

June 12, 2022  
Spirituality & The Arts Summer 2022 Series  
Mental Health & Spirituality

Yesterday at the Wisconsin Conference of the UCC annual meeting at Green Lake, Daniel, Reverie and I heard The Rev. Dr. Sarah Griffith Lund preach about mental health and wellness, and about the important work of the church in this area.

Rev. Dr. Sarah shared her story of growing up with a father who had undiagnosed therefore untreated schizophrenia, which caused deep suffering and disruption in her family. Her mother sought therapy and was encouraged to move out- so Sarah and her siblings left with their mother, and her father became homeless living in his truck and hearing voices. Upon experiencing a call to ministry later in life, one must go through a psychological evaluation in the UCC, and the message she heard coming out was: you have lived a charmed life. She picked up somewhere along the lines she picked up that mental illness is shameful, something to keep quiet. Somewhere she picked up that to be a person of faith, especially a pastor, it is best to be kept together, and “OK.”

She asked us is it OK not to be OK in our communities? The dark nights of the soul, the walking through the valley of the shadow of death, honesty about depression- is it OK to not be OK? After a few minutes of discussion- the huge majority of the pastors and lay leaders in the room raised their hand to express that in most of our UCC churches in WI, we have absorbed similar messages as Sarah had, that no it's not really OK to not be OK.

Our state motto is “forward,” after all. This is our quarter- the message to all the other states- corn, cows, cheese and FORWARD. Here is a badger sitting on “forward” at the state capitol. Here is MISS Forward herself. She is clearly not struggling with mental illness, is she?

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, you are with me... you comfort me. Mental illness is invisible, it is in our churches, in our pulpits, in our teachers and parents and children and elders.

Before the pandemic 1 in 5 Americans experienced a mental illness in a given year, and now after two years of a pandemic, the report is 2 in 5 Americans experience a mental illness in a given year.

For elders, loss of identity, loss of social connections and physical abilities, can have a huge impact on mental health. And we will spend time this fall in community creating spiritualities and theologies fit to match the challenges of the elder years- I am truly so excited about this work and ministry.

For the youth, pressures of perfect grades, social pressures, and the looming social and ecological disasters have a huge impact on mental health. Recently a coalition of the nation's leading experts in pediatric health declared a national emergency in child and adolescent mental health. The surgeon general outlined an advisory on protecting youth mental health. He writes, when speaking to youth directly says to remember:

“Mental health challenges are real, common and treatable. Struggling with your mental health does not mean you are broken or that you did something wrong. Mental health is shaped by many factors, including biology and life experiences, and there are many ways mental health challenges can be addressed.” This is the work of destigmatizing mental illness.

Proactively, the surgeon general reminds youth to tell trusted adults. To invest in healthy relationships, to find ways to serve, to learn and practice techniques to manage stress and other difficult emotions. Take care of your body and mind, be mindful about use of social media, video games and other technologies. And be a source of support for others.

I hope this list sounds familiar to us, because so much of what church does at our best, is on this list. It is part of our DNA to provide connections, relationships, opportunities for serving. Prayer, mediation and spirituality provide wonderful ways to manage difficult emotions. Faith cannot cure mental illness, but can model that for people of faith it's OK not to be OK, we can remind people that mental illness is not a sin or a failure, but a reflection of how we are made in the image of God, in all our diversity and complexity. We can provide what folks who report they are coping with mental illness best have- connect to community and to the divine.

The science backs it up! Dr Lisa Miller researches mental health and spirituality in her book *The Awakened Brain*, with studies done on people's brains who are struggling with depression, and the part of the brain affected by depression, is also the part that lights up when the person is engaging in prayer or creativity. Prayer or creativity have the ability to be live lines in times of depression. There is a beautiful statement attributed to St. Augustine that says: “The one who sings prays twice.”

We will focus explicitly on the arts and spirituality this summer and my deep prayer is that we will feel the blessing of the Ultimate Creative Being, the One whose brilliance dreamed us up, whose image we are created in and calls us each back, so that we can remind one another that you too are loved and blessed, you are loved and blessed, you are loved and blessed no matter what you are going through, by a God who not only lead us beside still waters and green pastures, but walk with us through the darkest valley. Amen