

"A BEAUTIFUL MIND"

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When I was ten years old, my Aunt Adele came to live with me and my brother and my mother. My aunt was not feeling well, my mother said, and could no longer live alone. I loved my aunt very much, and even at such a young age, I felt her inner pain which I had no name for. She was sad ... all of the time. She was in the dark, even when she wasn't actually sitting in the dark. She spoke slowly. Every sentence seemed to drag on, and she was not really interested in life or pleasurable activities. She said, she had headaches a lot and was tired a lot, either waking before dawn or sleeping all day and all night. She lost weight. She developed a fear of driving, a phobia, and so my mother drove her to work every morning and picked her up every evening. Once a week, mother took her to a psychiatrist. This was back in the 1950's before the explosion of so many wonderful anti-depressants and mood stabilizers that are available today. She was placed on a major tranquilizer, but, my friends, she did not get better. One Sunday, we went to church, and she said she would stay at home. After church I rushed in with all of my enthusiasm to tell her about the service, but she was asleep, and when I tried to wake her, she would not wake up. She would not wake up. I had no word for what I sensed had happened, but I screamed for my mother who came and picked up the empty bottle of tranquilizers and cried out, "Oh, my God! The bottle is empty!". I remember my mother shaking her and calling her name, panic-stricken, and she kept telling me to go outside.

My aunt survived this suicide attempt but was sent to a psychiatric hospital for three months where she received ECT. (shock treatments) She was challenged with severe depression throughout her life, and it even worsened with age, but the medications became so much better that she was able to find relief from her struggle at the end of her life, and I saw a side to her that I had never seen before.

I come before you today to bring good news about treatments for mental illness and also to connect what I'm saying to the spiritual dimension. I would like to answer the question, what does any of this have to do with religion or spirituality?

Before I answer that question, I need to speak for a moment about bipolar illness or manic-depression as it was once called, because so many people have loved ones who have been diagnosed with this illness. This means that the person has mood swings of the deepest depression and then vaulting up to the heights of mania, being too high, feeling too good. The person's thoughts may race. They often talk rapidly, go on buying sprees, make phone calls into the hundreds of dollars to long lost friends, and even experience paranoia, the belief that others are talking about them or persecuting them. There may be inflated confidence which is the opposite of a sense of worthlessness which depression brings.

Let me say here that, just as not everyone is sick to the same degree with heart disease or diabetes or cancer, so it is with mental illness. Not everyone who is Bipolar is non-functional. Some people are not able function, that is very true, but in fact, most people today who have Bipolar illness can have some semblance of a normal life with medications, have a family, a job, community, periods of peace and joy.

It is extremely important for me to share with you today that I have Bipolar Illness. I have had many challenges in my life, as have we all, but this was the hardest, the hardest thing that I have ever had to accept in my life. I believed, like so many people who have a psychiatric challenge or have a loved one who has a psychiatric challenge, that all I we need to do is set our minds to it and overcome it, the human will, Yes, I believed if I just tried hard enough and read enough self-help books, went to therapy long enough, prayed enough, practiced yoga enough or disciplined my thoughts enough, that I would triumph over it, not need medication anymore or have the illness anymore. Well, there's a biological component. It took me years to accept that.

But listen to this. I was able to get through Harvard Divinity School. I raised a son who is a good person and loves life. He's a wonderful son.

I was able to serve as a parish minister for several years before my illness made that no longer possible. And most importantly, three years ago, I was able to bring my mother home through hospice care and be with her, sitting beside her, when she died. For that I feel very grateful and truly blessed.

I stand before you today, I think, with self-acceptance, coming out of much struggle, and I would say to any of you who are struggling with a psychiatric challenge right now, you are accepted. The worth and dignity of every person. You have worth, and you have dignity.

You know, I have said to many that I resented Patty Duke for a long time, because she makes it sound, in her books, as if she just took a Lithium for her Bipolar illness,, which I also took for many years, and ever since then life has been perfect! Someone pointed out to me recently that maybe she's not telling us everything.

My friends, I want to give **hope** ... there are some wonderful medications, and more and more are coming out, but I don't want to mislead anybody ... it's **rough**. There are **rough** times. The medications stop working sometimes. They work for awhile and may lose their effectiveness. Then people must find a new medication and might need to try many before finding one that helps, and that's rough on the body. It's hard on the mind. It's draining. As anyone will tell you, the side effects of the medications may be difficult to withstand. I sometimes wonder if the side effects or the illness is worse! Sometimes the illness itself takes over, and those are the hardest of times. The depression may come back without warning or the mood swings. I don't want to give an unrealistic picture.

I can say that I was diagnosed, that I had an immense amount of support, unending love, and I'm able, because of that love, to stand before you with this acceptance of .. who I am.

Listen to this ... a person has an illness, but they are not their illness. They are much more than their illness. Inside there is someone, a spirit, who paints or writes or raises a child, who has a unique life. At times the illness takes over, but the person is not that illness.

I am here speaking to you only because there were people who were there for me during the hard times, and that is the spiritual dimension. The love and support and abiding presence that people with psychiatric challenges and their families need from all of us, from all of you.

It's really so simple, because, make no mistake about it, my friends, this is a lonely illness.

What do I mean when I say it's a lonely illness? When I was a parish minister and someone became physically ill, we announced it from the pulpit, put it in the newsletter, so cards would be sent, phone calls, flowers, a quilt could be made. The people in the parish, friends and family, gathered around to comfort, embrace, with compassion and support. Not so with depression or bipolar illness or schizophrenia. The stigma is there, the shame, the secrecy. How many times I have given a sermon on this topic and had people approach me afterward and tell me no one in the church knows, **and I think the church needs to be the first place where the person can share this and be accepted with mercy, compassion and unconditional love.**

Someone may approach me after church and say their husband is depressed and won't take medication, because he feels it's a weakness. If someone has heart disease or diabetes they don't feel weak for taking medication, but It's that stigma, that sense of shame.

In one parish I served, a young woman was so sick with a serious mental illness. She sang in the choir, and she took her life in a violent way. She was young. She had a baby, and afterward the guilt and the trauma were overwhelming in the congregation. Over and over again they asked, "How could we have not seen this? What could we have done to prevent such a horrible death?". They weren't bad people, not at all. They were very caring people. They were devastated that they lost this young person, but it's not quite knowing what to do or how to respond to someone who has a psychiatric illness.

Love, support, compassion, empathy. I said at my ordination, there is someone in my life who has been in my life for a long time. I said, if we can find one person in our life who can see us at our weakest and see us at our worst and say, 'I'm still here', that's a great gift. Just **to be there** for the person, just to sit with the person and listen. That's the spiritual dimension.

I want to leave you now with the words of The Reverend Mark Mosher DeWolfe , words which will carry us through no matter what our struggle may be on the path.. He wrote, "Know that the love inside you is stronger than illness, for people who love find strength they didn't know they had. Know that the love inside you is stronger than fear, for people who love find courage they didn't know they had. But most of all, know that the love inside you is stronger even than death. For people who love are like stones, tossed into a pool. The circles of love radiate out and bounce back, long after the stone has come to rest at the bottom, so remember your love as a source of strength. Remember who you are ... you are lovers, tossed by these difficult times."

So be it.