

## The Lions Paw

In writing about Mental Illness and in an effort to relieve stigma and promote awareness, I am incessantly reading and reviewing my experiences about and with those with Mental Illness. I also study my own past behavior. When you truly experience psychotic episodes, looking back on them – is similar to looking at someone else's life. You ask the questions, “Why could I not see this or that?” “How could I put myself through so much” and so on. The fact of the matter is, it was a chemical shift compiled with environmental experiences that placed many walls and barriers in front of my recovery.

It gets to a point where the why's and how's are secondary to my thinking. My concerns are more about, what do we do about it. When I look at the Mentally Ill and I read my notes, essay's and stories about those that I have met – I don't necessarily see the Mental Illness. I am searching, desperately, for what the illnesses is hiding. The talents, the environmental pain, the events in one's life that the illnesses are feeding on and most importantly the core of the person – the heart and soul. It is the core that is so often trapped by the illness and effects of the illness.

I find it interesting as I read through my notes and see that I made notations about individuals like:

*This person doesn't recognize any faith foundation – therefore you need a different analogy to make him understand right from wrong.*

*This person can't get past his conditioning of racism and therefore blocks all other help in fear of his belief system being proven wrong.*

*This person will not speak about life, but his drawings and paintings represent more than he could ever realize.*

*I have never seen such a blatant need for acceptance as I have with this person – he will do anything (right or wrong) to be accepted.*

And these notes are scribbles throughout my writings. They are there because I was constantly trying to figure out how to get to the core of this men. It interested me because the same drive that I find so important in my own recovery which is motivated from the need to “be understood” is the same tool that wouldn't allow me to quit on these people. With any hope, it was my goal to help them understand themselves. More times than not, this method did work and a different perception was instilled, promoting an understanding and awareness of their thinking patterns rather than acting on instinct alone.

I am not one that sees face value in a person – I am always looking for more. This is what drives me to figure out the “thorn in the lions paw”. My experiences in life have not taught me how people live; I can see that on television. What they have taught me is why. I could have easily gone through the experiences of my life without paying any attention to why people were the way they were – judged them by their behavior and dismissed them as something I felt “better than” or “they are

bad people”. That is not the way that I am wired. Instead, I dove into the pain and the anger and the frustration of all these individuals, even the ones I didn’t like, in an effort to find explanation.

I am not writing this to pat myself on the back – I don’t have any ability that we all do not have. It is very easy to go through our lives with no effort in learning about others. It is very easy to dismiss people because we are busy and live our lives according to what we believe and therefore are “better” than someone else. The fact is, we are not. I often ask myself when speaking with those that have such tribulations – “if given the same deck of cards in my life, how would I play them?” I am not searching for judgmental ways to degrade that person not playing the cards the way I might have, but I am looking for options for them to possibly try a different strategy in their own game – called life.

It never surprised me, nor did I ever consider it some emotional breakthrough when a big tough guy would weep in front of me. What always shocked me was the thorn itself and how deeply embedded it was in the lions paw.

I wrote this column this morning because throughout the night – I was bombarded, in my dreams, with these conversations that I had with so many. I remembered being called to a counselor’s office and being asked what I was doing. A class that he taught was taking on a new perspective with questions and concerns being raised that were not on the curriculum. He didn’t appreciate that. I was very put off by this man’s deliberate attempt to stop me from helping others ask the right questions. I

was even more put off with the fact that he either didn't know the answers (how to react) or was unwilling to do so because that would require much more of him.

I reviewed his curriculum in great extent and the curriculum I actually liked, however what I did not like was the fact that it was never taken beyond the black and white page. It was taught with boredom and an expectation that if read and assignments completed, somehow the inmate would be "rehabilitated".

How often do we do this in our lives? Go through the motions, knowing there is a thorn but ignoring it – all the while it is being embedded deeper and deeper into the lions paw.