

Power of naming

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I was seeing a therapist. I asked her my diagnosis and she said, "Situational depression."

"But I don't feel depressed," I responded.

"Well, I need to put something down on these insurance forms and that's, like, the lowest level in terms of a diagnosis."

I pondered the label. I often seek counseling. It's helpful for leaders to see a therapist, spiritual director, or someone to sort out family dynamics. We constantly wrestle with ghosts of our past, especially when we're in such highly intimate professions, where people look to us to say something meaningful in the midst of death, birth, marriage, and tragedy.

But then I had this diagnosis. A label. Something I walked around with and rolled in my mouth. Something that (regretfully) still bears a bit of stigma in our society.

That is the difficulty of our culture. We have these words that describe us. Powerful words.

**Sometimes they give us comfort.** We know the impact of a word when our child is sick and we don't know why. We take her in for tests. She is poked and prodded while concern eats us up. We start our Google diagnostics, scouring the Internet as if Web MD has just given us an advanced degree.

Finally, the doctors come back with label. A name. Just like Adam, Eve and those animals, we know that naming something gives us a sort of dominion over it. Then sometimes that diagnosis comes with medicine that makes it better, or at least bearable, and our anxiety decreases.

**Often the label becomes the key to understanding difficult behaviors.** We're not sure why someone dives into a project with Olympic energy and then inexplicably evacuates the premises, until a spouse whispers the words "manic-

depressive personality” and it makes sense.

Or we realize that the father seems sick all the time. It’s strange until the son says the word, “alcoholic.” And we remember all the confusing behaviors that become clear in light of that revelation.

I’ve started to look at these words a little bit differently lately. Someone told me that **social workers tend to look at problems through the lens of post-traumatic stress.** I’m no therapist, but this made sense to me and I began to look at people in the same way in pastoral situations.

**Seeing people through the lens of PTS shifts the label from the person to the context.** It’s easy for us to think of a person as depressed, anxious, or manic, but can we see the intricate history and narratives that made the person who he is? Can we begin to unravel the tangle of human connections that formed him?

**Looking through that lens allows us to celebrate the resilience of people.** " Yes, she is suffering from anxiety, but it’s a small wonder that’s all she has made it this far, considering the abuse that she grew up with" is a much different story than "She's an anxious wreck."

**Looking through the lens of PTS helps us to realize that different behaviors are often survival mechanisms.** We often see this in family situations where the teen is the “problem,” but when we spend time with all the members, we realize that the teen is often the healthiest person in the equation. He just developed some uncomfortable survival skills in the midst of his difficulties.

**It makes us realize that we are not that one distilled behavior.** I am not depression. I am not foremost a depressed person. But I can feel my body responding with certain lethargy in particular situations. It’s as if the air has gotten thicker and I retreat within myself. When things become particularly difficult, I imagine myself a victim in my own life’s drama. Yet, when I focus on the “situational” rather than the “depression,” I know that it’s a season that will pass. There are many aspects to who I am, not just depression.

When we work with others or with ourselves, we cannot let the label define us, as humans. We need to resist the temptation to identify one another by our sicknesses--even though it gives us a certain power. But **looking beyond the label to the context forces us to think theologically about people.** We are, in essence, people created by God, in the image of God. No matter what character

defects we have developed, our dignity and our identity should be rooted in the fact that we are God-bearers.