

Cultural Olympiad promises a night of INSANITY?

I recently came across an ad in the Georgia Straight, a local Vancouver newspaper promoting a comedy event with Shaun Majumder, Sean Cullen, Nikki Payne, Ed Robertson and Tyler Stewart (Barenaked Ladies). It is an Olympic event which promises a [high energy night of insanity](#). I have been contemplating writing this post for weeks, but now I can no longer suppress what needs to be said.

The premise that insanity is something to laugh about, I find troubling, and generally representative of the mass media's attitude towards mental health. It is so pervasive that whenever someone wants a cheap laugh, the terms 'Crazy, Insane, Mental or even Retarded' are thrown into the mix. At one point it was ok to refer to someone as gay whenever one needed to throw a derogatory remark. Would you dare to try that now? At one point being gay was a diagnosed psychological condition, so we shared the pain. For advocates in mental health, it is something that we have been battling with for decades. It's no doubt we have progressed somewhat, well, we no longer physically burn people at the stake. Mental Health is a [taboo](#) in today's society. Mental illness is a disease, like cancer, heart disease or diabetes, however in the broader context of society it is not always viewed that way.

In this context, the Olympic movement (which is a taxpayer funded venture), should not only be conscious, but should be held to a higher standard. In this case it showcases blatant ignorance. The Olympic concept purports development through sport, and putting human beings first, as it states on its website "[to bring the peoples of the world together, the Olympic Movement develops programmes that provide concrete responses to social inequality](#)". Suppose the promotion of this cultural Olympic event promised a night of retarded humour. That's not acceptable today, but there was a time where it may have been. Well, words matter, and 'Insanity, Crazy and Mental' are loaded words in our community. In the wrong context they continue to shape the stigma that prevents people from getting the help they need, it fuels the ignorance that demonizes mental illness. Shame and guilt are in abundance with those stricken with a disease of the mind, but they don't need any additional burdens from other people. Many people who have these conditions feel that they can't escape and their only way out is to take their own life and in some cases take others with them.

So why does this matter in the context of the Olympics? Some say, "Everyone loves the Olympics, we shouldn't say bad things you know!" That statement in itself is ironic. As I mentioned, the Olympics is a taxpayer funded event, both by infrastructure and crown corporate sponsorship, therefore, it is to be a representation of the population. The [facts](#) are one in five people will suffer a serious mental health issue in their lifetime and some many never enter the mental health system. It is such an important issue to our government that the Mental Health Commission of Canada has been established to look at the system over a 10 year period; primarily because Canada is [behind many industrialized nations](#) when it comes to Mental Health. One of the major initiatives is:

[Anti-Stigma](#), a gargantuan effort that we are spending large amounts of taxpayer dollars on, as well as other initiatives. So, while one side of our government is attempting to plug holes in a dam, another one is poking holes in it. It is frustrating, hurtful, and truthfully, it angers me.

So what should we do? I'd say start with looking at words like, 'Crazy, Insane or Mental' which are not nouns, but representative of behaviour. Many of those with serious disorders, are not able to control it. There are many different ways to deal with these Mental Health issues (biological, social, psychological), and it is social art as much as it is science. For the rest of us, behaviours can change, however many are ignorant and choose not to. One way to start would be using terms associated with mental illness in a more responsible manner. Be conscious of the context in which you are using words and find other creative ways to say what you need to say. For example, instead of using the terms, crazy, insane, nuts, etc., try the following substitutes: twisted, unbelievable, incredible, strange, inappropriate, unorthodox. Those are new terms that I am getting used to as well, but I challenge others to create new ones which we can all see in action – I too am conscious about changing my behaviour.

In a few short weeks the world is coming to Vancouver, and they are going to explore Canada and what it stands for. How do Canadians treat the mind and the mental health of its people? Do we take it seriously or merely perceive as a joke?

Jay Peachy

Visual Artist and Creative Catalyst