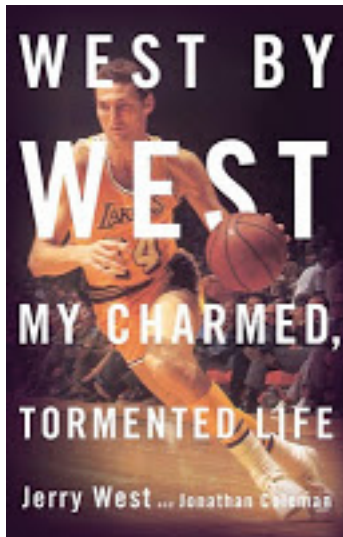


JERRY WEST AND WEST VIRGINIA'S DISEASE OF THE SOUL



Jerry West is the most famous West Virginian ever to wander from these hills. He was an all-American basketball player at WVU, the ninth greatest professional player of all time according to Bill Simmons's encyclopedic "The Book of Basketball", and he remains a literal icon of the National Basketball Association, which uses the silhouetted image of Jerry West driving hard to the basket as its logo.

Jerry West is also a tortured soul. In his recent autobiography, "West by West: My Charmed, Tormented Life" (written with Jonathan Coleman) this man who has earned virtually every reward and accolade society can offer an athlete tells us he is incapable of enjoying very much of it, that he cannot experience love in the way we all at least hope to, that he is, in short, a tortured and incomplete human being.

Although he doesn't use the term, one could say that Jerry West is mentally ill.

Does that sound harsh? Some of us, perhaps West himself, will recoil at the phrase because mental illness carries a stigma. But, it shouldn't, especially in cases where the causes are all too understandable. For West it was a father who beat -- not "hit" he tells us pointedly -- beat him repeatedly. Meanwhile, West's mother chose not to see the abuse taking place in their barren, wood frame house in 1950's Chelyan, West Virginia.

Afraid to go home, young Jerry would spend endless hours on a dirt-patch basketball court, shooting baskets and fantasizing about game-winning buzzer-beaters -- imagined moments of triumph followed by the adulation and love he didn't find at home. West calls his relationship with basketball then and now an addiction. In therapeutic terms, he was using basketball to dissociate from his pain and its causes.

Jerry West's story of abuse and his consequent behavior is unusual only in that, in the absurd lottery that is life, his chosen means of dissociation, playing basketball obsessively, happened to intersect with a freakish athleticism to produce a magic carpet ride that took him first to college, then to the Olympics, and eventually to Hollywood, far, far away from the sources of his pain. It's the one-in-a-million coincidence of which all addicts dream as they anesthetize themselves with booze, gambling, junk food, cigarettes, painkillers, assorted drugs, and still sometimes basketball.

Although Jerry West remains emotionally damaged, he escaped at least partially. Most who are similarly afflicted don't even have that. Their lives aren't saved by miraculous coincidence and their dissociative behaviors, far from being a means to prosperity, are more likely to cripple and occasionally destroy them and sometimes their families as well. It's an important issue for West Virginia because it happens here more often than in most places.

The National Institutes of Health and Centers for Disease Control rank West Virginia among the

leading states for the prevalence of depression, anxiety-related disorders, and, inevitably, suicide. We're nearly five times more likely to kill ourselves than we are to be killed by someone else. And suicide combined with accidental drug overdoses (usually prescription pain killers) kills more of us than even traffic accidents.

Of course not all premature deaths associated with mental illness are sudden and traumatic. Some play out over years of gnawing misery in the form of diabetes, heart disease, and cancers - conditions often caused or nurtured by chronic apathy and disinterest in our own wellbeing. All of this results in West Virginia ranking 46th among the states in life expectancy, more than six years behind the leader, Hawaii, and only seventeen months better than last place Mississippi.

It's a crisis, yet as a state we offer little support to those in need of help. Per capita state funding for mental health care is a third below the national average and we have less than half as many psychologists, social workers, and psychiatrists per capita as our neighboring states.

Instead West Virginia has largely narrowed and recast the problem of mental illness as one of drug abuse and attempted to counter it through policing and legislation designed to disrupt the illegal drug trade and punish perpetrators. However, these steps, although legitimate, address only symptoms of what is at its core a disease of the soul. The result is that, in West Virginia, prisons rather than hospitals and community-based programs are the primary repositories for many of our mentally ill while most go untreated at all.

Why do we choose not to address the underlying causes? A large part of the problem is our attitude toward mental illness. Many, including some political leaders, see depression and addiction not as illnesses, but as shortcomings of character – a lack of self-discipline, a failure of resolve, or even a dearth of religious faith – traits for which they believe people should be admonished or punished rather than treated. Even Jerry West, who has yet to escape the shadow of abuse six decades after it ended and who asks our understanding, admits that he only briefly tried therapy and quickly rejected it.

Until West Virginians dismiss the stigma surrounding mental illness and embrace depression, addiction, and other conditions as treatable diseases for which a sufficient number of qualified professionals are required, the statue of Jerry West that stands outside the WVU Coliseum will be as much a monument to West's and West Virginia's disease of the soul as it is to the athletic achievements it's meant to celebrate.