

Beyond the Storms



Reflections on Personal Recovery in Devon

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Foreword

This collection of personal thoughts and reflections is drawn from a wide variety of people across Devon, all of whom have their own stories to tell, in their own way. The stories provide a moving and uplifting insight into people's experience of mental ill health and emotional distress - and their journey of recovery.

This is a book to be wandered through. It describes journeys characterised by suffering, despair and confusion, but at some point in the journey, people have found a glimmering of hope and a way forward. In the book, you will meet some very courageous people, many of whom recall encounters with a person who has been a turning point at a time of deep trouble and turmoil which, in many cases has been going on for years. In compiling the stories, we have been struck by the dogged determination and endurance of people trying to live their lives in spite of much adversity, but also by the thought that it is never too late to come across somebody, some idea, that can be the starting point in converting the personal journey into a more optimistic and fulfilling one.

The building of positive relationships is a recurring theme. Relationships with oneself, with other people and with medication. A second theme encompasses Wellness and Recovery Action Plans (WRAPs) and the value of self-management. A third concerns the discovery of people, techniques or environments that are helpful and empowering. All can be discovered within these pages.

We very much hope that you enjoy sharing the stories. In the same way that many of the story-tellers have come across a person or thing which has been key to their personal recovery path, we hope that you come across a story which speaks to you in a positive and an inspiring way.

Laurie Davidson and Linden Lynn
Editors

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Thank you



Rediscovering Ourselves with Recovery Stories

Linden Lynn

“We do not know the future, but we do need to have a direction, a distant star.”¹

Recovery story telling is not easy. These stories are a tribute to the courage and resilience of their authors. People have shared with us their reflections, as they move towards self knowledge and wellbeing. The masks have gone; new voices speak. There is here a fusion of emotion and reason, which carries honesty and hope.

It is hard to explain the intensity of loss, powerlessness and exclusion, which may lie unhealed and unheeded within us, when we are broken by extreme emotional distress. Words are limiting when we try to share those times. Lucidity disappears and anxiety, depression and the self-destruct button can take over. Untended, old feelings can rise up, hot, angry, and out of control. Or they can crush us into inertia, to fracture the selves we strive to become.

We struggle to convey the complexity of our experience; each person's unique 'mystery' – 'my story', 'history, his or her story'. Perhaps that is why we often choose to remain silent. But then we are separate and vulnerable, and there may still be misunderstanding. Explaining our difficulties and differences can enhance knowledge for all of us.

Paradoxically, when we share our stories, we begin to see similarities. However fearful we feel in expressing our truths, we need to tell it how it is. Not only for ourselves, but for those who find or found the road too painful and for those too, who are unable to speak.

Painting, sculpting, music, voices, words all convey meanings. When we engage with these languages to tell personal stories, they become powerful tools to explore experience. Revisiting, from a safe distance, the narrator can make choices about the past, the present and the future. This reflection and reframing is empowering and potentially transformational.

Others too, can look through these windows into worlds we have inhabited and travelled beyond. For those who take the time, these observations help show the things that hinder and the details that help.

These stories have truth for anyone who has experienced neglect, abuse or despair. Also for those who work alongside to aid recovery. They are monuments to the power and survival of the self. Each story teller gains, knowing there are active listeners who care to involve and relate to their story. Over time and by identifying the people and actions that help, healing grows. So each person's story becomes a gift to the emerging self and can strengthen lives.

Like each new dawn, each person's recovery is unique, but it cannot be taken for granted. It requires ongoing vigilance. There are no final destinations in the move from chaos to order; there is more often an attitude of persistent struggle. The contributors are retrieving a sense of personhood, with increased objectivity, determination, discipline, and self management. Progress is increased with hope, love, and belonging within our communities.

These stories shine a light on the work to regain connection, harmony and wellbeing.

We are them. They are us. It is in degree of fortune that we differ.

¹Christian Schiller, 'In His Own Words', London: A&C Black (1979, reprinted 1984, p.106)

Dare to Believe

Bryn Morgan Evans

How can I know at all
I can but hardly see
Where does my story go
I wonder where it will lead.

I need some help to fly free,
Yes, the kind of help I can't see.
It seems nobody cares at all
And there's nobody here but me.

Yet I dared to believe
If you make someone laugh
And you help someone cry
You can look somebody in the eye
You're Somebody.

I'm somebody's daddy
I'm somebody's friend
I am something of a mystery
I'm Somebody.

But I forgot who I am
I can't forget what I see
All the faces that cry my pain
Are the same faces that fly my dreams.

Yea'n I dared to believe
I'm somebody's love
I'm somebody's kin
I am someone like no other,
I'm Somebody.

I'm somebody's cousin,
An' I'm somebody's dreams
I'm not alone so it would seem
I'm Somebody.
Well, one day I will be freed,
By answers I seem to find,
Yes, the synchronised side of me,
Yea, It's locked in this state of mind.

And I dare to believe
If you make someone laugh
And you help someone cry
And you can look at someone in the eye
Then you're Somebody.

Well I've made people laugh,
And I've heard angels sing
I am such a part of everything,
I'm Somebody.

I am not alone so it would seem,
I'm Somebody
Yes be anything you choose to be
You're Somebody.



Tragically, Bryn lost his battle with Bipolar Affective Disorder in December 2006 at the age of thirty four.

He left a legacy of beautiful songs and poems. Bryn wrote this song during a stay on a psychiatric ward and feeling very low.

He looked at himself in the mirror and later composed this song to remind himself that he was not a "nobody". It is an inspiration to others.

Here we celebrate his life and remember his compassion and his honesty. Search for him on MySpace or YouTube, or download his songs from iTunes.

His CD 'Dare 2 Believe' is available from Mark1records.com or record stores.



Better than before

Brenda

My eye catches the green rubber glove hanging in front of the window, with seagull feathers arranged like wings as it gently sways - a piece of art I made a while back. Outside sheep are being sheep, the estuary is beautiful and the distant sea.... I can check the surf at a push if it's clear. I do love the waves, the coastal landscape inspires me endlessly, it's all part of my studio and that's where I play.

I am calm and still, my breath gently fills me, the quietness inside me so very different now.

I know fear, absolute fear, terror, panic and horror. It makes my body tense up just to think of it. My mind always in turmoil, this was just the way of things.

I have always been unsure about time, never the less it passed. I learned to conceal my bleak thoughts - I mean, why would anyone want to know such things? I decided that everyone must be the same and basically I am just not good at dealing with it.

Times when I was paralyzed with fear in never-ending murky places. Reality and perspective would slip out to lunch and I would sink into the deep slimy pit. Nothing was solid, everywhere unclean and distorted. The more I tried to hold on, to find any foothold, the more energy would seep out and I would drain away.

I could never stop thinking. My brain drove me to distraction sometimes. Ideas permanently streaming and rushing about like startled gazelles all at the same time. Hectic and sometimes brilliant thoughts overwhelmed me. Trying to find order was difficult. Making the good ideas happen was the challenge.

Being a single parent and very poor I had no access to formal education so, I set my self projects to give me structure.

I spent a lot of time in libraries and galleries whilst the girls were in school. I studied and I learned.

Eventually I became an Artist in residence, a Community Art specialist, designed several strategies, coordinated numerous events, painted huge murals, created courses and taught in universities. I became a tour guide for a beautiful art gallery, had umpteen studios and art exhibitions, I was even in a band for a while.

I never felt a sense of achievement, never felt satisfied. I was always a failure.

The feelings of isolation and paranoia were unbearable. Suicide, although constantly with me and in fact my friend, was not an option, who would look after my girls? Creativity seemed to be my only hiding place. Years passed. My girls grew.

I moved to Oxford and started a new life. This ought to do it - a new beginning.

I knew I was wrecked, in the end I couldn't work any more. I had crashed so many times, so many horrible things had happened, I needed help.

The psycho stuff? The therapy? I did it to within an inch of its life. I tried to sort it. I learned a lot about my brain, the meaning of life and everything as you do, but emptiness was the way of things. There was no way of it being any different.

I realised that a big fat change of lifestyle was needed. I moved to Devon and explored yet more brain twiddling, intellectual, scientific, and philosophical. It was just not enough. It was not going to go away. It would never, never stop, not ever!

I met Joyce the Occupational Therapist of the community mental health team, who persuaded me to talk to Glenn the psychiatrist. I opened up and talked about some of the more barking aspects of my brain – might as well I thought, nothing to lose. He diagnosed cyclic Bi-polar disorder. It was strange as on one hand it's a relief to find you have an actual condition but on the other it's weird to think you are officially a barmy person.

I got to know the pharmacist on first name terms, eventually Lithium and Sertraline, the most effective and least noxious compounds, were prescribed. I allocated them a gold lamé handbag to live in as a visual prompt.

More recently I heard about the government's 'Direct Payments Scheme' and with Joyce's help I applied. Now Nathan, my pa, works with me; he has just the right skills. He does the accounts and the administration. He is also a musician and teaches me classical guitar, a brilliant distraction for my speeding thoughts.

Reading music is a beautiful new language to me.

And Emily, a fantastic decorator, masseur and cook, helps with all sorts of home maintenance; we have even fixed the shed roof!

All of this support enables me to manage my condition and to make it work for me. It has freed me, given me space to be my best. Not so overwhelmed, not as scared of the mail, of the bank, of a knock on the door. The rooms don't frighten me, the clutter is just an illusion and the pit is easier to avoid. Slowly my life has moved on. The house is in the middle of a field, the large dining room, a studio. Shells all up the place and stuff hanging from the ceiling, all the accoutrements. My three and a half year old granddaughter Millie's pictures are on the door. The latest art projects are in full swing, my

stereo and computer to hand. Artist friends are coming to stay soon and an exhibition is in sight.

Millie left me a singing message this morning and invited me for cake. How fantastic is that! She fills me up. Anyway, I'm off out later to check out the fields for my latest land art piece, a five foot high ball of grass and hay.

At last I am living a life that suits me. And it feels good. I have learned that I cannot be cured. It won't go away. This is me, my personality, but I have got better, better than before. I am lucky.

How many people do you know who live?





Getting my life back

Anon

I'll start with a poem. I wrote this when I was recovering from severe depression:

Depression

Winston's black dog nearly killed me,
brain chemicals and life events pushed
me down the spiral, aided by guilt,
harsh words and self-loathing.
I craved oblivion. Only those
who'd been there knew where
I was going. Emotionless
and out of touch
with reality
I cried for
help...



Drugs and
therapy and
non-judgmental
company
patience, love and
prayers
helped
me climb
back
up again...

...a stronger me, a wiser me,
less critical, and hopefully more
UNDERSTANDING.

Seven years ago, after a few stressful events (I mention these not as an excuse nor a reason, because I don't think you need a reason to become depressed, but because I've noticed that episodes of mental illness are often preceded by adverse life events), I crashed into depression so severe that, despite having a husband and school-aged children whom I adored, I attempted to take my own life. I didn't realise it was depression until later, I just thought that I was the worst person in the world, and the attitude of most of the nursing staff on the medical ward where I was put after the suicide attempt (not talking to me, even when taking my blood pressure, avoiding communication, almost unkind) confirmed this. Their attitude prompted me, much later, to write this poem:

I'm Mad, Not Bad

I'm mad, not bad.

Who gave you the right to judge me?

I'm human, too

What happened to me could happen to you.

If you have never been depressed, you too will wonder how I could have done it, and maybe judge me harshly. If you have been depressed, you will understand that, desperate for sleep and an end to the incessant stream of self critical thoughts going round and round my head, and with no emotions left save self-loathing, I wanted out.

I thought they'd be better off without me, anyway. That's how distorted my thinking had become.

Aaron Beck, the American psychiatrist, considers depression to be a potentially life-threatening illness. It can be. Take note, GPs like the locum who saw me and didn't involve the community mental health team.

It's hard to pinpoint when my recovery began. It might be when I was admitted to Haytor psychiatric inpatient unit, where the staff were so different: accepting; understanding. The occupational therapist who welcomed me apologised for searching my bag. The registrar was thorough, kind, and found some common ground: we'd both studied at the same university. One of the nurses on duty that evening chatted to me for ages. He was, I suspect now, helping me begin to challenge my negative thoughts. When he saw that I was fearful of one of the other patients (I had not encountered severe mental illness before), he gently asked her to leave me to settle in. When I queried whether I needed the antipsychotics I'd been prescribed (I was just about with-it enough to read the side effects), he said he thought maybe not and leave them till I saw the psychiatrist next morning. So I took only Venlafaxine at the maximum dose, and that worked well for me.

For the first few days there I felt fearful, self-absorbed, obsessive, devoid of emotion, plagued by strange thoughts and removed from reality. When the thoughts got too bad, I'd ask to talk to a nurse, and I think this is partly why my recovery was so rapid. One particular nursing assistant, Pauline, was wonderful.

Perhaps my recovery really began when, in a story-writing session with a girl who was anorexic, I said: "I'm a horrible person", and she said: "I don't think you're a horrible person", and I cried for the first time in weeks. Which shows how much we help each other, I guess, in these situations. Nurses contributed too, each in their own way.

When I got home, my CPN was fantastic. We did a lot of cognitive behaviour therapy, and he was so accepting and understanding. He listened carefully to what I was saying, accurately assessed what I needed to recover and put it in place.

I did pottery and a course called "Moving On" at the old Haytor Day Treatment (sadly, no longer there), both really helpful, providing the support of professionals (nurses and occupational therapists) at a time when, just out of hospital, I felt very vulnerable, even with a family at home, and, best of all, a self esteem course, which really consolidated my recovery. The cognitive therapy techniques I learnt and practised in this group I continue to use, and they keep me well.

So what helped most?

- ♥ Acceptance. On the psychiatric ward I felt accepted for how I was, not judged, but encouraged, respected, understood
- ♥ Avoiding people who didn't understand, who I feared might judge me, in the early days back home
- ♥ Professionals listening to what I had to say when I needed to talk, and putting in place what I needed to help me recover
- ♥ Medication. Venlafaxine worked very well for me. It helped me sleep, made me less anxious and lifted my mood. As I recovered, at times I felt euphoric
- ♥ My family, who accepted I was just ill, and loved me just the same
- ♥ Mark, who must be the best CPN ever, and Pauline, the best nursing assistant. Various other nurses whose responses made my behaviour seem normal, and made me be less hard on myself

♥ Most of all, the group work at Day Treatment. The self esteem course, which used cognitive behaviour therapy, was incredibly helpful. I wish I'd had it at eighteen. I saw all of the group move on. We helped each other and some of us continued to do so afterwards. I can now identify and challenge self-defeating thoughts. If I catch myself mind-reading, or discounting the positive, or catastrophising, I get out some paper and write down the evidence against the negative thoughts and IT WORKS! Shakespeare put his finger on it when he said in Hamlet: "There's nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so". I give myself credit for small achievements, and avoid the words "should", "ought" and "must"

♥ Being able to negotiate my discharge from mental health services with my psychiatrist. (I didn't feel ready, so we carried on until I felt confident the time was right)

♥ Being able to see my CPN, (the same one), quickly, several years on, when I was feeling wobbly, probably prevented a relapse

♥ I saw one of the hospital chaplains whilst I was in Haytor and we prayed that I would learn to love myself as God loves me. With the support and therapy I had, I did

I'll finish with a few sayings that I collected while I was recovering that struck a chord with me, and still do:

"If we didn't make mistakes we wouldn't be human"

"Light can shine through a very small hole"

"I've learnt so much from my mistakes I think I'll make another"

"In the depth of winter,

I finally learned that within me there lay an invincible summer"

"Your job is not your worth"

This is a pot I made at Haytor Day Treatment. I'm not very creative and wondered why I was doing pottery, but I really enjoyed it, and the contact with the occupational therapist, who chatted and listened to me while I worked on it. It contains shells I collected on various holidays during and after my recovery.





Looking In, Looking Out

Geof Lynn

Gathering Storms

A few years ago, my wife and I became caught in a maelstrom of emotion and distress, which neither of us understood or knew how to deal with. The time since then has been a slow process of rebuilding our lives together, with the occasional 'glitch' along the way.

We had lived together happily for 35 years, in a pretty equal partnership. We had both had challenging jobs and an active social life. So we were unprepared for the whirlwind that hit us. Looking back, I see many signs which we could have acted on, or tried to understand better, just before that crisis period.

My wife had always experienced life deeply, feeling its ups and downs intensely. I did too, despite an apparently calm mood most of the time. I too, had known deep depression.

But still we ignored the significance of her sleepless nights and agitated expansive behaviour, because we didn't know the dangers we were facing.

I paid lip service to trying to deal with our problems. We went together when my wife saw a psychiatrist, and then a community psychiatric nurse. But it was always in the context of 'her problem'. I now realise my moods and hers are tied together. If she is agitated, then so am I. If I am upset, then so is she. As time went on, our emotions raged higher and higher. As my wife became more unwell, so my own mental state worsened by the day. I was in a fog of confusion, though I didn't see a doctor about it until much later. I just thought we could carry on and see it through, as we had done at similar, though less severe, times in the past.

During that time, when life turned upside down, it was hard to say which of us was the more ill. It could easily have been me who ended up in hospital. I was truly at the end of my tether and unable

to continue in the situation. So I left home, saying nothing. Which was probably about the worst thing I could have done, for my wife's health, even though in my mind it was only for a temporary respite.

We were visited twice by the Crisis Resolution Team. On both occasions, they became convinced that my wife would be OK, even though I had left by the time of their second visit. This was probably because we hid our pain behind a 'front', which was difficult for others to see through. They told us clearly that they were trying to prevent hospitalisation. But within days of their second visit, my wife was in hospital.

She stayed there for three weeks, though she would have returned home sooner, except that I was still too ill to cope with her coming back. My mind was in turmoil and I feared a return to chaos and recriminations.

How It Could Have Been Better

The severity of our problems, my leaving home and my wife's hospitalisation were partly a result of stubbornness and misplaced pride.

I refused to acknowledge the anger, anxiety and despair we were feeling, until it was too late. Much of what happened was avoidable. A fear of washing our dirty linen in public was certainly part of the problem.

We who get mixed up in mental distress often stigmatise ourselves. My wife was offered the option of hospitalisation some time earlier. She was uncertain what to do and looked to me for a response. 'We'll manage', I said. You don't need a bowler hat to have a stiff upper lip.



Dealing with Change

I now realise that acceptance of these difficulties, and a quick response to them, are essential if we are to avoid a repeat of the problems we had.

So how could it have been better? At that time, apart from more realism on my part, we needed more support at home and in the community, and perhaps occasional overnight respite from an impossible situation. This would have helped health service workers understand what was happening at home.

If my wife needed residential care, a 'place of sanctuary', rather than hospital would have been a much better option. A hospital isn't always appropriate for someone in mental distress, and I feel it wasn't in my wife's case. She suffered terribly at that time, but mainly needed a respite from our situation. A place to relax and mend. And a hospital is not the ideal retreat.

More fundamentally, my attitude to mental distress could have been different. I should have accepted more readily that we needed help, and taken it gracefully when offered. But that needed a personal, social and philosophical change, which I am still undergoing.

What Really Helped – People Who Listened

Many different people supported me at that time – CPN, psychiatrist, GP. But there were also others, like the leader of the local mental health team, who I talked to for over an hour. A volunteer from the local Support Group, who listened on the phone for a similar time. A friend who worked in the mental health service. And sessions together with the Family Therapy team, who helped us hugely.

All these people shared one thing. They gave their time generously and they truly listened. I went through a stage of needing to talk about what had happened. I didn't feel much need for new ideas or

helpful suggestions at that point. Just a listener, who would give me the time and engage with my story.

Later, I became interested in recovery, and all that it means for mental health. That was when new ideas came and slowly began to make sense. Recovery approaches offer many new ways forward, but I think hearing and accepting people's stories and hopes for the future will be central.

Afterwards

For months we both walked on eggshells. We were putting our lives back together. But my partner now has a 'mental health' label - and I am now designated a carer/ supporter / enabler. The labels don't do justice to the complexities of our life together.

We had lived together largely successfully before those labels came to have any significance for us. They have been a mixed blessing for both of us. They have enabled us to receive ongoing support from the mental health services, who have been a real lifeline for us.

