

ACCOMPANYING ANOTHER

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Our connection to God and to one another are major components of recovery from mental illnesses. The sources of hope for me in our journey of supporting our daughter who has a major mental illness has been God, my wife Rita, and people who are going through the same or similar experiences that we have faced over the years and continue to face.

We have 4 daughters and as they were growing up, as children do, they would come to me with their questions or problems and I would have a ready answer for them. But, when our oldest daughter as a teen first started showing symptoms of her illness, I knew this was beyond me. I remember one night she and I standing on the front porch of our home and my daughter asking “Why am I like this.” It broke my heart. I realized for the first time I didn’t have the answers she needed!

Mental illness in a family can bring about feelings of helplessness and hopelessness! After that night I began to realize that there were two paths I could go down. 2 options -

I could drown in my feelings of helplessness or I could get involved in doing something positive. Fortunately I decided to turn my anger and frustration into advocacy for my daughter and others in her same situation. I drew my strength to be an advocate from my faith in God. As well as the support from Rita, and people who have similar experiences. At first through NAMI (The National Alliance on Mental Illness) but then in our parish and community.

Over the years I have learned what it means to accompany people with mental illness and their families.

First : God is always there even in our darkest hour

My strength Comes from God who is there even when we don’t think He is. I have felt God’s presence in so many ways over the years but often His presence comes when we least expect it or even when we think He has abandoned us.

Perhaps the most profound experience of this was when our daughter was in a mental health facility in the Chicago in the late 1980’s uptown neighborhood. She had been discharged to that facility from a state institution. One day we got a call from the facility and they told us we shouldn’t come to visit her because she was very groggy and couldn’t comprehend things. What they didn’t tell us in that phone call was they had overmedicated her. We immediately jumped into our car and drove to the facility. It was a hot August day and we found her wandering around in a stupor. The facility had no air conditioning. We tended to her needs and came back the next day and she was still very groggy. As we went to leave that evening our daughter turned to us and still in a fog she asked that when we come back would I bring her bread. At this point I was very angry and very frustrated and I turned to Rita and said “What could she possibly want with Bread” and our daughter looked at us and said Church Bread. She wanted to receive the Eucharist. She had never asked us for the Eucharist before. At that point I

felt a peace and calmness come over me, I knew that God was present with us and we would somehow get through this.

The second thing I have learned is that sharing our family's experience of pain and suffering with others going through similar experiences is a healing source of strength. We are not alone.

Dr Estelle Frankel who writes about Sacred Therapy says:

“Spiritual Healing is essentially about breaking out of the narrow prison of our own personal heartbreak to enter the heavenly palace of compassion and connection. It is about how the human heart can be broken open. So that the veils that keep us separate from one another and from our connection to the divine can be removed”

I believe we are called by God to use our gifts and talents in combination with our life's experiences to make a difference in the lives of others especially those in need. It is then that we break out of our prison of sorrow and self pity. It is then that we see God more clearly. We sense in a very concrete way His presence.

For me, Jesus parable of the story of the Good Samaritan who helped someone when no one else would and the Father who welcomed home the prodigal son with unconditional love are two examples of our path to spiritual healing. In both parables Jesus is teaching us that God's call is to serve others especially the people who are suffering. It is my strong belief that when we help others with unconditional love, we experience God's love through the connection with those in need.

When we look at our lives through the lens of Christ's teaching, we see that true joy and peace comes from using our experience to help others. This is how our suffering becomes redemptive.

When we accompany people as they go through the challenges that mental illness brings, you never know where that will lead or how God will use you.

Over the years whenever Rita and I talk to people, in the neighborhood, on airplanes, on vacations, or wherever, invariably the conversation turns to family or we are asked what we do. We readily share our story and we discover how common mental illness is and how many people are willing to talk about what they are going through **when** they find an empathetic ear. For many people just to find that someone else is going through something they are going through or understands what they are going through, is always reassuring and comforting. We discover we are not alone.

