

Wellness in Color: Each New Dance Was My Teacher

Interview Guest: John A. Burchall

Interviewer: Caroline Ludy and Cynthia Fashaw

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John: I'm not someone who suffering, or living with. I'm a person living in spite of my bi-polarity. In spite of my struggles. In spite of my suicidal ideation. I am living. and we particularly black community need to give our people credit for that. because they've been doing it.

Intro – Brian: Welcome to Wellness in Color on the Mental Health in Minnesota podcast produced by NAMI Minnesota, tThe National Alliance on Mental Illness. Wellness in Color is a podcast series that explores perspectives on mental health to reshape the cultural language of mental illness. Visit NAMI Minnesota online at namimn.org Subscribe to the podcast and listen on the NAMI Minnesota website or wherever you get your podcasts. And now here's your host, NAMI. Minnesota staff member Caroline Ludy.

Caroline: I'd like to welcome you our guest, Pastor John Anthony Burchall.

John: Thank you Caroline.

Caroline: And as well to our guest host Cynthia Fashaw

Cynthia: Hello

Caroline: A native of Bermuda but formed and shaped in Barbados. A former newspaper reporter, writer, EMT and currently an ordained baptist minister and hospice chaplain, forty nine year old pastor John Anthony Burchill talks to Wellness in Color about his understanding of hope and the connection to his own mental health after surviving two suicide attempts. These efforts were supported by the National Center for Advancing Translational Sciences of the National Institutes of Health Award Number UL1TR002494. The content is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the National Institutes of Health. So welcome Pastor John Anthony Burchall.

John: Thank you Caroline.

Caroline Yeah. So just kind of get this started, can you just tell us a little bit more about yourself?

John: I was born in Bermuda to, to two lovely parents, Anita and Bill. I have two older sisters and a younger brother. I was educated in Bermuda, Barbados, Canada and England as well as here in the United States. I would say that my shaping took place in Barbados at my grandmother's knee. It is the reason why I am the minister that I am. It is the reason why I pray as I do. it is the reason why I see myself as I see myself as a pastor in the world.

Caroline: And so you said that your grandmother was a huge influence on your life. What do you mean? Can you tell us a little more about that?

John: My grandmother was a steadfast and solid Christian. My grandmother awoke every day at four a.m. and I was then about seven. At first, I couldn't understand what she was doing. But then I would

hear her sing "Sweet Hour of Prayer". And then she would go into praying. And my grandmother had eight children and each of those eight children, had at least six children. So my grandmother would start at my uncle Sonny, her eldest. Pray for him then pray for his wife and pray for each of his children by name. And she wouldn't just be saying bless so and so, bless so and so. She was saying specific things about each one of them. My mother was number seven, so she went down the line to all the boys and then to my mother, Anita. She would pray for my mother, then she pray for my father, Bill. She'd pray for my sister Paula. And then I would perk up to hear what my grandma was telling God about me. As a seven year old I didn't really understand that. But all I do know is that I felt really special. That my grandmother could talk so easily to the creator of the universe who was listening to her. And in the center of that conversation was me. I never let that go. I have understood myself that way. And I think that I try to embody that in everything that I do.

Caroline: So then in, you know, your relationship now with your grandmother and now in your current role as an ordained dean Baptist minister and also hospice chaplain, how has this, you know, correlation managed your own mental health.

John: Well, if you can imagine feeling so centered and so grounded and so wrapped in pillows, and so loved. And then find yourself unloved. Unable to manage your life. The things that grounded you, my sense of being intelligent. Being smart. Being very good in school. And then I arrived that journalism school to discover that there were people who were much smarter than I was. To then, discover that there was such a thing as a writer's block and I'm in journalism school. My values, my grounding, my sense of security did not marry up with this new reality.

Caroline: How did your life and how did your own philosophies of your mental health come into play as well too?