But they have also changed our social environment. Where previously we were just living a normal life, our lives are now partly defined by an illness. It has subtly altered our relationships, both with each other and with the wider world.

Caring / Supporting / Enabling

I have real misgivings about the role I am now considered (expected?) to fulfil. We lived on the basis of equality before. But now I'm seen as the 'carer', she as the 'person who uses services'.

We are learning all the time, about how to live with this new situation. There are guides, some extensive, some aphoristic. Most of them help, some of the time. "Don't take it personally", "Separate the person from the illness", etc. But actually, as before, my wife supports me, I support her. That's life; labels, exhortation



A Time for Growing

and external support can help, but only we can make a good life for ourselves. We are on the way to doing so.

At the same time, family members and friends do often offer the most consistent help for those in mental distress. Simply because they are with the person for longer than anyone else and know them better. Without carers the health service would collapse. In a report published 2007, the charity Carers UK estimated that carers (of all types, not just mental health related), provided unpaid support worth £87 billion per year.

But supporters / carers also need support themselves, as well as for those they help. Indeed, I imagine that, as in our case, people often become ill together, each in their own way. Soon after our crisis, a carer support worker was appointed locally. I received regular support initially, which helped me hugely, and I also went to meetings for carers, which I found very helpful. I still find it reassuring that help is available at the end of a telephone if I need it.

New Directions

It is hard for both of us looking back at that time. But mostly now we look forward, not back. I try to support my wife's self management strategies, which we often consider jointly. We have regular conversations about how things are going, both individually and in our relationship. And we're more ready to contact the mental health services if there is a 'blip'. Together, we're taking responsibility for both our lives, intertwined as they are.

Meanwhile, we've made many new friends. We with lived experience of mental health issues, on whatever side of the fence we are balancing, are, like everyone else, just trying to make our way in the world. Indeed I think we are often more insightful in many ways, having first hand experience of other ways of seeing the world and our place in it. 'No more us and them, only us'.

We started to attend various support groups and activities. The local Bipolar Support Group has been particularly helpful, especially as supporters and family members (very often the same) are welcome there, which helps in the process of reducing stigma and feelings of exclusion.

Then we began going along to the meetings run by our local involvement workers. This led on to other activities, and we became more involved in working with the health service. We saw that by sharing our experiences, both of distress and of approaches to recovery, we could be of value to others. We were lucky. We were encouraged to find ways to do this and our views and ideas have been valued and nurtured. The new wave of recovery oriented practice has served us well.

And little by little, I realised; recovery is essentially about democracy. It is about the dignity and self determination of each person, to find their own way in the world, building on their hopes and strengths, whatever their problems or distress, with support as needed and/or desired.

Thus, it has the potential to revolutionise services. The traditional relationship between the person and those who may try to help them, is turned on its head. The person is at the centre, and the 'services' serve them, as best they can, if that is what the person wants. All help should aim to empower the person and foster their inclusion and hope.

So, gradually we've found some new directions. Having looked in for a long time, we are looking out again. Life is good.



Should this story be red ?

Fiona Coote

I have no idea who will want to read this story, but here it is, and I hope it will be helpful to someone. I live my life in a maelstrom of colour. People wander around with an aura of small but exposing slices of the rainbow wrapped around them. Music is a march of different shades and mathematics is an exciting mix of grey plus orange' rather than 'one plus six'. I beam out different colours at different moments depending on my mood. But one colour is matriarch and that colour is red: It burns me up inside and shoots through my skin energising and then exhausting everyone close by.

I am synaesthetic, 34 and a doctor hoping to train soon as a psychiatrist. I am fiercely ambitious and trained late in life for a medical career, having previously obtained a Ph.D from Cambridge University and held a 'prestigious' job with a chocolate company with a household name. This is not a boast – it's simply to assert that life as you choose it to be is still possible despite some pretty solid challenges: I also have Bipolar Affective Disorder, Type I, diagnosed a couple of years ago. Lithium keeps me alive and working. It is a miracle drug. When I first became unwell enough to seek medical help (aged 27, BMI about 14 and unable to go outside the house), I was started on a roller-coaster of drugs which didn't touch the numb, black void inside me. I begged my consultant to prevent the depression ever returning again, said I'd do anything to never have to face it. I didn't think I'd survive another time around the block with Sir Winston's persistent 'Black Dog'. Neither did my family.

Lithium stopped all that – well, it made life less chaotic and bearable again. I stopped wanting to sleep with any man I came across, stopped slaughtering my finances with useless purchases and finally decided that the house would survive without another 3am clean. I remembered who I was – I remembered a five year old girl whose view of life was clear, calm and hopeful. Lithium gave me that back.

I have helped myself and others have helped me so much too. Creative and driven all my life, I have made and accepted challenging compromises on the basis of my illness. Lithium has rescued me but at a cost. The

world is now largely shades of grey, although red still makes my heart skip and is magical – just. I survive each day, some of them surprisingly beautiful. I get very tired and need more sleep than many of my medical colleagues, making shift work difficult. But routine really helps, as does the support of my friends and family.

I have a WRAP which is brilliant and helps me remember the good times when low, and the bad times when tempted to party all night and ignore my medication. It reminds me to call my friends and cherish their love and help. It reminds me that I need to eat to survive and to do this I also need to get to the shops once a week. My family have copies, which they use to gently persuade me to chew through my breakfast cereal, take my vitamins and eat the boxes of fruit they lovingly lay out in front of my nose. Prone to emotional swings and excesses when left on my own too long, my family and friends are there – telephone numbers in a WRAP, a short call away to access their care. They come and prise me out of bed to go out into the daylight, absorb its energy and feel a bit human again. I can't emphasise enough the healing that banal, shared occupations offer – from watching endless Agatha Christie DVDs to craft sessions with my nieces. I've listed these too. My memory is appalling when ill and I need these written clues to remind me how to access the path to wellness again.

The final word – work. It's very tough but it is possible. I have told those who need to know at work about my illness (there is a lot of stigma in the NHS). I try to be an emissary – I try to get out there and do a job which not so long ago would have been barred to me on the grounds of my 'insanity'. I am determined to prove it can be done. It's a triumph of WRAP and a product of the love of my family. I want to help end the stigma surrounding mental health problems and I'm hoping that talking about my experiences is a good place to start followed by, I hope, many years as an insider in the world of psychiatry, gently trying to push forward against the tide of misunderstanding prevalent in the mind of the General Public. The world may not be multi-coloured now, but I still love it and the beauty.



The Garden

Rory Griffiths

Underneath this tumbleweed.
Between bush and tree.
Lies, cracked tiles and stubbed out lives.
Faces drawn and bent.
Past parks filled with smacked up cars.
And benches lined with cigarette butts.
Past a door that has just locked and opened.
I sit and paint straight lines.

Many lives must have passed right through here.
Some lucky ones that now live in what is a home in all but name.
Some now playing a completely different, dangerous game.
Some running drugs for bigger bullies than they could ever be.
And some that are as easily as, washing, talking, working and
fucking really is.
Truly set free.

I walked in once with an arresting limp,
announced by a fog horn of a fearful stink.
Stolen away behind a curtain and a quilted throw.
Clutching whores' phone numbers and loving poems,
a writing pad and forbidden headphones.
Saying 'so happy to be here happy and at last alone'.
That these tear clouds weep right to the waters edge.

Cold eyed and knuckle tired I was.
A few days older and a little less travelled than most would
like to admit.
Still dreaming of a long lost pretty girl.
One that didn't age or grow.
A girl that once gave me a long hard look,
then walked away with someone else.

Out in this garden I sat most days of any week.
With its neglected courtyard and abandoned flower beds.
Four walls around me with an open sky to pray to and beg.
A broken water fountain in the middle that muttered away.
Crowded plants all coloured the same.
A spider crawling unnoticed up a fellow patient's arm.
Waiting with me out here away from a busy smoking yard.
Due to be released today or tomorrow or some time next year.
Preoccupied by a something that simply isn't there.
Grinding any kind of hope I still had, bare.

Here I knew it really could be a case of no more look behind.
No more whisperings of 'let's go back, let's hide'.
Sharing a brief time with the desperate, the homeless and the lonely,
should have been the making of me.
Instead I am not sure which was more helpful amongst the veiled
threats and bullshit lies of a life 'inside'.
Those hours spent in that garden, reflecting and repairing.
Or those casually concealed sleeping pills.



Jacqueline's Story

Jacqueline

I lost my mum at the age of five. She committed suicide.

I have been on anti-depressants since the age of 8 years, on and off.

I have got four children. I have one daughter living up North with two grandchildren.

I became ill about five years ago, seriously ill. My children were admitted into temporary foster care and I was taken into Haytor. I suffered a breakdown and I was in Haytor for 28 days, spending Christmas there. I was diagnosed with psychosis, with manic depression and anxiety.

I have to take about four tablets a day. Sometimes I feel that things are very negative. I live quite an isolated life.

I was discharged by the services, but I am going to go back to my GP to ask to be referred again.

I have just one son living at home now. The other two live with their father. I some times think the reason the other two left was because they felt bullied by their older brother, who was smoking cannabis and drinking. Because I had mental health difficulties, I found it difficult to give them guidance and enough boundaries.

I see my children twice a week and I ring them every night. I see a friend Debbie and sit with her. I go to church on Sundays.

I find it hard at times to do things in the house. I get scared of bathing at times.

The things that have helped me to get better are:-

- Taking my medication, even though it makes me sleepy until the middle of the morning.
- Meeting with my support worker twice a week.
- Help from the Cool House.
- Seeing my GP; I normally see him once a month.

The Cool House in Torquay is good because there are other people who have similar problems. It is the only way I have got of seeing people when I feel isolated. It helps me to feel better.

I would like to grow more flowers.





I love my Life

Maria

I love my life!! I've a lovely home, a great job, a wonderful partner & fantastic & supportive family and friends. But it wasn't always this way.

In the depths of postnatal depression I've been to hell - but importantly I've come back again. In fact that's a phrase my mother uses - "We've got our Maria back again".

It's been a long and tumultuous journey, for me & for everyone that was in my world at the time. I've seen numerous psychiatrists, psychologists, mental health nurses, been in psychiatric units 8 times, once for 6 months, been diagnosed and mis-diagnosed & even underwent a course of ECT in the depths of my despair.

Recovery wasn't a word that I used at the time. My family didn't think I'd "make it". I didn't want to recover. I never believed it possible - no longer wanting to live in this empty, cold world, I attempted suicide many times. I would like to offer hope to anyone who's reading this & can relate to the depths of despair that I felt for that period of time RECOVERY IS POSSIBLE!!!

Looking back, the lack of hope led me to sabotage others' best efforts to help me. I would come off medication suddenly & impulsively - claiming it wasn't working. I'd cut & burn myself so that I could reconnect with the physical world. I was lost.

Five years later I reached the bottom, the world around me had crumbled away - I had lost my husband, lost my home, lost my status as a wife & full time mother & also the financial security that had accompanied that.

Having been discharged from Riverside (a psychiatric intensive care ward, where, on level 4 observations, I'd been within touching distance of my nurse), I was placed at St Maur, a psychiatric rehabilitation home.

It was here that the word recovery was talked about. Indeed within the first week of my stay, my counsellor said that she felt "hopeful" for me. It made me sit up & think! It seemed incredible that someone could feel hope for me whilst I felt none. But the thing about hope is that it's catching and whilst I was very ill there was a glimmer, a spark in the dark tunnel, of a chance, of hope. The staff at St Maur were utterly fantastic - devoted to their work and genuinely caring. It led me to write this poem;

Me!

Looking down on a gathering I can see my friends and myself,
We're laughing and joking and smiling aloud.
But my smile is a mask that veils my thoughts,
My laughter the brittle edge of morbid satire.
My answers prevaricate and hold cryptic clues
As elusive responses defend from intrusion
Keeping my seclusion in a safe sequestered place.
Concealed from perception ubiquitous fear prevails,
Dense and pervasive, penetrating the core of my being.
A mess of a mass of unsavory thoughts, puerile at source;
Rejection, resentment and dread of abandonment.
Unwittingly I sanctioned their tumorous growth
And soon they were budding into shoots of hostility and distrust.
Regularly nourished with torment and neglect,
They germinated and flourished into a great big

SELF HATE.

Looking down on the gathering I observe my reticence and pain.
Yet I'm secure in the knowledge that the tubers are threatened

By their noxious opponents,
SELF-RESPECT & SELF-WORTH



The deep dark tunnel was always pulling and seducing me. I knew that to escape it's entrapment I had to fight for recovery and believe in hope.

It was at St Maur that I learnt about the wellness recovery programme and with the help, consistent and constant support and understanding of my counsellor, the manageress and my therapist, who used to visit me weekly from the community mental health team, I made strides towards turning my life around. Emotions and feelings were normalized and I learnt helpful techniques to manage my recovery. From the basic and practical, to the fundamental desire of mine to be well enough to see my children grow up and to be a part of their lives.

So, at St Maur I maintained regular contact with my children, I kept old friends, made new ones, I learnt to find peace within myself. I clambered, fought, leapt and occasionally slipped on my own path towards wellness and recovery.

I'll always be grateful to those who supported me in desperate times and who helped me get the "old Maria back". However it takes determination and resolve. I had to swap my negative energy and force for positive and hopeful aspirations.

If I can do it – YOU CAN TOO!!!!!!!



I drew this as a flaming furnace. At a later stage of recovery I saw this as a blossoming flower.

I'm now at a new crossroads in my life, about to buy a new house with my partner & create a new home together. Whilst I'll never forget the harrowing & desperate experience of postnatal depression, my recovery has meant that I can now wholly embrace life again, with all its ups and downs. I love my life!!



Telling My Story

David

I have chosen to share my story, to give hope to people, that you can survive mental illness and change your life. I could still be lying in bed to this day – or something even worse.

I was never a confident person. I had dyslexia and, in the sixties this was very difficult. I had an older brother – just a year older than me – who was good at everything and he always got a lot of praise. I went to my local school, but on parents' evenings the teachers would always compare me with my older brother. This was because when I tried to read, the letters would all move about on the page and back then schools didn't understand about dyslexia.

They moved me out of my mainstream class and into the remedial class where there were naughty children who burned desks and smashed windows. This environment was away from the main school which caused my self esteem to drop and made me feel very detached from other people.

This also had a very bad effect on my relationship with my father who understandably believed everything my teachers told him. He judged me differently after that and for years he never called me by name and that hurt. I look at people as seeds, as you are growing up, if your parents are horrible to you, you still carry the baggage with you through your life.

I had an accident in my early childhood and I damaged my right arm, I went for quite a number of operations. My right arm although badly injured was still useable. When I left school I really wanted to be an ambulance driver. I went for an assessment and I sailed through the practical tests, I found them very easy. But when it came to the written exam I could not do it, the examiner asked me if I was English. Although at the time this was humiliating I can look back on this now and have a little giggle to myself.

Due to the injury to my right arm as a child I had to have more surgery in my mid twenties. It was during this time that I met my wife.

The surgery at this time went wrong and I suffered a post operative complication called Reflex Sympathetic Dystrophy which affects the nervous system and causes immense pain.

Over the following 10 years I had to attend a weekly pain management programme. This consisted of physical treatment as well as medications. Although these treatments worked to a certain degree I was never free from pain. The only thing that kept me going through this was my wife and children who always supported me.

The year 2000 hit crisis point for me. I had a Neuro Stimulator fitted to help with pain control and it was at this time that I became clinically depressed. A feeling of darkness and despair so overwhelming at times that I did not even wish to open my eyes.

I turned against myself and got terribly depressed. I was going to bed till two or three in the afternoon, then picking the kids up and going straight back to bed. I was in total depression.

Eventually though, when I was at my very lowest point, I began to get help from a skilful Mental Health Support Worker, Mark. He encouraged me to believe in myself and even though it took me a while I eventually began to slowly pick up the pieces of my life. He put me in touch with Jacek who suggested a 10 week 'Back to Education' course at college.



'Well, if you can do it, I can do it'

He said, 'The only criterion we ask, is that you attend the 10 week course, every week. We meet up at the library. We take you to the college. Would you do that?' I said, 'Yes', and started the course. But I didn't go back and got depressed again.

Jacek called me again and said, 'Look – can you come up? It would be good for you; ten weeks, that's all we ask'. My wife said, 'Look, I don't want you to give this up. You've got to sort yourself out. You're worth more than you think you are'.

I went to the college. I walked along a corridor and it said 'Media Suite'. I looked through the window; it was like a sweet shop, all these beautiful machines. And I thought, 'God – would I love to do that; but I won't be able to get on this course'. I said this to Jacek, and he said, 'you don't know that'.

I was asked to attend an interview with the head of the Media department, I was really nervous. He asked me what I had done in my life and I explained that I had done a number of manual jobs, including being a bricklayer, for which I got a City and Guilds qualification, although I had not worked for fifteen years because of depression and my physical disability with my arm.

He picked up on my dyslexia and my low reading age which he said might also be a problem. However, I had brought along all the video tapes which contained film I had shot of my children. After seeing them he said, 'If half the students had your energy and commitment, we would be laughing'. So he said, 'I am willing to give you a go.' I thought, 'Right!' I came home and I felt like WOW!

I went on the course. Our tutor was a lovely lady, she was an absolute angel. She said, 'You've got talent in abundance here', and made me feel wonderful, like somebody had injected me with a happy drug. So now she thinks I'm good; I've got my wife thinking

I'm good; I've got the head of department thinking I'm alright.

I started the course doing music videos and I got distinctions. Then I did Art and got an overall distinction. By the end of the year, I got overall distinctions for all my work, because I was dedicated, worked hard and was lucky to have fantastic support from my family.

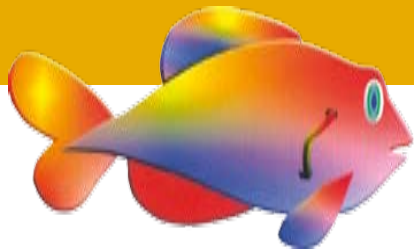
I was also able to get help with my dyslexia at college. A great lady helped scribe my notes and typed my essays from my dictation. So I started getting distinctions for my written work as well as my practical work.

At the end of the year, the teachers voted me 'Outstanding Student of the Year'. I was mentioned in the College Year Book . Yes – an actual book! And I was given a £20 Amazon voucher. My tutors said, 'Because you've done so well on your Media Year 1, would you like to do the 2 year HND course which is equivalent to 4 'A' levels?'

I still have bad days, but I enrolled for the HND course. I am doing "Moving Images" and am nearly at the end of my first year. I've directed a murder mystery for the college and I've made a music video dedicated to my daughter called "My Girl" and I've learnt a technique called "Stop Motion".

My tutors say I might get other distinctions this year. They still say that my practical work is amazing and they give me extra time to do written work and I have support assistants to help with my dyslexia.

My children have noticed that Dad is not so vacant. I will sit down and relax, even though I still get a bit edgy. I will watch a film right the way through, like we did last night. We sat in as a family, which normally I would never have done. It has even inspired my wife to go back to college and she is doing accountancy now. She said, 'Well, if you can do it, I can do it.'



Mark and his colleague Jacek believe in me so much now, that when Jacek has new people coming in, who aren't sure, he comes and gets me to talk to them. When people say, 'Oh you don't know what it's like to be in the dark', I say, 'Well, I've been there, honestly, believe you me.'

Going back two years, I was like the thing out of "The Little Mermaid". You know, where Ursula shrinks King Triton and he becomes a shrivelled person. That's how I felt, head down, didn't want to be around people. I feel now that it's changing back. The nicest thing my wife has said to me is, 'You're getting back to the guy I met in hospital.' That means a lot.

Music has been important to me. I've always been into my music and when I'm feeling down, my music never lets me down. I love my music. I put my head set on and even if I'm lying in bed, it will inspire me. I can also talk more openly with my wife; I have a better support network, because I've opened myself up.

There are people out there to help you, but if you are clammed up and feeling sorry for yourself, no-one can get in and help you, not unless you want to be helped. I think that is the main thing; I want to achieve greater things. I believe even though I'm now nearly forty eight, that there is still a lot of life left in this old dog – and I'm going to prove it.

