



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“Understanding, Recovery and Hope”
a sermon given by Joanna Fortna
on October 10, 2010

These are the words of the poet, David Whyte from his poem, “House of Belonging”

This is the bright home/in which I live, /this is where /I ask/my friends /to come, /this is where I
want/to love all the things/it has taken me so long/to learn to love.

This is the temple/of my adult aloneness/and I belong /to that aloneness/as I belong to my life.

There is no house/like the house of belonging.

For those of you who don't know me, my name is Joanna Fortna. Today I wear two hats, one as member of this church and the other as a mental health advocate in the community. This is my church and has been for a good 15 years. And virtually all those years I have longed to have a worship service like the one we are having today to honor and acknowledge those in our midst who know the lived experience of a mental illness as well as those families and friends who support them. For in my family as perhaps in some of yours I have been challenged to love and support someone who has been living with a mental illness now for almost 20 years. It has taken me this long for the time to ripe to be ready to lead you in this special service of worship. In that spirit, I ask those who feel comfortable doing so, to stand if you have a friend or family member with a mental illness or if you have a diagnosis yourself. (pause) To those who are standing and to those who remain seated, I thank you for your presence here, for your great courage, your strength and hard- won wisdom. Let us be peers and allies for each other. Now, I invite everyone to stand to support each other and hear these of Rev. Susan Greg Schroeder, a minister who has dealt with her own serious depression

Come along with me
As a sojourner in faith.
Bring along
A sense of expectancy
A vision of high hopes
A glimpse of future possibility
A vivid imagination
For creation is not done.
We are called to pioneer forth
Toward a future yet unnamed.
As we venture forward,
We leave behind our desires for

A no-risk life
Worldly accumulations
Certainty of answers
Let us travel light
In the spirit of faith and expectation
Toward our hopes and dreams.
Let us be a witness
To the future breaking in
Come along with me
As a sojourner in faith
Secure in the knowledge
That we never travel alone.
(Please be seated)

Since last week was Mental Illness Awareness Week, Frank and I decided to work together on a service to fit this theme. Over the years I have been involved with NAMI, (National Alliance on Mental Illness) a grass roots advocacy organization. Among other things, I have worked as a facilitator along with my husband Hal, for a family support group, which met here in this church, and as a teacher of NAMI's 12- week course, "Family to Family." In the process I have listened and learned of certain universal truths. I learned of the profound and difficult changes that families experience when their loved ones become ill. I've learned that despite great strides in research on brain disorders, we still have work to do to get rid of the stigma that surrounds mental illness. I've learned how draining it is to navigate the extraordinarily complex and often fragmented system of services, what I call the "Crazy quilt," to get help for loved ones. I have learned of a disenfranchised grief that comes with confronting the reality of a mental illness. I have learned that there is always the potential for recovery.

Recent statistics reveal that one in four families has a family member dealing with a mental illness, a quarter of the families in our communities. Yet some have said that mental illness is a "no-casserole" illness. While we expect our faith communities to bring food or flowers to someone recovering from a heart problem or an injury or for a family in grief, individuals with mental illness and their families may encounter silence. This kind of bias, borne of a history of guilt and shame, only perpetuates the stigma. Families and their loved ones who deal with mental illness need to be an intentional part of our caring network. In his book *In the Shadow of the Steeple*, Stewart Govig, states that research suggests that while families appreciate their ministers who listen with care, and welcome some form of pastoral counseling what they want even more is for the minister to mobilize a lay led ministry of care that includes awareness and response to mental illness among members of the congregation. When the outreach permeates the church culture, then the potential for a genuine acceptance can deepen.

Our first UU principle, "the inherent dignity and worth of every person," guides us to acknowledge our diversity and to struggle with inclusion. Often the hidden disability of a mental illness can isolate individuals within and outside our church community. We can work to be more welcoming by acknowledging the existence of these illnesses as we are doing today with this service. One way to counter the sense of isolation is be educated about the latest research and treatments of these brain disorders. According to NAMI, "mental illnesses are no-fault, biologically

based brain disorders which cause disturbances in thinking, feeling and/or relating. Persons living with these disorders deserve the dignity of medical treatment and a wide range of social services from mental health providers and caring congregations.” We need to use terms and labels responsibly and educate our youths and adults to be aware of stereotypes and misinformation and to fight indifference and fear. If one quarter of the individuals in our community are dealing with mental illness then we have a mandate to be more intentional in our work to raise awareness and to respond to the needs of others.

In the words of Rosalyn Carter, wife our former president, “people living with mental illness are our neighbors. They are members of our congregations, members of our families; they are everywhere in this country. If we ignore the cries for help, we will be continuing to participate in the anguish from which these cries of help come. A problem of this magnitude will not go away. Because it will not go away and because of our spiritual commitments, we are compelled to take action.” Advocacy for mental illness is a social justice issue; this church has a significant history of responding with compassion to social justice issues that arise in our surrounding community. The needs of those individuals dealing with mental illness are basic human needs of medical care, housing and jobs. I challenge this church to think of ways engage in the advocacy for those who are dealing with mental illness and their families. Such work will make a difference in the lives of those who are close to us as well as for those we will never know.

On a spiritual level, any kind of illness has the potential to challenge our views of the world. Families affected by mental illness often face a serious crisis of belief; during crisis their lives may feel shattered and torn. Sadly, some families reject their family member when mental illness is diagnosed, leaving the ill person without the foundation of family support. Places like the Haverhill clubhouse can provide an important place to build a social network when other safety nets have failed. Our congregation needs to create a sense of safety for people to share their stories, their struggles to make meaning amid the turmoil of change. We might consider restarting a family support group. Maybe there are needs for other kinds of support groups. We could cosponsor a video and discussion with the local NAMI affiliate. Or if needed we could simply make a casserole for a weary family in need of a caring gesture. Together we can face the ignorance of misinformation, the sting of stigma; we can open our hearts and minds to understanding, support individuals and families in their recovery; we can provide a place for healing and hope.

As I pondered how to approach this sermon, I got caught in what I what I think of as my own “crazy quilt” of issues connected with my personal emotions and experiences of advocacy. So much more could be stated about the needs of the mental health community and the consequences of living in a society that has for too long created and perpetuated many barriers to recovery. How could I capture that I wanted to say in my invitation to you to become allies for those who deal every day with the reality of a mental illness. As is often the case it was the eloquent words of another writer that centered me. Susan Gary Schroeder invites us to carry “a vision of high hopes/A glimpse of future possibility/A vivid imagination/ For creation is not done./ We are called to pioneer forth/Toward a future yet unnamed.”