

Our Mental Health Crisis

A sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson

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“The one thing we seek with insatiable desire is to forget ourselves, to be surprised out of our propriety, to lose our [everlasting] memory and to do something without knowing how or why; in short to draw a new circle. Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm. The way of life is wonderful; it is by abandonment...to [the] flames and generousities of the heart.” (Ralph Waldo Emerson, from “Circles,” in *Essays: First Series*, 1841)

Imagine something with me for a minute. Let’s think in our mind’s eye about the neighbourhood we grew up in; picture the classrooms and playgrounds in elementary and secondary school where so much of our childhood and youth took place. Who do you see? Do you remember?: Class clowns. Nerds. Drama queens and kings. Gods and goddesses. Teachers’ pets. Smart alecks. The fidgety ones that couldn’t sit still in their desks. The space shots. The jocks, techies, Goths, bullies and shy kids. Which one were you? Maybe we played several or many of these roles from time to time during our growing up years.

Let me also ask you this: do you remember the raging hormones? Bad skin? Drinking binges? Experimenting with drugs? Break-ups with a girl or boy friend, the never having had one? Parents who didn’t have a clue; who were too-remote and self-absorbed, or hovered over you til you wanted to scream? The anxieties about growing up, getting a job, going to university, finding a place to live, hooking up with a partner, and putting down some roots

What about religious enthusiasm? Did you ever have a conversion experience? A profound need to save the world? A crisis of faith, the end of it?

Not too long ago, this was considered, for the most part, as a normal description of the landscape of youth and coming of age—with its cast of characters, and life-stage script. Nobody really knew what to expect of these kids, of us. Who could guess where we’d end up? That was

part of the mundane, rough-and-tumble, ragged, glorious uncertainty of becoming a human being. And nearly all of us, at one time or another, for brief or extended periods of time, experienced acute mental and emotional distress during perilous passages of our own coming-of-age. I know I did. And I survived, more-or-less intact, because there were people who knew and cared for me, who didn't totally freak out when I acted up, and who were there for me to ride out the highs and lows of life.

But I have come to believe that something's happened to all of this; something that is passing under the radar, something like the 9/10s of the iceberg we can't see beneath the surface of the sea.

And let me put it this way: *over the past twenty-five years, psychiatry has been profoundly reshaping our society.* Within our life-time, our social conception of the human mind has been undergoing radical and fundamental change. Previously, we turned to great works of fiction, scientific investigations, rock song lyrics, philosophical and religious sources, traditions and practices, and social norms to try understand and respond to the mysteries and depths of the human mind and behaviour.

Those diverse sources and ad hoc understandings about mind and behavior are being displaced by a new myth and a single authoritative text. That text is called the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*. In the 886 pages of the Fourth Edition of the *DSM*, its authors claim that women, children and men suffer from 297 distinct mental disorders. This book is used by professionals in the mental health world to define what is and *is not* normal thought, feeling and behaviour. And the preeminent myth which governs prescriptive treatment for these disorders is that there is a clear-cut biological cause for something considered an "illness" of the mind, that

there is something “wrong” with our brain, that there’s a “chemical imbalance” that can be “treated” and “fixed” or “cured” with medications. In 1997, Edward Shorter of the University of Toronto put it this way: psychopharmacology “initiated a revolution in psychiatry, comparable to the introduction of penicillin in general medicine.” “We have very effective and safe treatments for a broad array of psychiatric disorders,” wrote the director of the Cornell Medical College in the *New York Times*, four years ago. That’s the myth, the story we are being told: chemical imbalances in the brain cause “mental illness,” and mental disorders can be treated safely and effectively by an array of medications. This narrative has attained the status of a near dogma. And for a time, deferring to the expertise of others, I believed it; it made things simpler.

There’s only one problem.

