

SHARING THE JOURNEY: SPIRITUALITY AND MENTAL HEALTH

I am humbled to be asked to open the day today,
But I really have no idea why I am up here.
I have little direct training in the topic today,
I took a little handful of pastoral care classes in seminary
But was mostly wasted a lot of time in systematic theology
Arguing questions that I'm now convinced can't be answered
And are not relevant to most people today.
I can't claim to have studied anybody notable in the field
And have found my best help about mental health in the Sun magazine
I take writing classes for continuing ed.

But of late I have been learning a bit in the school of life.
I discovered that it may be true that God's call
Is generally downwardly mobile
And I'm ok with that.
The congregation I'm blessed to serve is very urban tucked between
City Hall and San Jose State University
When I came 8 years ago,
there was an emergency family shelter in the SS rooms,
A soup kitchen open several times a week and people camping outside
Because they could get morning coffee there.
The doors were often opened at night by people in the shelter so
The street workers could come in and shower.
It was crazy!

The congregation is really small congregation –
About 25 people and by Tuesday I've talked to almost everyone
so that doesn't leave much for a FT pastor to do
So I suppose out of my boredom,
Needing more to do,
We started the Recovery Café San Jose.
It helped reign in some of the chaos going on in our building
And is really a truly lovely model of healing community
That can reach, and I believe heal people in ways our church could not.

I want to begin by telling you a story
Matt, we'll call him, was new to the Recovery Café SJ.
What I noticed about him was his hair combed back neatly
With some nice "product", as they call it these days, on it.
I noticed he smiled a lot and had a relaxed, easy going manner about him.
We ask people to volunteer at Recovery Café SJ and Matt was eager to
Helping to serve lunch most days he was there.
We had some casual chats, always pleasant and interested in others.
One Sunday he came to church with one of the other peer leader members
and I sensed his interest in the Bible and its message.
He saw me in the pastoral role then, so next time I was at the Café
He taking a break from serving and we sat down together and started
casually chatting.
Matt asked me if I'd read the book of Revelations in the Bible and what I
thought about the things in there.
I felt some kind of warning light go off in me,
but I managed to keep the focus on Matt, and to ask what it was that he
wanted to tell me about Revelations.
You see there was a time when I, who attended a fundamentalist church,
had read the Hal Miller books "Left Behind"
I even saw the movie and wondered who in my family might be left behind
in the rapture
These days my most common reaction to that period in my life,
Is that I feel stupid to have believed it. I managed to compartmentalize
my life for awhile and learned not to bring my friends to church,
But there did come a time when the dissonance about so many things
Reached a breaking point and I had the opportunity to grow....

Matt continued on his voice soft, as always, but growing more
Passionate and expressive.
These forces from the directions in the end were all to play out
In the Silicon Valley,
A place that now has risen to power in the world order.
God had willed it that this be the place and it had been shown to Matt.
He then began to explain the great role in the story
that he was to play in this epic battle.

His eyes were bright and his gestures broad as he talked about it...
I paused him to ask a question.... And used the opportunity
To then ask him what he needed from me about this.

“Well, what do you think?” he stopped and looked right at me,
expectantly.

There was a long pause.

I had just been firehosed and didn't quite know where to begin.

I mainly knew I didn't want to talk about this any more

And I didn't think it was good for **Matt** too.

“I used to see the things in Revelations, in a way a little like you described,
But I don't see it that way anymore.”

I communicated in some way that seemed polite enough

That I had other things I needed to do.

As I wandered across the room I noticed that **Matt** took off his gloves

For serving food and quietly packed up his things and left.

He never came back to the Café or the Church again.

My mistake with **Matt** seems benign enough.

But I made the fundamental mistake of not holding safe space...

Being too impatient, too busy, too tutorial, too triggered, to do it.

That's what I was... really.

In the beginning, when we were learning the RC model

From our friends in Seattle,

We were on a call and were asking many questions about how to get
started.

At the end, I had to ask – What's the most important thing you do?

Killian Noe, the visionary founder of the RC model –

answered without hesitating....

“We hold the space.”

