

Feeling depressed? Maybe that's healthy, considering everything

By HANNAH ZAIV

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A recent article in The Oregonian mentioned, rather casually and as if in passing, that "mental illness strikes 22 percent of adults in the United States each year" (Dec. 14).

Twenty-two percent! Think of any four or five people you've known this last year. Which one was stricken by mental illness? Which ones weren't?

Are persons mentally ill who go to work for long hours every day at meaningless jobs, come home in order to sleep, then get up and work again? How about persons who have been married forever and never talk to their spouses about anything except bills and other people? What about persons who smile and joke all the time and can and will make vibrant conversation about every nuance of every movie ever made, but will talk about very little else? Are they mentally ill, or are they well-adjusted Americans?

The Oregonian article indicated that, thanks to funding provided by Bristol-Myers Squibb Co., the maker of several psychiatric drugs, M.D.s who don't even have to be psychiatrists can now diagnose whether you are among the 22 percent mentally ill by administering a simple questionnaire, which takes, on average, 8.4 minutes. Whether you're anxious or depressed, they will have a drug to fix you right up.

I find this chilling and terrifying: the labeling of people who suffer anxiety or depression as mentally ill and the massive drugging of them.

I know a number of people I respect who take antidepressants and express gratitude for them. They seem to be doing all right. However, I can't help but wonder what they would be like if, with a good deal of community support, they faced and listened to the depression instead.

What if you didn't take the pills that enabled you to go back to your job and your normal life, but let yourself feel all the awfulness of terrible loneliness, disconnection, despair, until you acknowledged the truth of your feelings — for yourself and for everyone?

The 22-percent off of whom the drug company wants to make its fortune are the ones most clearly tuning into the pulse of our current world.

A well-adjusted American is numbed and brain-washed and can trundle around amusing himself with platitudes and stereotypical behavior. A so-called mentally ill person gets glimpses, or sometimes great stretching, yawning vistas, of how everything is vastly not all right.

Often the despair relates to personal history of abuse or neglect; and always, beyond that, it relates also to the way we're all trying to live in this culture: never really

interconnected, not doing anything deeply meaningful, rushing around on the surface of something that we call life, but which is nothing but pretense.

What if the 22 percent, and the other people, too, who maybe fake the questionnaire and aren't really so unmentally ill themselves, did a general strike for a year or so? Not for wages or hours, but for health; with trust in the process of what their psyches and bodies are trying to tell them.

What if they all got together in huge communal places and wept and screamed and writhed on the floor and hid under covers and sometimes got up and sat in circles to talk, then screamed and hid some more? What if everyone wept out their despair and bleak disconnectedness together, until the despair and disconnectedness were replaced by deep bonds of having seen together into the darkest parts of reality, and having come out together to find, together, ways of living that are real?

Let's flush the Prozac and bring back our spirits. Let's bring back the spirits of all of us who are blunted and tranquilized by psychiatric medications. Not alone, because that can be conducive to suicide, but together, with more real, deeper kinds of connectedness than most of us can seem to find in the 1990s' America.

Let's honor and listen to those of us who have the sense, sensitivity and courage to be really depressed in our really depressing world. Then let's fix our world, so that it's no longer depressing.



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