It's sometimes easier to go to bed and take the easy option, than it is to get out there and fight back. When you are depressed everything seems to be compounded. I wouldn't answer the phone a couple of years ago. Now I can pick it up and speak to people. I was nervous in case any one was going to confront me. There are changes like that because of the confidence that's growing in me. Through the fact of having a few things go right. There are weeks when things are a bit of a roller coaster ride and that will most probably carry on, because I think I am a person who feels my emotions deeply and sometimes I take things to heart too much.

I also think when you do talk to someone who has mental health issues and they've been in the same place as you, even though it is sad that it has happened to them, I take comfort from that because I know I'm not alone. When you're unwell like this, you feel totally alone.

You feel selfish, because you don't want to be around people; you're in your own bubble. Meeting up with other people with mental health concerns, like when I did the pottery course at the day centre makes such a difference. I met a guy there who was so lovely. He inspired me and he made me realise this could happen to anyone.

I'm upset that they closed the day centre. It seems such a shame. I think these places are important at a particular time. So that people

...when I'm feeling down, my music never lets me down

with the same issues can mix with one another. You don't just go there to make a pot. You go there to meet other people who've got the same problems. I try to take things from others who have had issues in their life and try to say, 'Well I'm not alone here and there is a better support system out there when we open ourselves to it.'

I want to embrace life and make the most of it, because you don't know what's round the corner the next day. And, you know, my whole outlook on life, instead of wanting to get rid of myself, I'm now worrying about surviving. And that's a good sign, because I used to do daredevil things when I was fairly ill, because I didn't care whether I died. But the other day, just for instance, I took my son to Exeter. It was raining and I slowed right down in the car because I felt, I don't want to die. And that's a lovely feeling, that you enjoy being alive.

There's no way I could have achieved all I have without the support of my wonderful family. Particularly my lovely wife who has always fought my corner and given me loads of love and encouragement.

However the support I have got from the Mental Health Team, the college and great friends I have made along the journey have been invaluable and I couldn't have done it without them either. It is because of all these people that my life, although it still has its ups and downs, has become better and better.



"David was an asset to all production team work in the media department during his First Diploma in Media course. He made outstanding progress and achieved distinction level work. He is highly motivated, enthusiastic and passionate about media and film production."

From the Award for Outstanding Achievement 2008

it still has it's up and downs, has become better and b



You Always Have The Power

Dawn Powell-Morris

"You've always had the power" - Glenda the Good Witch – The Wizard of Oz

Let's just say that I have experienced extreme mood swings, since I can remember. Even as a child I remember feeling things so very deeply, which was challenging living in a house that didn't do emotion and used negative jibes as humour and to keep you motivated. My suicide attempts were considered the work of a drama queen. I remember being told that as a very young child I was in trouble for something, so my mum smacked my hand, and with eyes full of tears but also fire I held out the other hand in order to show that it didn't hurt and that I wasn't going to be beaten down, and so it went on for some time my mum slapping my hand and me holding out the other again in defiance. I never did discover who won that round but I like to think it was me.

I'm sharing this story so as to let you know why I have taken the path I have in my recovery. Nothing happens in this life by accident, I personally believe that we are here to have experiences and that that is what life is about. A series of experiences and the choices we make around them. I have often questioned who decided that my way of being is me being unwell? That my behaviour is not normal? I'm talking about the point of origin of the experience of mental health. I'm not in denial, by the way, I just refuse to view it negatively and use the negative labels that are attached to it, you see that is my choice too. When we resist something it persists. So to resist how I'm feeling and to try to carry on as 'normal' that to me is denial. To keep trying to squeeze down my emotions because they are not appropriate or right. Again who decided what is normal? I'm not a paragraph in a text book or a piece of analysis, nor am I a statistic. I am me with all my experiences up to this point. I'm unique and I'm comprised of many wonderful things, and as we know there is always an opposite, but it's how we view those opposites and how we treat them.

To hide them and try to pretend that they aren't there just creates a pressure cooker effect and they have to blow out somewhere. My worst times have been after a long period of 'holding on'. Of trying to be brave or pretend that all is well, to appease a world that doesn't 'do' people's emotions. The pressure has just become too much and then darkness

and an inability to function, an internal rage at life, a rage at me. Rage, now that's a scary word to 'them', they never understood that they were safe, my rage was only ever at myself. The only thoughts of harm were to myself, and if I really wanted to get at them it would be to end my life and see them suffer that they had driven me to it. The thing is I kept the rage to myself and the intense pain in my chest that sometimes felt like I was having a heart attack. The hurt in my throat in swallowing it all down just so as to appear to be functioning normally, best we don't upset 'them'.

My first bursts of pressure build-up ended in unsuccessful suicide attempts. Looking back at them now they were actually a way to release the pressure to get rid of this pain in my chest. All that emotion. Teenage self-harm didn't really work too well, nor Bulimia or panic attacks. A stint on medication just knocked me out and then when awake the anxiety was too much which brought on further panic attacks. That's when that same little girl who wouldn't back down came back and decided that I was going to deal with this thing. Fighting it was not the way. Fighting is about resistance and as I said earlier that which you resist persists. I asked out loud for help, I don't know who I was talking to but I just said out loud, let me deal with this thing.

What is my lesson? If there is one. Acceptance is my answer. Acceptance of who I am. Just in that alone it alleviates some of the pressure that starts to build. Acceptance that I may be having an off day and that that is ok. I don't 'freak out' in Tesco, in fact in all my 40 years on this planet I don't think I've seen anyone 'freak out' in public. Yet it is something that I was scared of and I know that those that don't understand mental health are wary of it too. When they think about it they haven't seen anyone 'freak out' either. So one basic myth dispelled for me. I can feel these feelings and it's ok to let them come up and through me, let them out. Where there's release there can't be a pressure build up. If that means sitting and crying all day then that's what needs to happen. The thing is that I found once I surrendered to it I couldn't maintain it for long periods and noticed that it came in short bursts. The body cannot physically cry for hours on end. Intense emotion can't stay either.



I have learnt that it is not just about mental health but that it is a holistic thing, because that's what we are. We are not just our minds our bodies our emotions our souls, we are all contained in the one unit and if one thing is neglected then the rest suffers. In a society that wants to medicate people in to 'normality' whatever that may be, the solution can be found closer to home by finding who YOU really are and discovering the creative depths of yourself. To get comfortable with who you are, and then love who you are, as you are right now. Know that God, Life, The Universe, what you may call it doesn't make mistakes.

Here are a few suggestions based on what I know for sure that works for me, 100% of the time. As I stay true to these things there are no great crashes in to the dark any more. I love myself too much now to not honour myself and do whatever it takes to keep me healthy and happy as I deserve to be. Love your body. What fuel do you run on? What food do you eat? Food triggers chemical reactions in your body; these chemical reactions can cause us to feel a certain way. Energetic, lethargic, happy or depressed. Our stomach is referred to as the second brain. Scientists have found a knot of brain nerves in the digestive tract. It is thought to involve around 100 billion nerve cells - more than held in the spinal cord. Also, 95% of all serotonin (the happy chemical) in the body is in the gut, where it triggers digestion. Nerve cells in the gut also use serotonin to signal back to the brain. Serotonin is considered to amongst other things do the following:

A brain chemical (neurotransmitter) that helps to regulate your mood. A lack of it may lead to a depression.

Regulate sleep and appetite, mediate moods, and inhibit pain, induce a sense of relaxation and drowsiness, possibly associated with fatigue; may also depress appetite. Therefore, it figures that what you put in your mouth affects your entire body.

Your body needs exercise. It's not only a great distraction, it doesn't just get you out of the house and moving it gets you out of your head. There is growing evidence that exercise can be effective in improving mental

well-being via improved mood and physical self-perception. Exercise produces a chemical chain reaction in the body, increasing the feel good endorphins in the brain which produce our 'natural highs'. If I don't exercise regularly I feel a big difference in my mood.

Change your perspective

Life is only as we CHOOSE to see it; there is no reality only our perception. Our experience of life is seen through the filters that we use to view our experiences. Really, is the glass half empty or half full? Because it's both, you can see all that is bad in your life, the world or you can choose to see all that is good. Trust me the good is there, but you have to choose to see it, you have to find it and make it.

Choose your media

I filter my media input. I don't read newspapers, when did you last see a newspaper that told you of the millions of people that got home safe to their loved ones yesterday, who still have their jobs and their health? Bet you know the one person who didn't though. Sadly, this stuff doesn't sell, so they don't print it. The News doesn't bother broadcasting it, because it's, well....just not news. Do you really need to watch or read about other people's misery that is passed off as news or entertainment? Other people's joy, or comedic capers, that's what this life's about. Look around you; there are many alternatives to the mainstream misery that is pumped out at you 24/7, but you've got to want to find them.

We are individuals and one size does NOT fit all

Physically and mentally we have similar characteristics but individually we are unique with varying talents. It is very important for us to find an outlet in which to express those talents, whether we make it our life's work, or they become our hobbies. We have to have something outside of ourselves that we can put ourselves in to. Find that which you love to do, which is deeply personal to you and honours those things that are you and you alone. E.g. I love to write. My husband writes music and performs it. We have to have something that we are working towards that brings us joy. Love what you do. Without passion and joy the spirit starts to shrivel.

Have goals for your life both personally and in your chosen career. Direction is so important. Without that we drift aimlessly. A vision for your life is a really important thing for the human psyche, without it depression will fill the void. 'Nature abhors a vacuum', lack of vision leaves a big gap. Goals have to be thought about and planned, and more importantly you have to allow yourself to believe that you are firstly worthy of achieving those goals, and that you can. We have to actively participate in the creation of these goals, and work on finding our belief if it's not running at full power at the outset. Just start, and then allow the belief to come, don't listen to the naysayers. Who declared their opinions to be more valid than yours in the first place? What qualifies them to decide whether your goals and vision for your life are right? When you are focusing on your goals and your dreams you can't be focusing on what's not working.

Be Willing, above anything else you need to be willing, that's the key factor in this. Have a willing heart and a willing mind. Be willing to move past something, to seek help, to view it differently. Then use that willingness to move towards something, something bright, to acquiring the belief that you deserve it and can have it, whatever IT is for you. Basically be willing to do whatever it takes to pull yourself through something that is causing you pain.

Forgiveness of yourself and others. Not to be confused with accepting others' behaviour as OK and right. Forgiveness means to not hold on to something in order for you to move on through it. To surrender being right, hurt or indignant etc. Forgiveness lets us move on and live our life. Forgive yourself.

To **be in the 'NOW'**. We cannot change the past, we cannot accurately predict the future, all we have is the Now, this minute. In the minute there is no anxiety, fear, stress, in the moment there is only peace. Thoughts of the past or the future don't help us, they are out of our control and leave us feeling powerless as we can not act on what has been and what has not yet transpired. We can mentally create a thousand different ways we could have done something, and the same for what may come at us in a future that hasn't even happened yet.

We have to **LEARN** to do this, to live in the moment, to be at peace.

Be conscious of your thoughts. Check in with yourself what your self talk is. If it's negative in any way then focus on your 'positive' thoughts. Have an armoury of things to sidetrack yourself with. Plan them when you are up rather than try to grab them in the downtimes. Choose your thoughts and the pictures you make in your head, make sure that they are empowering. These have to be practised and available to us in preparation for when we start back down old thoughts that don't serve us.

Embrace all that we are

Acknowledge what we perceive to be our dark side, those parts of us that we have deemed to be bad or that we have been taught is not right. That's 'their' opinions. When we understand those parts of us that we try to keep hidden we can find that they actually can serve us in a positive way if we **CHOOSE** to see them. Trying to not be what we are is exhausting and can drain us physically and mentally. It's like trying to keep an inflatable ball held under the water; it's takes up a lot of our focus and physical energy. Let it go.

Balance

That is what this is all about. It's finding your balance. It's about finding the balance in all areas of your life. Balance is everywhere, in everything, and what happens around us is life just trying to restore its balance, that's what it does. In our sadness we get to find our happiness, in pain we come to understand love, through hardship we can then understand comfort. Everything has its opposite and when you know that you see that all that goes on is the scales of life adjusting until they are level once again. When our lives aren't working life is telling us we too are out of balance, it is then our job to restore it, to keep going until...

Educate yourself about you; understand who you are without judgment. Educate yourself as to the options that are available for you and what other people have found that works for them, try it, some you'll win, some you may lose, but that's ok because this is about your journey, through this life.



Living to Dance

'Re-finding My Own Space' 2009

Linden Lynn

T.S. Eliot wrote, "At the still point of the turning world.... there the dance is."

I struggle to find this dance, this harmony. There are no absolute truths here, more memories that stay with me. Mostly, I loved colour, ideas, vitality, except when I collapsed, drained and empty. In my mind, I was an artist and dancer, in the real world a worker, a teacher, adviser for education, wife, mother, and campaigner.

I was imaginative, enquiring and always striving. At times, I felt like a whirling dervish, spinning ever faster, trying to be everything to every-one, trying to prove myself, when actually most of the time I was doing just fine. Such a life meant I was/am not always fully in control. Seeking and finding the still quiet point, at the centre, where we note each breath, in and out, has been crucial to my recovery.

It is a point of contemplation and stillness, a different dance. It has felt like a life and death struggle, to regain my sense of self and direction following an onslaught of illness. Now, I can find some inner peace, and things are safer. I allow myself to be in the moment. I have learnt partly through the help of others, partly through meditation, reading and reflection, but mostly through realising I have choices, using daily self management and regaining a sense of purpose.

Acceptance

Some things are hard; I learnt I no longer have constant levels of ability. My functioning varies, according to my state of mind. Sometimes, I have greater clarity; sometimes my mind is clouded. I am inclined to panic, try too hard and am oversensitive. I know now that I endanger myself when I hide severe distress. I know and accept I have to monitor my responses.

Time is a healer; I have begun to feel hopeful and am now able to gain from advice, educate myself, assert my needs, share what works for me, and make progress. I know the importance of living in the present, unafraid of past or future. My attention and concentration have improved through my focus on the here and now.

To get here, I have had to change my mind. We can talk easily in conversation, about changing our minds about this or that, a plant for the garden, paint for a room, any number of exciting or humdrum things. But for me, changing my mind has been immensely challenging. Perhaps because previously, I was too busy to listen to the voice within, or too frightened of my inner world. I turned a 'blind eye'.

Yet, changing my mind, has transformed my understanding, perception and interpretation of events. I have had to consider my inner thoughts and revisit things that were and are important. I have done this with help and the purpose of trying to be well. We only have one life.

We can give it up to regret, confusion, despair, any number of thoughts, which



'The Dance' Watercolour 2009

stop us moving forward, then these become lost years. Or we can open up; take on the struggle, taking as much responsibility for ourselves as we are able.

Hardest for me, travelling this path was recognising that within me lay a fiery shard, which shone out through an icicle eye, and that I turned it worst, on those I loved the most. At times on others, but also myself.

Over the years, I have experienced excruciating episodes of depression, which went on for ever. More recently there were highs related to medication changes, leading to hospitalisation, which was devastating. I was later diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Despite caring people, hospital felt terrifying, largely because I was so raw. I absorbed the pain of others, like a sponge. It was as though I had no skin.

I see a need for a sanctuary, as an alternative to hospital, and others who have walked this path before to offer support. I also felt a stigma that society brings and one which we inflict on ourselves. Over time I've learnt I am ultimately responsible for my own well being.

Early Life

My life began as a silent watcher. I was often separate and fearful. My young parents lived on the Presceli Mountains amidst the blue stone, hillside rocks, used for the standing stones at Stonehenge. It was remote, they were idealistic. They hoped the beauty and wilderness would sustain them, but they were living on love and fresh air. When poverty came through the door, love prosaically left home. Following my birth, my mother was hospitalised for six months with severe post natal depression. She was extremely vulnerable and received numerous treatments with electric

convulsive therapy, un-anaesthetised. She had two babies born within a year; my sister being just eleven months older than me. Unable to cope, their dreams shattered, my father fled to an Ashram in India.

My early life felt unsafe. Books more than people, became my safe and loyal companions. I sensed ambiguity toward me because my birth precipitated family breakdown. There were loving relationships, but there was also confusion. I thought I could stop the impact, but ultimately, I could not. I didn't meet my father again. But my vulnerability increased when he died at the age of thirty eight. Unresolved, the past became part of my present. These early years left unhealed wounds. Revisiting with experienced help, has allowed me to reinterpret events. I recognised my inner child, who felt neglected at times, clamouring for attention. I learnt what happened was no-one's fault. It was a revealing and restorative process. I recently learnt that my father died after overdosing on medication, leaving a new partner and three week old son. Tragic as this was, nothing had felt worse than an over-active imagination left to fester for decades.

Getting Better

The recovery journey is ongoing. It's about a learning, collaborative attitude and tools that work. I am encouraged by trusting personal and professional relationships. I am an equal partner in my own care.



'Falling down' - Acrylic 2008

The recovery approach is enabling. In discussions with family and health practitioners, my perceptions are valued and I am able to influence change.

When I was severely ill, helpless, there were still health decisions to be taken. I was glad when people took time to consult me; it reminded me I was human and had knowledge about what helped and what didn't.

I found I resented hugely, things that happened without my agreement or behind my back.

I have had opportunities to share an account of my recent past with people who experience distress, supporters and staff. It shows aspects of my life and what I learnt about managing my health. The follow-up discussions have been validating, and the feedback suggests participants gained. But some felt I was not typical of those who suffer. There were staff when I was in hospital, who said I shouldn't be there. These views need exploration. Generally, as people caught by such overwhelming emotions, we are much the same, terrified at losing our minds and struggling to repair and reclaim our lives. The main difference is the point where we stand, right now.

I have been lucky, meeting others who could give me hope. I can speak up, probably because I had a fulfilling life in education. But that doesn't make me different from others experiencing distress. Nor does it lessen how it feels when I'm at my worst. My pain was and can be very real. Such illnesses can devastate any-one's life.

Understanding

Now I am becoming less haunted. Hell was a void, with many scenarios; I stopped functioning each time it found new ways to entrap me. I still live with ongoing self doubt and I struggle with

a mood disorder. Before I became so ill, I had been reasonably disciplined in my life, perhaps to compensate for my perceived shortfalls. This was long before I knew the uncouth beast of Bipolar was planning to burst forth. I would like to say, when it happened, I grappled it to the ground and stood triumphant, knowing I am more than it. But I didn't, I denied its existence and I was crumpled. I have had to remain constantly vigilant, knowing it can easily become bigger than me. I now recognise my limitations and possibilities and manage it daily. I cannot ignore it, when it creates uproar. If I recognise it as a ferocious beast that needs taming, I can adapt how I respond and that way, the beast shrinks a little and I can keep it at a safe distance. I have learnt enough self management to keep myself safe, for the time being at least.

When I respect it, I can learn from it.



Understanding comes at a cost, going with the ebb and flow of living in a slightly parallel universe. Help has come from two sources, things I receive from others and things I have learnt about myself. A key support was from the NHS, where people listened, responded and treated me with courtesy, over many years. Sometimes the suggestions worked, sometimes they didn't, sometimes I got worse, but we continued until clarity about the situation prevailed. I don't know at what point it became apparent to the medical world what was wrong. But it took a long time for that information to filter through to me. When it did, it was inadvertently.

It was only when I understood what I'd been told, took my experiences seriously and accepted I had a right to a safe inner life that I began to get on track. I am grateful to those who retained their humanity, despite what must be the temptation of compassion fatigue; particularly my husband and current doctors, nurses, support staff and friends within the health service.

I have gained from an NHS Mindfulness course and many have wished me well. I have received much kindness and knowledge, including from fellow travellers from the Bipolar Support Group.

I have amazing friends who have not turned their backs, as well as some lost through this illness. Finally, I am lucky to have the love of my husband, three children, their partners and wider family. These connections have made a difference. Active listening from others has acted like a mind hug and has helped me regain strength.

Partly recovery is about 'emotional intelligence': identifying the skills we have or need, and maximising things that help us feel better. I know now that I can choose how I view things, choose how I do things and I can become more aware of how I feel and respond. I try to be kind to myself.