Given this highly touted advance in care, we should expect that the number of people disabled by mental disorders would have declined over the past several decades. We should have expected that the numbers would have declined especially since 1988 with the arrival of Prozac and other second-generation psychiatric drugs. “Instead, as the psychopharmacology revolution has unfolded, the number of disabled mentally ill in the United States [and Canada] has *skyrocketed*”; it has accelerated further since the introduction of second generation psychiatric drugs. “And most disturbing of all, this modern day plague has now spread” to our children. If we have treatments that effectively address our acute mental and emotional distress—from recurrent depression to mood swings, from anxiety to unwanted thoughts and voices—why has “mental illness” become an ever-greater health problem? (see Whitaker, *Anatomy of an Epidemic...*, pp.5-9)

Let’s look briefly at the numbers printed on the insert of our orders of service.

Our Mental Health Crisis: Some Numbers

- Each year, 1 in 5 people living in Canada will experience diagnosable mental health problems or illnesses (Mental Health Commission of Canada’s 2009 report *Toward Recovery & Well-Being: A Framework for a Mental Health Strategy for Canada*, p. 10. Hereafter MHC)
- 900,000 people in BC deal with “diagnosable mental health problems and illnesses” this year—including 140,000 children and teens—1 in 7 kids in BC (“Heretohelp fact sheet,” Canadian Mental Health Association, BC Division. Hereafter HTH, and “Mental Health, “BC Pediatric Society, and “Prevalence of Mental Disorders in Children and Youth,” MHECCU, UBC, October 2002)
- Disability claims attributable to mental illness are the fastest-growing category of disability costs in Canada. Mental illness and addictions rank *first* and *second* in terms of causing disability in Canada (from “Economic Impact of Mental Illness in the Workplace,” in *Out of the Shadows at Last...* report of the Senate Standing Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology,
- A study in 2008 estimated the total cost of mental illness in Canada—in terms of direct medical costs and work loss—was about \$51 billion annually. (from “Economic Costs of Mental Disorders and Harmful Substance Use,” HTH Backgrounder, 2008—HTHB, 2008)
- In BC, the annual public health care costs related to mental health is nearly a \$1 billion (HTHB, 2008)
- Prescription drugs are the fastest growing health care expense in this country; total spending on prescription anti-depressant and anti-psychotic medicines amounted to nearly \$2 billion—about 10% of total drug expenses. (HTHB, 2008)

- In 1987, the US, 1.25 million people (1 in 184) received disability payments due to mental illness; in 2007, that number had soared to 3.97 million (1 in 76) (Social Security Administration, annual statistical reports, cited in Whitaker, *Anatomy of an Epidemic*, pp. 6-7)
- 1 in every 16 young adults in the US is now “seriously mentally ill.” (GAO Report, 2008)

Tonight, in this Sanctuary, at 7:30 pm, these numbers, this amazing, and profoundly disturbing story that affects millions of people and costs tens of billions of dollars will be presented and discussed by the award-winning science and medical journalist Robert Whitaker. In February, Whitaker spoke on this subject at the 1st Unitarian Church in Portland, Oregon, to a standing-room-only crowd of over 450 people. I think that what he has to say, the evidence he will be laying out, and the alternatives he will be proposing are so important, that we have gone to great lengths to bring him here. I think this evening’s event will be one of the most significant and provocative programs to take place at UCV since I started serving this congregation almost ten years ago. Adlai Stevenson wrote that “if we value the pursuit of knowledge, we must be free to follow wherever the search may lead us.” Tonight’s event is going to be eye-opening and informative. I hope to see this place packed tonight. I really do.

But right now, here, let’s go back to those neighbourhoods, schools and playgrounds of our childhood and youth we conjured in our mind’s eye a few minutes ago—to the characters, the behaviours, the perilous coming-of-age rituals and feelings, the thresholds of distress and elation across which each of us stepped at one time or another. Can we remember? And do we know what our children and young people are facing today? They are the first generation in human history to grow up under the constant shadow of “mental illness.” Those diagnosed with mental disorders are in every classroom and schoolyard. Untold numbers of families are

struggling mostly out of sight and behind closed doors. Parents and kids are being told that acute emotional and mental distress, that prolonged sadness, that anxiety, distressing shyness, religious enthusiasm, disturbingly dark thoughts and fantasies, and hyperactivity once understood as part-and-parcel of the complicated, painful, difficult- to-deal-with, but next-to-normal repertoire of what it meant to come-of-age and grow into an adult—rather than being more-or-less the steep price we pay to become a unique human being—increasingly they are being told “that they have something wrong with their brains, and that they may have to take psychiatric meds for the rest of their lives, just like a ‘diabetic takes insulin.’” (Whitaker, 10-11)

That myth-fueled dictum is basically saying that we are the prisoners of our neurotransmitters. That dogma is teaching us and generations coming-of-age something about human nature, about free will, reason, emotions, and human community that is radically and dangerously different from anything we’ve thought or known about inhabiting our contradictions, about reconciling the necessary and the impossible—that on-going work that lies at the heart and animates the very soul of the human project.

