



Mental Health Chaplaincy

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www.mentalhealthchaplain.org

For Mental Illness Awareness Week, Oct. 5–11, 2008

A CONVERSATION ABOUT FAITH AND MENTAL ILLNESS

*A study guide to **Souls in the Hands of a Tender God***

In our congregations and in our neighborhoods are family members and friends who face mental illness. On our streets, vulnerable souls struggle with illnesses that disturb their mood, thinking, and behavior. An increasing number of our returning veterans suffer from brain injuries, trauma, and depression. Serious mental illness directly touches 10% of us—and one out of four families.

What can we do?

Mental Illness Awareness Week each year is a special opportunity to make mental illness and recovery a visible concern in our faith communities. This is a time to build awareness and deepen understanding, to call our congregations to service and action. We begin with education.

A new resource. A recently published book, *Souls in the Hands of a Tender God*,¹ takes a fresh look at mental illness and spirituality. In the stories of people we see every day in the streets of our cities, we can begin to understand more fully the workings of the human brain and see the presence of the Spirit moving in even the most desperate moments of life. Each story becomes a parable, opening us to the deepest levels of healing. The book explores the role that congregations can play and the gifts we each have to offer in support of recovery and well-being.

Reading circles. We invite you to use Mental Illness Awareness Week this year as an opportunity to form a reading circle and have a discussion about faith and mental illness. On the following pages are suggestions for organizing a reading circle, a discussion guide for *Souls in the Hands of a Tender God*, and a listing of other books and resources that are readily available to help educate faith communities.

Our longer-term hope is that Mental Illness Awareness Week in early October becomes an annual time of learning, reflection, and conversation in our faith communities, leading to caring community and constructive action.

¹ *Souls in the Hands of a Tender God: Stories of the Search for Home and Healing on the Streets*, by Craig Rennebohm with David Paul (Beacon Press, 2008). Web site: <http://www.tendergod.com/>

Forming a reading circle for *Souls in the Hands of a Tender God*

Anyone may form a reading circle, and there are many ways to organize one. Here is one model that has worked for us:

1. Put a notice in your monthly newsletter, make an announcement after worship services, or simply invite a few friends to join you in reading and discussing the book together.
2. Help people get copies. You may order copies from your local bookstore or an online bookseller such as Amazon, Barnes and Noble, or Powell's Books. Or you may contact the publisher, Beacon Press, directly, to inquire about bulk discounts. Information is available at www.tendergod.com.
3. Distribute the books and set a time and place to meet for discussion.
4. Decide who will facilitate the meeting. The Mental Health Chaplaincy uses a simple five-step framework which you are free to copy or adapt to your own setting:
 - a. We begin with introductions and a brief time of quiet or prayer.
 - b. We continue with a short scripture reading or words of wisdom, a reminder that others before us have been on the path of healing, the way of love and care.
 - c. We move into a time of sharing, holding each person's comments, questions, and concerns with gentleness. We listen deeply without argument, criticism, or crosstalk.
 - d. Toward the end of the gathering, we pause for discernment: Are any of us prompted personally to make a change or take a new step? Are we as a group moved to act?
 - e. We conclude with a simple ritual of blessing or benediction.
5. It can be meaningful to share your reading circle experience with others, for example by putting a brief report in your newsletter. You may also want to follow up by planning a next step—inviting a speaker, organizing further education, exploring service opportunities, or becoming involved in advocacy efforts.

How many conversations? Some groups meet for just one conversation, and that may be enough for you. Others meet more than once. Each reading group should feel free to explore its own interests according to a discussion format that feels most comfortable and encourages the sharing of thoughts, feelings, and ideas.

Here are two different approaches that have worked:

One conversation. Before the group meets, everyone reads the entire book. The discussion begins when one group member, acting as facilitator, asks each participant to point out a story or passage from the book that struck the reader as particularly interesting, inspiring, or surprising. Then the facilitator asks participants if they have ever had a personal experience with mental illness or spiritual/emotional crisis, involving either themselves or someone they know, and how the book relates to that experience. Especially if the experience involves helping someone in distress, how did the person do it? Do the “companionship” practices outlined in the book (see Chapter 5) offer a useful model of helping somebody? Finally, what is the relationship between homelessness and mental illness, and what does this suggest about our society’s ability to provide treatment for those who need it?

More than one conversation. The group reads the book section by section and meets three or four times to discuss it in more detail. The structure of the book suggests these topical focal points:

Part I, The Movement of the Spirit (Chapters 1–3)

Part II, The Life of the Soul (Chapters 4–7)

Part III, A Community of Tenderness (Chapters 8–11)

Whatever your plan is, it’s good to have a designated facilitator to make sure all participants have book copies and to keep the discussion(s) on track.

