Mental Health Awareness Month: A Dissent

Numerous sources have accosted me lately with the Important News that May carries with it the dubious distinction of Mental Health Awareness Month. While I do not desire to malign where there exist benevolent intentions behind these efforts, I dissent. I acknowledge that it is vital to bring attention to this issue; yet, I dissent. I propose a different, deeper, and more just approach.

Why? Because the sort of awareness-raising typically carried out is not a Consciousness-Raising. It is, if anything, a cementing of the very systems of oppression that have been dehumanizing those of us with labels of “mentally ill” for centuries. We may have softened this term to “mental health” for the *sensitive* like me, but what good is a shift in language if the meaning behind the words remains the same? As if we need more euphemisms to couch the realities of living!

I find the othering of mental illness labeling to be a false dichotomy created to prop up deathly systems of power. It is a myth that there exists some finite line in the sands of the human condition, which separates the Fully Human from the “mentally ill.” Health - including the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects of our beings - exists for us all on a continuum, a spectrum of ever-changing states influenced by myriad factors inseparable from our environments and each other. Mental health awareness campaigns invariably seem to suggest otherwise.

Many will cry: “But what of STIGMA?!” Another euphemism. I call malarkey. The very notion of stigma, by definition, requires an ‘other.’ Erase the lines between us, allow the outcast their true homecoming, and the ‘other’ is no more. It is only us, and the concept of stigma does not exist.

The fact that these campaigns encourage people to seek “help” is another issue that gravely concerns me. Literally, gravely, in every sense of the word. (For more on that matter, please have a listen to ‘Say My Name’ [listen here: https://drive.google.com/open?id=1KgANFt0BCShpdW5yocuRtLY5Ti20ppx].) I’m all for asking for help: I do it on a daily, often hourly basis. I have benefited throughout my life from several therapists who treated me with dignity: as a whole person, with respect and compassion. I could not survive without the ongoing support of my spiritual connection and my community. I don’t believe any of us is meant to journey alone through this adventure we call life.

However, there are several insidious pitfalls to “help” in this context. One is the all-too-often unhelpfulness of the “help” which is frequently proffered against our will through the use of force.¹ We are, after all, “crazy” and cannot possibly know what’s best for us! Actually, it’s probably for our own good that we be locked away, so as to protect ourselves and society. Thus the voices of many harbingers of truth are silenced, often forever.

All too often, we are prescribed - without truly informed consent - an over-abundance of medication that will likely greatly reduce our quality of life. And all too often greatly reduce the length of it as well.² Furthermore, should we decide that this is unacceptable and experience withdrawal effects upon discontinuing said medications; this is used as evidence that we need them, that we cannot live without the very thing which is hastening our death.³

And what if this “help” doesn’t effect the desired outcome? Or, heaven-forbid, the crazy person question the desired outcome? Whose desires are truly taken into account when it comes to tat? Those of the ones with power, of course, which is exactly as the system intends. We are made to believe that
we have failed, that we are irreparably damaged goods. The system couldn’t possibly have failed us.

Which brings me to another hazard: the devastating impact of solidifying a person’s identity into the ‘broken other’ who needs professional fixing, whose innate worth and wisdom may be forsaken entirely under the guise of the lens of “craziness.” I have personally experienced and witnessed time and again so very many tragic losses of person-hood resulting from this phenomenon.

In the words of Aboriginal activist Lilla Watson, “If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.” So come, let us call each other by name, let us embrace the messiness of our full humanity, and let us fight together for a homecoming to justice - for a liberation to wholeness.


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Spoken Word "Say My Name" Transcript (listen here: https://drive.google.com/open?id=1KgANFt0BMCShpdW5yocuRtLY5Tl20ppx)

Say my name. Say my name while I am yet alive to hear it. Say my name before the oppression of this dehumanization kills me. Say my name before I become yet another casualty of this toxicity, another lifeless canary in the coal mine.

My name has been forsaken for a diagnosis. The summation of my being has been reduced to this label slapped over a collection of ‘symptoms’: the bodily display of the toxins I’ve internalized. This manifestation an egotistical psychiatrist has interpreted through their lens of power. I hear a nurse page the other unit as I wait to be securely transported for yet another group meant to remind me Who I Really Am. “I have the ED here,” she sighs in exasperation at the nuisance of my very existence.

Acceptance was the answer to all my problems. Acceptance of my condition, of this identity, and of the “help” that you gave me for it. Fourteen years old, alone, terrified, confused, and nameless; I accepted those labels as my identity. What choice did I really have? How else could I have escaped that particular prison which threatened to swallow my soul alive?

So I escaped by the means necessary for survival. And today I have a voice. Today I would respond to
that nurse: “Bitch, I have a name! It’s Faith. Say my name while I am yet alive to hear it.” Today I will speak to myself: “Faith.” I will avow to my innermost being: “Faith, you are a Beloved and worthy of life.”

Ellen didn’t make it. I say her name in death to honor her life. Ellen. I say her name with tears streaming down my face. Ellen. I say her name because you did not. You did not say her name while she was yet alive to hear it. No, you called her “Addict, Criminal, Liar.” You reduced her life to these terms. You made her speak of herself in these terms - on your terms. You put her in that ‘Hot Seat’ and made her call herself a thousand wretched things instead of calling herself by name, instead of calling herself a Beloved, worthy of life. And you killed her. Hanging in the second story bathroom of a treatment facility, that was her last breath. Stripped of her humanity, then stripped of her very life. Ellen.

I weep because I cannot remember all their names. I weep because I have witnessed so many casualties. So very many brutal casualties of spirit.

Let me remember to say your name while you are yet alive to hear it. Let me remember to say your name before your spirit is too crushed to remember itself. Let me remember to fight for justice while we are yet alive to receive it.