Mental illness touches many lives even where you might least expect it. One of the most profound examples of that happened years ago when we were on a trip out west. We stopped at a national monument in southern Arizona that had once been a Franciscan mission. As we left I noticed a tape on the counter. It was Christmas music from the Santa Rita Abbey in the Santa Rita Mountains near Sonita Arizona. Rita said we have to visit this place because it's named St Rita. So the next day we traveled two hours into the desert looking for the abbey. We stopped in Sonita, a small town at the crossroads of two state highways. At a local café we asked the owner if he had heard of the St Rita Abbey. He said he could tell us how to get there but there were no signs. It was six miles down the 2 lane highway, then turn onto a BLM dirt road for a mile or so, then go around a foothill and you will see it. Sure enough we found it. We walked up to the door and there was a sign that read “ring the bell and walk in.” We did and found ourselves in a small room. Soon a nun came through another door and greeted us warmly. She had a big smile and seemed very excited to see us. Later I thought of

course she was, they couldn't possibly get many visitors and it was her day to answer the door! We talked awhile and we got around to Rita's and my ministry to people with mental illness and their families. Suddenly, her whole demeanor changed, as she grew worried and concerned. She said she had just heard that her sister who had a mental illness was not doing well and her brother didn't know what to do. I asked if she heard of NAMI. I explained that they have chapters near where her brother and sister live. The NAMI group could be a great resource for him. She became joyful again and took down the contact information to forward on to her brother. As we later left I said to Rita I'm sure she thought two angels had just visited her. She lives at the Santa Rita Abbey in the Santa Rita mountains, she was probably praying asking St Rita to intercede for her sister, and who walks in the door but Tom and Rita. I learned once again that God is always there for us in our care and concern for one another.

P.S. Ten or more years later after no contact with the nun at St Rita's Abbey, I wrote to her asking the Abbey to pray for a niece of ours. In the email I said you probably don't remember me. She wrote back and said she did remember me and her sister was doing well!

Third: HOLY LISTENING

Over the years what I have found is the most healing thing we can do is listen to one another, that is, to hear people's stories with an ear to understanding and empathy. Many people who have a mental illness and many family's members often don't have anyone who will listen to them. I mean truly listen – which is more than just hearing a person's story, it is being engaged with the person. I call it Holy Listening.

Holy listening, that is, listening in the context of the healing presence of God, means hearing what a person tells us and letting their story unfold at their pace. It affirms a person's dignity and value. Their story is a sacred story. We respond and react to their story in a non-judgmental way with an unconditional love for the person. Holy listening allows and encourages people to relate their experiences in a supportive atmosphere that leads to comfort and healing. Holy listening brings one to a richer understanding of God's unconditional love for us through our acceptance of one another. It leads to a mutuality of understanding that allows the person who is ministering to another to begin to see that they are being ministered to as well. This supportive process leads to solidarity and mutuality that enriches faith and hope. The listener also becomes the learner and both journey the path together to wholeness and holiness. We are not leading or following each other we are walking side by side. Such mutuality of understanding creates an environment that gives a person "permission" to tell their story, which they may otherwise feel too uncomfortable or too embarrassed or too stigmatized to tell. It's about creating a safe place for people to share their story.

When someone comes to share their story of joy or pain it is a very intimate conversation. We should not intrude on their story except for clarifications. Gradually the trust level is built and the conversations deepen.

People come to us searching for answers, finding the why in suffering, what did I do wrong, is God punishing me, does God listen to me? We know illness does not come from God, and God

loves us unconditionally. God gives us the tools to navigate the ups and downs of life. However, it can take time for anyone to come to a better understanding of that. We have to work through the stages of anger, frustration, loss, grief, etc. Healing takes time so we do not rush. We allow the healing process to unfold. We are not solving problems we are entering the mystery of God's redeeming love for us.

Listening with a sense of sacredness for the person's life makes the sharing a Holy experience, God's healing presence. It is their story. It allows for healing and over time and trust to build.

SOME KEY UNDERSTANDINGS

First - We are accompanying people and are not counselors. We are not mental health professionals who treat the symptoms of mental illness just as we are not oncologists who discuss remedies for a person with cancer. We are spiritual friends and companions who journey in faith with those who are in need or suffering and often isolated by their illness. Praying with and for people with mental illnesses and their families is very important. How do we know God loves us? In a very tangible way it is when we show our love for one another.

Second - When interacting with people with a mental illness we need to recognize that each person has dignity, each person has gifts, each person has a unique relationship with God.

Sometimes we are helping the person discover or bring to light the gifts they have.

People w/MI live in a society that often looks down on them, or make them feel inadequate, yet I have discovered what people with mental illness can teach us about life and what gifts and insights they have are amazing. Affirming those gifts gives a person a sense of self worth and value.

Everyone needs purpose in life. Often people stigmatized by society lose a sense of purpose. As people accompanying those who are struggling we can help them find purpose by identifying the gifts they have.