Things that help me include creative activities. Painting and sculpting help. I make daily changes; like not doing too much that is over stimulating, not getting overtired or overemotional. I am careful with alcohol. I had/have to parent myself. I have an up-to-date recovery plan. I created a Wellness Toolkit, which is an eclectic set of index, advice cards, which serve me well. The first card reads 'ABC, Action, Before Crisis', another 'We should aim to be gentle and generous with ourselves and with others'. When very poorly, I made and used Vulnerability cards - Green, Yellow and Red - so people supporting me knew when I was OK, unsure or needed to withdraw. I use the computer, Holosync meditation, a light box to counteract Seasonal Affective Disorder and I exercise regularly. I also take Omega 3, several grams every day, and other medications, if things become problematic. Mostly I am regaining self belief.



Regaining Hope

Acceptance of past events means I am not at war with myself. Knowing my limitations means I try not to beat myself up about mistakes or what I can't change. I have learnt to put my health first, safety first.

Mr Pleasure, Mr Pain and Mr Me

Bryn Morgan Evans

The notion of Recovery can be difficult for some who care for others with complex and enduring mental illness. Sometimes, we feel that significant progress can't be made. But in my work, I spent time with children with profound handicaps and know from first hand, change can be happening, which is not immediately visible. Humanity is at its best when it holds hope.

Being offered simple choices is empowering. Everyone is entitled to the best possible life, where they can make decisions. Progress is made with sensitivity and time. To be offered hope through practical interventions is to be shown a future. Sometimes it takes a long time before internal change shows. Like waiting for water to boil, though nothing appears to happen, eventually, there is a dramatic change and liquid turns to steam. So it is, when people are profoundly unwell, if they are given the right support, with time and appropriate interventions, progress is made.

The recovery approach offers partnership and potential. I know now to take care how I judge others before I have walked a mile in their shoes.



This painting, 'We are all in the same boat', reminds me we are more the same than different. The title comes from a G.K. Chesterton quote, "We are all in the same boat on a stormy sea, and we owe each other a terrible loyalty."

There is no up if there's no down,
No freedom if we don't know bound,
Right means zip if there's no wrong,
As short is sweet all thanks to long.
Light can't exist unless there is dark,
Like peace needs war to bench its mark,
White is nothing without black,
A see-through front not even backed!
Feeling lost empowers found,
As silence owes its life to sound.
Reflect that days are born of night,
While acknowledged dim best measures bright.
My pleasure stands proud with my pain,
(a mental picture . . . quite insane!)
But we three made friends to best survey
How far I've come since yesterday!
Now happiness is all I seek
For me and everyone I meet.
So if a nightmare rears his head,
I shake his hand, admire his threads,
And weave them in life's tapestry,
(My hobby steeped in meant-to-be),
It rids me of my old disguise
To speak my truth, not gossip lies,
So I play the hand of cards I'm dealt,
For without the bad . . . good can't be felt!
Experience! That's why we're here,
To laugh, to cry, to embrace our fears.
Respect these facts. Accept they're true.
And love yourself 'cause you are you.



Back to Reality - My Journey Through Recovery

Lynne Sara Barry

Looking back now at the last seven years it's beginning to get harder to remember how bad I felt in the darkest times. That's how I can now gauge that I'm so much better. I was so deep even the tunnel didn't exist, let alone the light at the end of it! Almost long gone are the feelings of absolute doom and gloom and "why am I even here?" Replaced are feelings of self worth, confidence, self structure and assurance, emotions I thought I would never experience again. It was a long hard haul; even the people closest to me were beginning to give up hope.

I was "stuck" in a void of desperate depression for seven years.

As I was diagnosed as having Bi-polar affective disorder I took it all very literally. I was told that after the extreme highs would come the intensive lows and the more highs I had the longer and deeper the lows would be. I'm not so sure this is at all true or even helpful to know, all I do know is that for me after experiencing several extreme highs (manic episodes) that lasted weeks, the lows that followed lasted months.

After three major manic episodes (the last one back in 2002) I crashed into the third and final intense low and stayed there for almost seven years. Everything was a complete effort and immense struggle, sometimes days blended into nights and without realising or wanting to know time and life were passing me by.

I want to shake that person who I was back then and say "life is short and precious what the hell are you playing at?!" but I know I wouldn't have listened or even cared. It felt like a "battle within a battle" stuck in a "revolving door" a "box on top of a box" "layers upon layers" of coping devices that you put into place to keep you safe - but then you're so safe you are no longer living, just existing. To re-surface into the world, to rejoin the human race and be counted is a huge and individual journey to anyone coming from a

"dark place". I can only relay my insight and coping strategies in the hope that other people will identify and connect and in some way benefit from my experience.

For me the key people who helped me through were close family members. Their learned understanding of depression through group discussions organised by my Occupational Therapist were invaluable.

We could set out goals and strategies and be aware of each other's expectations in a "cards on the table" type of format (our version of the WRAP plan). This way everyone's feelings were taken into consideration and a lot of pent up anxieties dispelled, not just for me.

Being encouraged into independent tasks and sometimes being almost "forced" into a situation was incredibly difficult and gut churning and upsetting - but once completed gave the first feelings of achievement and "maybe I could do that again" attitude. Small seeds sown all the time in day to day activities with the support of others then grew into bigger achievements once undertaken individually. The sense of self worth returned slowly followed by a small amount of confidence.

Then the next chapter of my journey was putting myself "out there" and testing the water. This for me, was taking on one day a week as a volunteer at the zoo! It wasn't so much for the love of animals, more for overcoming the fear of being in an environment and having to deal with people. Also having to be at a place when I said I would be and staying to talk with complete strangers!

This created a constructed pattern (a routine!) enabling me to continue to improve my recovery. I became the lady who goes to the zoo and does something worth while, something to look forward

to feel motivated about and be part of something (self worth and achievement). As my confidence grew people around me began to take notice of what I had to say, so I said more! People began to be interested in me so I became more interesting! I slowly came back to life and started to remember the "old me" of years ago - the one who I thought was buried and lost. The person who could achieve all sorts if she put her mind to it! The "I can do, will try and have a go" attitude returned and my options grew and my avenues opened.

Attitude - big word! I found my life hinged on me and my attitude towards everything and everyone. If it's a negative one (depression can feel like this in a big way) then life can easily pass over you and drift on by. Make it a positive one and you'll be pleasantly surprised how you can change things for the better.

I took more positive steps (some scary ones) but I'm still here to tell the tale! I became involved with "Opportunities" - a government based scheme helping people back to work - and consequently enrolled on a "back into education" course. I met other people in a similar place to myself and discovered I had an empathy and understanding into their lives. This led me into going on the "Support Time and Recovery" course and ultimately into a job as an S.T.R Worker within the Community Care Trust.

I'm glad I'm able to empower others in a way I never thought possible, but then just look what a little time, support and aided recovery can do...



'I've picked this photo, it is of the "wobbly" bridge at lemur woods in the Zoo.

I remember when I first looked across it, I thought how getting to the other side might be tricky and slightly scary.

Much like a journey of recovery could be....'



Story of Recovery

Sharon

My early childhood experience of trauma continuing into young adulthood has helped to mould me into the person I am. Whether I like to admit this or not, it is true. I tried in vain for many years to block out the pain suppressed inside me for nearly thirty years.

The suppressed emotions came to the fore in the form of physical and physiological burnout. This happened three times before I finally stopped and admitted I needed help. It was only after my third burnout, having suffered trauma to my back which resulted in me being incapacitated, that I launched myself fully into therapy. My back incapacitation has lasted for the last two and half years. At present since my neuro-surgery to my spine I have hydro, exercises and a cocktail of medication to suppress some of the pain.

To get to this stage of total abuse and lack of care of my physical and psychological body I had tried in vain to be superwoman, super-mum, super-partner, super-friend, super-work colleague and super-family member. Trying to achieve my dream perfection but always falling short. Other women could do it why not me? Another thing to beat myself up about.

To come to terms that I needed outside help and I would need to talk about things was a real uphill struggle. I had never or only briefly talked about my past life and abuse before. This process also brought up incidents I had blanked from my mind. The realisation gradually dawned on me that there was no quick fix - that this was a long rocky road with many dips and troughs. My previous reluctance to take medication to aid me had to be overcome. From being a business woman, a management lecturer, mother of two children, one with ADHD, and partner to a man who had been off with stress eight years ago, I became a bed-bound wreck who was terrified of the phone ringing, who could not deal with personal care or with eating food, even sipping water made me involuntarily urge to vomit, even vomiting at times. Not wanting to talk to anyone or being able to. Going between being insomniac, to wanting to sleep all the time to block everything out.

Thank goodness for our great family doctor who got the crisis team involved, that was a real life saver. Even though in the deep recesses of my mind I felt I wouldn't go through with ending it all, I was aware I was slipping dangerously close and I had previously tried to commit suicide. The crisis team were brilliant, giving very practical baby steps, support for myself and for those close to me.

I had previously had involvement of the crisis team but at the time I was on a mission to get back to work, to be the main breadwinner again, to be the one responsible for everyone else. Our business income was not initially sufficient to cover any of our living costs. We knew this when buying the business and it was agreed that my partner would continue working outside the business and I would run it. However the best laid plans soon change. My partner's wage didn't pay for any holidays, items the children wanted or any treats. So I started teaching part time for the local college. When my partner was off long term sick I upped my hours, teaching for Social Services, National Children's homes and private organisations. My deputy covered some of my hours and I had to catch up with the others. Also my mother's home was attached to the business financially so I felt duty bound to make sure all was ok. I have always been the one to sort out all the problems. My mother and I have always had a reverse relationship whereby she is the wayward child and I am the parent figure.

It was on my third breakdown that my involvement with the crisis team became a long term mission to improve my health permanently. My psychiatrist was concerned to see me again in this state and in clear plain speaking told me I had to deal with getting truly better not just put a sticky plaster on it. I have always been very good at putting a positive face on, when I don't feel like it. A habit I learnt as a small child. I had to come to terms with just giving in to the mental distress, not in terms of suicide, but to start dissecting bit by bit the problems that had caused me to be back at this dark lonely place. I call it a lonely place as you can have all the people in the world around you, but in the middle of the





My puppy has made a big difference to my recovery

night when I am pacing the hallway (when I was able before my back problem), also during the day when my mind won't stay still, my mind and body are far away in a dark muddled place where no one can reach me. Where every problem is magnified millions of time, memories played over, future worries added to the mix.

Luckily I was assigned a fantastic Community Psychiatric Nurse, who I have grown to trust and have a good rapport with. She has done so much work with me. Getting me to talk when I haven't felt able, chipping away at my false positive veneer, on days when I have been able to put that on, giving me baby step strategies to aid my recovery. I was finally able to tell her I had been abused as a child and this continued into young adulthood. One of my fears was that if I told anyone I had been abused, they would assume I would abuse my own children. We continued to work on my Wellness Recovery Action Plan together; part of that was to attend group sessions for childhood abuse.

To build trust was a long and slow process. Eventually I was to go through group therapy for women who had suffered childhood abuse, with additional outside support and one to one sessions. Even though we were told at the interview stage and at the beginning of the course that this was just the start of our individual recovery, I still believed that the course was going to cure me of all my problems and was a quick fix. How wrong I was. To learn to trust the two facilitators of the group and the other members of the group was a massive challenge. The thought of going to the group triggered thoughts of anxiety, flashbacks and suppressed anger brought up thoughts of self harm. After each session the feeling of total numbness, headache, was over whelming. My consumption of sweet sugary foods went through the roof and alcohol was needed to help me sleep even if it was restless. Massive ignition of my senses during flashbacks was horrendous. Many times I decided I wasn't going back to the group. With the support of my CPN I was able to return. Many things in the group shocked me, from the fact that all us women had suppressed this information to the



detriment of our health and our lives, to the fact it is ok to feel angry, to verbally stating and recognising who should have protected us and didn't. I would say the course is tough, it brings up unexpected twists and turns, challenges, is mentally and physically draining, but I am so thankful I was given the opportunity to be a part of it. The bond our group made has been unbelievable and we are still in regular contact three years on. We understand that when we feel unable to talk to anyone, it is ok to send a text saying we are thinking of them, offering any help and not being offended if they don't want any. We have gone through life threatening illnesses, house moves, legal procedures, problems with family members, evictions, serious money problems together. If somebody had told me this bond would occur I would never have believed them.

Continuing one to one work with my CPN has been a true life saver and that is no exaggeration. The trust and rapport that has been forged with my worker has been the catalyst of my road to recovery. The stigma attached to mental health problems led to me not telling colleagues that part of my illness. Also as my job involved living on the premises our meetings took place initially at my mother's house.

Further work needs to be done on my lack of personal boundaries and assertiveness. So due to my early adulthood experiences I was accepted onto a Women's Aid course.

This was another group of women who had all suffered abuse in various formats, that need to learn new skills to be safe for their children and themselves. The groups are run by a CPN and an assistant and last 14 weeks. This group hasn't bonded as the SAGE group did. More terrible flashbacks, anger at self for allowing the abuse to happen and continue.

However I have gained good theories and practical methods of communicating, boundary setting, positive relationships and assertiveness. The challenge now is to start implementing them for the





benefit of myself and those close to me. Also learn to imbue the idea of giving myself a gift each week, which could be anything from having a relaxing bath to buying myself some flowers.

My road of recovery is ongoing, I know this is going to be a very difficult year. My family has had to move in with my mum as we cannot afford to live in our house anymore and mum does all the jobs I cannot do because of my spine problems and mental health issues. Living with my mother brings up past issues that have not been resolved, as well as three generations living under one roof, also with three dogs.

This year my home and business will be taken by the bank, I will be made bankrupt. The staff and all the other issues have to be dealt with. My youngest son who has ADHD is thirteen and we have been informed by his consultant, is going to find becoming a teenager difficult.

There is so much pressure inside my head it goes between feeling like porridge, where I cannot even remember simple names, to horrendous flashbacks/anxiety attacks, to seesaw of emotions of anger at self/grief/despair.

The therapy I have received so far has only scratched the surface, as my period of abuse went on from childhood into adulthood. I am now having intensive therapy with my CPN, starting at the very beginning. This is bringing up more issues, but it is what is needed to aid my long term permanent recovery. The emotional rollercoaster is mentally and physically draining.

I am more realistic about the fact it is going to continue to be a rocky path and I will always need to be aware of my triggers and strategies for mental health wellbeing.

I would like in the future to help others on their road to recover. I want to be able to walk my talk and be living a healthy life in terms of physical and mental health. So I could speak about methods that I have

tried from experience. I am gradually working towards a Diploma in Stress Management and in the future I want to study Psychology.

For mental health to lose its stigma we need to expand the nation's knowledge of what the term "Mental Health" means. To lose the image of somebody who wants to harm them or someone who is going to fall to pieces.

As the world is descending into recession there are going to be more individuals being stressed and depressed. If we can educate individuals on the broad range of mental health issues, how to identify mental illness, causes for mental health issues and methods to aid recovery, it will help to improve the image and the outcome for individuals suffering from a mental illness.

In years gone by individuals suffering from epileptic seizures were said to be possessed by demons and some thought you could catch it. This has improved over the years through education. Scaremongering initially about individuals being HIV positive and AIDS has now been replaced on the whole with informed knowledge, relieving most of the knee jerk reaction of individuals. Hopefully in the future individuals will have better informed knowledge about mental health.



My Encouragement Alphabet

Janet Proctor

(A, you're adorable...)

When I am down or my brain is working too fast or I'm being hard on myself, I try to slow down and encourage myself by using my alphabet game. I try and find at least one positive word to describe myself for each letter of the alphabet. If the "mean voice" in my head tries to knock my positive description I answer it back. I also use the alphabet if I am doing something dull like the washing up.

I've begun to keep a written copy which I add to, as well as play this game in my head.

RULES

I look for positive words to describe myself. Look for the positives.

I include words that I am or will be or that I wish to be or that I **COULD** be.

I find negative thoughts pop up, this is my positive alphabet,

I can put "I'm a mathematical genius"

oh yeah

Look buster, compared to a newt I'm Einstein!

I'm attractive

No you are not...

I am - I have a partner, a cat, a dog, a bunny, I attract midges when I walk. ...

I AM ATTRACTIVE and I have a sense of humour.

Spelling doesn't matter.

Invent any words that you need to, it is useful to explain what they are at the end.

Your list can change.

I can use a dictionary when I want to search for new words to describe my good points.

Don't show it to anyone who will be critical, it is OK to be sad, little, vulnerable but concentrate more on the good points.

Having a conversation with myself to justify why I am or want that "virtue" is great – as long as I win!

I am virtuous – I have just eaten a salad and achieved my 5 a day!

The aim is to make me giggle, exercise my brain, concentrate the mind.

I run through my alphabet when I'm exercising as it passes the time...

New words can be added all the time and I look out for compliments to add.

Have fun – good luck.

The Alphabet I am (or will be or desire to be)

| | | | | | |
|----------|--|----------|--|----------|---|
| A | Appreciative, adorable, attractive | K | Kind | S | Sexy, slim, Stressed Studious Sometimes solitary |
| B | Brave, bright, beautiful | L | Loving, lovable, lovely Loved | T | Timid Tenacious |
| C | Caring, conscientious, creative | M | Massage-able Miserable – at the mo, but I’ll get over it | U | Unique, unusual |
| D | Delightful Daring | N | Nice Naughty | V | Vulnerable, vital Valiant |
| E | Emotional – that’s Ok Energetic | O | OLLYACIOUS <i>(this is a new word I’ve made up – it means Worthy of love, cherishable – to be cherished)</i> | W | Wonder –full full of wonder about the world Witty - “ You say a lot of witty things that I try and remember” Majella 23.1.9 |
| F | Friendly, fun loving, frivolous | P | Pretty | X | Xcreative – I can spell it that way if I want! |
| G | “Gorgeous” My Aunt told me Generous – well sometimes, but I’d like to be | Q | Quirky | Y | Yogic Youthful |
| H | Happy – I WILL be Hopeful, helpful | R | Reliable Reasonable Ratty – upon occasion – and why not? | Z | I’m still thinking about this one |
| I | Imaginative, inquisitive, ingenious Inventive | | | | |
| J | Janet Joyful – sometimes – | | | | |



One for Sorrow

What did you go through in experiencing mental health difficulties?

Two years ago I had an extreme manic episode where I went into a psychotic state of increasing intensity for about ten days. This resulted in me being sectioned and after a horrendous night in police cells I was admitted to mental hospital. I stayed there for a couple of weeks and then went home for a long recovery. After a couple of months I was struck by a terrible anxiety and depression. This lasted on and off for 18 months during which time I tried to end the agony by suicide a number of times, finishing up in a police cell again on one occasion.

Having been diagnosed with Bipolar disorder a number of years earlier this was not my first 'breakdown' but it was by far the most intense and damaging. On the previous two occasions I had been hospitalised I returned to my job, the first time in Paris and the second time in London, as a business development director for a major technical services company, very soon after my release from hospital.

On the second occasion when I returned to work after about ten days off I was still quite psychotic. For two to three months afterwards I believed that the whole of my office had been set up specifically for me and that all the other people there were consultants whose purpose was to train me for my next job. This was either as leader of the western world or the next messiah depending on how hyper I was. In actuality nobody seemed to notice that they had a mad man in their midst!

This last time after the initial mania, frightening as ever, it was the depression and anxiety that most characterised my illness. In my daily journal I recorded the following passage:

“Depression isn't just a reluctance to get up and get on with things. No spark of positivity or hope can exist without immediately being overwhelmed by a torrent of negative thoughts. So a thought about getting back to work might be followed by the internal critic telling you 'Don't be a prat, it is too risky, you will fail as you always do, you haven't got the skill, tenacity, experience, authority, guts to go back to that job. You can't do anything else, and you will always be ill, so you will never work again and your family will end up penniless and in misery. Face it you are a worthless piece of shit and the world would be better off without you!’”

It is not only the mind that deserts you, in extreme lows your body is so drained of energy that getting out of bed feels like Gulliver must have felt when he was tied down by many fine strands by the Lilliputians. You think you should be able to move but there is no power. Worse, the slightest attempt to get up is accompanied by a deep nausea and fatigue and sometimes for me malevolent pulses of electricity all over my body defying me to try to move from my stagnant state.

