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September 11, 2008

Family Matters

"Nobody who has not been in the interior of a family can say what the difficulties of any individual of that family may be."

~ Jane Austen

As I stood among the crowd that had gathered on the steps of Torrington Town Hall for a candlelight vigil to honor people in recovery and their families sponsored by Prime Time House and the National Alliance for Mental Illness, clouds gathered threatening rain. I thought of the many trips I had taken as a child to visit relatives here in this town where my mother grew up. I remembered her stories of how she grew up with extended family who occupied several houses on the same block and the close knit nature of the community. Everyone knew everyone on this street and no one ever wanted for a babysitter, a hot meal, someone to mend their clothing, or company—someone to talk with.

It was with a sense of nostalgia I surveyed the at once familiar, yet different, neighborhood and shops. I could picture many of the events my family shared on visits to my mother's childhood home and how my brothers and I always managed to get into some sort of trouble. Relatives we visited had aged and died, cousins drifted off to other states, we all got absorbed in the hectic rush of our own affairs. I hadn't been back in years. It seemed like the kind of place my mother described now belonged to a different era.

I listened to the stories people at the vigil told about the effort and courage involved in overcoming mental health problems and addictions, the impact it had on their parents, siblings and children, the cautious celebration of recovery attained, and the concern that it might not be sustained. I know when I was very ill, many years back, my mother would have found it hard to share her concerns even with her closest friends, much less declare it in such a public place as the steps of the Town Hall with a newspaper reporter in attendance.

I heard about family education and support groups that were growing in number with the involvement of people from Prime Time House and NAMI. I started to wonder if it was possible that there would ever be a time when the shame, guilt, and prejudice associated with mental illness and addictions would also belong to another era.

I thought about the people I'd known for whom family was a source of conflict and pain that they needed to shed in order to move on in their lives and recovery. I remembered how they found a sense of belonging in the bonds of friendship, the camaraderie of the workplace, the sense of kinship shared in communities of faith and recovery meetings. Family can mean many things. It's that place where you feel like you belong, like you have a stake in what matters. We need to nurture those connections.

The rain held off and evening started to dim the landscape. I had a long ride home to the eastern part of the state along that same familiar route from my childhood. I'm sure it was an aggravating drive for my parents in those days, four kids in the back complaining every five minutes, arguing, whining about having to go in the first place. We didn't make it easy for them to impress on us the importance of family. I'm glad they tried.

Your comments are welcome at steven.fry@po.state.ct.us.