



Features

The stigma has not abated

October 18th, 2011

As part of our ongoing coverage of the full breadth of Respect Life Month, Catholic San Francisco interviewed Franciscan Sister Maureen Sinnott, Ph.D., M.Div., a clinical psychologist who has a private practice in Redwood City and whose ministry also includes serving as a disaster mental health psychologist for the Red Cross and as a clinical psychologist for organizations assisting formerly incarcerated women. She is active in the National Alliance on Mental Illness.

Please share a short biography.

Long before I heard the words “social justice” I experienced the living out of this term within my family circle. My father was a union leader and over the supper table we learned about the dignity of workers and all people and the importance of speaking up for those who have no voice or feel powerless to change the system. My parents lived in the same home for almost 70 years and at my mother’s funeral six years ago she was eulogized as the “Compassionate Mother of our neighborhood who was always there for the most vulnerable or excluded.” No wonder that all five of my brothers and sister became socially active in serving others.

What inspired you to your vocation?

My parents, grandmother, and the sisters who taught me in grade school and high school inspired me by their example of caring for others, especially those most in need. From a very young age I felt the call to go to Africa to be a sister and be of service as a nurse. For over 50 years in religious life I have had the privilege of being able to minister with the underserved as a nurse-midwife, clinical psychologist and spiritual directress in Taiwan, Tanzania and the United States. My Franciscan Sisters and many others inspire me by their solidarity with and advocating for the most marginalized and underserved of society.

Tell us about your work with the National Alliance on Mental Illness. What are the services provided and what are the greatest needs in our local communities?

For me, one of the greatest needs in our local parishes is to share the “good news” of the National Alliance on Mental Illness. So many parishioners are suffering silently and helplessly because they do not know where to turn for support when a loved one is suffering from serious mental illness. If only someone had told my family about NAMI when my younger brother, suffering from mental illness, was panhandling in tattered, dirty clothes with matted hair and living homeless on the streets of our small city. My family did everything to try to help him to no avail and I believe the greatest heart-pain of my mother’s life, after the death of my father, was reading a sign in

parish church stating that if my brother came into the church the pastor was to be phoned and he would call the police to escort him out, presumably to jail. My mother and brother never returned to our family church until the day of her funeral.

Our family's story is not unique; many families have these same experiences and feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, guilt and shame of being able to help others but unable to help their very own loved ones. Until recently the term "schizophrenogenic mother" was used by the psychiatric community in books and many mothers including my mother, believed that they were somehow the cause of their children's mental illness. Many mothers still do not know that current research invalidates that theory and has revealed that the brain scans of those with schizophrenia and other brain disorders look very different from the brain scans of someone without mental illness. Mental illness is nobody's "fault."

How do you experience the presence of Christ in your work with the mentally ill?

When I read the Gospels I am touched by how Jesus always reached out to those who were most vulnerable, excluded, invisible and marginalized in the community. I ask myself: "What would Jesus do today to reach out to those excluded from the circle?" My response is to go into the jails for Sunday services (and we all know that many of the mentally ill end up in jail); pray at murder sites with families of the victims; teach trauma recovery to women transitioning from jail; and do therapy with the undocumented, uninsured and others.

How much of a stigma against the mentally ill do you see in society? Has this abated somewhat over the years, the same the way that other minority groups have become less marginalized?

No, the stigma has not abated and the most informed answer I could offer to this question is in the mission statement of the group known as Stamp Out Stigma. Their mission is to change the destructive perceptions caused by television and film's portrayal of people suffering from a mental illness, typically presented as society's outcasts, being violent, unproductive, uneducated, dangerous, crazy, and nothing more than an economic drain on society. Employment, education, and housing opportunities of persons with schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, major depression, anxiety and panic disorders, personality disorders, obsessive-compulsive disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder can be significantly hampered by this societal stigma which is then often internalized within the person with mental illness.

What are the root causes of mental illness in your experience? It's often said that mental illness is half genetic and half environmental. What is your experience?

Mental illness is a brain disorder, and brain disorders are biologically based medical problems. Untreated, disorders of the brain cause severe disturbance in thinking, feeling and relating to others. This results in substantially diminished capacity for coping with the ordinary demands of life. These brain disorders can affect persons of any age and occur in any family. Mental illness is not caused by bad parenting and is not evidence of weakness of character.

Can you give an example of how your work with a mentally ill person has changed you?

Every person I have met or counseled with a diagnosis of mental illness has been my teacher. I marvel at their resiliency and courage in facing the daily burden they carry through no fault of their own. When I feel down or

rejected in some way all I have to do is to think of them, each one of them, including my brother struggling through each day and it renews my strength and hope. There are many lessons to be learned from those with the lived experience of mental illness if we are open. The least we can do is to support them, advocate for them and do all we can to reduce the stigma.

How can members of the Catholic community help their mentally ill members?

The Catholic community and all caring communities can Google www.NAMICalifornia.org to find their local NAMI office listed by county with the phone number. You will reach a kind volunteer who will answer your questions. Be sure to ask for some pamphlets that list the free services NAMI provides. Then perhaps you can request that they be placed in a convenient place in your church available to all. If you carry a few in your car or purse you will always have some handy to offer persons or family members suffering but not knowing where to turn for support. You are also invited to join us for the annual NAMI San Francisco Bay Area Walk where seven Bay Area counties come together in Golden Gate Park to walk together to end stigma and raise awareness about mental illness.

How to help

- The National Alliance on Mental Illness, at www.nami.org, offers a free 12-week course taught by trained family member volunteers. It is open to parents, spouses, siblings and adult children of persons with mental illness.
- NAMI offers a free nine-week program for persons with mental illness taught by trained mentors with lived experience of mental illness.
- NAMI collaborates with sheriff's departments and behavioral health and recovery services in some counties to help law enforcement deal with people with mental illness.
- For more ideas on parish work, take a look at one Philadelphia parish's Disability Advisory Committee, <http://bit.ly/qK5WDn>
- Ideas from the Archdiocese of Philadelphia on how parish members can support families with children with disabilities, <http://bit.ly/rnE71n>
- View the U.S. bishops' 1978 Pastoral Statement on People with Disabilities, <http://bit.ly/o3CRmO>
- Catholic teaching on disability, <http://bit.ly/r4DnAR>

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