Let me frame it this way—what would have happened to most of the founders of world religions and prophets if they had been alive today? A shepherd sees a burning bush unconsumed by the fire; hears a voice calling out to him from within the flames commanding him to liberate the Hebrew slaves in Egypt. (Ex. 3) Isaiah walks naked and barefoot for three years as a prophetic sign of impending catastrophe. (Is. 20) When Jesus’ family hears that he’s started preaching in public, they “went out,” in the words of the Gospel of Mark, “to seize him, for “people were saying that he had lost his senses.” (Mark 3:21, 31) Siddhartha Gautama begins his journey toward enlightenment by abandoning his wife and children, and nearly starving himself

to death through severe ascetic practices. In 1799, the advent of Handsome Lake's prophetic path began when this alcoholic Seneca warrior feared that he was "evil and loathsome," collapsed on his sick bed and fell into a spectacular visionary trance. The great Shawnee prophet Tenkwatawa, in 1805, was seized with violent "trembling," and "cathartic weeping" over a "deep and awful sense of his sins" that propelled him into a dazzling, fateful, visionary journey.

See these accounts in Gregory Evans Dowd, *A Spirited Resistance: The North American Indian Struggle for Unity, 1745-18-15*, pp. 123-147)

Let me ask you this: If any of them had been alive today, can you imagine the diagnoses? The labels? The treatments with counseling, meds and hospitalization? This may just confirm what some of us have long believed—religions are delusional, and the world would have been better off if all these guys had been tranquilized and put into institutional care. I don't happen to think so, but before I move on—consider the origins of our respectable Quaker cousins, and one of the founders of our own religious tradition. Believing that all earthly authority was corrupt and that judgment was at hand, early Quakers were rather demonstrative in public in order to get their message across. Samuel Pepys notes in his famous *Diary*, that on July 29, 1667, Solomon Eccles, a prominent Quaker, "came naked through Westminster Hall, only very civilly tied about the privates...with a chafing dish of fire and brimstone burning on his head...crying "Repent! Repent!" George Fox, the leading figure in the movement was regularly beaten by churchgoers, angered by his interruptions to their parish worship—on one occasion he was given a bloody nose by a clergyman who hit him in the face with a Bible to silence him.

Our own Michael Servetus was described by a biographer of Calvin, and thus no friend, as a man who was "in intellectual endowments the peer of the greatest men of his century." He was also portrayed by the Unitarian historian Earl Morse Wilbur as "irritating and insulting,"

“self-conceited,” “temperamental,” and “obsessed with a certain sense of a divine calling to spread his views on Christian truth.” (see EM Wilbur, *A History of Unitarianism...*, pp. 57, 125)

These people, each in their unique way, exemplify, they are archetypes of the complexity and mystery of the human condition--our acute emotional and mental distress at being thrown into a world experienced as fundamentally awry: people enslaved, heedless nations on the precipice of disaster, corruption in governments, courts and the marketplace, manifest injustice, the poor ground down into the dirt while the rich conspicuously consume, whole swaths of humanity condemned to hell by stone-hearted, dogmatic religious leaders, indigenous people losing their land and eviscerated by disease and drink, urban landscapes studded with closed circuit TV cameras and the homeless. How can it not be that sensitive souls, distressed by their own shortcomings, by the manifest, wholesale screwed-upness of things and their own apparent powerlessness to effect change, their anxieties about being able to make their way into the world while holding on to and living out their moral and ethical values—how can it not be? Tell me! Is it surprising that they, and we, are wracked with profound sadness, with moments of elated enthusiasm, and mind numbing anxieties and fear?