John: Yeah. Well, I took a turn. I did get through journalism school. I did find my voice and I was able to write and do everything. And I did do really well in the end and that was fine. I went back to Bermuda, got a job, I working as a journalist. Everything was fine. Working as an EMT, everything was fine. Working as a speech writer for the premiere (of Bermuda) everything was fine. But I basically turned my back on my religious life after that incident on the bridge. I felt that if I was that important to God, God would have done something to prevent me from harming myself. If I was the apple of God's eye I as my grandmother said, and if I was that important to be spoken about to God by her, then why is it that this precious child was not helped in the moment of greatest need? Why was this precious child abandoned?

So I had a very difficult time between what my mother sorry, my grandmother taught me about faith, and what my actual lived experience of faith was in depression. So I basically walked away from my faith. I became rigorously humanistic and atheistic and my life went along that front. And then my life crashed. I worked hard. I put in the hours, I took care of the children. I did everything. Everything. And then the divorce came. And the reason for the divorce was I wasn't in the house enough. I wasn't present enough. And for me, it was strange because I said "Well, this house, the swimming pool didn't just happen?" You know, I took care of my children, I did everything. I read them their stories. Did everything. But I worked basically night and day. EMT at night, speech writer and journalist by day in order to pay the bills. At the end of the day when I stood before the judge who took three minutes to take away the house and everything from me. Because my wife, then wife, cleaning me out. I became homeless. I was just a person paying child support that was it. I had nowhere to live. I discovered (John laughs) that all of that work and living what we would say the Bermuda dream. That conventional understanding of life failed me as well. So here I was. What I felt or understood God to be through my grandmother's eyes had failed. I came to this part, worked hard. House,

swimming pool, two kids, community minded, great job, all of that. Community minded, community spirited through my alpha-phi fraternity. Still ended me up in court. And the judge only took three minutes to take away what it taken me years to build up. How do you think I felt at that point?

So I was in a situation where I just thought there was nowhere else to turn. I don't think anything else was possible. I didn't think I had any options. I thought that everything was done for me. And at that time I was okay as long as I got to see my children. I got to read them their bedtime stories. And so every day I would say "I'm going to work. Everything is going to be fine because I'm gonna go see my daughters and read them their bedtime stories." As long as that that happened then I was fine. So for me, I then started to rethink my understanding of God. But now as a thirty year old divorced man, with kids who has been through the ringer that fathers go through trying to see their kids in a divorce situation. And then I got to a stage where I started to reexamine my relationship with God through the prism of all of that. From my university, challenges, right through my divorce through situations with my children. And I came to the realization that my grandmother wasn't wrong. I came to the realization that as a child, and it couldn't have been any other way, I dependent, I depended on her as the carrier of my faith. I didn't. I didn't have to do that. My grandmother, did it for me. And so what I then learned is that the God, I was coming to understand wasn't the God of the Moses story who intervened. But it was the God that says, no matter what happens, you are beloved. And if you understand yourself to be beloved John Anthony, how are you going to relate to your ex -wife? If you understand yourself to be beloved how are you going to relate to your children? What can make you fall out of love with your children? Nothing. Well there's nothing that could make this happen that can make you fall out of love with me. And that was my journey back. I gave up my jobs. I quit. I moved to the States. I went to Howard (University) to figure out for myself (laughs) on an intellectual level that science method in my head, what my understanding of myself could be now.

The mental illness, hit a second time when I was separated from my hospice job. I was evicted. Homeless. Bankruptcy. Housing insecurity. Unemployment, all at once all came crashing down together, and it was just too much. It was just too much for me.

Caroline: At this point in time now, you said, now you're at Howard?

John: After Howard.

Caroline: At what point... how old are you now?

John: When I went to Howard I was thirty three.

Caroline: So now you're just in your early thirties.

John: Early thirties and now, graduated from Howard. I went into Chaplaincy at Washington Hospital Center, and Georgetown. I then went into hospice chaplaincy after that. Loved it. Separated from that job after four years and then because I wasn't working, eviction. With eviction came bills. With bills came the IRS. With IRS, on and on, it just built up and built up and built up. . And so in that vortex, I went to the medical professionals who then mis-diagnosed me. As a consequence of their misdiagnosis, I went into full-fledged mania. I mean full-fledged. I got caught speeding at seventy two miles per hour by a cop.

I didn't even know that it was, you know. I was just beyond myself. I thought I was Jesus. I thought I was invincible. I thought nothing could harm me.

