enough we come to internalize it. And we forget it is coping mechanism and not who we are within.

Throughout the book, the actions of the protagonist, McMurphy, against the authoritative, bureaucratic and repressive rules wakens something deep inside the Chief, and he remembers who is . As much of society in the 1960s seemed to rebel against authority and bureaucracy, this country took a new approach to mental illness. Starting in the 1960s states decided to deinstitutionalize mental health treatment believing that more humane treatment could be achieved in the community in group homes and with outpatient care. And although this may be true, the funding for such treatment was converted to block grants and less and less money was spent on treatment of mental health care in this country. In our own state of Iowa the latest budget is proposing to close two of only four residential mental health facilities. As it is now, often people need to travel hours just to find a bed in such a facility if there is even one available. What happens to the people who need help when there is no room at the inn, or no room at the hospital.

Often individuals with mental illness end up on the street and then in prison. Our prisons have once again become the institutions where we house the mentally ill, where. We are returning to the time before Dorothea Dix to a time of where the mentally ill are confined in "cages, stalls, pens! Chained, naked, beaten with rods, and lashed into obedience." So tell me how humane is that. What will we do as citizens of this state? What will we do as a Congregation? The first thing we should do is recognize the pervasiveness of mental illness in our society.

I will share with you that my entire life I have had Attention Deficit Disorder. It was never diagnosed when I was young. I heard often enough from teachers, he has his head in the clouds, he's such a daydreamer, an underachiever...and so I had to teach myself coping skills such as becoming super organized, so I could learn to live in the world with what I didn't even know was a disease. Even that word. I like to think of it as Dis Ease. Not at ease in the world. As I became older, thru my experiences in the world. I realized that my ADD was preventing me not only from reaching my full potential, but from allowing me to live a sustainable whole life.

So as an adult, actually soon after I started seminary, realizing I could not work, go to seminary and have any semblance of a family without some help. So I started taking medicine for my ADD. I have to tell you that the medication was transformational, it connected dots in my head that I never previously connected. But taking medicine raised many questions for me. As the song we heard earlier, Who is the real me? Is the real me the person with the brain I was born with? Is the real me the person I am when I am on medication. How much of my questioning this is just being neurotic, and is there a pill for that as well, or is that just part of my cultural Upbringing?

I think part of it is actually cultural, a way of looking within, a culture of curiosity. Now over the years I have found a balance of when I need to utilize medicine and when to take a vacation from it. But I can't deny its positive impact on me.

We often think of mental illness as some major break with reality. But often, most often it is something people live with and try to cope with in reality every day. There has been since the beginning of discussions on mental illness a question of physiology versus Environmental causes and how that is answered dictates the treatments of mental illness. There is no question that our society in recent years has, in part due to the pharmacological industry and in part due to advances in technologies that have allowed us to examine the brain, moved heavily towards the physiological side of the equation. And I can personally tell you that the pharmacological help can save and transform lives, although to be fair, I have known medication to harm individuals in some circumstances.

We also know that the environment we live in, the circumstances we are forced to deal with affect our mental health as well. And as much as medicine deals with symptoms, Therapy can deal with the underlying issues such as trauma, at any age of life that can initiate a mental health crisis and the triggers that cause subsequent reactions. It doesn't have to be an either/or. Medicine or therapy. We are always drawn into these dualities. It can be both. It can be both and as well it can be religion. I credit in part this religion with helping me become more self-aware about myself, which helped me understand who the real me is. It allowed me to be more self-aware about what my values were and how I wanted to live my life. And in that, in the actions we take, in the lives we lead, in the way we model a sustainable life and world for others, in the results of how we treat ourselves and others, all of these things will determine who we are. So our goal as a religion is to create an environment where such understanding can happen, where people feel safe exploring their life experiences.

NAMI, the National Association for Mental Illness on their website indicates that "Research has shown that for some, religion and spirituality can directly improve our physical and mental health." As I spoke of in March NAMI specifically lists the benefits of meditation linking it to better mental health. I think it is interesting that it mentions the mind and Body. I have spoken of the mind-body connection before, but usually I speak of it the other way around. How the *mind* impacts the body. But let us also think about how the body impacts the mind. As we heard about at the Food Faith and Climate workshop just last week, certain foods we eat are healthier for us, and there is significant study about the affects of pesticides, chemicals and preservatives that are in our food that affect our body and thus our mind. As well, many religious spiritual practices such as yoga, walking meditation and tai-chi are specifically related to embedding the spiritual practice into bodily movements. Other spiritual practices such as fasting are a way of recognizing the mind-body connection from the body's point of view. I think of dancing, such as the dances of universal peace, or singing that embody the mind-body connection as well.

NAMI goes on to list Togetherness, A sense of understanding, and helping others as ways religion helps mental health. I think togetherness is intuitively easy to understand. We are here to support each other, as our opening hymn indicates, to comfort, to speak with, to sing with, and yes even to dance with each other (I know we don't do a lot of dancing) and as our closing hymn says to lean on each other. That is one of the major purposes of coming together. Is to be together, and **to learn** how to be together with others.

Now the second one, Gaining a sense of understanding in the world is probably a little different for Unitarian Universalism than it might be for other more rigid religions. We do not offer easy answers or solutions to why we experience the world the way we do. What we do offer however is an understanding that we are interdependent with all that is. That all are welcome, and all are accepted, that all have a part in creating the beloved community, and in that understanding compassion can be born.

Lastly it lists helping others as a way to help our own mental health. Helping others puts us into connection with others. Helping others gives others a sense of hope which can positively impact us, and just the act of helping, gives us a sense of self worth, that we have something to offer the world...even if it serving a cup of coffee in coffee hour, or growing food in our garden, or feeding the homeless, or offering a kind word to someone, we all have something good to offer the world. We all have something good to offer each other. As Channing said, God is love and we are all a part of that love and we are called to show that love to others” May it be so.