And are we to pathologize all of this, and drown the depths of our acute, soulful humanity in an ocean of meds? It's not working; the so-called “safe and effective cure” is turning out to be worse than the so-called “disease.” And we have a tens-of-billions-of-dollars, millions-of-suffering-people policy crisis on our hands. *And more*, our mental health crisis is, I believe, root and branch, a spiritual crisis of epic proportions.

Thank god my mother stood by me, when I was fifteen years old, and backed up my adamant refusal to be put in a psych ward for observation. I probably wouldn't be standing here

if we'd said "yes." Do you hear me? I was just bored out of my mind in school; a restless, inquisitive, sensitive kid trying to figure out how to grow up. It was hard then; I think it's even harder now.

I know about global warming, about the tar sands, and petro-dictatorships; and every day I stand at the intersection of Oak and 49th and watch a relentless river of single-passenger driven cars and trucks stream by, and I think about that Quaker who walked naked through Westminster Hall with a chafing dish of fire and brimstone burning on his head...crying "Repent! Repent!" It's a miracle we're not all stark naked, raving mad. The strength it takes to hold it all in, and not go over the bend, is unbelievable. When we can't bear up and break down from time-to-time, my heart breaks, my soul aches; and body and soul, I wonder how we can help. The lyrics of a Radiohead song keep coming to my mind—"I really want to help you man; I really want to help."

Right now, all I can do is share this story in closing: In the early 7th century in the city of Mecca lived a successful merchant by the name of Muhammad ibn Abdullah. He was known for his good judgment, uprightness and business acumen. However, he was distressed by corruption in the marketplace and religion, the injustice of tribal governments, the abject subjugation of women and slaves. He meditated on these troubling issues in a cave near the city. One night, he sat alone, deep in thought. Suddenly an invisible presence crushed him in its embrace. He struggled to break free but could not move. He was overwhelmed by darkness. He couldn't breathe. He felt he was dying, when light and a terrifying voice washed over him. "Recite!" the voice commanded. "What shall I recite?" Muhammad gasped. The invisible presence tightened its embrace. "Recite in the name of your Lord who created humanity...

Recite for your Lord is the Most Generous One who has taught humanity...that which it did not know.” This was Muhammad’s burning bush, and he thought he was going insane.

Frightened and trembling from the experience in the cave, he made his way back home, where he crawled to his wife’s side, crying: “Wrap me up! Wrap me up!” His wife Khadija threw a cloak over him and held him tightly in her arms until the trembling and convulsions stopped. Once he had calmed down, Muhammad wept openly as he tried to explain what had happened. “Khadija,” he said, “I think that I have gone mad.”

“This cannot be, my dear,” Khadija replied, stroking his hair. “God would not treat you thus since he knows your truthfulness...your fine character, and your kindness.” Still, Muhammad was inconsolable; and so Khadijah ran to Waraqa, her Christian cousin, who was familiar enough with scripture to recognize Muhammad’s experience for what it was. “He is a prophet of this people,” Waraqa assured Khadija after hearing her story. “Bid him be of good heart.” (this story is taken from Reza Aslan, *No god but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam*, pp. 34-9)

While we may not be called to found a new world religion, stories like this: of good, sensitive, troubled souls finding themselves in deep emotional and mental distress are taking place every day, all over the world. I don’t want to romanticize this. Acute emotional and mental distress can cause insufferable pain lasting days, months, even years; people can become paralyzed or violent when gripped with it. It can break down and thwart bewildered, confused loved ones and friends. And each case and person is unique. But the worst thing would be to run away, wash our hands, and leave countless individuals and families to suffer alone. I really feel we need to lift this up and begin talking and trying to understand what we can do.

We are blessed and vexed by virtue of being conscious beings who hunger for meaning in this world; who hunger for a rich inner life, for splendour of thought and connection, and for the dignity that attends upon wonder and reverence for life and its manifold possibilities. May we, for our sake, and for the young women and men who need the emptiness in their hearts filled, strive with love and passion to rekindle and sustain our wonder, awe, and commitment to each other! May we wrap Khadija's cloak around those we know and love and with whom we suffer and dream, and hold on, and do the best we can to ride out their distress of mind and soul as best we can with courage, patience, kindness and hope!