

Dear Friends,

I am writing to you about a recent situation that shocked and angered me, and the response to which I feel I am being called.

Recently, Grinnell Regional Medical Center, hired a consultant to help with organizational culture there. All of the hospital staff was asked to read his book and attend a 90 minute session with him in mid February. He is scheduled to come back at the end of March. He is well respected and used by many health care facilities. He has much to offer, I'm sure.

However, in his presentation (which I heard about from hospital employees and have now seen large portions of), as well as in his writings and other videos, I think he betrays a lack of understanding of mental illness, and, given his position and power, I think that lack of understanding may have negative effects on many people at the hospital, as well as on our community.

In my estimation he reinforces a number of damaging stereotypes and stigmas we find already embedded in the culture at large, and, however well intentioned, this caused pain for some of the staff and reinforced harmful ignorance for others.

This is, obviously, my interpretation of events at the hospital. Others differ with me. But it saddened and angered me. Consequently, I have decided to try to address it with the hospital. I am talking to people there about the stigma people with mental illness face, the dangers these stigmas pose to people with mental illness, and how painful it is when the hospital appears to reinforce that stigma. I want my community hospital to be better than this.

I'm hopeful that this dialogue can bring about good results. People have been really receptive so far to the conversation and my concerns. However, as a part of those conversations I have been sharing my personal experience, which includes my own experience with mental illness, and I didn't want you all to hear about this from others first.

I have a diagnosis of Bipolar II. (see this website for a fairly good primer on bipolar <http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/bipolar-disorder/basics/definition/con-20027544>). I have excellent care; I'm on medication, and I'm in therapy.

I haven't talked about this in public, and while I don't know for sure, I suspect most of you weren't aware of this. And that's because I understand the stigma. I have had experiences in the past where I have been hurt by people's misunderstandings of my mental illness.

Many people with mental illness feel like they have to keep it a secret, including staff at the hospital. They fear losing their job, the respect of their coworkers, their insurance, their friends. And that fear is not irrational. That is, all-too-often, what happens.

Because the cost for people who share their experiences of mental illness can be so high, we have an incomplete picture of mental illness, and stigma and misunderstanding is reinforced. Among other misunderstandings, we don't have a sense of how many people are able to fully function with mental illness if they have the right treatment.

These recent events at the hospital have invited me to consider if I'm being called to share more openly about my own experiences. I have spent a lot of time in thought and in conversation with trusted people as I made this decision. Partly I feel called to do this because so few others can. For me, the risk of talking about my mental illness at this point in my life is relatively low. I do fear losing some people's respect, and having people look at me differently. But I likely will not lose my job and I'm guessing this will not significantly impact my relationships with most people.

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You all have known me a long time ó you know what it's like to have a pastor with Bipolar II disorder, even if you didn't know it. I'm also fortunate to be in a congregation that has an above-average awareness when it comes to issues of mental illness. Though we all, including me, have misperceptions about mental illness, I truly know you to be ahead of the curve.

I do fret a little about how you will respond. I worry that some of you will feel like I have kept a secret I shouldn't have. And I can imagine some of you will disagree with me deciding to be more open about it. But I trust you care for me, and I trust that you all know how deeply I care for you ó and that seems like a pretty solid foundation for dealing with anything.

I want to be as open with you as possible. I will be staying after worship on Sunday (March 29), and invite anyone who wants to talk about this to join me in the sanctuary. I will answer questions and listen to concerns. I am also more than happy to talk about my concerns about mental health care in our community.

Thanks for being who you are, and for loving me for who I am.

Peace,

Pastor Kirsten