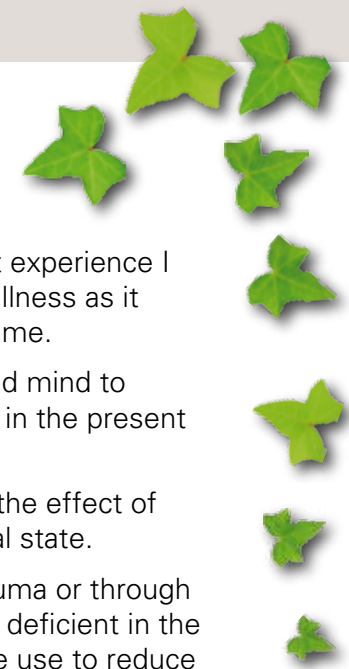
When I did try to drag myself to work, the fatigue, fear and negativity were constant and on many occasions my brain would fog so entirely that I couldn't decide whether I wanted tea or coffee, let alone make a rational and convincing business decision.

What specifically helped to facilitate your recovery?

My recovery was supported by a whole range of kind and skilled people. In particular I am very lucky that I have a sister who is:-

1. A trained psychiatric nurse
2. A Buddhist nun particularly skilled in mindfulness and insight meditation

MB



3. Knowledgeable in a wide range of conventional and alternative approaches in treating mental disorders
4. Prepared to drop her role as a senior nun in her monastery to devote the time I required for intensive care in the early stages of my recovery and during the numerous relapses
5. Like me absolutely determined that there was a fix for this problem and that together we would find it

Together we planned a recovery programme that included the following :-

- Taking advantage of all the care, advice and treatment provided by the NHS and other local facilities e.g. the local Bipolar support group.

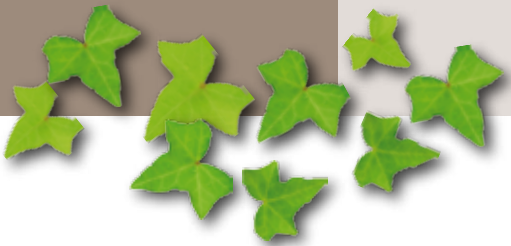
Unlike previous episodes the antidepressants and mood stabilisers this time didn't work and there was no quick fix cure available for the intense anxiety and brain fogging that was making it impossible for me to work. We tried different combinations of drugs but with no real change. Then in one tense session my consultant told me that I wasn't going to get well unless I stopped working altogether. This was very difficult for me as fear of not being able to work again was at the root of my anxiety. However, after 9 months of trying to work with frequent sick breaks and then part-time, I finally had to concede that I couldn't go on. So I gave up the weekly commute to my flat in London and the career that for so long had been the dominating centre of my life.

- Reading as much as possible to try to understand the background to the illness and what others have found effective in managing it.

From all the various reading and my subsequent experience I will try to encapsulate my understanding of my illness as it relates to me and in a way that makes sense to me.

1. The naturally healthy state is for both body and mind to be calm, relaxed, centred, grounded, aware and in the present moment.
 2. Life events cause tension to build which has the effect of moving the body/mind state away from this ideal state.
 3. Either through a genetic disposition, early trauma or through early learned responses, people with bipolar are deficient in the homeostatic mechanisms which 'normal' people use to reduce the build up of tension and return to the balanced state.
 4. Breakdown or burnout happen when the body and mind can no longer hold this tension and their normal working collapses. For people exhibiting bipolar symptoms until the body's systems are stable again they will oscillate between low (anxiety and depression) and high (euphoria or mania) states.
 5. A strong symptom (or cause) of the build up of tension is hyperactive conscious cognitive activity characterised by constantly reviewing events in the past, regretting outcomes and fretting over what I should have done differently, such as worrying about what might happen in the future, trying desperately to increase the chances of happiness for myself and family in particular, or to avoid future pain.
- Trying a range of alternative therapies (all new to me) to see if they could add to what was provided by the NHS

I have tried a number of therapies that claim to be able to alleviate stress and depression. I have found the most effective



for me to be cranio-sacral therapy which, in a way that I still do not fully understand, has for me, had an immediate and profound impact in releasing 'trapped' energy, allowing my system to calm and reenergise and alleviating anxiety and depression.

- Finding a private psychotherapist in tune with my needs and objectives

Again I have been very lucky in finding a highly skilled psychotherapist. As well as being a respected and renowned therapist and author, he also has deep understanding of Buddhist approaches, having spent many years studying meditation techniques, which he now incorporates into his therapeutic approach

- Beginning mindfulness meditation as an aid to training my mind to behave itself!

I was introduced to meditation by my sister and that practice has continued under the guidance of my therapist. I also attended an excellent course on mindfulness (a form of meditation) run by the NHS. To me meditation is an essential component in helping to train the mind to stop the constant churning that I describe above.

- Defining and sticking to a programme of daily exercise and good diet supported by vitamins and food supplements
- Care with alcohol
- Changing my work-life balance and reducing stress

I now work part-time for a small local family owned company (at a vastly reduced salary!) through choice. I have started to use the new time available to begin enjoying life again with my

friends, family and self. I am also not really missing being able to afford some of the material things that once seemed so important.

- Facing down my problems

A major part of my recovery so far has been to fully recognise a broad range of issues with my life and to take them on and sort them out. In the end, although exaggerated, many of the fears I had during my bouts of anxiety and depression were based on a nagging feeling that things were fundamentally wrong and needed sorting. As I have begun to do this I have lifted much weight from my shoulders.

- A Daily Routine

- A loosening up morning exercise – I do Chi Kung which is a bit like Tai Chi
- Meditation
- Work tasks
- Home tasks
- Rest
- Exercise – walk, cycle ride, squash
- Fun – be with family and friends

I put no pressure on myself to complete the list, even letting go of 'essential items' if I don't have the energy or motivation.

Finally I try to do a daily journal noting how things have gone and any learning points around what seems to be supporting recovery and what doesn't.





How has your life improved since you made progress in your recovery?

I would say dramatically. Before this last breakdown I was, for a number of years, in a high state of tension, feeling constantly stressed, tired, frustrated and empty with frequent outbursts of anger aimed particularly at my long suffering wife and children.

What has changed?

Though I am still prone to bouts of depression, particularly if I get physically or mentally tired, in general I :-

- am more relaxed
- am happier
- have more time
- am much more able to let go of positive or negative thoughts before they spiral into mania or depression
- am kinder to myself and others
- have a richer life with work held in perspective.

Did you experience discrimination or stigma on your path to recovery e.g., in the workplace or in the community? Were you able to overcome it and if so how?

After my recent breakdown I was initially very frightened of telling my employer about my illness fearing that I would be fired straightaway, particularly as I had lied on my job application about my history of mental illness. In the end when I did finally tell them they were fantastically kind and supportive. This has also been my experience in my new job where I resolved early to explain my condition rather than having the constant worry of being found out.

How would you promote mental health in society to support a recovery approach?

I think I would want to promote the idea that in many cases, however extreme the illness, the body and mind have tremendous ability to heal themselves, so most people will get well again given the right conditions and support.

Also do not put mentally ill people in police cells, it is very frightening !

Why you have chosen to share your story?

For those who may be going through similar agonies to my own, to let them know they are not alone and that a way through is increasingly available and possible. In many ways there are positives to the illness as it helps us to move forward in our lives.

‘Then the time came
When the risk it took
To remain tight in a bud
Was more painful than
The risk it took to blossom’

Anais Nin





Moving towards Wellness

Linden Lynn

For those of us who struggle to be well,
We stretch and reach and sneak a peek at others, living out their time. . .

How to be sure, so sure, walking the floor of presence to distance?
From what went before to this moment, here,

From now to the future; from night to day, and away into the half light?
Swiftly, with certain purpose, heel and toe,

Striding to another beat of drum.

Not hesitant, fearful, or regretting; not stumbling, uncertain of direction,
But, free of doubt, strong, persuaded, in harmony with the rhythm and yourselves.

In tune; not in tune with the bad times, but in tune with. . .
With the present, however it shows itself,
And in tune too, with the who, in tune with You, Your Self,
With who you are; with internal melody, balance, composure,
Centred, with the names and the naming, accepted and with acceptance

And with who you want to be. . . and your direction is clear.

Knowing, not questioning. . . Who is me?

But I was lost. . . What was , what is - my Self?

Yes, that is it. . . That is what you have, I lacked.
I needed to claim back, My Self. Know who I am in good times and in bad,
Know myself, with the strength and certainty I had before.
Respond to the true, creative core of me,
Not feel judged, obliterated, dis-eased, belittled or despairing,
I want only to understand and be understood.
For who I am; as I move along rugged trails and beyond to future flight.

And so it is, that I seek none other than My Self.

I crawled from the abyss; exhausted, bruised, confused, ashen
and barely breathing

And at times, I still flounder, but I have risen from my knees,
There is further now to go, before I sleep

I must stand, orientate myself, survey the landscape,

Feel the place, adjust my pace.

Construct that reality, real and afresh, that allows me to steer a way.
With some insight now and clearer boundaries, I can better find direction.

Past soundless rooms of airless emptiness and frenetic, hectic streets,

Toward the natural green of grassy knolls and unwavering waters
Where there exists a simple clean composure.

There, I allow myself to mend, soak and repair, ready for the work to come.

I am mindful of my actions, and can share in the patterns of dance and song,

Congruent, in tune with my beliefs and harmonies, amongst my friends,

I can recover the person I still am, moving into each new place,
Breathing in and out, stepping at my own pace and letting myself be.



My Road to Recovery

Eileen

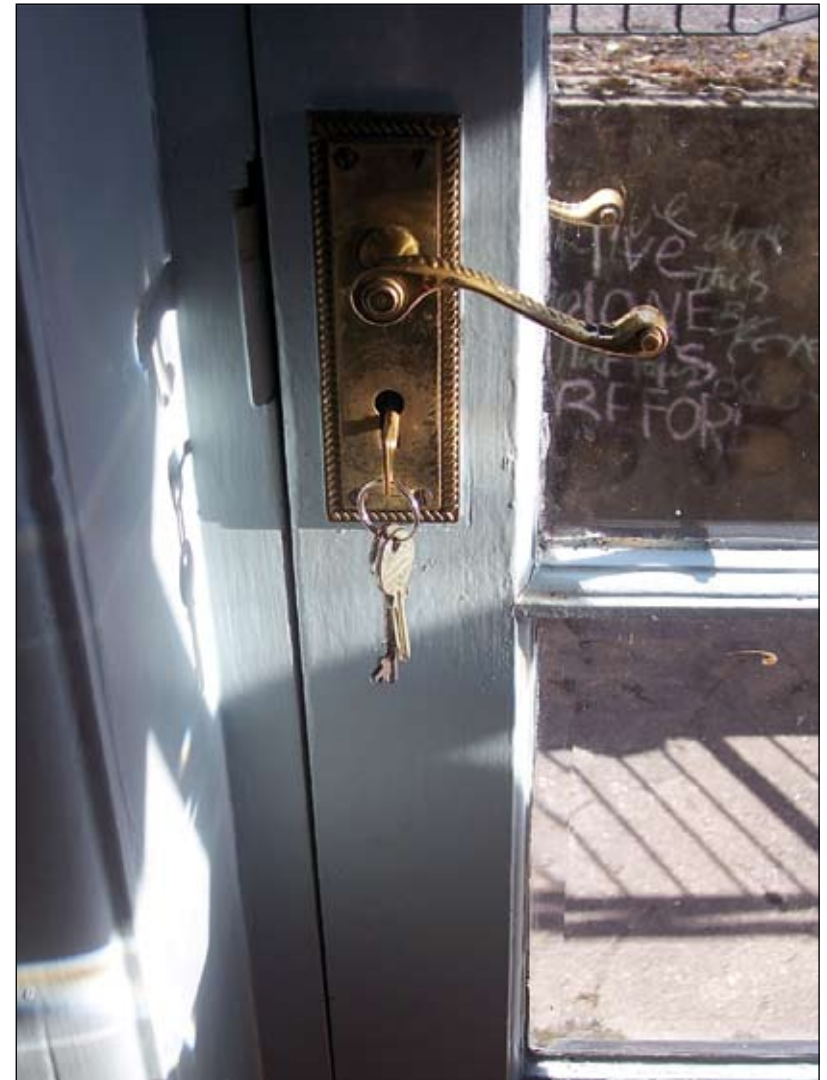
I have suffered from anxiety and panic attacks for most of my life. But it came with a vengeance after the birth of my fifth child. I was separated from my husband. It was a very violent marriage. At first it only happened at night. I was scared to sleep in case I would not wake up. The doctor said it was because I was solely responsible for five children. Of course, I did drop off eventually, but then it started in the day, especially when I would go shopping or to the school.

I had another baby. By the time she was ready for school I just managed to get her there. I kept getting worse. I could barely leave the house. When my daughter was six I had to change her school to one nearer. My social worker got me a place in Chaucer (London). I really thought, I'm going to get better, but it was not like that. I learned ways to deal with the attacks like having cards in my pocket with things written like, "I've done it before", "I've gone through it" and others. When I got a really big one, I could not think rationally; I wanted to run and hide in case I died on the street. I got them at home too. One thing I found helped me was (don't laugh), I'd read a children's fairy tale to get me away from reality. Maybe it reminded

me of when I did not get the attacks, but it helped.

Another thing that really helped me was I would cry my eyes out if I tried to go out and had to come back. I felt a coward; I was disappointed in myself because when I got in I felt better. But Catherine, a support worker from Hillbank told me: don't worry, if you can't do it, just try next day, don't beat yourself up. Believe me that really helped. Now I try next day and so far, it's worked. It's great not to feel guilty. One thing that really helped me: when I was walking down the street and got a fierce panic attack. I was with my brother. You know when you get one it seems to go on for ever, but I really tried to concentrate on two elderly people on the other side of the street and was surprised to see they'd only gone a very short distance by the time I got over my attacks. When I get one now, I always think of that and it helps me.

I would also like to say the Walk and Talk helps me enormously because it gets you out and there are so many different people to talk to. But it could not happen for me if Cecily from Rethink did not come too; she makes me feel safe and it's a good way to get exercise and fresh air.





William's Story

William and Anna

This is a multi-layered piece of writing. William was interested in submitting a contribution for The Recovery Stories Project so we met at a coffee bar and shared wandering, stimulating conversations. I was enlightened by William's passion for graffiti art, moved by his recollections of childhood and warmed by a sharing of experiences. During the meeting, I transcribed William's words as he was unsure of how to proceed. Afterwards, I realized his words had had a profound effect upon me. These words are my interpretation of aspects of William's life as revealed to me. My writing is an unnecessary addition and exists as a record of my response to being with William. Perhaps it can be seen as a subtle background for the brightness of William's colours.

William is eight years old, flicking through his collection; pictures of castles, when he hears his mother say, "cancer". Mom says, that word means dad will die soon. William looks at his model fort. The plastic walls surround, bind and enclose.

During a fifteen-year process, his father's death unfolds.

The walls prove too confining to remain in the house and watch.

The drugs bind his father to his body. William takes drugs to leave his body far behind.

My mental health has wavered over the years from forensic and intensive psychiatric care, psychosis, schizophrenia, depression, delusions and alcohol / drug addiction problems, which took me all over the place.

Normality is removed, as far away as the fort, the flags flying on the castles, the line of buttons on the school coat. William has become someone who has slipped through the positive; the lines, grids, structures and frameworks into the negative spaces, that exist in the crevices, the in-between, the margins, outside. He is here; but not

there; fluid rather than solid. The shape shifting not only frightens William, it frightens others...

*I lost my life. My life has been in bits...
I had to take responsibility for my actions.*

He needs to find a way to make a fall into alternative spaces work positively to his favour.

Art is a great release for me as I share with other people and create designs, grow and get a lot of satisfaction from my work, always making progress and growing in good soil...

William needs to find a link, a bridge between the abstract, shifting, dream-like shapes that occupy his mind and an outside reality he is becoming further removed from.

To express myself is all important, to give and to show light in the darkness..

I learnt to love myself and others and unblocked the channels between myself and god as I understand him.

Where do we see art existing outside of gallery spaces, which would cheer those without access to insulated, comfortable private transport, for those who instead peer out of train windows and see huge shapes, names and identities hidden within brightly tattooed murals, made by people who feel unseen yet need to be glimpsed at...

*I instantly loved spraying...my finger on the can, pushing...
I draw a circle and insert myself, my mark – a triangle, to make my own letters, my own language.*

Where you place the marks matters. It can just look like an abstract pattern but if you look, it's a language. The gaps make up the form of the letters for communication, writing, tags, identities.

The Gift

Rory Griffiths

*If I lose my identity, I lose myself. That's what this is all about.
I've seen some things. It ain't me. This is me: pens, paint, paper
sketchbooks, ink, brushes, canvasses, notepads, diaries: enjoy
buying art media and clothes, trainers, books on art, music and
going for coffees and meals out...*

*I have a great life and am grateful for good health, friends, family, a
god who cares, loves and provides and protects me from harm.
I don't need to be this heavyweight person.*

*I lost my life. My life has been in bits but now, I use the letters.
If I feel this fear, I put it on paper and then it passes.
I've recovered from a seemingly hopeless state of mind and from
active addictions.*

*I've regained mental stability, freedom, peace of mind and a positive
feeling for life.*



You are no memory or photograph.
I cannot find you in any newspaper or magazine.
No search engine carries your name.
You are no friend of a friend or distant cousin.
I did not notice you in any street.
I did not queue behind you.
I did not brush your arm at any bar.
I did not buy you.

You do not remind me of someone I once knew.
You never once caught my eye or nodded my way.
I never sat next to you on any bus or train.
I do not know your wife from work.
I do not play football with your son.
I never did teach your daughter.

You did not sign a letter or a get well card.
You did not visit me in the hospital.
You were never just at the end of my telephone.
You did not listen as I cried.
You did not comfort me when I almost died.

You are no friend of mine, yet
You gave that gift.
You saved that life.
You signed and you sacrificed where most would not.
You stood up when everyone sat.
You screamed when everyone was silent.
You gave,
You give.
Forever more,
I thank you



Coming Home

Glenn Roberts

*'I could tell you about my life,
and keep you amused I'm sure,
about all the times I've cried.
But I don't want to be sad anymore'*

Man of the world, Fleetwood Mac

I was both pleased and apprehensive to be invited to add my personal story to this gathering of hope and experience. I'm used to writing, but this is very different. I've had a professional lifetime of privileged access to people's inner worlds but was challenged to consider how prepared I am to also be known – as a person. I felt that if we are to really value working towards a future in which there will be 'no more them and us' it means being willing to show that whatever our roles and responsibilities, we are all much more alike than different.

So ... looking back over my life I've often felt lost and wandering and 'coming home' is what my story is all about. If we'd met in my early life I don't think I could have offered a coherent story at all. As youngster I was fairly sure I would die early – it turns out incorrectly. In middle life I would have given an inwardly preoccupied account overfull of tangles and sadness. Nowadays I now feel I've come home to myself and I'm grateful with how life has worked out. This is a story of what I've recovered from and to and with.

For as far back as I can remember I've had periods of disabling depression, accompanied by a haunting sense of loneliness, detachment and isolation from people and the world around me. However it took me a long while to recognise it as such. Throughout my childhood and teenage years although frequently sad and fearful my experience was more of becoming unable to concentrate or do things for lengthy spells. I thought of it as a sort of hibernation.

I just had to sit it out and needed to wait until I woke up again and could get on once more.

Life stories are like garments that we wear and much of the fabric of my story is woven out of threads of others making. Julie Leibrich shaped her wonderful 'Gift of stories' around the proposition that coming into one's own story, having a telling-tale, comes as both a gift to ourselves and a means by which we make our experience available to others. I've found this to be true.

Where to begin? Maybe at the beginning ...

I grew up with a story that my future career was predicted by a Gypsy who had rewarded my mother with a blessing rather than a cuss for buying a bunch of 'lucky white heather', and a prediction that her toddler would be a doctor - and the Gypsy was right, but it was a near thing.

