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Lessons Learned

The Noonday Demon

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New Canaan News - Review

Article Last Updated: 04/19/2007 12:17:30 PM EDT

Happiness itself can be a grand labour.

Charlotte Bronte

On Dec. 7, 2004, 34-year-old Carson Spencer took his own life. It was a shocking and unceremonious exit from the world in which he excelled and touched so many lives.

His disease, bipolar disorder, had pursued him like a relentless phantom, unseen by friends and family but a familiar specter since he was first diagnosed at the age of 17. Like many manic depressives, his symptoms were subtle at first and disguised by enormous accomplishments and popularity that a visceral society interpreted as achievement and success. Carson was the embodiment of all that was right. Yet, his manic swings and struggles to cope with an illness that he hid like an ugly scar conspired to overwhelm him.

In his book "The Noonday Demon," Andrew Solomon leads us much like Dante's guide in "The Inferno" into the harrowing hell of depression. As he pushes us forward, he attaches a rope to the outside world so that many of us might find our way back to the light of day and out of the blackness that occupies the uncharted parts of our brain chemistry.

In reading Solomon and hearing the story of Carson, I was struck by how common bipolar disorder is in America and the terrifying statistics around suicide. Last year more than 500,000 people attempted suicide in this country. Suicide accounted for almost 2 percent of deaths worldwide in 1998, according to Solomon, ahead of war and homicide. Half of those with bi-polar disorder will attempt suicide. The most likely to attempt suicide are those who are experiencing their first depressive episode. Those that have had multiple episodes have significantly reduced risk, particularly if they have maintained a treatment regimen of cognitive therapy and medicine.

Carson's life and death left footprints to follow and lessons to be learned. Much like a suicide bomb, the carnage that ensues is not limited to the bomber. In Carson's case, its unintended consequences ravaged the lives of friends, a sister, a wife, a 2-year-old daughter and loving parents. This successful husband, father, athlete and businessman was by all accounts dynamic, driven and compassionate. As he struggled through the massive roller-coaster ride of a brain whose chemistry would not cooperate, his ability to understand and master the less traveled and veiled road of those with bipolar disorder created doubt and confusion.

Shame, prejudice and lack of understanding about mental illness have been passive accomplices in the rate of suicide in our country. I have seen in my own industry, healthcare, a reticence to consider mental health parity as a cornerstone to a healthy society and adequate healthcare coverage. Timothy's Law, recently passed in New York, was named after Timothy O'Clair, a Schenectady boy who completed suicide in 2001, seven weeks shy of his 13th birthday.

As a society, we are now discovering and understanding that these illnesses are created by imbalances in the brain's chemistry and uneven release of serotonin, dopamine and epinephrine. Life events, profound trauma, body chemistry and genetics all can conspire to create the demons. A bi-polar individual may unwittingly receive massive doses of their own neurological chemicals during a "high," propelling them to incredible accomplishments and great heights. But like a plane that expends all of its fuel to reach its highest possible altitude, the engine runs dry and crashes to earth in a shattering collision that leaves the individual cut off from a world and deadened to any overtures of love, affection or compassion. In many cases, the only logical alternative for this purgatory of nothingness is death.

Carson did not realize he was in such a common club of tortured souls: Buzz Aldrin, actors Jim Carrey, Patty Duke, Cary Grant and Marilyn Monroe, columnist Art Buchwald, Francis Ford Coppola, Mozart, Emily Dickenson, Darryl Strawberry, Agatha Christie, Walt Whitman, Abraham Lincoln and J.C. Penney all struggled with bipolar disorder over the courses of their lives and all fought the noonday demons who would appear without any sound and tug at them, trying to pull them back into that "dark place."

The lack of knowledge, the fear of confiding something that society rejects as mental weakness or the trap of one's own mania can conspire to drive a person further from help and into stop-gap efforts to blunt their symptoms through alcohol, drugs or inconsistent use of one's prescribed medication. Our ability to raise awareness enough to

destigmatize this disease and to educate not only those afflicted but those affected, is paramount to stitching together a social safety net that catches everyone who falls. If Carson were alive, he would have wanted to help create awareness and understanding around the disease of bipolar disorder. In the end, the noonday demons took him from us too soon and robbed the world of yet another person whose capacity to love and be loved could have healed our society just a little faster.

Out of the ashes of this tragedy, a small phoenix emerged in the form of the Carson J. Spencer Foundation. Carson's friends and family established the fund to support further bi-polar research. Two million Americans, or a little less than 1 percent of the population, have bi-polar disorder, diagnosed or undiagnosed. This translates in this community of 20,000 people to more than 180 adults and children suffering from this disorder, and five-fold more who are affected by its radius of pain.

Carson's friends and family, Genesis Gallery and Digizip, Inc., will hold a benefit Saturday, May 5, in Port Chester, N.Y., to support the foundation. The admission is \$125 per person. The event will feature a live auction with world-class vacations, art, jewelry and a few surprises. The money raised will support the continued work in the fight against bi-polar disorder. Tickets can be purchased and donations received on www.carsonjspencer.org. The foundation is a lifetime memorial to a beloved son, husband, friend and brother.

Eleanor Roosevelt once said, "We can either light a candle or curse the darkness." The noonday demons dwell in the darkness and prey on uninformed and unsupported people. Through our efforts and energies we can cast a light so bright that we can banish them from our town, from our country and from the minds of those whose lack of defense makes them vulnerable.

For more information about the foundation or the event, please call New Canaan resident and Digizip CEO Greg Schneider at (866) 375-8324, ext. 201.

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