

Love is EleMENTAL

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One of the pillars of our [Global Mental Health Program](#) is our [Arts and Advocacy Program](#). Through the engagement of the arts, our aim is to improve understanding about mental health and mental illness and promote conversations in community where this topic has been hushed and avoided for too long.



This past Friday, our second Love is EleMENTAL Program centered around Eve Ensler's performance of her personal memoir, [In the Body of the World](#). It was a riveting ninety minutes that drilled to the heart of humanity and what happens when stripped bare and vulnerable, someone finds courage and strength and a life that is finally grounded in her body and in her world. A standing ovation met the closing line of the show.

Flooded with reflections on the evening's messages about health and healing, midnight struck before I could send out my Five on Friday - so please join me in reflecting on Ensler's wisdom with Seven on Sunday this week instead!

1. Activist, Actor, Author, Artist? What do we call Eve Ensler? Many thanks to [Gwendolyn Alker](#), NYU Director of Theatre Studies, for her pre-show discussion. Alker described Eve Ensler as a woman ahead of her time - and the conundrum she presented for the traditional theater community in the nineties with [The Vagina Monologues](#). According to Alker, given that Ensler's work is rooted in people telling their personal stories, her art is not really about acting, but rather about giving voice to lived experience. Thus, as activist, author, and artist but not actor, Ensler's exquisite artistry is in the narratives she weaves. [The Vagina Monologues](#) amplified many women's voices. [In the Body of the World](#) is Eve's voice. They are both about giving expression to stories previously untold. What was once *avant garde* is now at the heart of today's recovery movement in mental health.

2. We need scientifically proven treatments; so what about kindness? No question that we need evidence-based care - whether we are talking about uterine cancer, depression, or PTSD. But the health

benefits of technical expertise are greatly enhanced when such care is delivered in the lush environment of kindness. Ensler describes “Dr. Handsome” who gained her trust when he moved from his technical examination of her uterine tumor to looking her in the eyes and conveying his respect for her as a person who was much more than a body carrying a cancerous growth. His kindness was not just nice. It was healing. We have a strong body of evidence that [kindness is, in fact, an evidence-based treatment itself](#) - associated with benefits such as faster healing of wounds, reduced pain, reduced anxiety and depression, and shorter hospital stays.

3. What did I do wrong? Ensler gropes for answers to the unrelenting question of “why?”. Why did she develop uterine cancer? Too much Tab? Too much red dye #2 from those maraschino cherries she loved as a child? Too little sleep? Her soul searching is familiar for many of us. What did I do wrong to find myself somewhere I never imagined and do not want to be? She and I didn’t get to discuss this during the talk-back session. Maybe another day over a cup of tea where the answer to “why” is as likely to be found in the tea leaves at the bottom of our cups as anywhere else.

4. Healing doesn’t depend on knowing why. This is one of the most difficult truths for most of us to embrace in the western world of logic and reason, explanation and evidence. It is a refrain that I have sung to hundreds of patients with anorexia nervosa over the years. The search to define how and why we develop certain illnesses can be useful. Yes, knowing that smoking is associated with lung cancer is important, but never buying another cigarette is not going to stop the spread of those deadly cells in the lungs. Once those bad guys have started to grow, they take on a life of their own, and recovery depends on something completely different than not smoking.

5. No more Tab, kiss those maraschino cherries farewell, and get more sleep? Groping for answers in these impossibly painful moments indulges our fantasy that we have the agency to control what happens in our lives. If we can pinpoint what we did wrong, we can change, and then we can orchestrate the reality we want. Would Eve feel better substituting juice for Tab and blueberries for maraschino cherries? Would good sleep hygiene do her good? Probably. But it’s likely they had nothing to do with her getting uterine cancer in the first place. It is not going to make the uterine cancer go away. And going too far down this path runs the serious risk of misplaced self-blame.

6. City of Joy. In 2007, Eve Ensler went to Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo to meet with and learn from women survivors of violence. Why were these women so horrifically violated was not the question. Instead, the inquiry that guided their partnership was, “What is healing and where do we find recovery?”. Thus, was born the [City of Joy](#). A “transformational” leadership community for women survivors of violence, [City of Joy](#) was conceived and is owned and run by local Congolese. Proving once again that no one has a monopoly on creativity and innovation, this money-poor community is rich on ideas that can serve as a model around the world. [City of Joy](#) brings together evidence-based therapies for trauma and the additional, essential ingredients needed to move forward in life - love and community.

7. Healing happens in community but not everyone participates. Eve Ensler is brutally honest. Her father abused her. Her mother was not emotionally available. She and her sister were competitive and estranged from each other until Eve’s bout with cancer. Her journey of healing included a complex tangle of tubes and tests and treatments. It was also a chapter of sorting - those people in her life who could help her heal were keepers. Those who were not available and even toxic had to be sorted out. She found connection where she didn’t expect it with her sister. And she had to come to terms with saying goodbye to her parents never having reached recovery and healing in her relationship to them.

In the opening of [A Farewell to Arms](#), Ernest Hemingway wrote, “The world breaks everyone, and afterward, some are strong at the broken places.” This is certainly true for Eve Ensler. It is also true for communities around the world like the City of Joy in the Democratic Republic of Congo. And it is absolutely true for all who embrace life while facing and living with mental health crises and mental disorders. It is an invitation to all of

us. Sometimes I even hear Hemingway whispering in my ear, "I dare you."