TEARS OF THE CLOWN
Rabbi Dan Moskovitz – Temple Sholom
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Why do some clowns – the universal symbol of joy and frivolity have tears painted beneath their eyes on their colorfully designed grease painted faces?

The answer I learned from that great sage, Google, is that, "Tragedy and Happiness are part of life. The tear represents sorrow. The smile and bright colors represent the happiness of overcoming sorrow."

These were among the first thoughts I had when I learned this week that Robin Williams – the perennial childlike funny man, had taken his own life.

We have since learned that Williams who had long suffered from addiction and depression could no longer cover up his sadness with clown makeup. He could no longer mask the pain of his dark depression as he had for so many years by shifting the focus away from

himself and on to others through his brilliant and wild humor.

Every generation has their clowns, their jesters, their comedians, whose humorous commentary on the times we live in gives perspective and insight, allowing us to laugh as some of life's more difficult events.

Robin Williams was mine.

He made being a teenager, a university student and later a husband and parent funny, which made them bearable – when sometimes all you want to do in those moments is cry.

I remember seeing him in small comedy clubs in San Francisco as a teenager. He had these massive forearms, covered with a dense forest of hair. Which seemed to take over much of his body. Robin Williams as a furry guy. He had an elastic face and a smile that

started at his mouth but ended well past his eyes. And he was a sweater. Watching Robin Williams do standup was watching a grown man drip. That too was funny, and part of the act.

He was the guy from Happy Days and then Mork and Mindy. As kids my friends and I would walk around greeting each other with v fingered handshakes saying Nanoo-Nanoo. It was so oddball it was funny in the absurd.

His characters in movies whether comedies or dramas were rich, layered and often a glimpse into his own nature and conflicts.

- The DJ who used humor to make biting commentary on the folly of the Vietnam War in Good Morning Vietnam.
- The insightful physiologist in Good Will Hunting who managed to break through the hard exterior of

a brilliant but broken teen savant, revealing his own tormented soul in the process.

- The teacher who inspires his students to find life in poetry and the poetry in their own lives. Oh Captain, My Captain we'd all proclaim. The only Latin I ever learned was from that movie, a whole generation set out to Carpe Diem.
- His colorful and heartwarming depiction of Patch Adams the doctor who I know has inspired some in this congregation to embody the old saying, 'Laughter is the best medicine.'

He was so very much the sound track (or at least the laugh track) of my generation.

We are all equal in death, Jewish tradition teaches. Therefore the same white shroud, the simple casket. But celebrity death is still somewhat different. Since how they lived was an inspiration for so many, it

follows that how they died, that too becomes a lesson, often in the stark relief of tragedy.

While undoubtedly their reasons for William's suicide are complex and varied – there is indications that long suffering darkness of depression was a contributing factor if not the primary factor.

We know also that Williams fought the demons of addiction for most of his adult life and had once again just recently entered rehab. These two dark shadows that hang over the soul of so many people, addiction and depression are both diseases of isolation.

The suffer, even one as famous and universally admired as Robin Williams feels alone in a crowded room.

Approximately 6-10 percent of adults and up to 13 percent of teens experience serious major depression. LGBTQ teens report depression and suicidal thoughts at

a rate three times higher than other adolescents. In fact, major depression is the most prevalent disability experienced by adults in North America.

Research shows that one in ten people are substance abusers. One in three people know someone, a family member or close friend, who is addicted. Sitting among us today are people; members of this congregation; struggling with addictions and weighed down by depression. They are our Moms or Dads, brothers or sisters, sons or daughters, aunts or uncles, friends or co-workers; they are us. When a person struggles with depression and/or addiction everyone around them struggles as well.

When a person has cancer we have learned over time what to do, how to support them and how to rally for a cure. But when one suffers from mental illness, and I include addiction within that broad category we are so often stunned to silence. We know how to heal a

broken leg, but be are so often ignorant of what do when confronted with a broken psyche.

My colleague and friend Rabbi Eddie Mencher, writes that, 'Depression is often invisible. And for those who suffer silently, it can be as though they themselves are unknown and invisible—even to the people with whom they interact daily. Many who experience considerable pain go to great lengths to disguise and hide their symptoms, appearing jovial, witty and solicitous of others.'

'Stigma and fear of loss—loss of reputation, authority, love, admiration, relationships, employment, opportunities for advancement—most often drive people to hide their depression and/or addictions.

Paradoxically, even as these twin mental illnesses, depression and addiction cause withdrawal from individuals and community, what is needed most are

encouraging, warm and supportive relationships that acknowledge suffering, provide enduring connection, and convey persistent, realistic hope.

What is needed most is meaning and meaningful relationships.

Christopher Lasch wrote in ''The Culture of Narcissism, that 20th Century man is 'Plagued by anxiety, depression, vague discontents, a sense of inner emptiness.'

He found that the 'psychological person' of today's age seeks neither individual self-aggrandizement nor spiritual transcendence but peace of mind, under conditions that increasingly militate against it,''

Lasch observed that a corrosive 21st century mentality of anti-religion tries to liberate people from the idea that they should submit to a higher authority, so they

can focus more obsessively on their own emotional needs.

Dennis Prager who's writing on the subject of depression pointed me towards Lasch's work adds that, "Given that the need for meaning transcends all other human needs, its absence must create havoc individually and societally. In government, secularism is a blessing; but most everywhere else it is not.

Whatever the logical inconsistencies or theoretical arguments in either direction, the fact remains that while secular individuals can believe that their own lives have meaning, secularism by definition denies that life has meaning. The consequences have been devastating to mental health and to social order.

Like so many illnesses that confront us in the modern world, there is no miracle cure, no magic pill or therapy that will rid the sufferer of all signs of the disease. In

the world of cancer treatment oncologists talk about, 'managing the disease'. The same is true with mental illness. The first step it to acknowledge it is real, not a sign of weakness or a character defect, but something that happens to you, not because of you or anything you did. Torah teaches that all human being were create k'dai, we were created worthy at the moment of creation and looking upon us God declared that our creation was Tov M'oed – very good, including and especially those who were created with mental illness.

We must talk about it, remove the stigma – so that those that suffer do not suffer alone and in silence.

Then as we manage the disease and help our loved ones who suffer with it manage one treatment is what we are doing here. One response is the structure and support of being in a spiritual community. A sacred community of people that care about the soul of each other. That look beyond your station or your status and see you as

b'tzelem elohim as a reflection of the divine, broken and flawed as we all are.

For some of us our fractures and breaks are on the outside for the entire world to see and we respond accordingly. We open doors for the disabled; we bring the balm of healing to the cancer sufferer. We walk with heart patients to restore their strength; we steady the steps of stroke victims.

I ask us all to see those whose illness is on the inside, whose pain may be masked by the grease paint of a clown, and to respond with love, with support, with empathy and with compassion.

In life Robin Williams made me laugh, some times so hard it hurt to breath. In his death he has made me cry for the suffering of so many like him who feel alone and isolated even here, even surrounded by a caring congregation. You are not alone, none of us are, we all

need each other. We need each other differently, the mitzvah is to look beyond the mask and uncover how we are needed by we love.