

Beyond Stigma and Shame

Rev. Tim Temerson

UU Church of Akron

October 19, 2014

Every so often in the life of our church community we experience moments that so clearly point to why we are here and what Unitarian Universalism and the UU Church of Akron are ultimately all about. One of those moments occurred last February when we held a service on mental illness and on the stigma and shame that lead so many to journey alone and afraid. For those who were here that day you may remember that after Becky and Pam shared stories of how their lives have been touched by mental illness, I invited everyone present whose lives had been similarly touched to stand together in a moment of witness and community.

I can't put into words how powerful and moving it was to see virtually everyone in this room stand together in solidarity and love. In that brief moment there was no fear, no shame, no suffering alone in silence and isolation. We were one community of acceptance and love sending a powerful message that shame and stigma have no place in this church, in this faith tradition, or in this society.

So today we are here to take the next step, or perhaps I should say the first step, in translating that powerful moment into a ministry of unconditional love and support – a ministry grounded in partnerships with organizations like the National Alliance on Mental Illness or NAMI, a ministry that will offer educational programs on mental health-related issues, a ministry that will provide a support group of love and community for those whose lives are touched by mental illness, and a ministry that will offer ongoing advocacy and activism around mental health-related issues.

I am so proud of our congregation for launching a mental health ministry. I think we have so much to offer in creating a space that is free of judgment and fear and that instead offers a message that simply says "come as you are, bring your

joys and your sorrows, your wholeness and your broken places, your triumphs and your struggles.”

And I think it is so very important that we are part of a small but growing number of faith traditions and religious communities that are beginning to break centuries of silence and indifference to the reality of mental illness. More often than not religion has caused or contributed to the stigma and shame surrounding mental illness rather than standing on the side of unconditional love and acceptance.

I wish I could tell you that Unitarian Universalism has always been an exception to this legacy of silence and stigma. Of course, there have been bright spots and proud moments in the history of our tradition around mental illness, like the courageous work of the nineteenth century Unitarian reformer Dorothea Dix, who was one of the first people to champion humane treatment of the mentally ill. But more often than not, examples like Dorothea Dix have been the exception rather than the rule and we have, until quite recently, said and done far too little about mental illness.

Sometimes I wonder if our silence is rooted in the very strong strain of individualism that runs through much of the history of Unitarian Universalism and through American culture and society. We UUs value individual freedom and our commitment to individual freedom has, until recent years, led to a kind go it alone, pull yourself by your own spiritual bootstraps approach to religious life. Thankfully, that lone ranger model has become a thing of the past. We are coming to recognize that while individual freedom is vitally important for leading a meaningful and authentic spiritual life, it is the shared journey – a journey in which we recognize and embrace the fact that we need one another – it is the shared journey that truly gives meaning and hope to our lives.

How I wish there had been a ministry like the one we are launching today when I experienced the shame and stigma that are so often attached to mental illness. In previous sermons I’ve told you about my late mother’s struggles with depression, struggles that led her, at one point, to attempt suicide. My mom’s depression and her suicide attempt left me feeling so hurt, so lost, and so very

alone. Day after day I felt as if I was riding an emotional roller coaster that alternated between feelings of intense anger at my Mom for what she had done and a guilt that left me feeling responsible for her pain and her depression. In the weeks and months that followed my Mom's suicide attempt, anger and guilt were my constant companions.

And then there was the stigma and the shame. I was blessed to be part of a family and a church community that loved and supported me. But no matter how many times people offered to listen or to give me a shoulder, I couldn't bring myself to share my feelings. I was simply too ashamed and too embarrassed – ashamed and embarrassed about what my Mom had tried to do and even more ashamed and embarrassed about what I was feeling. I kept telling myself that a good son would have paid more attention, seen the signs, and found a way to prevent his mother's suicide attempt. And a good son certainly wouldn't feel so much anger and rage over what had happened. There was something wrong with me and with what I was feeling. So although I accepted many hugs and kind words of support, until I saw a counselor some months later, I never opened up about what I was feeling. Instead I journeyed in silence and with shame.

Many of the hugs and kind words I received came from friends at the UU church we attended. In fact, my closest church friends offered me the kind of unconditional love and support that makes Unitarian Universalism such a life-saving and life-affirming religious tradition. But what our church didn't have was a space where I could let go of my shame and end my silence. What I needed was a place of trust and acceptance where I could be with others who had gone through what I was experiencing – a place where I could listen to the stories and experiences of others and then feel safe enough share my own. If such a place or group had existed I would have learned that my feelings were not strange or unusual and that I didn't need to let shame run my life. More than anything else, such a group would have enabled me to know that I wasn't alone in what I was feeling and that I was loved and accepted for who I am.

And that is what I believe our mental health ministry will do. The classes and workshops we plan to offer will provide invaluable and perhaps life-saving

information – information that we hope will be empowering for those whose lives have been touched by mental illness and for those who want to learn more so that they can be of help to someone struggling with mental illness. The first of these programs will be a workshop on suicide prevention that will take place on Saturday, December 6 from 10AM to Noon.

This winter, probably in January or February, we will launch a mental health support group here at the UU Church of Akron. Becky and Pam will co-facilitate the group. It is our hope that this group will provide that space of love and trust where anyone whose life has been touched by mental illness can listen, share, let go of shame, and experience the blessings of community and connection.

Those are just the initial plans for what I hope will be a ministry that will touch lives and heal wounds caused by shame and stigma. We want our mental health ministry to send a clear message that no one who comes through our doors has to fear that they will be judged or seen as less than because of mental illness. No one who comes through our doors has to ride a roller coaster of emotions alone and ashamed. And no one who comes through our doors has to fear that they will be stigmatized or shamed, or told that they should get over it or just pull themselves up by their emotional bootstraps.

Whoever you are wherever you have come from, we welcome you. We welcome your joys and sorrows, your hopes and your despair. Ours' is no caravan of shame or silence. Ours' is no place of stigma or judgment. This is a community of love and belonging and this will be a ministry rooted in love and belonging. You don't need to journey alone. You don't need to fear stigma and you don't need to be ashamed. Come as you are and join as we journey together, sharing our lives, and supporting and loving one another.