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The Art of Seeing

One Man's Perspectives on Bipolarism and Depression

Tom Wootton

James Turrell is a most remarkable artist, whose work includes the volcanic Roden Center in Arizona, many installations of “light tunnels” that use light to create shapes that have mass and weight, and an exhibit at the Indianapolis Museum of Art. He understands light and perception perhaps more than anyone else. By using darkness and almost imperceptible light, his artwork totally changes the way we see the world. Turrell’s amazing work with light and darkness is a perfect metaphor for trying to see psychological depression in a new light.

When you enter one of Turrell’s installations, it is so dark that you cannot see anything, or at least not much. The amount of available light is simply too little for our eyes to use. His artwork is not a pretty picture on the wall, it is the entire environment and includes both the perception of the audience and time as critical components. If you stay long enough, your eyes begin to adjust to the lack of light and you start to see things that were there all along but your eyes were not yet ready to perceive. When you go back out into the “real” world, you bring a new perspective and may begin to see everything in a whole new light. His work can be described as the art of seeing.

As an advocate for individuals with

bipolarism or depression, my own art is similar to Turrell’s in many ways. Like Turrell, I do not use a brush to paint a picture, instead choosing to build an environment that blocks out light and helps me to perceive. Unlike Turrell, my art is not in the

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physical world; it is interior of the human psyche. Instead of blocking out the physical light, I have learned to block out the thoughts and feelings that distract me from seeing the more subtle light that shines within each of us. My art is called *meditation*. I have been practicing it for more than forty-five years, sometimes as much as eight hours a day. Meditation has given me the ability to “see” things in a much deeper way. It can truly be described as the art of knowing.

I recently went through a fairly deep depression and came out thinking a lot about James Turrell. I don’t know whether he is bipolar or experiences depression, but if he does I’m sure he sees it in the way I am beginning to. When I went into depression the first time, all I saw was darkness and pain. At the time I thought it was unbearable, but looking back and comparing it to some of the far deeper states I have been to since, it was really nothing. As my perception has grown I am beginning to “see” things I never knew were there. In “seeing”

them more clearly, I notice that they don’t affect me so negatively any more. They now affect me so much more, but in a positive way, at least according to the way I have learned to “see.”

My book, *The Depression Advantage*, is about looking at depression in a new light. If we learn to examine our condition instead of avoiding it, we can gain clear insight into what it is and how it affects our lives. With that insight comes understanding and the emotional maturity that gives us the ability to choose how we react to our circumstances. Virginia Woolf said, “You can’t find peace by avoiding life.”

On a much deeper level, through meditation we can gain awareness and control of any stimulus. Mahatma Ghandi developed so much control that he was able to have surgery without anesthetic. He said we can eventually get to the point that we are free to choose our reaction to every circumstance and condition in life, including our mental states.

The mainstream meaning of mental stability is to be in remission of symptoms for an extended period with the goal of being permanently symptom free. While the tools, including medicine and therapy, are valid, we might reexamine the goal itself. A stability that has us living a diminished life in fear of a relapse is only the beginning, not the end point in a path from disorder to advantage. If stability is the goal, perhaps we need to redefine what it means and how we measure it.

In the mental world, the dictionary defines *stable* as “sane and sensible; not easily upset or disturbed.” Since the extremes, mania and depression, typically accompany clear signs of being “upset or disturbed,” it is understandable how freedom from symp-

toms became the standard. Unfortunately, it forces us into a predicament; if our condition changes in the slightest bit, we may become unstable because we may not be able to function under the duress. We live in fear that our condition might “turn the corner” and we will flip out.

With professional training, people who are bipolar or depressed can learn to handle the ups and downs of life and maintain real stability, remaining sane and sensible, not easily “upset or disturbed.” Limiting our life to a very narrow range and living in fear that we may have a relapse is not stability at all. Fear-based avoidance therapy will never “cure” mania or depression, and it can result in a diminished life with constant fear of relapse.


Equanimity, or evenness of mind, can be misunderstood. Many people interpret equanimity to mean being in a tranquil place that allows people to relax, to escape from the stresses and strains of everyday life and to “recharge their batteries.” Although

it is helpful to occasionally remove ourselves from the conditions that create stress, real equanimity is the ability to remain in control of our responses while the world may be crashing around us.

Equanimity as applied to depression does not mean we are never depressed. It means that although we are having all of the symptoms that indicate depression, we are unaffected by them. Equanimity means true freedom, stability in all conditions, and wisdom-guided responses to all conditions. And one cannot get to that point by avoiding it any more than you can get the meaning of Turrell’s art by walking out too early. Equanimity means that even though the symptoms are still there, the individual can still function normally and understand something that few ever will.

It takes equanimity to truly understand how bipolar disorder or depression can be seen as an advantage. Once you begin to look at depression and mania from the perspective of equanimity, the richness of

experience brings insight and understanding that is beyond the capacity for those without our condition to even imagine.

Communicated through images, it is the unique perspective of artists like James Turrell that can bring a new way of seeing. The ability to bring light from darkness, to see things differently, is what defines the artist. Do artists have a higher incidence of depression or just a greater capacity for “seeing” it? 

Author of two books, The Bipolar Advantage (2005) and The Depression Advantage (2007), Tom Wootton is CEO of Bipolar Advantage, Inc. Combining the expertise of doctors with that of patients, family, and friends, the Bipolar Advantage Program is changing the paradigm of mental illness. Through education, assessment, and treatment, its mission is to help people with mental conditions shift their thinking and behavior so that they can lead extraordinary lives.

Welcome New Members!

The San Francisco Medical Society would like to welcome the following new members.

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