

“The Darkness Shall NOT Overcome It”  
September 20, 2015

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I’m going to be honest with you.  
I don’t want to share my story.  
I don’t feel safe this morning.  
Do I feel loved? Yes.  
Supported? Yes.

But the moment I begin to tell you what happened to cause my need for restorative care, I will be removing a barrier between all of you...and me.

It’s like taking down a fence between suburban homes:  
the twin five year-olds on the one side  
---recharged from their snack of Mountain Dew and pixie sticks—  
now tear through the tomato patch belonging to the less energetic retirees  
--at top speed--  
And the crop of tomatoes is ruined...  
and the relationship between the households is ruined. As Robert Frost once said, “good fences make good neighbours”.<sup>1</sup>

As long as I keep that fence up, I can maintain the relationship; my vulnerability is protected and so is yours. As long as that fence stays up we can continue to speak politely across the sides of our realities. That feels safe to me.

But there is a problem with my need to feel safe; it goes against what I have preached in the past.

For six years, I have preached about taking risks....  
I’ve tried to encourage all of us to pull ourselves out of our comfort zones.  
I’ve said if we  
--as a community  
--can find the courage to break out of our old habits and old ways of thinking-  
we will move into a new place in which we can carry out God’s mission in the world  
--together as the community of Unity.

I have also said that at the intersection of risk and uncertainty, we will encounter God.

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<sup>1</sup> “Mending Wall”, Robert Frost.

But you've also heard me say---I would never ask any of you to do anything I wouldn't do myself.

So, if I expect you to risk. I must do the same.

I am now standing at the intersection of risk and uncertainty.....whether God will show up or not remains to be seen.....but, here goes....

Like 3 million Canadians, I have depression along with an anxiety disorder. In February of this year, I had what's called a "major clinical episode."  
The fence is down. The elephant has left the room.

Put another way: like 1 in 5 Canadians, I am a person with mental illness. 79 per cent of those of us with mental illness in Canada have depression with anxiety.<sup>2</sup>

1 in 5 Canadians, eh....well, that means I'm not alone here this morning.

I'm not even alone in my vocation. Mental illness is not unusual among North American Protestant clergy like me. In fact,

*"Protestant clergy [have] the highest overall work-related stress and were next to the lowest in personal resources to cope with the occupational strain. One in six clergy showed signs of serious distress with their levels of isolation, loneliness, fear, abandonment, anger and boredom."*<sup>3</sup>

My own counsellor says it's likely that number is not 1 in 6 but 1 in 3 clergy...based on what they've seen in their own practice. Even though I can't use my counsellor's anecdotal observations as scientific proof—those observations are enough to raise questions for me about how high those actual numbers might be.

Clergy are risking job loss, moral censure, rumours, gossiping and shaming if they talk about their mental illnesses. Those risks are the same for non-clergy. Those risks could explain why 2/3 of all people in Canada who have depression never seek treatment of any kind.<sup>4</sup> Canadians with depression are sometimes afraid to get help because of what others might say in the present....or what others have said in the past.

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<sup>2</sup> Mood Disorders Canada

<http://www.mooddorderscanada.ca/documents/Consumer%20and%20Family%20Support/Depression.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> "Mental Health Issues Among Clergy and Other Religious Professionals: A Review of Research",

published in *The Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling* (2002) as accessed through

<http://network.crcna.org/pastors/why-denominational-leaders-need-address-clergy-mental-health-issues>

<sup>4</sup> Mood Disorders Canada

<http://www.mooddorderscanada.ca/documents/Consumer%20and%20Family%20Support/Depression.pdf>

In the past, mental illness was misunderstood. As you saw in the first video this morning, it still is. Did you really listen carefully to what those people were saying? Maybe you didn't have to—because those things have been said to you personally.

When I started to get sick in November of 2014, people asked me what was wrong. And I told them what I thought was wrong at the time. Many, many, MANY different things. And in those early conversations I received lots of terrible advice:

“Just think happy thoughts.”

“Would you just stop worrying?”

“Get organized.”

“Don't be so organized.”

“Don't take things in your life or in the church so personally.”

“You need to take things in your life and in the church more seriously.”

“Take vitamins.”

“Vitamins don't work, try these herbal supplements.”

“Exercise more. Go back to your swordplay classes.”

“You shouldn't do strenuous exercise. You should do yoga.”

We've all given advice like this although, maybe not about mental illness. The problem with is this advice places “blame”. Advice like this is NOT the result of careful or care-filled listening. It's usually given because we want the person to stop whining/complaining/being down....immediately.

We want them to function...immediately....

We want them to be normal...immediately....because when the person is down, their mood might affect ours. We don't want to be affected like that.

The internet encourages us to remain unaffected by other people. Facebook Memes and Google images encourage us to “avoid negativity”, “discard the drama queens” and “turn all frowns upside down”.

While those internet motivational posts encourage self-preservation, they also discourage compassion. Compassion isn't just kindness or friendliness. Compassion actually means “to suffer with” ...and if we're brutally honest, do we REALLY want to enter into the messiness of true suffering....

to be on the other end of the phone at 3 in the morning walking them through a panic attack....

to sit next to them in total silence because the sound of human voices---even on the television has become disturbing....

to offer assurance when they're walking through a crowd because the experience of being in a mall has suddenly become overwhelming...

to hold them as they sob uncontrollably because they've lost the power to speak about what they're feeling?

Do **we really want** to spend time –being compassionate- to people with mental illness—standing with them, being with them in their struggles and suffering?

**Who** would want to sit with Elijah?

Elijah was suffering. He had anxiety---afraid for his life. He should have been feeling confident at this time in his life. God had worked through him to do many amazing things. His most recent: his victory over the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. On that mountain, Elijah had dared the prophets of Baal to call upon their god to set the offering on the altar ablaze with divine fire.

