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Prejudice, Alive and Well . . . If We Allow It

In July 2002, less than six years ago, a fire broke out at the Trenton New Jersey Psychiatric Hospital. Four hundred fifty residents and staff were safely evacuated and, thankfully, no one sustained serious injuries in this tragic event. The local newspaper, the Trentonian, covered the incident with a bold, two inch front page headline of just two words; "Roasted Nuts."

In 2008, it is possible to play an online game called "Crazy Stuffed Animals." The goal of the game is to provide treatment to a quartet of cute stuffed animals committed to your virtual psychiatric hospital. Bloggers humorously report their struggles in the game... "I gave Hippo too much shock therapy, he died"... "I killed Duck by overdosing him on meds"... "I forgot I had Lion in the padded cell and he starved, ha, ha, ha."

After the Virginia Tech shootings, there was a call to create a public list of everyone committed to a psychiatric institution, similar to the registered sex offender list. Chat room participants were astonished that "these psychos are even allowed to attend our colleges. Isn't there some kind of screening process?"

We're nearing the tenth year anniversary of the Surgeon General's Report on Mental Health (1999). You remember the one that talked about recovery as a common outcome; the one that said people with these disorders are no more violent than anyone else; the one that said *stigma* is a major obstacle for people in recovery and prevents people from seeking help when they needed it. Remember?

Stigma is a nice word for prejudice and discrimination projected at a particular group. Prejudice and mistreatment of people with mental illness, the crime of being different, is as old as human history. People *are* fighting back, but are the many efforts to educate the public, to speak out against stereotypes in media, and to portray people with these conditions as living productive, positive lives really making a difference?

The 2007 British survey, "Attitudes to Mental Illness," found an *increase* in prejudice across a wide variety of indicators, including not wanting to live next door to someone who has been mentally ill, not believing that people with mental health problems have "the same right to a job as anyone else," and believing that people with mental health problems are "prone to violence." Younger people were more likely to hold negative attitudes, in particular by wrongly associating mental illness with "lack of self-discipline and willpower."

The 2006 Health Styles Survey, conducted by the federal Center for Mental Health Services, indicates that only about 27% of Americans believe people with mental illness can recover and that, with the exception of people diagnosed with depression, most Americans would be uncomfortable having contact with someone with a mental health or substance use disorder (*MacArthur Foundation, 2006*).

The National Coalition for the Homeless reports that violent attacks upon homeless people, many having mental health or substance abuse problems, have risen 281% since 2002. One hundred twenty five individuals were attacked and beaten in San Francisco and its surrounding communities in 2006. Twenty people died, six of them by being set on fire. Funny how we don't see that widely covered in the news.

While national headlines have been made and career obituaries written because of politically insensitive remarks, people who experience mental illness and substance abuse problems are free game for imagery and depictions that separate us from all human tenderness; making it easier to overlook cruelty, look away from responsibility, scapegoat the victim. Herein we deputize indifference.

Today, this month, this year, ask yourself: **How will I speak out against prejudice? How will I correct the misinformed? How will I insist on dignity for all people? How will I help to bring about change this year?**

What's your answer? Silence sanctions the status quo.