

Chaplain's Bulletin May 21, 2023



Dear Folks,

In discussions about making this a less violent world, the subject of mental health comes up. Then it usually vanishes, and people move on. Partly, I think people get uncomfortable dealing with this subject, as if it is somehow shameful. We need to get over this. The brain is an organ and gets sick like any other organ. I would also think it is a big issue without a simple solution, and we like quick and simple solutions. How can we keep the conversation going? How can we have some fruitful discussion about our mental health system, and how does our system need restructuring? What resources would be needed for some good outcomes? People who know more than I do need to be pushing these questions.

Of course, just as we know that heart health is not just a matter of thoracic surgeons, cardiologists and statins, but also fruits, vegetables, and exercise, so we recognize that mental health is not just about the mental health professionals, but healthy practices. As we think about how people are taught to brush and floss their teeth, and how we are taught nutrition principles, should we not be trying to develop some more common mental hygiene practices?

My training in psychology is pretty rudimentary, but there are some places to start.

One place is in relationships. So many are lonely now. So many describe the pain of toxic relationships. Can we talk about what makes a healthy relationship, and how to form them?

Another place is how we react to events in our lives and how we weave them into a narrative. What meaning we can find in our good experiences and bad experiences? Viktor Frankl, in his wonderful book, "Man's Search for Meaning," talks about the human response to suffering. As a Psychiatrist and a survivor of Nazi concentration camps, he has a special authority to talk. He said that people who are more resilient in horrible situations are people who find meaning in them.

Many today do not have a strong enough vision of life to help them find meaning in bad situations. Many would agree with Macbeth: "Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more: it is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing (Macbeth Act 5 Scene 5)." Or, as Monty Python said so eloquently, "Is life just a game where we make up the rules as we're looking for something to say? Or are we just really spiraling coils of self-replicating D.N.A.?" Not a strong vision to give you hope when life gets really hard, and our hearts get broken.

This is a good time to talk about Christianity. A relationship with Jesus and discipleship in the Gospel is the most powerful approach I've found, not only to find meaning in suffering, but even power in suffering. We see our lives woven into a larger story of salvation, and that casts a different light on everything, the bad and the good. Many who go to church, and many who have wandered away from church, have not found that to be the

case. I would suggest that many have been taught an enfeebled, mush version of Christianity that is has no power to transform lives. It is for those who take Jesus seriously to help others find what Jesus is really about. As Peter Kreeft said in "Jesus Shock": "If you think Jesus is boring you have the wrong Jesus." The better we know Jesus, the better we can share Jesus. If you want a better world, the best first step is always to fall more deeply in love with Jesus.

Blessings,

Fr. Jim