Caroline: And how long in between your wrongful diagnosis and your correct diagnosis of living with bipolar disorder?

John: The wrongful diagnosis was towards the end of 2014. And then I had the manic episode. I was treated for that. I came back home. I had my selections of drugs. But I didn't like how I felt. Mania I felt everything. Every pore in my body was feeling. These drugs made me numb. I was hollow. I couldn't feel my feelings. I was in situations where I should have been upset, but I had to intellectualize it because I wasn't feeling it in my body. And then I came to May of 2015 and May 14th, 2015 would have been twenty years since my father's suicide.

Caroline: And so now after that point up to where you are right now as you say, within your own family you lost both your father and grandfather to suicide. And your sister, brother and now of course, yourself have made suicide attempts. In your own words you say that for my tribe, suicide is the family business. But then how does now come back into where you are right now because you are a hospice chaplain. You are in as you've said the throws of life. So how have you reached the stage of your mental health?

John: What you do is you live day by day. And you celebrate that today, today I don't feel like killing myself. I won.

Caroline: So is your language then celebration?

John: Celebration. Not recovery.

John: Why? Because I know that tomorrow could be different and I respect that. And the more that I respect that, the more, I would be able to take care (of myself). Advocate for myself, then if I thought that moving in an exitable line towards some destination, called wellness. I don't think so.

Caroline: So then in your role as a Baptist minister, also hospice chaplain, how does your racial and cultural identity fuse with this, meaning of the word celebration. Because you said before that you don't use the word privilege or recovery, because it's not of the character that people have defined for you.

John: Right, right. Yeah. Well. When you are. Let's go right back to it. When you are the descendent of slaves words like hope and we'll get over by and by. Right. Are basically words that say that your status quo right now as a slave are going to continue. And in my work as a hospice chaplain people are dying. There's no sugar coating it. The doctors have done all they think they can do. Science has done all that it thinks it can do. But here we are as to human beings, both broken. But for some reason your circumstance and my circumstance can marry up. And we can even experience moments of clarity: a smile, a chuckle, the enjoyment of a hymn. In this desert that is joy. And when that happens in my work, it is celebration. And when I do those funerals, that's what I talk about. There's not about how well or how, but how a person in the most difficult circumstances, still experiences joy.

Caroline: Even though hope is not in your vocabulary or in your language I just wanted to interject. I am not saying I am playing devil's advocate but, for a lot of individuals generalized hope is their own pathway to their own wellness. So I don't want to downplay that for other individuals too. So you're just saying that for yourself it is not in your language?

John: Right. When you talk to me about hope and recovery and wellness from the same people who give me drugs have now given me side effects, one of, which is suicide ideation, I find it very difficult to accept their methodology as help for me. My own body has suffered as a consequence of their drugs.

Caroline: So then from your own experiences, what has helped you?

John: Advocating for myself. Once I got strong enough. Once I got out of the haze of the drugs. Not being truthful all the time to my therapist or my psychiatrist holding things back. And then when I got enough clarity being able to say no. I'm not going to take that. I am not going to take that. Do what you will. You've done it to me before. You've got the power to override my civil rights. Go ahead. Call yourself a doctor. So for me it became advocacy.

Cynthia: So what do you do for self-care? What are the three most significant things that you do that, keep you going? That keep you in your level of faith. That keep you being able to wake up every day and celebrate being alive?

John: I care for others at my job. I work out. I read my bible. I pray. I meditate. I talk to anyone who would listen about my journey. Particularly people, particularly teenagers who experienced this confusion between what their parents are telling them is going to be good for them. And what their actual experience is, but they can't tell the truth about it, because the parents know the doctors know everybody knows but them. But then I can actually say to them "Well, actually when you become an adult, it doesn't get that much better. And what you can do how you must do it, is you must continue to believe right in there that you, are you. These drugs are not you. The doctor diagnosed you as, it's not you." So my self-care is meditation, and we say meditation, it's going to the place where you no longer cling. You know longer desire anything. You're not pursuing a destination. You're not seeking an answer. You're not hearing what's going on outside. That's the meditative space going. You're not going on and asking for anything. Prayer, is the leaning in. The leaning towards. The opening up of the south. It is not to ask for anything because the God, I serve already knows. So you're not telling my God, anything that my God is ready. No. And I'm not going to ask for anything that my God wouldn't already give to me. So if I don't have it, I don't have it. It's not up to me to give a shopping list to my God. So for me to be open is for me to listen. Because if I'm speaking, I can't hear the voice of God. Also reading my bible. And enjoying that. Also reading trashy books. Also watching telenovela's: Colombian, Venezuelan, Mexican (laughs). I am absolutely addicted. That's me. That's me. The telenovelas I can't get enough (extended laugh) Yeah. Yeah so that's, that's my self-care in a nutshell. Some religious and some spiritual. And then there's you know.