The atmosphere in my family home was one of frequent dispute and arguments about trivial issues, there could be angry eruptions over who left the top off the tomato sauce. I only later realised how unhappy my parents were with one another. Perhaps understandably I was a naughty child, with little confidence who clung fearfully to anything that seemed to offer some security. From an early age I felt odd and later identified with being 'an outsider'. At about 8 I impressed an assessing psychologist sufficiently to be allocated a place in a residential school for disturbed boys. I'd largely forgotten this until much later when I had flashbacks visiting people in prison – the stairs in both were metal and clanged underfoot. I do remember being terrified and pleading to go home - my parents fought and nearly split up over it, but I escaped deportation to the 'naughty boys home'. I had a feeling of being on probation for the rest of my childhood. I still get a panicky sense of being in jeopardy resurfacing when I've been depressed.

I was slow to read and clumsy, nowadays I'd have a diagnosis and possibly help, back then I was just thought a bit stupid. Despite my difficulties one of my chief delights was to wrap up in the company of books, in particular the remaining 9 volumes of Arthur Mee's Children's Encyclopaedia. The mysterious volume 8 having been destroyed when my Father's childhood home was bombed in the war. These were full of wonders: how to make pets of all kinds of unsuitable creatures, a glorious colour plate of the Madagascan Moon Moth, and 'The great stories of the world that will be told forever' which I read over and over again. I spent much of my childhood wandering in Epping Forest. I was a sort of a feral nature-boy, in a middle class sort of way, with an Arthur Mee inspired disposition to catch anything that moved, in quantity, which also meant I was a bit of an ecological disaster.

I couldn't really relate to other children and was bullied. Looking back I can see that a principled but mouthy lad growing up in East London with no discernable athletic talent was liable to get into numerous fights and invariably lose. I may have attracted the playground predators but then I was waving a red flag at the time. My early school years came to be dominated by a sense of threat which I did my best to escape. As a young child I escaped by bunking off and hiding amongst my father's dahlias and later into the cloistered world of laboratory assistants who, because of their 'duties', were never required to attend for assembly or register or much else come to that.

Despite the Gypsy's promise I was initially turned down by all the medical schools I applied to, probably due to having failed all my mock 'A' level exams and despite several attempts I'd still not gained English 'O' level. I can look back now on my earlier failures with a wry smile, supported by multiple qualifications, national awards and 50 or so published papers, but at the time it was a bit

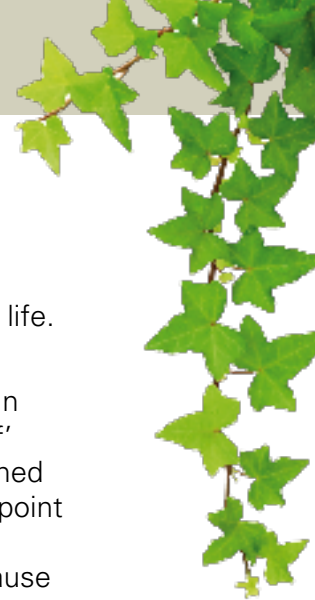
of a disaster as I had no other ideas about what to do with my life. Fortunately the ensuing panic was also highly motivational.


As a first year medical student I remember sitting up all night in a state of inexplicable excitement writing an essay on 'the self' based on a book about a young boy called Dibs who was crushed and contorted by the emotional disturbance within him to the point of being unable to communicate. The story of his opening and becoming thrilled me. I didn't realise at the time this was because of how much I saw myself in Dibs and longed for a similar release. I also thought psychiatry would be like that – working closely with people in great difficulties to find themselves – and I was disappointed, at least initially.

From my earliest student encounters with mental hospitals and their residents I felt in some measure at home. I was oddly comfortable with people who were distressed and disordered and found the surrealistic kaleidoscope of psychosis simply fascinating.

As a young psychiatrist I was stressed with the rush, the preoccupation with suppression rather than expression (most of our medical treatments are 'anti-something'), the peculiar knowingness we are trained to profess about mysteries and the claustrophobia of many of our clinical environments. As a more senior psychiatrist I have been additionally frustrated with the ever present invitation to obsess over rearranging the organisational structures we work in rather than the work of developing creative outcomes and supporting hope for the people who come to us in need.

Although I later became an examiner for the Royal College of Psychiatrists I think I initially failed the Membership exams as I couldn't quite believe the received wisdom of my profession. Having eventually been persuaded to value science with its rigor and regularities, my preoccupation since has been in trying to reconcile





that with the search for meaning and understanding. I have come to a personal belief, based on long experience, that every symptom tells a story.

I'd married young in search of security. Having never felt part of a family I had a naive longing to find or make one of my own. Ten years later and 'fully trained' we packed up our bags and 4 young children to move from inner city Bristol to a farmhouse in Devon with land and pets and assorted wildlife – and it was a delight. I stood in the stream that bordered our land with my daughter and laughed and laughed at the joy of coming home. I'd come to North Devon on the 'small is beautiful' ticket and exchanged the paranoid politics of a large organisation for the 'periphery of excellence'. And it was good, although as the organisation I worked in grew and grew I came to resent an imposed requirement to relate to bigger and more remote structures.

Much of the underside of my adult life has been about struggling with depression. So what's that like? The first thing to go is any enjoyment of music which grates and jangles and I prefer both solitude and silence, although it is a silence increasingly populated by my own nagging thoughts of failure and uselessness. My usually overfull mind empties out and I feel I know nothing. I feel a boring fraud and a rising sense of threat and danger takes hold. Sleep and much else becomes difficult as the night fills with aching restlessness. The air thickens and everything becomes effortful, heavy and slow.

Moderate dips simply grind me down – I have to shut down for a bit, reprioritise and necessarily look after myself to regain my capacity to care for others - a fuse has blown, often because I've overloaded the circuits and maybe that is purposeful. But protracted periods feel like skating on thin ice with an attendant fear of what would happen if I

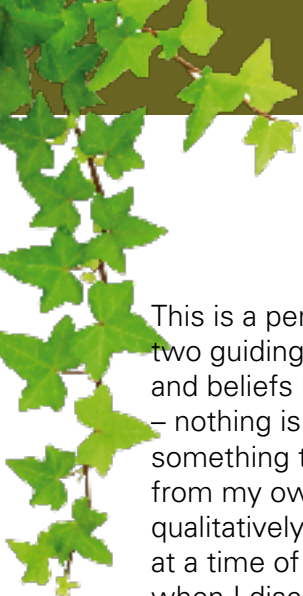
slowed down and fell into the inky depths beneath. Less frequent times when I've gone beyond that has felt that both I and the world around me are disintegrating. It is as though I can then see things as they really are. In depressive truth there is no hope or joy or love or purpose, it is as if it is all an illusion that we create to cover up the emptiness and futility – the sheer pointlessness of life. Everything can then seem out of control ... the growth of plants in the garden overwhelming, the cracks and imperfections in the house crumbling. I don't want to eat or sleep, everything slows and I don't say much. It is not a good place to be.

At my lowest I sat up for 3 days and nights weighing up whether to hang myself from a noose I'd set up for a hanging basket from a skylight. It would have undoubtedly worked.

Thankfully it's not a place I've visited for some years now - although there is some tension even in remembering, like watching a horror movie that you are part of. In standing right on the edge and deciding 'no' I learned forever that you could get that close and still step back – which has given me confidence to sit in the dark and on the edge with many others since.

I've never lost a fascination with these extraordinary transformations of the inner world under stress and strain and how easy it is to confuse projection with perception. Getting a secure grip on reality is a slippery business at the best of times. But if 'all the world's a stage' then even when I'm tumbling off it backwards, I can still be intrigued at the sight of all the scene shifting mechanics I catch sight of whilst falling. Working with people whose life problems in some measure overlap with my own has taken me on a maturational journey and looking back I can see that some routine clinical skills have enabled me to look after myself too.





This is a personal view in a personal story. Broadly I've come to two guiding conclusions. The first is that virtually all ideas, thoughts and beliefs have a basis in reality, however surreal and unusual – nothing is truly 'bizarre' and just because I cannot understand something that doesn't make it nonsense. The second is that from my own experiences I've learned that being disordered is qualitatively different from understandable distress, even if occurring at a time of loss or conflict. No one was more surprised than me when I discovered that antidepressants actually worked when I was unwell. My odd and altered experiences can be seen as meaningfully connected to my life but that's a poor explanation for why my thoughts and feelings have taken that particular form and run down that particular rabbit hole. I have a problem, much like my mother and brother and I've found it helpful to give it a name and face it. I've also mostly found it helpful to be straightforward about my difficulties and experiences with my colleagues and workmates. The world has often proved to be a much kinder and more accepting place than I feel and fear when unwell.


I've generally been more disposed to face my demons than run from them, which has been the making of many adventures: fearing abandonment led to my hitchhiking around Europe alone - sleeping rough, fretful self-consciousness led to frequent teaching and public speaking, my sense of existential confusion led to a doctoral thesis on meaning and purpose, and feeling alienated from my peers led to developing workshops and retreats on stress and burnout and setting up mentoring schemes.

In my early 40's my marriage failed. As our 4 children became more independent the somewhat unfathomable difficulties between us tangled beyond unravelling. Precarious communication broke down entirely. We tried very hard but even my own children could see

the incompatibility of their parents and wondered why we were together. As our relationship broke down so did I, and entered what was possibly the most painful and disturbing period of my adult life. It took about 2 years before I properly emerged from that depression. With the loss of my marriage I lost much else besides, my home and imagined future, the daily love and challenge of my children, their cats and creatures, our lovely dog Tilley - and a good deal of my pride.

Living alone and unable to work or do anything much else, I spent that winter burning my way through a friend's wood pile, preoccupied with how everything I valued was also burning. I sat so still that for the first time in 25 years my self-winding watch stopped. After a few months with the kindly support of colleagues I made a cautious return to work – for the first time routinely wearing suits, 'body armour' as I joked, but I felt very vulnerable and loosely held together.

If I had to select one life experience that was the making of me – this was it – a traumatic induction into being real and joining the human race. It was a terrible and transformational time which now appears to have been the low turning point around which my life pivoted and from which the future unfolded. If given a second mark to plot my recovery it would be unexpectedly finding Annie who was to become my wife. We shared a fondness for country walks, William Morris, Monty Python and one another. Eleven years later I still find myself married to my best friend and companion, the only person I've been comfortable to spend unending time with. We had both survived the breakdown of long marriages and, without looking, found one another. I've had a lot of good fortune but this was one of the best, a small miracle which has proven to be a secure foundation for love and life and living ever since.



Recovery is work, often hard work and one of the many things that make it difficult is how attached we can become to our problems and how reluctant to give them up. I've found that there are seductive satisfactions in sadness and strangely consoling dark pleasures in nurturing a sense of grief. The prisoner in Plato's story of The Cave had been captive for so long that he'd accommodated to the dark and even come to regard the light as dangerous and unnatural. On breaking free he stumbled out and his fears seemed confirmed by temporary blindness. But as he found the courage to persist and face the light, he adapted once more and was able to go on his way, released and free.

Reading and hearing accounts of personal recovery from the mid 1990s onwards resonated with what had drawn me into psychiatry in the first place. People spoke of finding hope in their journeys of personal discovery and of picking up responsibility for themselves and their lives - trying to work out what worked best for them on the basis of personal experience. I found this a hopeful and helpful approach that was equally applicable in my own life as for those I worked with. Annie and I moved to Exeter in 2003 and later that year I went with Laurie Davidson to learn about the Wellness Recovery Action Plan (WRAP) from Mary Ellen Copland. This became pivotal to all our subsequent activity developing recovery ideas and practice. Learning about recovery pulled together so many of the threads from what had gone before and has been the most hopeful and helpful discovery of my 30 years in psychiatry.

I've learned slowly that if I don't look after my health and sanity I'm of little use to others, for you cannot give what you do not have. But I've also learned to value my vulnerability. I was sad when my father died a few years ago but very glad to be so. For it was only in the context of my own difficulties in middle life that our relationship was remade sufficient for the sharing of tender feelings and a meaningful

connection as men – and now I miss him and wish that he was still around – we could have gone fishing together.

I've spent my adult life working as a doctor in psychiatry which is a very odd way indeed to earn a living. But more than that – it is an identity and in some ways a spoiled identity in our present culture. I was recently asked to stand down from being directly involved in a new project precisely because the presence of a psychiatrist was regarded as a potential impediment to the recovery of the people attending it. This was the final nudge I needed to confirm a growing feeling that it was time to turn the page and begin a new chapter in my life too. I see the opportunity for 'retirement' next year as a welcome transition to whatever is next - what I've called 'recovery from being a psychiatrist'. Life has worked out very well for me. The various homecomings in later life have been accompanied with a sense of contentment and fulfilment which in turn gives me confidence in venturing out again and further. I even wonder about a trip to Madagascar...



My wellness tools – what works for me

Work –

being productive, making things and using my skills

Homemaking –

nesting, holding together creativity and safety

Contemplation –

study, thinking, writing, reading, talking, teaching

Medication –

antidepressants and sleepers

Authenticity –

valuing being real more than being comfortable

Apologising –

accepting I can get it wrong – saying sorry

Tenderness –

being open to moments and places of real connection

Honesty –

with myself and others – saying and facing things

Practical usefulness –

doing anything that needs doing

Giving –

I feel better for giving to or seeking to be mindful of others

Prioritising –

ordering, scheduling, listing, cancelling, delegating

Kindly realism –

expecting less of myself so I can succeed when low

Humour –

it can be a relief to find my own seriousness funny

Accepting –

present realities, my own state of mind and it takes time

Decluttering -

tidy up, clear out, clean up, mend or throw away

Sustaining hope –

believing it will pass; it has been and will be good

Adventuring –

experiencing the world as much bigger than my horizons

Creatureliness –

being with, absorbed in and part of nature



Rosalind's Story

Rosalind

I began to recover after eleven years of depression, when the heavy burden of being responsible for my elderly (95 year old) mother was ended by her peaceful death. After the natural period of mourning her loss, I found I was able to feel less anxious, sleep better, and enjoy life more than I had for years. Even though I was caring for my son who had had a manic episode when my mother died, even that did not plunge me into depression.

I believe my depression was caused by pure overload, of having too many people to look after. (My husband also suffers from bipolar disorder, but was well at the time, and able to support me emotionally through my bereavement). Looking after my mother had taken such a toll, because she was also depressed and wanting to die, and it was exhausting trying to keep her spirits up. My recovery has also been helped by more time spent in my garden, enjoying sunshine and fresh air. Also I can go out and meet other friends without feeling guilty all the time that I was taking time out from being with my mother. I am able again to feel free, energetic and I am relieved that my mother is out of her pain and suffering.

I think depression is often the consequence of caring for others, for too long without a break, and from having perhaps too strong a sense of duty, to the exclusion of looking after yourself. I would say to others that the carer has as much right to receive care as those they care for.

One thing I remember that really helped was when I had a quiet prayer time with a friend. I was feeling depressed, hopeless, exhausted and wintry. We sat together in quiet contemplation.

My friend "saw" a picture of us hibernating like bears beneath the ground, while above the countryside was covered with soft white snow. Then she "heard" the bells of Christmas ringing in the air. Beautiful sparkling snowflakes began to fall all around.

We talked about C.S. Lewis's story of Narnia, where it was always winter, but never Christmas.

We knew that we weren't in Narnia, because we had the hope that this was a passing thing. There would be hope and joy and bells again. As we talked, we realised our hibernation was just a rest. We knew that we would re-emerge in the spring, refreshed and ready to get on with life again.

I felt better because I could view my depression as a rest from activity, I could allow myself time to pause before I began again, that there were things I could learn about myself. Little by little I could pick up things that make life worth living. I was able to say "No" to the things that caused my depression, including striving too hard to make others happy and not giving enough time to myself.

Another story helped me too. It was the story of a young tree, who, when it came to autumn, was afraid to shed his leaves. He watched as the other trees let their leaves fall but he hung onto his leaves, brown and bent and wrinkled all through the winter. The older trees tried to persuade him to release his leaves but he couldn't let them go. In the spring the other older trees put forth young, new, fresh green leaves to wave to the sky, while the young tree had only shrivelled ugly, brown leaves. The young tree learnt a lesson and the following autumn was eager to release the old leaves in anticipation of new leaves in the spring. Letting go of old thoughts and habits can give us space for new and hopeful thinking.

Let go of the old. Take on the new.



Recovery

My boy

There is a completeness about the word “recovery” which does not fit me. I think that the process itself will unfold over the duration of my life. Actually – at least for me – I am certain that it will take that long and be shaped in that way. But if there are clear moments along the route, then I believe that this is the start of it.

And it has begun with the setting in motion of grief that has been suspended in time for more than thirty years. Up until now, my life has been a cell. A place in which I have been locked up alone, with my sadness and fear, but at the same time always running within the walls, driven by that fear. The fear feels like vertigo: There is nothing to hold you and you are going to fall and die. In my nightmares I am often running – on and on – escaping a faceless monster from whom no one I run past can protect me. So this setting free of emotion has come as an extraordinary relief. It has brought with it a sense of cleansing and startling clarity. And now I can (and do) run for pleasure.

It was only when my husband’s work took us to the U.S. for several months last year that I stopped running in my head and started to look back. I know that our torments follow us everywhere, but physical distance from something had triggered an awakening of consciousness, like the removal of a blindfold.

It had taken most of my life to reach that point and throughout all of that time I rated my greatest failure as being my absolute inability to get well. I have been “unwell” since the age of four when my Father died. I do not remember him, but I have always felt closer to him than to anyone. Closer to the people I have lost: like a collection of ghosts who watch over me, but with whom I have also been lost and wandering. Searching for stillness.

I have very few memories of my childhood: I created a myriad of places and friends in my head and spent most of my time retreating there. I watched the real world going on around me, but did not feel a part of it. I was first seen by a Child Psychiatrist when I was about

eight, then pretty much weekly from early teenage until I was sent to university. He treated me for chronic depression, panic attacks “school refusal” and anorexia. In reality, he should never have agreed to see me as he was a colleague of my Mother’s. Had it been someone further removed, perhaps I would have been helped far sooner.

My teachers at ‘A’ Level tried to persuade me to take a year out to “get well”, before resuming my studies. The same was recommended by my tutors at university. But I was terrified of stopping. It felt as if that place held something dreadful: “The Stopping Place”. It seemed to signify the end of everything; a deep, dark void. Nothingness. I think, now, that perhaps I had been defined solely by my actions or assumed roles (student, tennis player, daughter, then wife and mother later on) and thus to stop would have meant I would have been lost – Worse than that: I would have become nothing. I was hanging on to those things that would somehow take me into the future and out of the awful place in which I was present. But although the roles evolved, the place in which I was confined emotionally remained in stasis.

At university I was prescribed various forms of medication by the G.P. on campus (valium and Seroxat were two I remember). I quickly built a tolerance to the former and the latter did absolutely nothing. I am constantly amazed that I survived this period of my life – I lived in a hole of depression, hiding behind closed curtains for days, running from lecture halls and the students union in a state of indescribable fear and missing hours and hours of work. At other times I felt indestructible and would write feverishly (but never about the required subject), or drink too much and behave outrageously and totally out of character. I thought that I was mad and, when the pain was at its most profound, I wished I would go mad. Perhaps at times I almost did, but one hand always clung stubbornly to reality.

Anon

At the age of twenty-seven, having graduated and managed to work for a few years, I had a termination contrary to my own wishes (because I did not believe my wishes mattered). My mother was relieved and bought me a very expensive pair of shoes. However, my all too fragile world shattered into tiny pieces. My feelings and thoughts centred primarily on the loss and guilt (I felt I should have protected the child, not abandoned it. I also felt that it had been taken from me and I suppose this was true of my Father too), but also failure, shame and uselessness. I believed that my life had been a huge mistake and that I should never have been allowed to happen – in the way that my child was not. And I craved (and perhaps always shall) the forgiveness of that child. I identified with it far more than I could acknowledge at that time. I made the decision to die and tried systematically to kill myself.

But I did not die and I was brought home and introduced to my first Community Team and more Psychiatrists. I think I resented them all tremendously, because I had chosen to die and they were trying to keep me alive. They gave me more medication that did nothing except make me feel sick and shaky. What they did do for me, however, was refer me to an Art Therapist, and that was the turning point. That man has seen me through to the present day.