Then she went on to describe what it is to hold safe space

That is loving, that is participatory, that invites everyone to be accountable,
in the best sense of that word, for it.

And it happens when the team holding the space does that for each other.

One of the nicest compliments a RC member recently gave us was when

she said, “RC holds my pain like a baby.”

Our San Jose RC Board chair recently shared with us some
Very interesting information related to this.

He told us that Google did an extensive study to discover the secret sauce
That makes a perfect team – a team that is deeply satisfying to be part of
and effective at what they do.

They discovered that it is not about having the best idea, or smartest
people, or most creative, clearest goals or dependability.

Psychological safety turned out to be the single most important factor
In having a consistently satisfying and effective team.

Psychological safety in a group is having the trust that the group will not
embarrass, reject or punish someone for speaking up.

A group like this carries a confidence, a shared belief that the team is safe
for interpersonal sharing

And this enables them to work really well together and be happy to do it!

So do faith communities do this?

Well....

The church was not safe space for my grandmother.

Who struggled with depression all her life and ended it at age 62 after her
pastor came and prayed that she would have more faith in God.

I almost left the church after that.

It had no credibility for me.

But I suppose I stayed and went all in to do something different.

I think my grandmother stayed... and I stay

Because we know that the story of our faith is really all about healing.

And I do believe that faith communities are intrinsically wired to be a
healing place for those who struggle with mental health challenges.

Why?

Because healing is all about having a sense of belonging.

I remember sitting in Judge Manley's (our own amazing drug court
entrepreneur) office and he, of all people said –

People in my court don't need recovery, they need a relationship.

Faith communities can be one of the best places to meet the need for
belonging.

One of the most difficult aspects of sinking into a mental health challenge

Is the isolation that often results.

Getting out of it often means finding a way to get out –

Finding safe space to be with others.

Faith communities can say – silver and gold have I none –

We can't help much with the bills, but what we do have is belonging.

Belonging in the sense that the people, not just the pastor,

Will call you when you're MIA for awhile.

People have coffee or lunch w/ you – you listen to each other.

You have a job to do in the community – you're needed and useful.

But not too much!

Faith communities are great at this...

Our spiritual practices of prayer, meditation, lectio divina, anointing,

Yoga, mindfulness, sacred reading, pilgrimage

All powerful healing tools to open up channels of grace –

For as they say – trauma is often lodged in the body

So our spiritual practices can do things talk therapy cannot.

The shamans have an understanding that people often in times of trauma

Experience soul loss

And they have a ritual of soul retrieval that many shamanic practitioners

Are reviving.

What a gift to have someone journey for you in search of lost soul parts...and to bring them back and work with you to reintegrate them into your life.

But people don't automatically know how to do these things –

Even the Disciples of Jesus said teach us... we have no idea how to pray.

Before I close I want to be sure I don't forget to share with you what I learned from the Sun magazine.

It was there I was introduced to the work of Gail Hornstein

And have since read her amazing book called Agnes Jacket.

She believes that people who have been in the mental health system Have been too readily dismissed as not having insight into their own experience.

What she has discovered is that peer oriented groups can bring remarkable insights to each other.

She began a Hearing Voice Network in the UK and brought it to the US
Where people in these groups teach each other how to work with the
voices that sometimes torment and sometimes have helpful information.

The more I live closely with those we have labelled as
The mentally ill,
The more I wonder who is.
Our world itself looks quite mad.
And I often wonder if those who are quite sensitive to energies
And know a great deal about them
Have become the symptom bearers of the culture's madness.
The system is not well, and those who remain undisturbed by suffering,
those who are callously indifferent,
those who function well under cruelty, show no symptoms.
But there are those who are sensitive.
They see and sense things.
Their psyche cannot bear what is going on in the world,
so they slip into another reality that is less dangerous than the real and
present one.
A reality that speaks truth in code.
They generously give out warnings to try to make people more aware of
the danger that surrounds them.

So I have the sense that if we are to cure what ails our systems and our
culture,
We should stay close to them.
Create safe spaces for them.
Matt taught me that.
We should listen.