Third - We need to recognize in ourselves any preconceived negative images and prejudices we may have toward people with mental illnesses. Acknowledging this to ourselves will improve the ability to communicate with the person with the mental illness.

Fourth - It is natural to want to problem solve, but listening is not problem solving. Holy listening should be supportive and affirming. Many people have poor images of themselves again due to stigma, we have an opportunity to reaffirm their goodness and their dignity.

Fifth - It is important to separate the illness and symptoms from the person. People with mental illness should not be defined by the disease they have but by the person they are. When we start labeling people as a disease, we see them as problems rather than a person.

Sixth - Each illness carries with it symptoms that may affect how people interact with us and we with them. The intensity and severity of the illness impacts one's ability to communicate.

Mental illness can affect a person's ability to think sequentially, to manage emotions or mood swings, and to be in relationship with others. Medications can present the same communication hurdles.

Understanding the symptoms of the particular mental illness of the person will help us to better communicate, minister, advocate, and pray with people with mental illness. For example, someone with depression may seem uninterested or distant. That is a symptom to be recognized but not indicative of the person they are outside the illness. A person with schizophrenia may hear voices or experience hallucinations which are very real to them and is their reality. It is important not to deny that they are experiencing those symptoms and that you are willing to learn more about what they are going through. A person who has a panic disorder may be uncomfortable in Church or at meetings so it is important to be sensitive to the person's need for space or need to get up and move around.

Seventh - Boundaries are an important part of listening. Setting limits on how often and how long one can meet will lead to more productive meetings. As family and friends we need to care for ourselves if we are to be effective caregivers for one another. We need to care for ourselves in order to be caregivers.

As we listen to a person's story, an individual may begin to name specific needs – shelter, medical help, food, transportation, counseling, clothing, financial assistance. A companion could become quickly exhausted trying to meet all of a person's needs. But we are companions not providers of services. Our role as companions is to support a person in finding resources in the community and building an ongoing circle of care. To Refer people to available resources.

Eighth - Journaling is important tool both for the person who has the mental illness and the person who is companionship that person. Journaling gives us a sense of where we have been and where we are going. That way we can build on what has been discussed.

Ninth: Commitment is important. Understand that Holy Listening is a process that takes time. We have to be committed for the long haul as mental illnesses are often chronic and persistent. People with mental illness have lost friends and in some case families. Their professional relationships with psychiatrists and therapists are good but they need more. Regular folks who also listen in a supporting and understanding way.

Tenth - Always have a sense of Hope that is rooted in Christ message to us all. The joy of life is knowing we are loved by God and one another. We are a people of the resurrection, the joyful expression of the outcome of Christ's suffering. Rather than being imprisoned by suffering we can know true joy when we use our suffering to help others. The experience we have helping others can lighten the load others are experiencing.

Praying with people is a very positive way to be hopeful.

Support Groups

Why are they important?

Over the years people have said to me, natural food is the answer, or vitamins, we had a pastor who said what ever you do don't let them give your daughter drugs, well medication saved her life, and so on.

My answer is that we are people with a mind, a body and a soul and we need to pay attention to all of those aspects. Healing comes from a healthy spiritual life, a healthy lifestyle for what we eat and drink, and healthy treatment for our brain.

Support groups can help us figure out what is best for us or our loved ones. We are not alone and others who have had similar experience may have some good insights. We need good information so educating ourselves with facts and experiences will help us discern what we should do. Because we are all unique as the therapist last week reminded us, there is no one answer for everyone. The medical community as he also told is still in its infancy stage regarding treatment of the brain. We have made progress, I can remember going to conferences by scientists talking about the brain when they were first understanding how neurotransmitters worked, how many there were, and how that would help the new generation of psychotropic drugs target specific illnesses. This is back in the early 1990's. We are still not there yet. But look at the evolution of cancer treatment and the targeting of chemo therapy and radiation. Far different and advanced from years ago . We need each other to help find what is the best decision for our situation. Ultimately, it's our decision for our unique situation.

Resource information:

It is important to educate oneself on mental illness.

Valuable information and programs can be found through groups such as NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness), NIMH (National Institute of Mental Health), SAMHSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services) and others.

It is also important to be aware of local services and programs as well as governmental programs. There are government assistance programs but they are often hard to navigate. For a person with a mental illness it becomes overwhelming and frustrating to even try.

Accompanying people going through the process can be literally be life saving.