But at the sound of Baal's name no fire was kindled...not even a spark.

But when Elijah called upon God to do the same thing.....

the fire from heaven descended and consumed the bull on the altar,  
AND the wood in the pyre  
AND the stones around the altar  
AND even all the water in the trench Elijah had dug.

But that spectacular show of heavenly favour was not enough to keep Elijah's mood good. He heard what Jezebel said: she was angry---so angry that she wanted him dead. Even though God had defeated her through Elijah, Elijah couldn't focus on those accomplishments; all he could hear was her voice. "What you did to my prophets, I will do to you." Elijah had killed them; now she wanted him dead. Elijah believed that could happen. So he fled...from her, from his call...from his sense of self...fled into the wilderness...with only his suffering for company.

Elijah's Anxiety became depression...

He stopped walking....stopped moving....just stopped under the shade of a broom tree. Alone and depressed---seeing no hope for himself, for his prophetic ministry, Elijah spoke into the darkness of the dense shade saying: "O Lord, take away my life...."

In 2009---according to Statistics Canada, 3 890 Canadians took their own lives away....<sup>5</sup> There is nothing to suggest that rate has decreased. Suicide is the second leading cause of death for those between the ages of 15 and 34 in our country. But the highest rates of suicide in our country belong to people who are in my age bracket: ages 40-49.<sup>6</sup> In Canada, "mental illness is the most important risk factor for suicide; and....more than 90% of people who commit suicide have a mental disorder—and 60% of those people have depression."<sup>7</sup>

I knew all these stats. I knew all the signs. I've seen it in countless people—even in my

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<sup>5</sup> **Suicide rates: An overview**, Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 82-624-X, by Tanya Navaneelan: as found at <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/82-624-x/2012001/article/11696-eng.htm>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

family. But none of that prepared me for what happened in February. Seeing it is one thing; living through it is another. But by February, my anxiety, like Elijah's became depression. "Depression is much more than simple unhappiness. Clinical depression, sometimes called major depression, is a complex mood disorder caused by various factors, including genetic predisposition, personality, stress and brain chemistry."<sup>8</sup> I couldn't function.... I couldn't care... didn't care. I felt like my dentist had given my emotions a shot of novacane, but the freezing effect never wore off. There are days and weeks I don't even remember.

And while I didn't find dense shade, I found a dark place...  
a very dark place in my mind, in my heart and in my spirit.  
And one morning, I moved into that dark, dark place....so I drove to a parking lot in Barrie....

When I got there, I didn't find a broom tree.

I found myself....staring at---of all things----  
A lighthouse---a replica of the one I had seen in Peggy's Cove in the summer of 2014.....  
A light house.....made from snow and ice  
---complete with a light in it—which happened to be lit.  
And in the darkness of the very early morning,  
this lighthouse was glowing----the whole lighthouse---not just its light.  
And suddenly, I heard the lyrics of a song one of my best friends had shared with me—a song about God's presence with a person who in the midst of a difficult time in life:

"Fire before us, you're the brightest, you will lead us through the storms....my light house...shining in the darkness, I will follow you....my lighthouse, I will trust the promise, you will carry me safe to shore."<sup>9</sup>

And in that moment—through those lyrics, I felt the light shift from the lighthouse to me...and that was when I knew I was staring into the light of God....

The Light of God...the fire before us  
The Light of Lights...

And the darkness of my illness didn't overcome it. Instead, the light of God started to overcome the darkness. And while Elijah had angels feeding him fairly quickly after his low time, I had to wait a month before I could get all the help I needed. But in that moment, I knew I could wait---because God was in the process of leading me safe to shore.

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<sup>8</sup>[http://www.camh.ca/en/hospital/health\\_information/a\\_z\\_mental\\_health\\_and\\_addiction\\_information/depression/Pages/default.aspx](http://www.camh.ca/en/hospital/health_information/a_z_mental_health_and_addiction_information/depression/Pages/default.aspx)

<sup>9</sup> The lyrics come from the song "My Lighthouse" by Rend Collective. They don't appear exactly as written. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=dSn9HW5P-sA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dSn9HW5P-sA)

When Elijah asks God to take his life, Elijah is far from his home, his call and even his sense of self---yet God hears him.  
God hears Elijah---because God is right there with him---God isn't talking at him, giving him terrible advice or expecting him to just "get better". God is with him in his suffering. God is compassionate presence, self-less presence.  
God listens to Elijah in a careful and care-filled way.  
God knows Elijah's needs: rest, food and a place in which they can encounter one another more intimately.  
God provides each of those things to Elijah.  
And after Elijah takes in all of what God offers, he is able to return to the work God has called him to do.

I have returned to work. You may be wondering if I'm up to it. Well, I am or I wouldn't be here. And the fact that I'm well shouldn't be a surprise because "80-90 percent of people with major depression in Canada can be treated successfully."<sup>10</sup> I'm grateful to God that I am part of that group. I feel like God has given me a second chance at life. In fact, I feel like I have become a new person (hence the short hair and the tattoo). For me a combination of meds, exercise, spiritual disciplines, therapy and counselling have helped me regain my strength, stamina and sense of purpose. And I believe God is in each of those forms of treatment. Because God's desire for us---all of us---is healing and wholeness. God's great love has seen me through....God is the peace in what had been my troubled sea.

Would you like to hear the song through which God saved me?

*And if you are sitting in a troubled sea right now, know that you are not alone. There are people who can help you and I am one of them. Call me/email me. And if you're not comfortable talking to me...or your doctor, Barb will put up the number for CAM-H in Barrie. CAM-H is the only centre in the area that can help people through self-referral—meaning you don't have to go through your doctor.*

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<sup>10</sup> Mood Disorders Canada

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