How did it go? Afterward, if you have comments or suggestions you’re willing to share with us about the reading circles or the book itself, we’d be delighted to hear from you. Please feel free to e-mail David Paul, david@mentalhealthchaplain.org.

Talking About the Book

You will undoubtedly come up with topics and questions to explore according to your own interests and those of your group, but just to help get you thinking, here are some you might find useful. You will probably find that there too many questions below for your group to cover, especially if you meet only once. Pick and choose from these suggestions, and add your own.

The questions are organized under two headings, those that pertain to the book as a whole and those that focus on topics within certain parts of the book, but there is no clear distinction between the two types of questions and you should feel free to move them around as you please.

About the book as a whole and the intersection of faith and mental illness:

1. Is there any one story in the book that you find especially helpful, uplifting, or meaningful? If so, please tell why.
2. Did you find any story disturbing? What about it disturbs you, and what does it make you want to do?
3. Have you learned anything new about mental illness?
4. Did you learn anything new about faith?
5. Have you yourself ever had a friend or loved one who has struggled with depression, bipolar disorder, or any other form of mental illness?
6. Think about your religious or moral upbringing. What did it teach you about:
 - How you should relate to those you know who are suffering?
 - How you should look upon a stranger who is suffering?
 - What to think of a person who is different (in any sense) from you?
 - How to treat someone whose behavior seems weird or abnormal?
 - Who is responsible for suffering?

7. Now think about the norms and patterns of behavior you've learned from your society. Think about "what people would say if they knew ..." and what you've learned from others' attitudes about how to deal with:
 - A friend or loved one who begins to show signs of inexplicable sadness, withdrawal or isolation from others, including you, or indifference toward people or things that once brought them joy or excitement.
 - A friend or loved one whose mood bounces from the pits of depression to uncontrollable flights of energy, activity, and bizarre behavior.
 - A friend or loved one who suddenly starts speaking nonsense and appears unaware that he or she isn't making sense; or who lapses into uncharacteristically careless habits of personal hygiene, along with other odd behavior.
 - A stranger on the street who exhibits any of the above characteristics.
8. Elyn Saks, a law professor who has written about her long struggle with schizophrenia, writes that when she had breast cancer, people brought her flowers, but no one ever gave her flowers when she was having a psychotic breakdown.² Why do you think that's true?
9. If your answers to any parts of Questions #6 and #7 seem contradictory—for example, if you find that your religious or moral sensibility tells you to do one thing and society tells you to do another, how do you reconcile that?
10. Why are there so many people on the streets of America who suffer from mental illness? Why don't they just go and get treated for it? (Hint: See the stories about Karl and Jack in Chapter 6 of *Souls in the Hands*)
11. What needs to be done in our country to help people with mental illness and to prevent homelessness?
12. Thinking in broad terms, how can our churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples play a constructive role in addressing the issue of mental illness:
 - Among those in our communities who are homeless?
 - Among those within our congregations who suffer from mental illness?
 - As advocates of improved healthcare on the local, state, or national level?

² Elyn R. Saks, *The Center Cannot Hold: My Journey Through Madness* (Hyperion, 2007).

13. Now thinking in practical terms, how can *your* congregation play a role? What are the first steps to take? How can you map out a plan for continued engagement and the creation of a caring, healing community?
14. What can you as an individual do?

Questions arising from the various sections and chapters of the book:

1. Read (or reread) the Prologue (page xv). Are you familiar with that story from the Christian Testament? Have you ever thought about it before? If so, has its meaning changed for you as a result of reading *Souls in the Hands ...*? What other scriptural verses or passages can you recall that have relevance to the message of *Souls in the Hands ...*?
2. Craig's first story centers on the man who called himself Sterling Hayden. Think about that man, his struggle, and his sad fate.
 - The once-famous actor known as Sterling Hayden did not become homeless but, rather, died of cancer in California, so we know that the man Craig met in the chapel courtyard was not who he said he was. Why do you suppose he took the actor's name?
 - What does the man's story tell us about (a) the workings of our public health system and (b) the capacity of our churches to help people who are mentally ill? We'd like to think we've made some progress since the time of that story; how far have we come?
3. The stories of Terri (Chapter 1) and Jerry (Chapter 2) have happier endings. What do their experiences tell us about the potential for healing?
4. *Souls in the Hands...* talks about a couple of things we don't usually hear discussed together: the workings of the human brain and the workings of God through the Spirit (e.g., pages 22–25 and 36–41). What do you make of this?
5. How does Craig's account of his own struggle with depression (Chapter 3) relate to his message of God's presence in your life?