In 2006, married and five months pregnant, I was referred to another Psychiatrist. I had been in his office for about ten minutes when, armed with my notes, he told me that I was almost certainly bipolar. Initially I was very angry as no one had suggested this before. He sent me off to do some reading and form my own opinion, which I did and in due course thought he was right. It made a great deal of sense. But I still did not feel as if I was moving forward. I had not found that stillness and if anything, it had only added to the turmoil – the raging noise in my brain that, for want of a better explanation, seemed to be about having even less sense now of who I was.

Incredibly, in America I began to feel the noise quietening and the shame lifting. The outside world started to pose less of a threat and my fear was no longer overwhelming. I had to ask why. And the answer lay with my mother: Her ceaseless criticism and quick rages; my feeling that I could never make her happy – and even that she was more proud of my very brilliant and successful husband than of me. She was ashamed of my lack of achievement. But as I started to wake up, I remembered more and more: Mainly the terrifying losses of temper. They were predominantly verbal and aggressive, frequently from out of nowhere and at other times vindictively sarcastic. But there were also regular beatings. I would run and try to find somewhere to hide, but she would always pull me out. Once, because I was terrified of going to school, she literally hurled a jar of marmalade at me before storming out of the house and driving off. Apparently, she had always been like this. She could not cope.

The first professional I spoke to on returning home was my wonderful psychiatric social worker. She sat and listened and then told me that I had always appeared to her as a classic victim of child abuse. It was hearing it said like that which I believe shifted something deep inside me and I finally began to realize who I was. The ridiculous thing to me is that the Art Therapist had tried for years to tell me how significant my mother's behavior was, but I had not been able to hear him. I could not look there. And now I am in therapy with him once again and it is a bringing together of all the therapy and analysis I have had over the course of my life. I have finally been given a picture of all those years.

When my father died, I looked for a safe place in which to grieve, but there was no such place to be found. As a result, I remained in the shock stage of grief, enclosed with all the fear that accompanies it. And furthermore, as such a young child, my fear will have known no limit. So I carried it with me into adulthood, constantly searching for my father, or equally a safe place in which to accept his loss.

Andy's Poem

Andy Reaks

My mother's behavior simply reinforced the fear, guilt and lack of self-worth, as well as invalidating my emotions (she could not cope with any more emotion on top of her own) and taking away any confidence I might have had in myself. I often begin a sentence with an apology.

Her instability increases the likelihood that bipolar is a good diagnosis, but it is only part of the story. I have been almost drowning in the grief that we have unlocked – grief for my father, my lost child, the child that I was myself and the last thirty-three years of my life that could have been so different. I am angry that the symptoms were not identified all those years ago. I have seen a total of six psychiatrists over the course of my life and not one of them identified the root of the trauma. Help could have been given to my mother as well as to me. One of the psychiatrists that I saw a few years ago said that she thought I had spent my life just staying alive. That all began to change when I met my husband: the kindest and bravest man in the world. And now we have a beautiful, living dynamo of a child. But I am determined that the roles of wife and mother, however precious, will not be all that define me.

In essence, I suppose a large part of this is about starting from scratch. There must be the "original me" in here somewhere – the one that went into hiding when I was so small – but that version has not been allowed to grow up, make its own choices, feel achievement and success, develop and take responsibility for the adult me. That small, frightened child who stood behind a closed bedroom door alone, the morning her father died and was taken away from her. She is safe now and starting to live in the real world. I stopped running in my nightmares and turned around. I have not had them since. And although I accept that there will always be depression and sadness, I am now able to sit back and start feeling the stillness.

I dropped my pen
And was handed a crayon.

In a daze I scrawled and scribbled.
For days I crawled and dribbled.

Locked up and locked in myself,
Playing a hiding and seeking game,

Of looking into different mirrors
The reflection is always the same.

But some-one's got the dimensions wrong.
The corridors are too short; the days are too long.

Reminding myself, I think
Therefore I am - but still I am flesh

But I'd rather be ash.
To sift myself through my fingers and drift.

Today I handed back my crayon
And picked up my pen again.

I'll try and write my way out of this.
Recovery like this poem, is a work in progress....





My Journey

This is one of my encaustic paintings

Marie

Looking back at my life I now understand what Alice was talking about when she talked about the mind being like a computer. If you program it correctly every thing runs smoothly. Get it wrong and you're in for all sorts of problems. Alice was my counsellor when I was about thirty-three. I was married with two teenage sons. I really didn't like who I had become. I would fly at Ted my husband usually out of jealousy and on occasions I had a violent temper. I had sought help from a hypnotherapist before seeing Alice.

As I learned to control my temper I thought things would get better. How wrong was I? The whole family were falling apart. Ted was angry with me. My sons were angry with both of us. After experiencing two psychotic episodes in my late thirties and early forties, I was finally diagnosed with schizophrenia after a third episode at the age of forty-six. I was hospitalised for six weeks.

I now realise how important it is to keep myself well. For me, that means the right medication and always taking that medicine. The Cool Recovery Group in Dartmouth enables me to explore my creativity. From encaustic art, card making, basket weaving to creative writing and many other activities. The group helps me to look for positive experiences. We have raised money from table top sales and a coffee morning.

As a group we have visited many local and not so local gardens and projects including the Eden Project. We also have an annual Carol service THANKS to a fellow member who plays the piano.

I also count the years when I worked from home for a souvenir company and now part time for the local Spar shop as the best years of my life. I've used exercise like swimming and jogging for the past twenty-eight years and try to eat reasonably healthy foods. I'm still married and my husband is by and large without fault in my eyes.

Happy

Rory Griffiths

Happy is the ridden road, an adventure's end.
Happy is the missing metaphor found, a bulls eye of a sound.
Happy is the word that fits, a safe door that finally clicks.
Happy is the line that can make all of us cry,
A kind of miracle born straight from the lyrical.
Happy is the sentence that reads right each time.
Your favourite song, that repeating rhyme.
Happy paints people like pictures and fills alphabets with words.
Happy will never falter or ever fail.
Happy will never not sale.
Happy comes with so many conditions.
It cannot be saved and passed over to another date.
It is not an alarm clock or a recording timer.
It is no TV show with advertising breaks.
Happy sounds so simple.
It's that children's book or that picture show.
It starts with that smile and sounds a lot like laughter.
It's this tune tapped out on a keyboard.
A slow forever after.



Recovery and Creativity

Malcolm Learmonth

Stone made for the mountain path, but never sited. Given to a friend who had helped. Slate, screen print and acrylic, 1984

When it comes to the human conditions of love and loss, attachment and distress, madness, sadness and gladness, there is no 'them' or 'us'. No-one gets immunity from feelings, no-one 'owns' distress, or joy. A 'mental health problem' is usually an extreme expression of some aspect of the human condition. 'Madness' may be more a measure of what the people around you won't put up with than anything else!

Neither the mental health workers, nor the people who talk to them, are a 'them' when it comes to delight, despair, and Bad Things Happening. Some of 'us' undoubtedly have a **lot** worse occurrences than others. I can't, thank goodness, compare my experience with the trauma I know many people have survived. Yet being a mental health worker doesn't get us off the hook either.

In Greek mythology, the patron of healing is Chiron the centaur. His human half is a wise, knowledgeable healer but his horse half is wounded and kept hidden from sight in the cave he consults from. Chiron is a 'wounded healer'. His wounded-ness is inseparable from capacity to heal.

The desire, and hopefully the ability, to work with wounds, and their survive-ability, is often rooted in the worker's own story. Like Chiron, the worker's wounds are not usually for display. If workers disconnect from their share of 'wounds', from experiences of Extreme Human Conditions, (EHC) bad things can happen. If 'mental health problems' only belong to a 'them', unhelpful things have tended to happen to 'them' such as: over medication, institutionalisation, de-personalisation and more. And the workers, as an 'us', have different difficulties like: being frightened by distress and disturbance; failing to sort out our own issues; being bad at our jobs, burning out, and so on.

If a mental health problem comes to define a person's identity, to themselves, the people near them, and their workers does that mean the worker in turn becomes a 'them', who doesn't understand or know what helps?

In this account I'm trying to bridge that gap. I'm saying we are all like Chiron, most of us wounded, most of us healers. The painter Braques said, "*Art is a wound turned to light*". As an artist, an art psychotherapist, and a person with a pretty normal dose of 'EHC' I believe it can be.

Every life has deficits, and losses. Many have real cruelties and traumas. Perhaps if things don't fail a bit, we can't grow up, but if they totally fail we can't either.

While 'everybody hurts', my hurts were comparatively minor cuts and bruises rather than broken limbs: a displaced nomadic childhood..., Calvinist pleasure-hating cultural shadows..., family secrets.... I could go on....

I painted and drew intensively as a child. None of this survives: there's a family tradition of destroying artwork. My grandfather's 19th century glass plate photographs were smashed to make hardcore for a new cellar floor; my father's paintings were mostly burned by his mother, as was everything I did before the age of 20 by mine.

There is one photograph, taken by my brother, of my long drawing of a battle on Hadrian's Wall. I'm holding it up so the wall and battle, is right across my chest. I'm about 8. There was already a kind of war going on in me.

About 15 years later I was walking down my street, distressed and exhausted. I caught my reflection in a shop window and quite clearly saw the skull inside my head. I mean **saw**. It felt like the pavement turned to ice beneath my feet and I was skidding...

This drawing from the time tells it pretty much like it was.



Slipping Glimpse. Indian Ink, 1982

It was the time of the Falklands War. I couldn't tell the difference between the war 'outside' where an antiquated ship sailing away from the war zone has just been torpedoed by 'Our Boys' drowning 323 men, the war in my head, the war in my marriage and in my art-making. I was buying several copies of the papers every day. 'GOTCHA!!' said the headline.

I drew a drowning man over the front page, copied it, and fly-posted this alternative news across town. I kept up a running commentary right through the war. But which war? During the Falkland's this whole country seemed mad to me. Which made it hard to tell if the madness was mine or not. Art making does tend to join up the inside with the outside. This isn't always good.

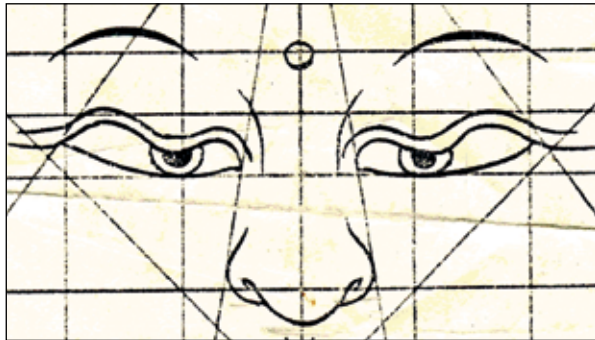
My wife was emotionally unwell. I had two young children, very little money, we were homeless, (six temporary accommodations over the second pregnancy) I was completing an 'Art and Design in Social Contexts' course, and I wasn't feeling that well myself. I was breaking up.

For about 6 months from that point I should certainly have activated 'The Services', had I come to their attention. I am profoundly grateful to the friends and family who gave enough sanctuary to make that unnecessary.

It's often thought that 'art therapy' is necessarily and always 'cathartic'. It's all about 'Getting It Out' and expressing your anger etc. Sometimes though, it's just the opposite: a safe place. One of the things that has kept me, just about, sane was Tibetan Buddhist Thangka painting.

It is a meticulous discipline. Buddha's left eyebrow goes exactly 'so'. This isn't just a precise mark, it's not technical drawing, it's precise grace and feel, too. The teacher takes your painfully clumsy

eyebrow, and with one sable line of red Indian Ink, shows you it right. Off you go and try again. 'Cathartic' it wasn't. Ordering and calming, it certainly was.



Buddha's eyes: Drawing template

Since that time, I have been intimate with depression, suicide, bereavement, an eating disorder, drug and alcohol problems, psychosis, sectioning and Alzheimer's in my closest friends and family. At several points I've been a carer too. When you're carrying the label, the role, of mental health professional, one's own wounds are usually, and appropriately out of sight, like Chiron's. That doesn't mean they're not there, just that it's not usually helpful to share them overtly.

I experienced serious depression again in the mid 90's, and resorted to an SSRI anti-depressant. It worked for me, not because a medication can cure sick souls, put right mistakes or solve a difficulty in living, but because it can buy you time and energy to tackle the problem.

I have been to the borders of depression since. If necessary I self medicate with homeopathic remedies. But mostly when the signs of depression start I check out these possibilities:

It's winter:

I'm overworking:

I'm not being creative enough:

I'm not getting enough exercise:

I'm not getting enough nature:

I've lost something or someone:

It's an anniversary of something sad:

People have let me down:

I'm taking life and myself too seriously!

Then I try and correct, or at least acknowledge, one or more factors. Some factors aren't correctable, and have to be grown through. Carl Jung said, 'Problems are not solved they are outgrown'. Sorrows and losses aren't illnesses. Sometimes they even help us taste life more sweetly.

So what's all this to do with 'Recovery'? Well, from the viewpoint of the kind of art therapy I trained in and love, the recovery principles are mostly what I call 'SOBOs' - Statements of the Bleeding Obvious, which sometimes makes it really important to spell them out, especially when they have seemingly not been obvious in large areas of the mental health system.

The arts have a survival value. They are one of the few tools we have to work with our vulnerability to malignant sadness and madness. Even more importantly, because images can 'mean' many things simultaneously they help us to explore the paradoxes and ambivalences that run right through our emotional lives.

The myth about art therapists delivering single, simple 'interpretations' about images to their makers is nonsense, at least in my practice! Most feelings are mixed feelings. Words tend to go in straight lines: images enfold, unwrap, digress, and walk



One stone from the mountain path: because it was in Wales, it is bi-lingual.

around their subject. They open new feelings, possibilities, and understandings.

The act of making shows us that we are autonomous, choice making creative beings. And that feels good. The creative process makes suffering meaningful. And perhaps it is meaninglessness that makes us saddest and maddest of all.

When I broke down in 1982, I had at least in part painted my way into cracking up. By tackling war, injustice, homelessness visually in the way I was, while deep in my own distress, I was digging myself an ever deeper depressive hole. And I had to 'art' my way out again too. Much of the following year was spent working with what heals me most: art making in the mountains.

I made a path with words and images printed, carved and painted on local slate up a remote hill in North Wales. A stone circle on the summit was orientated to the Spring equinox sunrise, and amazingly, worked. A great thing about being an artist, or an art student, is that you can do out of the ordinary things, without being seen as mad. The whole work was destroyed by someone within weeks because, I later learnt, it was suspected of being Magic. In a way it was. The living effect of the art-making upon me was not destructible though. I literally gave a physical and symbolic form to a journey from the dark valley up to a sunrise. I came back to life in the process.

In this process, I had also, partially unknowingly, embarked on the journey to becoming a therapist. Out of inner necessity, I'd invented a kind of art therapy. It was a joyful discovery that this approach was known, understood, and could be learned about.

The learning itself, when I got there a few years later, was an initiation. (I was honest about my own mental health, and wisely

advised by the college to give myself another year's recovery time). 'Terror', it has been said, 'is the essence of true initiation'. Working intensively with the issues of psychotherapy and image making is guaranteed to reach deep into one's own, and other people's, distress, understanding, creativity and resilience. Now being in personal therapy is mandatory for trainees, for good reasons.

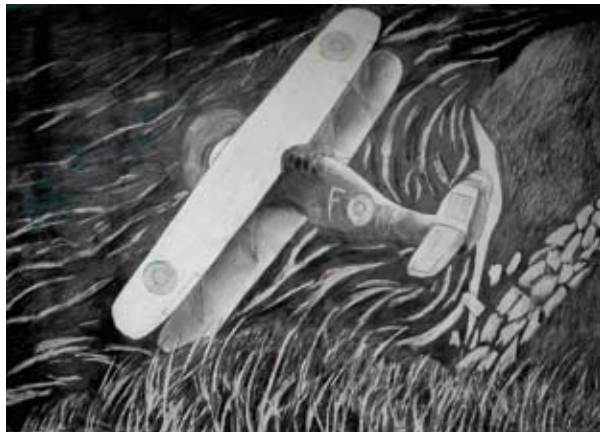
Practitioners need to understand the destructiveness of vicariously working out our own woundedness on others. Understanding the potential vulnerability of being a 'client' and our own motivations for wanting to 'help' are also critical. Then, therapy wasn't mandatory, and I couldn't have afforded it if it had been. But as soon as I was working I embarked on what turned out to be six years of art therapy and Jungian analysis, with a wise and compassionate man: one of the originators of art therapy in the 1950s.

Towards the end of this work, I had several important dreams: in one of which I met Chiron.

*It was the Second World War, and the air defence of Malta. The Fascists were coming. There were only three, antiquated aircraft left. (This much is pretty much historically accurate). We couldn't get them into the air. I had to consult the centaur. I went to see him, with my dog. My dog had to go into the cave, and lick his wound clean. Understandably, he didn't want to, but did. Chiron told me that 'the air was too heavy' over the airfield. We had to fly the planes **off a cliff** to drop them under, then round, the 'heavy air'. The dream ended as I flew the first plane into this insane gamble. It worked.*

I don't want to 'interpret' this dream, any more than I 'interpret' other people's paintings. But in turning its multiple meanings of woundedness, healing, kindness and fighting back, risk, vulnerability

and resilience around in my mind, my therapist was able to point out that the real planes on Malta were called 'Faith', 'Hope' and 'Charity' (the latter from 'Caritas' meaning 'Love for all people'.)



Getting Air-born. Graphite and mixed media, 1992

That's 20 years ago now. I have worked with many people in art therapy; often the abused, the traumatised, the marginalised and the silenced. When we talk about 'Recovery' it can be easy to slip into glibness about just what people

are recovering **from**. Hurts, fears, sorrows, angers, oppressions, discriminations, neglects, distresses and disturbances are real, and have real causes.

Yet it is still the creative resourcefulness of us human creatures that moves and amazes me most. I have continued to make art: for me it is a condition of wellness that I do. Most recently, art making has been at the heart of how I've been recovering, from being present at the (awful) death of my father. I'm also getting help: I'm not afraid of 'taking my own medicine' on the counselling front as well as the art one when necessary.

'Recovery' isn't about everything coming up rainbows and daisies. The best definition of 'health' I know is this one:

Health is 'a process of adaptation. ... to changing environments, to growing up and aging, to healing when damaged, to suffering and to the peaceful expectation of death. Health embraces the future as well, **and therefore includes anguish and the inner resources to deal with it.**' (Ivan Illich, *Limits to Medicine*, Marion Boyars publishers, London, 1976, p 273.)

This 'recovery story' is also a mini 'personal art history'. Birds have appeared, been trapped, flown, danced and parted throughout my art and recovery story. I'd like to finish with three of them. The first goes back to my most disintegrated phase in the 1980's. The title is from Blake.



'How can a bird that is born for joy sit in a cage and sing?' Acrylic, 1983



Stone made for the mountain path, but never sited. Given to a friend who had helped. Slate, screen print and acrylic, 1984



Parting Dance. Found objects and digital photograph, 2009

Discovery

Melanie

Help! I need a priest, what's happening to me?
'Divine intervention won't work, its pathology'.
No one to turn to, unhappiness intruded.
My medical notes said, 'withdrawn and deluded.'
Images and sounds, a repressed memory,
'She's hallucinating, visual, auditory...'
Given a label, the unspeakable name,
I felt like a freak, never to be the same.

My third time in hospital I trusted to talk,
And spilled out my fears, like learning to walk.
A nurse had time and listened kindly,
I told her my memory, she replied wisely.
The millennium past, the world did not end.
I had more leave and came back round the bend.
They changed my medication, mornings awoke.
But then a voice that spoke and spoke.

My friend and enemy, brother to this day,
The trick is not to listen and then it goes away.
I moved on with my life, slowly found meaning,
I avoided some people, however well seeming.
Others empowered me to rekindle my dream,
I could help people because of where I've been.
One day I could work with the mad,
The crazy, vulnerable, unbearably sad.

