

Stigma Brought Home

I recently went through the anxiety of waiting for the results of a biopsy for possible breast cancer. Gratefully, the biopsy turned out to be benign. But the ten days of waiting and wondering brought forth many feelings.

Many of us who experience a dramatic interruption in our lives, for any reason, come away with a deeper appreciation of what is really important in our lives. We often find ourselves looking more closely at what we spend our time on and what is important in our lives. This can result in a change in our priorities...a deeper appreciation of family and friends...a closer look at our daily work...pursuing those dreams and passions we have put on hold.

What struck me most from this experience was the outpouring of support and the stories of hope. The reality of facing breast cancer affects us all at some level. Some of the most unlikely persons offered comfort and helpful information. I heard from spouses and children of women who faced this health crisis. My hair dresser and others called to check up on me as I was waiting for the biopsy results. And they rejoiced with me when the biopsy showed no malignancy. I knew that if the results had been different that these people and many more, would have been there for me and for my family. Their responses brought me comfort and hope that I could face whatever lay ahead.

How different people react when dealing with a mental illness! As a pastor and a person living with a mental illness, I was enveloped with shame when I was first hospitalized with major depression. I felt that my depression was a moral or spiritual weakness. The fear of what others might say caused my family to keep my depression a secret from my congregation. Without the support of my faith community, we mostly suffered in silence.

Both cancer and emotional disorders are treatable illnesses. Medications and treatment options are just as available for brain disorders as they are for other medical conditions. Our communities of faith can be a source of support, care and hope to all who struggle with visible and invisible illnesses. But they need to be educated in order to erase the stigma and shame that too often surrounds illnesses of the brain.

I came away from this cancer scare feeling sad that most faith communities do not know how to respond when dealing with mental illness. Yet one in four families sitting in our pews has a family member dealing with mental illness. Our society must work to erase the stigma and fear associated with illnesses of the brain. We all need the support of others who will walk beside us during our difficult times...including those persons in our communities of faith.

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