Caroline: So bringing it back for you to come on and talk about it with Wellness in Color to talk about it, so openly and honestly, as an individual of the black community. Can you in your own words now to also as a Baptist minister talk about the relationship between religion and mental health for the black community because I would say as a black woman, too often it's not talked about.

John: And it wouldn't be talked about because if it was we would have to face some unsettling truth. All right. The biblical understanding of mental illness is that it is a curse from God for failing to follow God's laws. Those six hundred thirteen laws of the Hebrew bible known as the holiness code. You don't obey them you get punished. And the scripture is Deuteronomy 28: It is God, that punishes us. And that still exists today. So we see somebody who's mentally unwell. It's their fault. That's biblical. That's the biblical answer. So if you see that guy over there rooting around in the trash muttering to himself. That's

his fault. Pastors won't touch that. New Testament: Jesus - he goes off and he heals in the temple. The Pharisees are seeking to kill him. There's a crowd following him. So the Pharisees can't touch him, yet he goes into this home. His brothers and his mother hear he is there and to sidestep between the Pharisees and their son his mother says "Oh, he's out of his mind and some translations. He's crazy." Meaning that what he what he did in the temple he's crazy. So, so Jesus, so stigma goes back as far as the first century. Right. So that the biblical understanding is, it's a punishment from God.

Now in the black community where our people suffer so seriously, it is the church that is our salvation. The church is our therapy. The church is everything. What the pastor says is everything is gospel. Is bible. The unfortunate thing for the Christian tradition is that we have what's called a redemptive story. Things go bad. They go bad, they go bad, they go bad, they go had. And, and they get better and bliss.

Cynthia: Well we do have a number of African American churches that have a mental health ministry that you know, I can think off the top of my head. There's a church in north Minneapolis called the kwanza church. It's run by a husband and wife, African American husband wife, are both pastors and they have a really significant mental health ministry there. They talk about mental illness. They house, the homeless. They provide clothing and food, you know. And I see some of that beginning to change. And, and I see. Where we're beginning to develop an understanding that you can't understand the word if your mental health is in need. You know. So I'm seeing some of those changes, I think they've been really slow in coming and I think it's a different path for African Americans than it is for non-African Americans. And I think even stigma is different for us, the source of the stigma, and how it's manifest. But I'm gonna use the word hope coming from a family that is steeped in mental illness.

John: I'm sorry to hear that.

Cynthia: Yeah, I am too. But, you know, every year somebody in my family takes a step. You know, towards their wellness. And every year I see somebody that we were worried wasn't gonna make it begin to make it.

John: I'm glad

Cynthia: And so I think I you know, I think we were on the road. I don't think enough of us are on the road and some people who are on the road are just standing there, not moving.

John: It's unfortunate, but it's true.

Cynthia: But I hear you and I hear your words. I understand what you're saying because the language of illness and wellness and how we move away from illness, I know you don't like the word recovery; but how we move away from that into whatever direction we go needs to be reflective of our process as well.

John: I like what you're saying. The reason why I that I am that the way my bio reads that I was an EMT. Alright. So I have the experience, I have the experience of taking someone in to surgery with a broken leg. They go into surgery for that broken leg. The broken leg is repaired. It's set, and then I come back and get them and I take them to the recovery room. That leg will be set and they go into recovery. They have two to three months of therapy for their leg, and then they're walking. I am bipolar. I will never recover from being bipolar.

Cynthia: You live with bipolar.