My CV was in bits, what could I try?
An OT took a chance, now I know why.
Meaningful work got me back into living;
Now qualified myself I can do my forgiving.
In the same hospital I wandered before,
Now not a patient, I have keys to the door.
I recognise staff and I try to smile,
I hope everyday I go the extra mile.

I'm married now with a happy home,
Good people close to me, friends of my own.
My mind has mended, I discovered who I am.
I use a little medication and my Wellness Plan.
Loving husband by my side, making me smile,
I love our cat, and to walk and swim in the wild.
No caffeine, cigarettes, alcohol, I can be strong.
I can turn to my Mum if things go wrong.

I have more dreams that I want to live,
But I need information, is there any to give?
Is there evidence a baby would be OK?
It's a risk and I'm responsible, it could go either way.
Don't let me feel stranded, I have come this far,
I'm moving on, but please leave your door ajar.
Hope breeds hope, there's enough for everyone,
Good shines through, when all is said and done.

This photograph perfectly illustrates how swimming and nature have helped me. I asked the photographer, Dominic Taylor, if it could be reproduced for this publication.

"Thanks for getting in touch. It means a great deal to me that my photograph has such strong, positive, associations for you and I would be very happy to give you permission to use it."
Dominic Taylor



This photo was published in The Guardian on 22nd June 2008.



Kathy's Story

Kathy Gibson

This is a little background about me, of where I came from and who I am now.

I was born in the 1950s in Swansea, South Wales on an estate called "Town Hill" - a very rough area of Swansea.

I have a sister called Gloria who is three years older than myself, as I look to remind her.

My father had just left the Navy when I was born. He was an alcoholic and was a very violent man.

One day, when I was four I went out to play with my sister, we played in the road with all of the other children who lived in the road. I dropped a little plastic dolly in the drain, it dropped onto the metal grate. I screamed at my sister to get it out for me as it was stuck - she in turn called the 'bigger boys' over and they pulled the doll out for me and gave it back to me. I stopped screaming and put the doll in my mouth.

The following day my mother thought I had the flu so she called the Doctor who agreed I had flu. The next day I could not move my legs; I could not walk or get out of bed. The Doctor was called again and I was rushed to the isolation hospital (Townhill Hospital) where I stayed for the next two years. When my mother was allowed to visit, she had to stand on a step outside of the window as it was thought in those days that it made it worse for the mother to see the child if the child was going to die.

However, I eventually came out of the hospital - I could not walk and have not walked since.

I went home to my family and in the following six months my mother died of throat cancer. Although my sister and myself were not told. When the coffin came out, my sister could not understand

why the new wardrobe which has just gone in has just come out again.

I don't know why, but my father moved to Exeter taking me and my sister. He soon found himself another woman who he would beat up most days.

A court order was made and myself and my sister were taken. Eventually my sister went to live with my aunty in Wales and I was sent from Exeter to Dr Barnardo's village in Essex. This was a huge village with a fence around it. It had houses for the boys, houses for girls and a very big house for the disabled children - known as the "Crippled Children's House".

Dr Barnardo's was where I first experienced both physical and mental abuse. I also learnt to keep my head down, jump when I was told to, attend meals when the 'bell went' and found out how cruel man can be.

Moving on to the next part of life, I got married and had two children who were both girls. My husband was a mentally abusive man. Eventually I got divorced. We went to court and although I had brought up my children for the last eight years, his case was that, as I had a disability, I could not look after my children.

Eventually I got custody of my children, despite his lies. However, the judge said I had to have a social worker because he was not sure I could cope on my own - I saw this as an insult.

After this I had another extremely violent relationship with a man and after this relationship I had a breakdown.

I saw many counsellors and mental health professionals - none of which helped. Someone suggested I may like to try "Art Therapy", which was going to change the rest of my life and to help me realise

I was a person and could make decisions on my own.

Art Therapy is a method of working with psychological and emotional distress – using the instinct to create.

So ... what have I achieved?



Here is an example of my work since having the help I needed through Art Therapy.

By the time I arrived at art therapy I was at the point where I really felt like joining my dead mother. I'd had different kinds of help before. Trying to talk about what was going on in my life was not easy. Often there were weeks between appointments, and then it wasn't the same person. I remember cold plain rooms: not

easy places to talk to a stranger if you are being beaten or cutting yourself. There was no consistency.

When I arrived at the Creative Therapies Service, it was different straight away. I felt like I was away from my life. It helped that it is in an old gothic house, with some wonderful trees around it. There was an old piano in the entrance. It felt welcoming. The art room was full of pots of paint and brushes. The rooms and the building were so different from the institutional white rooms, that they were a sort of therapy themselves.

When I met my art therapist I was offered a cup of tea by a man wearing pink baseball boots and not a suit! It was clear that the entrance to the building was not a doctor's waiting room, and that this was not a doctor. That made it easier for me to talk, to sit quietly and remember things and, often, to express things that I couldn't have talked about before. I made a lot of pictures, and I learned a lot about myself. There was so much that I didn't know about my own life. I was confused.

I grew up in Barnardo's Homes, and had terrible experiences of loss, of abuse, of children's homes, of not having a story that made sense to me. I had lots of very tangled up feelings, lots of shame, lots of abusive relationships. Sometimes I was really distressed and unhappy. I think that being disabled when I was growing up meant that I, and a lot of others, were treated like 'things', not people. It left me feeling unconfident, self harming, drinking and vulnerable.

Sometimes I felt trapped in a useless 'thing' myself. It has taken me a long time to get the confidence I have now. I can speak up for myself better now and work as a trainer on disability issues. The therapy has helped me to get my self respect back. Through the words and pictures, and having someone to listen and help me to make sense of it all, I'm not ashamed any more. Sometimes

feelings come up that are still hard to deal with, but I don't drink or harm myself or anyone else. I feel like I know who I am now, where I've been and where I've come from.

It was very hard for me to trust a therapist: I've had some really bad experiences of people who were supposed to look after me or 'help' in the past. I'm still easily angered by the 'Authorities'! Now I want to challenge them though! My therapist had to work quite hard at times. I'd get really angry and upset and not have the words to talk about why. It still happens sometimes. But that is where the paint really comes in. A lot of my paintings weren't pretty at all: this wasn't about 'art' or pretty pictures. It was about my life, about how it really was, and about how overwhelming my feelings could be.

Making art let me express and be myself fully. Working with an art psychotherapist helped me contain, make sense of my feelings, and to get my story back. I wish more people who experience the kinds of distress and disturbance that I did could get this help.

I don't think the mental health needs of people with disabilities are taken seriously enough, and art therapy is one way that it could be.

I don't forget what happened to me, I have learnt to live with it, have found some sort of peace. Every now and again I visit that place in my mind and I just want to scream and then life goes on as usual till the next time.



I have learnt to live with it,
have found some sort of peace



Dispelling the myth of 'them and us'

Laurie Davidson

Revisiting the past is, for me, like cautiously peeking into Pandora's Box. Part of my own self management for many years has been about living in the here and now or looking to the future. However, seeing how other people's stories can speak to me, I have broken my own rule and taken a trip into history.

My world collapsed when I was 11. Up until then I had lived a 'Laurie Lee' rural idyll of tree houses, cycle rides to the beach and bringing in the harvest with my grandfather. Passing the 11+ and going to the Grammar School, however, was not altogether socially acceptable where I came from. The purple uniform and cap made me an easy target on the bus and train; where just choosing the right carriage took on the proportions of life or death decisions. When I was 11, my father took a girlfriend, whom he flaunted at home and publicly; starting a decade or more of humiliation for my mother, who, 'for the sake of the children' stayed with him and tried in vain to save a family in meltdown. The children themselves put hands over ears under covers each night to block out the anger and vitriol. Coming bottom of the class in every subject in my first year at Grammar School I was kept down a year. My parents wouldn't speak to me for days as direct communication was not our family's forte. Malignant atmospheres hovered like storm clouds that rumbled and occasionally broke.

My descent was rapid. I developed a serious stammer which made every gathering of more than two people a scene of potential humiliation. My personal hygiene plummeted. I was sure that God was monitoring my every move and that everyone knew what I was thinking, which left me with very red cheeks and a sense of shame. I prayed and read religious texts until the early hours, so met each morning exhausted and full of dread. My stomach became solid with muscle and constipation which could last for days, causing

chronic stomach cramps. Only music, a baker's round, the church and a holiday job as a mountain guide stopped me from going over the edge. School gradually improved but I spent all the time I could in my room or outside of the family. When one day I saw a rainbow aura around myself in the mirror, it precipitated a decision to leave home quickly.

I was left with an enduring fear from childhood that others would 'see through' me and that disaster was just round the corner and it was just a matter of time before tragedy would strike. My pessimism was rewarded when a tragic bereavement left me unhealed for a long time, but which also gave me an understanding and empathy I could never have learned from books.

Had I encountered any professional during that time, my life would probably have taken a very different course. I was saved because, when I was at home, my parents would not have allowed the family washing to be aired in public and, after I had left home, I was determined, because of what I saw of the mental health system, never to ask for professional help.

I started work as a student nurse in Broadmoor in 1968, which offered me accommodation, namely in the form of a cell on one of the wards (there being no room in the nurses' home). I slopped out, washed and shaved along with the inmates. One of the dormitories had 50 beds with just enough room for each patient to squeeze in between. In the case of a riot we were instructed to lock the door from the inside and throw the keys out of a window. Medicines were given as a punishment to induce 'the shakes' and vomiting when someone was 'up the pole'.

I remember working in a mental handicap (the term used in the 1960s) hospital where the residents were stripped naked at 5.00pm, left in open toilet cubicles until 5.30 and then dipped like sheep into

the large bath before being in bed by 6.00; so the staff could have some peace and quiet. In another hospital, a circle of 30-40 people with dementia in one room were imprisoned in their seats by a device cunningly disguised as a table and they would only be moved as far as the bathroom when a puddle appeared and staff were grudgingly volunteered to clear up and replace clothes with others that never fitted.

I was working in hospitals when they opened the doors of the wards, then the gates to the hospital and eventually when they pulled down the hospitals. At each stage people said it would never work. At each stage it did for many, with a few notable exceptions. Community Care took a bashing, but it didn't stop Paul, who had been mute on a back ward of the asylum for 12 years, getting a dog, getting a flat and talking at a conference a year later. There are many stories like that which may never be told, but which began to open windows of hope and possibility.

At university, I became a therapy junky. I had managed to persuade my sociology tutor that I was going to carry out objective interventionist research into Encounter Group Weekends in the early 1970s. In reality, I lapped it all up and was anything but objective – pillow bashing, primal screaming, guided fantasies, psychodramas, gestalt empty chairs, TA, NLP and a host of other therapy fads. I cursed my father, raged at my mother and wept out some of the pain and resentment I had diligently been storing up. This led to a lifetime interest in mental health and a full time course in humanistic counselling at Aston University in 1975. As a counsellor and social worker, the sound values of Carl Rogers remained with me throughout my career.

I also remember the day that depression lost its grip on me. I had always had an image in depression of a rain sodden forest with

tightly packed trees and the music of one of Bartok's string quartets. I decided one day to thin out the trees, put some grass and flowers down, change the music to a cheery cello and let the sun shine in. I visualised this several times and depression never had the same power over me again. Strange, but true.

My doubts about the integrity of 'the system' began when I went to a conference in 1983 in Brighton when people with lived experience were the inspirational speakers, made wonderful music and recited poetry and stories that made me fight back the tears. I woke up in a sweat at 5.00am with the realisation that much of what I had been taught about mental health was simply untrue and very damaging to people's chances of recovery. A process of 'unlearning' the indoctrination and myths of the mental health establishment began and still carries on to this day.

Early days of community care reflected benevolent paternalism. Well intentioned clinicians and managers made decisions which affected thousands of lives without any reference to those people (some would say they still do). In Devon in the mid 1980s, the first of several 50:50 conferences took place where people with lived experience of receiving services or of supporting those people had equal representation with professionals. For the first time in my experience, the dynamics of power began to be addressed and the idea of 'professional distance' changed from being a worthy aspiration to a poor excuse for remaining aloof.

In 2001, I went to work in New Zealand for 6 months. I first came across recovery when I was speaking at a Bi-Polar support group called Balance. I met a very special person, Frank Bristol, who had struggled with bi-polar patterns since adolescence, but had managed to avoid hospital for over 30 years. He introduced me to the work of Mary Ellen Copeland, who developed the Wellness Recovery Action



Plan (WRAP) in the US. We arranged a recovery conference together where he told his story and how he managed to keep himself well. Being only used to professional speakers, I had never seen an audience reaction like this before. People's expressions lit up with hope and they swarmed round him afterwards with their thanks that somebody had at last described their own experience.



Coming home to England, I found a good friend and fellow recovery enthusiast in Dr Glenn Roberts, a psychiatrist with whom I attended Mary Ellen Copeland's Wellness Recovery Action Plan course in Southport in 2003. The next week the first Devon Recovery and Self Management Conference took place and Mary Ellen came down to Devon and lit a spark which has grown into an eternal flame. She inspired and gave hope to all who listened to her and from that conference 'Recovery Devon' was born – a group of people who support recovery who have met for 5 years to debate progress

and organise further events. WRAP has been key to the growth of recovery values, as it translates high ideals into daily practicalities and gets people used to the idea that they have rights and choices.

A conference in 2006 featured Shery Mead and David Gonzales from the US and Frank Bristol from New Zealand. Following that, a five day residential Intentional Peer Support course was staged for 30 people who have lived experience of receiving services.

Recovery is important for individuals and because it has acted as a magnet to people of good will to focus on improving the response people in distress receive. Having been round the block a few times, I was used to new fads and fancies which had blossomed and then faded. I am still surprised by the incredible impact recovery ideas have on the attitudes of individuals and the culture of mental health provider organisations. Having trained over 350 Support, Time and Recovery workers in self management and recovery, I have been very encouraged by the quality of the people I have worked with and how willing they are to take on board recovery ideas. At least a third have lived experience of services themselves, providing undeclared peer support. A voluntary sector organisation, the Community Care Trust in South Devon, has been transforming itself into a recovery organisation for over 5 years and has shown that with good leadership it is possible to move mountains through value based training.

Recovery has started to change the culture of mental health. A move from 'user involvement to partnerships'; a move away from 'treatment and cure approaches' towards living good lives as defined by the person; looking for personal qualities in staff that support recovery rather than just skills and capabilities; exploring recovery conversations rather than assessment; negotiated safety plans rather than risk assessments; a recognition of the huge value

of the third sector in keeping people well and trail blazing recovery focussed approaches. The list goes on.

I have been incredibly lucky. The story I tell of the last 30 years is a personally happy one, which I did not expect. I have a beautiful, loving and supportive wife and three wonderful children whom I adore. I have not experienced serious depression for over 20 years and life just keeps getting better. I have used WRAP to allow myself to be honest about the patterns I have developed over a lifetime which I don't always react well to. I still find family conflicts very difficult and I have to fight hard not to pull memories off the shelf and over-react. I still experience times when I think it will all collapse. My children make it very difficult for me to take myself too seriously and their humour bursts the bubble very quickly if I start to withdraw. I know I need to get a good night's sleep above all and be careful what I eat and drink. My garden with its seasons, pottery for its creative focus and Dartmoor with its granite are three other loves in my life which keep everything else in perspective. With retirement comes a new and exciting chapter in my life. Others will take on the recovery relay and many good people are working in partnership to radically change the world. I feel privileged to have been so involved in this chapter in the history of mental health.



“That’s what hope is. Reaching for, working for, fighting for what didn’t seem possible before.”

Barack Obama in Ames, Iowa on December 31st, 2007

Afterword

The process of gathering this collection of stories and personal reflections on the experience of recovery has been uplifting and rewarding. The project team has been a unique collaboration of people who are expert, either by lived experience of mental distress or by training - and some who are on both sides of the fence.

The commitment to the project has been resolute and inspirational. It has been a privilege and pleasure for the team to work with people who have reflected on their experiences and have shared their stories in order to help other people through stormy times.

Inviting people to contribute their stories has required a sensitive, supportive and optimistic approach. Writing and creative workshops were run to explain the project and engage and support people in participating. These allowed people to work together and talk through their stories. Many found it helpful to build on a 'Getting Started' framework. Others found one-to-one meetings important. Some preferred to have someone to scribe their thoughts for them.

Special thanks are due to the contributors themselves. Some gave their own names. Some preferred to give pseudonyms or remain anonymous. Their courage and generosity in sharing their experiences is greatly appreciated. It is not possible to anticipate fully the impact of the collection, but it is certain that each contribution will connect with different people in different ways and may help towards other people's recovery.

It is hoped that this is the beginning of future explorations that value personal recovery stories, where experience and wisdom gained, is turned into expertise. In time, further materials may become available, visit www.recoverydevon.co.uk for further news and updates.

A special thank you to Kathy Evans, who very kindly gave permission to use the songs and poems of her son, Bryn Morgan Evans.

We wish to thank contributors who provided photographs to support other people's stories, including Anna Maksymluk for her photograph for Eileen's story.

The Project Team who worked together for a year to produce the publication were Laurie Davidson, Linden Lynn, Glenn Roberts, Janet Hooper, Charlotte Hubbard, Anna Maksymluk, Peter Leggatt, Linda Stapleton. Ann Ley and Geof Lynn provided additional support. It was hard work, but rewarding and humbling to draw alongside people finding and sharing their 'gift of stories'.

Devon Partnership NHS Trust has been firmly committed to the project through the Chief Executive, Clinical Cabinet and Recovery and Independent Living Professional Experts Group. This includes significant financial support in terms of time and funding. For all this support we wish to extend heartfelt thanks.

The voluntary organisations MIND, Rethink and the Community Care Trust (South Devon) are also financially backing this project.

These stories show much depends on what we each do today. When we act now to look after ourselves, but also raise our eyes from the present, we can plan and prepare for better futures. So when that time arrives, we can look back knowing we did what we could, to manage our wellbeing. Thus we can feel pleased with our progress, and so again, look forward on our personal voyages, confident of greater choices before us.

It is our hope that the reflections from our story tellers will bring a brighter future for those struggling with mental health difficulties and for those supporting them. They may offer hope and the belief that days to come can still be filled with uncharted potential and possibilities.

What can we learn from this book?

Well, above all else the message is that personal recovery is possible, regardless of how long the person has struggled with their difficulties or how seemingly unbearable those difficulties have been.

So... what has helped? (by no means an exhaustive list)

Recognising the need for help!

Opening up – being prepared to try and talk

Being *brave and willing* to try what is offered

Taking those first tentative steps and *giving yourself credit for small achievements*

Accepting *personal responsibility* for your own wellbeing

Hope – often starting with others having hope for you

Self-management – self-care, diet, exercise, changing your perspective, looking forwards; finding things to do which give you pleasure including hobbies and creativity, identifying goals and working on them, being in the moment, finding balance in your life, learning to avoid unhelpful people and activities; learning when to stop and rest and many more.....

Devising a *WRAP* plan – often with help from others

Routine shared activities

Meaningful activity

Music

People – kind, non-judgemental people friends and family, peer support, professionals who really *listen*, who are encouraging and *empowering*, who do not give up on you

Re-establishing your identity and self-acceptance – remembering who you are, discovering who you are for the first time and also establishing new identities as a worthwhile person

Education – can take many forms from learning about specific diagnoses, attending courses as an aid to living, such as assertiveness training, self-esteem, dealing with childhood abuse, coping with voices or learning new knowledge or skills for fun or potential employment

Unexpected blessings – being given an opportunity, someone giving you a chance, meeting the right person, a change of environment, recognising positive aspects of illness such as 'really living', becoming a stronger, wiser and more insightful person.

Ann Ley

Research Psychologist, Devon Partnership NHS Trust



This publication has been made possible with the support of Devon Partnership NHS Trust, Recovery Devon and a number of local voluntary organisations. If you would like to support future projects of a similar kind in the county, all donations will be gratefully received. Please make cheques payable to Recovery Innovations Devon and send them to the Finance Department, Devon Partnership NHS Trust, Wonford House Hospital, Dryden Road, Exeter, EX2 5AF.

For more information about Devon Partnership NHS Trust go to www.devonpartnership.nhs.uk or call 0800 0730741
For more information about Recovery Devon, go to www.recoverydevon.co.uk