Civil Rights Symposium 2011: Mental Health and the Community
Opening Remarks

Welcome

Good morning, and welcome. I’m Brian Hendrickson, Assistant Events Coordinator for the Writing Across Communities Alliance and Program Chair for our Fourth Civil Rights Symposium, entitled Mental Health & the Community: Conversations about Civic Literacy and Social Justice.

You do not have to be good.

These words mark the beginning of Mary Oliver’s famous poem, “Wild Geese,” which some of you may know.

You do not have to be good, Oliver asserts.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves.

Regarding that last line, another poet, David Whyte, once remarked on the immeasurable weight and distance embodied by that one adverb, only.

You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves.

As if it were just that easy. And maybe sometimes it does seem to us as if the life we always wanted for ourselves were just beyond our grasp, that the only things keeping us from living that life—a healthy and fulfilling life—are our own foolish selves.

Such a belief is, after all, a prerequisite to faith in the American Dream. That one is responsible for picking one’s self up by one’s own bootstraps. That needing and asking for help are signs of weakness.

The reality, though—the reality is something altogether different.

Background

Tell me about despair—Oliver implores—yours, and I will tell you mine.

According to the World Health Organization:

About half of mental disorders begin before the age of 14, yet regions of the world with the highest percentage of population under the age of 19 have the poorest level of mental health resources. Most low- and middle-income countries have only one child psychiatrist for every 1 to 4 million people.
On average about 800,000 people commit suicide every year, 86% of them in low- and middle-income countries.

The WHO states that in order to increase the availability of mental health services, five key barriers need to be overcome: the absence of mental health from the public health agenda and the implications for funding; the current organization of mental health services; lack of integration within primary care; inadequate human resources for mental health; and lack of public mental health leadership.

Framework

Meanwhile—Oliver notes—the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain are moving across the landscapes, over the prairies and the deep trees, the mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air, are heading home again.

For Oliver, the natural world is not comprised of static objects to be examined from a distance. It is a dynamic amalgam of singularities imbued with conscious energy. It is a part of us, and we, it. And if we can sense all of this in objects as indifferent to our despair as sun and rain, how can we not recognize the same in one another?

The topics discussed in today’s symposium are, in many ways, painful and difficult. But we enter into these conversations today with open hearts and minds, ready and willing to support and learn from one another, and together create an environment wherein we can share our stories without stigmatizing or fearing one another, that we might come away with a better understanding of the relationships between mental health, individual rights, and social responsibility.

Conclusion

Whoever you are—Oliver reminds us—no matter how lonely, the world offers itself to your imagination, calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting—over and over announcing your place in the family of things.

Let’s not forget who is really doing the announcing. It is the poet, Mary Oliver, with her generous and compassionate imagination, who reminds us of our belonging in the community of life. Let’s take this opportunity granted us today to announce that belonging to one another, to establish here and now our own community of respect and understanding. And let’s each carry
that belonging with us at the end of the day, out into our various communities. And let’s announce loudly and clearly what it means to belong, the commitment it requires from each and every one of us, and the change we must enact to make it truly felt by all.

Thanks

I’d like to take a moment to thank all of our presenters for sharing their knowledge, insights, and experiences with us today. Thanks to our co-sponsors, without whose generous financial support we would not be able to host such an excellent event as this. Thanks, too, to the Student Union and the University of New Mexico for providing us this wonderful space. And thanks to Agora Crisis Counseling, who have done a superb job hosting the first annual Mental Health Awareness Week all this week, who played an integral role in planning and promoting this event, and who continue to do so in assisting us, alongside counselors from Career Services, with the staffing of our Listening & Resource Room. You can also drop by and see the very friendly folks from Agora downstairs at their booth in the atrium.

Please note that in addition to providing information on various mental-health related community resources and Writing Across Communities-related events, the Listening & Resource Room, upstairs in Santa Ana B, will be staffed from 10am-4pm today with persons qualified to provide support for any guest of the symposium should he or she so desire.

Additionally, I’d like to thank all of the members of the symposium’s steering committee for their invaluable time, advice and support. Thanks, too, to the countless other persons who up to the very last minute continued to swoop in and snatch those of us planning this event from the jaws of defeat, and that includes all of today’s volunteer symposium staff.

And finally, thank you all for coming and participating in this important conversation. Without you, there would be no symposium.