6. Part I of the book refers to the “illness self” and the “familiar self”? What do these concepts mean? Do they help you understand anything about someone you’ve known who has struggled with a mental illness?
7. Chapter 4 begins with Mary, whom Craig first met on a downtown street corner, huddled behind her protective bags. Later we read about a Buddhist monk whose goal is to slow his motion down until he spends an entire day taking only one step along a stone pathway. What do these two stories have in common?
8. Chapter 5 spells out a particular meaning of the common word *companionship* in terms of four practices that anyone can apply to help another person along the road to healing.
 - What are the four practices, and how do they work?
 - Can you envision a situation in which you could put these practices into effect and become a companion to someone who needs assistance?
 - What would it take for you to be ready to provide this type of companionship? What supports might you need, if any? What support would you be ready to offer others who are trying to be companions?
9. Chapter 6 talks about building a “circle of care” around a person in need of help. What does this mean? Can you think of anybody you know who might benefit from a circle of care? How could you go about helping to build one?
10. Is illness a punishment from God? What can we learn about God from the stories in Chapter 7 about Ally, Walter, Morgan, and Enid?
11. What do you think about the healing work in the town of Geel, Belgium (Ch. 8)?
 - How does mental healthcare in your community compare?
 - Why don’t we have anything like that in our communities?
 - Do you think Geel’s model could be applied in our own towns and cities?
 - What are the chances of building a house of healing in your neighborhood like the one described in Chapter 9? How many such transitional homes would be required in your city or town to care for all who need them?

12. Reflecting on Chapters 10 and 11, consider the following, and discuss how each relates to your everyday life, our life together as a human community, and the prospects for building a world that takes better care of its sick and suffering souls:
- The words “crazy,” “nuts,” “cracked,” and _____ [fill in the blank].
 - The words “hello,” “mind if I sit beside you?,” “would you like a cup of coffee?,” and _____ [fill in the blank].
 - The current national discussion about our healthcare system.
 - America’s ongoing concern over national defense, armaments, diplomacy, and other aspects of our country’s role in the world.
13. “... it is not this particular activity or that special phraseology which makes for deliverance, salvation, or the restoration of our souls. Deep healing is a spiritual grace, proceeding from a source of care and a word of tenderness, far more powerful—and yet more gentle—than our human language can adequately convey.” (*Souls in the Hands ...*, p. 176)
- What does this mean?
 - What’s the difference between “curing” and “healing”?

Further Information

If you have any questions about forming a study group, please feel free to contact David Paul, david@mentalhealthchaplain.org.

Book Web site

Please visit www.tendergod.com for reviews, endorsements, and purchasing information

Additional Resources

Books

Amador, Xavier, *I Am Not Sick I Don't Need Help* (Vida Press, 2007).

_____ and Rosen, Laura, *When Someone You Love Is Depressed* (Free Press, 1997).

Carter, Rosalyn J. and Susan Golant, *Helping Someone with Mental Illness: A Compassionate Guide for Family, Friends, and Caregivers* (Three Rivers Press, 1999).

Govig, Stewart, *In the Shadow of Our Steeples: Pastoral Presence for Families Coping with Mental Illness* (Routledge, 2000).

_____, *Souls Are Made of Endurance: Surviving Mental Illness in the Family* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1994).

Greene-McCreight, Kathryn, *Darkness Is My Only Companion: A Christian Response to Mental Illness* (Brazos Press, 2006).

Gregg-Schroeder, Susan, *In the Shadow of God's Wings: Grace in the Midst of Depression* (Upper Room Books, 1997).

Howell, Patrick, S.J., *Reducing the Storm to a Whisper: The Story of a Breakdown* (Thomas More Association, 1985).

Koenig, Harold, *Faith and Mental Health: Religious Resources for Healing* (Simon & Schuster, 2001).

Lund, Marcia, *When Your Family Is Living with Mental Illness* (Augsburg Fortress, 2002).

Saks, Elyn R., *The Center Cannot Hold: My Journey Through Madness* (Hyperion, 2007).

Swinton, John, *Resurrecting the Person: Friendship and the Care of People with Mental Health Problems* (Abingdon, 2000).

Resource organizations

Pathways to Promise www.pathways2promise.org

NAMI FaithNet www.nami.org

Mental Health Ministries www.mentalhealthministries.net

Congregational Resources www.congregationalresources.org/mentalhealth.asp