

Death of a Salesman and the Ability to Embrace Disappointment

By Joe Kreuz — October 2025



Revisiting *Death of a Salesman*, a play I first encountered in high school 46 years ago, has provided me with a fresh perspective amid our current mental health crisis. Arthur Miller's portrayal of Willy Loman's tragic struggle underscores the devastating impact of unaddressed mental illness and the silent battles many continue to face.

Arthur Miller adeptly illustrates Loman's inability to cope with change and personal crises, symbolized by the rubber hose — a poignant emblem of the internal struggles associated with mental health.

Considering this, I contrasted Loman's despair with my father's resilience through numerous career challenges. In 1949, when Miller penned the play, my father was 22, freshly returned from serving in the navy during WWII. My reflections on the play highlighted stark differences in handling adversity, not just between Loman and my father but also within broader society. My father's mindset, treating each obstacle as a "mere speed bump," vividly contrasts with Loman's spiral into hopelessness.

The play brings to light the societal stigma surrounding mental illness, a significant barrier preventing many from seeking the help they need. This stigma exacerbates isolation and despair, emphasizing the urgent need to shift our perspective and treat mental illness with the empathy and seriousness it deserves.

Despite advances in understanding mental health, the stark reality depicted in Loman's narrative remains all too prevalent. The initiatives by friends at organizations like Save the Michaels and BryLin Hospital, alongside countless others addressing mental health challenges, underscore the critical need for proactive engagement. Their work illuminates the extensive network of available resources, as well as the existing gaps in accessibility and acceptance.

My father's resilience was significantly bolstered by a robust support system of family, friends, and colleagues. This network was pivotal in enabling him to navigate life's challenges. The importance of such support is immeasurable, acting as a vital lifeline for many grappling with mental health issues.

Death of a Salesman serves as a profound meditation on human psychology and mental health, showcasing the vital role of literature in dissecting the complexities of the human psyche. It underscores that empathy, understanding, and support can profoundly influence those struggling with mental health issues.

Faced with modern challenges like the opioid epidemic, the aftermath of Covid-19, escalating military suicide rates, and pervasive isolation, prioritizing mental health on par with physical health is imperative. We must cultivate environments where individuals feel empowered to discuss their struggles openly, fostering a culture of inclusivity and support.

The aspiration for a future where mental illness is destigmatized, enabling individuals like Loman to receive the support they need, is more essential than ever.

Let's commit to action and solidarity, striving for a society where no one endures their darkest moments in isolation. Recognizing these silent struggles, we can advance towards a future where mental health is prioritized and stigma is dismantled.

Author's Note: This piece was inspired by a Christmas gift—Leo Pusateri gave me Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. Rereading it decades later struck a chord and prompted the reflection you just read. A special thanks to both Leo and John Connelly, whose insights and shared stories about our fathers—each shaped by common values and life lessons in resilience—helped bring clarity and purpose to this essay.