

Hyding From Jekyll

by Miriam Ruff

While recently watching a movie version of the Jekyll and Hyde story, I was struck by the incredible timeliness, and timelessness, of the story. Because Stevenson's premise - that both good (Jekyll) and evil (Hyde) reside in each of us - essentially characterizes the human condition, it is therefore able to transcend the time and place of its origin to reach out to us even today.

But while each of us faces the ongoing struggle between Jekyll and Hyde that powers the classic tale, for the mentally ill it's often much harder to deal with - the reason is the illness itself. With all its accompanying problems, it often appears to be a manifestation of the sinister Hyde; it thereby serves as a visible, tangible validation that the person is somehow "bad."

But in reality this is not the case. First of all, meek and submissive, Jekyll would be lost without Hyde to fuel his passions; degenerate and cruel, Hyde would run amok without Jekyll to rein him in. Both are integral components of the human psyche, and to deny either one is to deny a part of who we are. No matter what our situation, therefore, we are all "good" and "evil" to a certain degree.

It is also important to realize that while mental illness can create enormous difficulties, the illness itself is neither Jekyll nor Hyde. Not a blessing, a punishment nor a character flaw, it has no power beyond what we give it to determine who or what we are.

We demonstrate our character primarily through our actions, especially in the way we handle conflict or adversity; it is therefore through those actions that we - and others - can see our true self. Jekyll, unable or unwilling to deal with his own difficulties, ran from them by creating Hyde in a tangible form. The result was ineptitude on the one hand and moral degeneration on the other, and it ultimately led to both their deaths.

We, however, can avoid his mistake. By not only recognizing and accepting Hyde's existence within ourselves, but also by refusing to grant him free and unlimited rein, we can prevail over the darkness he represents. In the same way, if we not only accept that an illness (mental or physical) exists as a part of our lives, but also fight against it in whatever way we can, we can ensure it is we, not it, that determines the path our future will take.

As Stevenson's tale so vividly demonstrated, it's not an easy task to face life's obstacles head on. Still, when we do, the knowledge and understanding we gain from the experience can help us become more than just a pawn in life's game. Despite - or maybe even because of - the struggles we endure, we have the power to become who and what we want to be. Health or sickness, Jekyll or Hyde - the decision, ultimately, is ours to make.

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