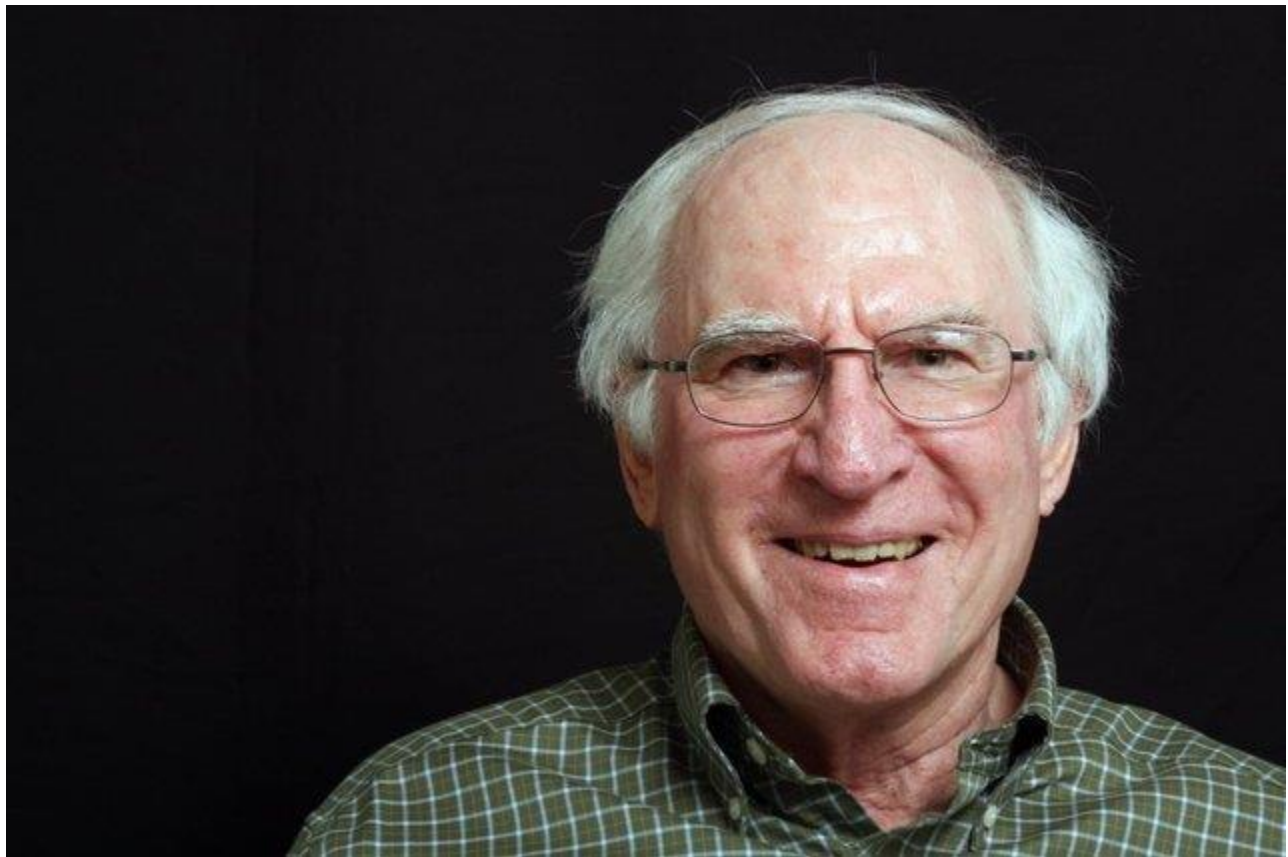


ROB WOUTAT | Is mental health the next McCleary?

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Kitsap Sun community columnist Rob Woutat

You are in a very long tunnel. You can't see the end and you're not even sure there is an end. You only hope there is, and that you'll see it soon.

The tunnel is dark and the air inside is so heavy, you can move forward only with great effort, but you're not even sure which direction is forward, so you can just hope you're

moving forward and that someday you'll be out, but it's hard to imagine being out. If there are doors leading out of the tunnel, it's too dark inside for you to see them.

Somebody must be with you but you can't see him. You can only hear him. He's saying, "Cheer up. Hang in there. This can't go on forever. Things will get better soon." But he has said that many times before, so you can't believe him, even though you wish you could. You can't even find the energy to reply.

This is just a glimpse of what it feels like to have major depression, a mental illness so burdensome that those who aren't susceptible to it can't imagine what it's like and can say only, "Smile. Cheer up." But you can't smile and cheer up because nothing tells you the tunnel has an end.

Asked what disease he would cure if he could cure any disease in the world, my doctor said in a heartbeat, "Depression." If his adult patients are representative, about one out of 10 have been sufficiently sad and hopeless to warrant a diagnosis of depression.

When the depression is severe and long lasting, it's called major depressive disorder, and at any given time, the CDC says, about three percent of adults are severely depressed. Major depression is the leading cause of disability for Americans age 15 to 44.

With Robin Williams' death and our state's severe shortage of care for the mentally ill, mental health has frequently been in the news lately. People with severe mental illness in one form or another have been turned loose with no ongoing supervision and care. Some have wandered the streets babbling to no one visible. Some have killed themselves. Some have killed others. And most of the recent news stories have emphasized the deplorable lack of facilities and money to care for them.

While illnesses of the body have been "acceptable" for thousands of years, while they have been analyzed and eventually found to have treatments and cures, while there is no

shame about having cancer or tuberculosis or heart disease, diseases of the mind have spooked us. Mentally ill family members have been hidden in attics or corralled in penal institutions for lack of healthful, compassionate environments and the money to care for them.

A professor who teaches state and federal constitutional law at the University of Washington pointed out in the Seattle Times of August 28 that when Washington became a state 125 years ago, the authors of the state constitution placed three mandates on state government: to make ample provision for the education of children; to provide homes for disabled soldiers and sailors; and to foster and support universities, prisons, and facilities for blind and deaf youth, the developmentally disabled, and the mentally ill.

More than two and a half years ago, our State Supreme Court found that we're not meeting our obligations in educating our children. It's hard to believe they'd rule any differently in our care for the developmentally disabled and the mentally ill.

The onus is on the state Legislature, the Court says, but there seems to be no provision for forcing the Legislature to act, for individual legislators to vote contrary to what they think their constituents desire. If voters oppose the additional taxes needed to comply with the constitutional requirements, and if they expect their elected representatives to act on their wishes, how can the Court compel democratically elected lawmakers to countermand the will of their constituents?

Ultimately it's the voters, not the legislators, who are culpable for the state's inability to support legally required and morally obligated services. Legislators will go wherever the voters want them to go.

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