John: No, no, no, no, no. I am bipolar. You can take. Let's go. If you took the leg a veteran loses both of his legs, he is still a veteran. Then his arm. Brain. Can my brain be transplanted and me not be me? You can replace my arm and my leg I I'm still John Anthony. You can replace my kidney or both and put me on dialysis, I'm still John Anthony. I can have heart problems. I'm still John Anthony. Brain. Take my brain away. Am I still John Anthony? Right. So people say, right, when people say you just a person with bipolar. I say, no, no. My brain is sick. And my brain is also me. Just as my arms are me. Just as my heart is me. My brain is also me, the very thing that makes me have a sense of who I am is the very thing that is ill. That is me. And I don't care if people try to sugar coat it and say, no, you are a person with. I say "No, no, no, no, no." You don't live with what I live. You don't get to define me. I've been on enough definitions: Major depressive, that in workout. Right. I'm not someone who suffering, or living with.

Cynthia: Alright (emphatic)

John: I'm a person living in spite of my bi-polarity. In spite of my struggles. In spite of my suicidal ideations. I am living. And we particularly in the black community need to give our people credit for that. Because they've been doing it. Right And so I think the credit needs to go where credit is due. And that is to say that people who are living with, who are these mental illnesses or whatever people want to define us as. Are living with difficult circumstance, but we're living through those difficult circumstances without denying them. We are living anyway. That's how I see it. That's just me all together. But that's just me as someone that it's prevalent for me in my life. It's not an intellectual thing. It's in my life.

Caroline: So with your own experiences now that you are at your current identity

John: Yeah

Caroline: How can services be improved than for an individual of color? Again. I know it's individual experiences.

John: No, it's more. No it's more. You've you know, you've hit the gold standard. All right. The most horrible thing about the encounter with the mental health service, as a person of color, is their abject, abject failure to consider your humanity. They totally dismiss you. Your sense of self. So if I come into the emergency room, uhh and I have done some kind of self-harm, whatever you want to call it. Right. And the doctor comes in and say comes in talk to me about why I'm doing it. My answer is "You are presuming that there is a self to harm." There's no self here. That's what's lost. When your brain isn't working right, you don't have a sense of self. That's why you act out, act out...no that's why you do some of the things that you do. Because this self the only way you can feel it is through pain. That's the only way you know that you're there.

Caroline: How would you describe yourself now?

John: Oh, this is going to surprise you. I would not give anything for my life now. Meaning, if you were going to tell me I was born October 5th 1969 in Devonshire, Bermuda on a hurricane night, that I would have bipolar, that I would survive suicide twice, that I would be divorced that I would go through bankruptcy, IRS debt; If you told me I will go through all of those things, including a second suicide survival, I would tell you yep, I want to live. I want all of it. I have no regrets. I see myself as an advocate speaking for things that I know. I also know that a lot of people like me don't have the platform to speak about these issues. And I also know that and I also want people to understand that even though I'm an

ordained Baptist minister and can get out there and preach it up and have people falling out (laughs). That, that that does not protect you from life. Life still is coming. Life still is going to hit you and harm you and all of that. But there is something particular about the black experience of mental illness that is not seen or reflected in a community that is 99.9% percent white. That has a very modernistic understanding of health, which is removed from diagnosis to a cure via drugs, operations therapies, and all these kinds of things. That there are other and more vast and wider ways to do that, that people have done for the two hundred thousand years that people have been on this earth and women have been having babies. So now we get getting into this little period between say 1700 and now where we think that modern science has the answer to all of that. Me think not. But it's dominating now and I think it's on us as people of color to say "Hold on a second I come from a culture where. So that there can be other voices instead of just let lettuce we can have some other things in this salad." And that's our reason for being I believe.

Caroline: Pastor John Anthony Burchall, thank you for talking about your celebration, but also in your own voice.

John: And thank you for being here to listen to my voice and to what I have to say. I appreciate it.

Outro – Brian: For additional resources related to this episode please check the podcast show notes and visit NAMI Minnesota online at namimn.org You've been listening to Wellness in Color on the Mental Health in Minnesota podcast. Produced by NAMI Minnesota.