

Mental Health Sunday

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May 16, 2021

Although I was quick to agree when asked to share something at church for mental health Sunday, I soon doubted how much I wanted to disclose. I am fortunate that in my generation, discourse about mental health has become much less taboo and more commonly regarded as something that can affect individuals on all paths and stages of their lives. I have never shied from showing public support for mental health awareness, nor disclosing my experiences in specific contexts. Though on a personal level, my hesitation wasn't due to embarrassment or shame, but feeling somewhat self-indulgent in speaking from personal experience. It is easy to belittle suffering when it's seemingly only coming from your head. I have much to be grateful for: a stable environment, a strong support network of friends and family. And as isolating as mental health issues can be, it's tempting to think your experiences are too unique to be relatable or understandable. Who would want to listen to any version of my story?

Though each individual experience truly is unique, there is usually a common denominator: they can easily be invisible. They can present themselves regardless of the circumstances of your life, seem to have no rhyme or reason, occur on their own unpredictable timeline. I started attending and joined the choir of this church in the midst of a mental health crisis, that in no exaggeration shook the foundation of my life and identity. For reasons outside of my conscious control, I was faced with many transitions in my life, from professional, to lifestyle, to most importantly adjusting to a label of having bipolar disorder. My greatest challenge, which for a period of time took all of my energy, was striving for stability in what had always been dependable to me: myself. Only from there would I be able to build a steady lifestyle again, which seemed impossible at times. It was inherently isolating, and even with the unconditional and fervent support from family, I only had myself as my own best friend and worst enemy. ^[1]_{SEP}

Mental illness can be invisible, and even when apparent it can often be different than it appears. Someone thriving and productive can be on the verge of crashing and burning. Someone reclusive and lazy can be struggling with fatigue, loneliness and depression. And someone erratic who often lashes out can be paralyzed with fear. I've known all of these circumstances. In church we strive for values that support these issues: understanding, compassion, love. Yet even as allies, it's nearly impossible to get the full picture of another's experience, much less have the tools to "fix" it. If it were, believe me, my mom would've done it. In the darkest times, when even functioning is a challenge, it takes all of these things with addition of crucial elements: time, rest, and for some, yes, medication. ^[1]_{SEP}

Yet in the best of times, my illness truthfully is not something I struggle with. It is something I live with, acknowledge and identify as part of my life. The diagnosis shed light on experiences I'd had in the past and helped me get to know myself better. It is just one story. It could've looked like many things to any other person in a given moment. Mental illness comes in all different forms: latent and draining, urgent and acute, apparent or deep underneath the surface. In the face of this unpredictability, what stands out for what we can do is what this church gave to me then: familiarity. Kindness. Simply being there. ^[1]_{SEP} Being here gave me an opportunity for something familiar and comforting to me: making music. Creating something outside of myself. And being among a wonderful group of people as competent as they are kind. In a way, each week it was a reminder that I was still myself. And at the end of the day, though I was weathering a storm, there were people and simple pleasures that would still be with me through it. Most weren't aware of my circumstances, yet still people were kind. We can provide such valuable support without even realizing it. So, continue to be kind, continue to listen, and continue to just be there.