

Walk a mile in their shoes

When it comes to the stigma associated with mental illness, we have a lot to learn

GOOD COUNSEL

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Although I don't watch much television, I recently I watched three programs where characters used the words crazy, psycho, or whack job to refer to people with mental illness. The entertainment world reflects what society believes.

So I'm not surprised when clients, still stunned by a diagnosis of depression, bipolar disorder, or an anxiety disorder, tell me that anticipating the stigma they will encounter feels worse than the illness itself. And they know they will encounter it because, until their health problem began, they participated in it. We all do, often out of ignorance.

Stigma is negative judgment or attitudes towards individuals or groups of people based on a trait that sets them apart from others. It's one of the greatest

barriers preventing people from seeking help. We usually associate stigma with racial or ethnic bias and we're rightfully proud of our progress towards eradicating prejudices based on race, culture, religion, or skin colour.

But one important frontier remains, as challenging as any other civil rights issue. The stigma of mental illness also identifies a group of people as different, unacceptable or undesirable and it, too, leads to discrimination.

Mental illness itself doesn't discriminate, touching people of all ages and from all walks of life. It appears as depression, anxiety, schizophrenia, or a host of other disorders.

Twenty per cent of Canadians will personally experience a mental illness and approximately eight per cent of Canadian adults will have major depression at some point in their lifetime. This means mental illness will indirectly affect all Canadians through family

members, friends or colleagues. People living with mental illness are in our homes, our workplaces, our schools, and our churches. Many cope in silence, afraid to admit their distress because they dread the response. They expect to be misunderstood, denied adequate housing, passed over for jobs or promotions, and ostracized socially.

I'm reminded of the saying, "walk a mile in someone else's shoes," exhorting us not to judge people until we understand life as they have to live it. I don't wish mental illness on anyone, not even for a short time, but I long for a way for us to learn the empathy needed to respond helpfully to those who have it.

In my counselling practice, it's often people who are dealing with mental illness themselves that I'm educating, destigmatizing their symptoms or need for medication, promoting patience with themselves first, and encouraging them to

talk with family members and friends about what they're experiencing and to ask for the support they need.

Some of these clients become the first to eliminate demeaning words like psycho, crazy, lunatic, or wacko from their vocabularies. They recognize that messy or disorganized households, neglected yards, and apparent laziness or lack of ambition might be symptoms of mental illness.

They refused to judge because now they are walking that mile. What if all people who deal with mental illness were to speak up and tell us what it's really like and what they need from us? Would we hear it? Could we learn from them? Or do we have to walk that mile, too?

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Light and shadows in a Good Friday world

There's a gritty—and holy—beauty in suffering

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Jesus wept. Not long before He set His face like flint toward Jerusalem and the cross, He wept. Why?

Surely He knew how it would all end, how He'd resurrect Lazarus, who lay nearby so cold and dead; how this miracle would foreshadow His own final triumph over the grave. Was He playing His audience? It's a scene with at least some strangeness. Here's another.

Last year, best-selling commercial artist Thomas Kinkade—the self-described "Painter of Light" who once said, "When I got saved, my art got saved with me"—died. More so, he died during a night of heavy boozing and Valium use. On Good Friday.

So the believers, at least some locals, cried "take it down," referring to The Cross, an epic 15-by-31-foot mural that Kinkade had previously painted for the Billy

Graham Library.

Why? Is Jesus' cross not big enough to remove this sinner's stains, his apparent failure to live up to the ideals in his work? Or might the stains give this particular painting even more meaning? Might this even have something to do with why Jesus wept?

Kinkade was our generation's artist. It's estimated that one in 20 homes in the United States have his work, those cottage or Victorian or Main Street scenes that gently exude serenity. Plans had been underway for his Light of the World project which would have linked his aesthetic to cultures in developing nations, starting in Africa, then Asia and India.

At the same time, in recent years Kinkade had demons that took their toll. There was the broken marriage of 30 years, and the ongoing criticism by the world of higher art that his hugely popular work was a sellout, too kitsch-like

and sentimental with light for light's sake.

Kinkade, who grew up poor and often feeling like an outsider looking in, responded that he was motivated by a yearning to make art that showed "a world without the fall." And who doesn't crave this, if not an innocent Eden then a blameless future world?

But Jesus wept. He wept real tears that ran down dusty cheeks and settled with salt and bitterness between His lips. They showed something was wrong. Is wrong. Sunday may be coming, but it's still Friday. No matter how we want that holiday on the sea, we're stuck, for now anyway, in a dilapidated world where the plaster is falling all around us.

This is why Jesus wept. He relates to our suffering. But maybe there's more. Maybe He wept also because there's a certain beauty in suffering, a gritty and holy beauty that's lost on the flimsy religious crowd, those who prefer their messiahs, and art,

a little more pristine.

I know of a freshman theatre student who was taught to be suspicious of art for this very reason. A colleague of mine recently shared: "When I talked with her about the notion that 'All truth is God's truth,' she wept. Imagine the religious nonsense that needed to be undone?"

Maybe art is, in fact, the spirit in what is a holy trinity: art, faith and mystery. If so, last Good Friday we got a cold splash of it.

Because Kinkade was never called to be an artist. Not really. He was called to be, like any of us, fully human. The irony is, when darkness fell over his death, he was made just that: more human.

This is when the Divine works. When we ourselves become the art. His art. Great art. When The Artist makes use of both light and shadow.

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