

A Part of the Human Race

It is good to be in my 60s and to be 'countercultural.' The last five years have been the healthiest and most contented of a life that has been otherwise coloured by serious episodes of misery and turbulence. I have had a bipolar condition, probably since my early teens, which was not diagnosed until I was in my 41st year.

I say I am 'countercultural': Many of my peers are just beginning to struggle with chronic, debilitating illness, whereas I have been living with my 'friend' for so long it is almost familiar enough to be ignored. It demands more attention at some times than others, but my life is tidier and richer for my learning not to be mesmerised by it. I am a woman who has an illness, rather than a diagnosis. 'Suzie Bloggs' who has a bipolar condition, not Suzie Bloggs who is bipolar.

The contentment of the last five years basically flows from the 'getting of wisdom' rather than a narrow focus on managing 'highs'. My life is much more fulfilling because I know what I need and I now have more assertiveness to say so – I sense a greater maturity in myself which is also affirmed by close friends. Life as a whole is more manageable, so there is relatively less stress to deal with. As a side effect I seem to be having fewer, less disruptive highs.

Probably we with a bipolar condition are psychologically frail. But we, too, need to negotiate our life tasks, even though they might be a bit more difficult, perhaps, for us. Human development is a bigger, more integrating task than just learning strategies to lessen the impact of a particular illness. In this area, I have been lucky. I have had good opportunities for personal growth, and people around me who believed in my capacity to face challenge. Some of them thought I was a bit of a slow achiever at times, mind you! Personal development is also important even for managing a stress-related illness like bipolar disorder. Failure to negotiate life-stages leaves people stuck in uncomfortable, stressful conditions.

There are countless examples of human resilience which bring observers to silent awe. They are displayed by people who could have been suspected to be without resources. I have joined the rest of the human race in facing and doing my best to negotiate challenges as they presented themselves. I hiccupped my way through various 'seasons' of parent-daughter relationship: submissiveness, independence, equality and, finally, nurturing them. At eighteen I resocialised into a strict convent culture, which has been constantly changing ever since. I have faced and changed the original lack of wisdom in my choice to be a teacher. I was eventually able to grow beyond miserable dependence towards mutuality in relationships. Learning to value and express my creativity has, itself, been creative of my sense of self. I have taken the risk of living alone after 55 years of various kinds of group living. I have explored and integrated expressions of generativity appropriate to my uniqueness as Suzie Bloggs, first, religious woman, second.

It is with a great sense of thanksgiving that the 'getting' of these and other wisdoms has left me in a life space of such unexpected contentment. Gratuitously, also, bitter intensities about victimhood have evaporated, and gratitude is a constant companion now. On the authority of this week's Sydney Morning Herald, I have apparently joined the ranks of contented women over 55!

From early teens to age 41 my life was significantly marked by the pain of undiagnosed, poorly understood mental illness. Since my first hospitalisation in 1985 I have learnt some life skills that are specific to managing my bipolar condition.

Good, clear knowledge gave me power over the condition. That knowledge included general information, clearly applied to my personal experience. For the first time my symptoms were objectified as a medical condition rather than a failure to be any sort of decent human being. I learnt about the validity of mental illness diagnoses and welcomed the appropriateness of psychiatric drugs.

The psychiatric help I have received has been patchy, but sometimes good. As I have got older I have become more assertive about seeking and maintaining good GP and psychiatric support. I value a good

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sounding-board in times of crisis, but, more importantly, in negotiating personal growth.

I have continued to seek good spiritual information through reading and through a competent 'spiritual director'. My image of God can be distorted by both mania and depression. My membership of my religious order is important to me because we challenge each other to be idealistic, realistic and authentic. I have significant relationships within and outside the group.

A protective attitude that I have found helpful is to remember not to take responsibility for things that are none of my business. A personal tendency to 'fix' others can be very stressful, and lead to exhaustion, not to mention delusion!

My stomach, and its resident butterflies, is an infallible barometer of tension. Being aware of such physical symptoms is very useful to me in being comfortable, and in the last resort, in preventing mania. My most common cause of tension is not balancing solitude and gregariousness in my life. There are also other balancing acts that can benefit from attention: inactivity/hyperactivity; being self-contained/self-disclosing; self-discipline/spontaneity etc. All of my major highs have been the result of a strong external stressor (e.g. my parents splitting up) during which it would have been much better to seek early counselling. (I 'know' and have been through the proximate warning signs of my highs many times. But by the time I am experiencing them I often deny that any of this is leading to a high. My real protection lies in good, early self-knowledge and well-developed habitual stress-management)

Within the structure of my religious community an arrangement has been made to quarantine the resources of the group from the financial indiscretions of my highs.

A few good friends know the waiting signs of my highs, and they loyally try to tell me when I am getting into danger. They are women of stern stuff who usually bear the brunt of my denial and anger, endure my absence from the relationship while I am off being 'mad', and then forgive me for my arrogance when I am available again.

The capacity to maintain friendships in spite of my disruptive, even frightening, behaviour is what sustains me most in living with a bipolar disorder. I belong to a group of religious women who all knew me in a fairly detailed, if superficial, way before I had a particularly publicly manic attack. They know that there is more to me than my illness. (Humanly they find the silence of depression easier to put up with than the unpredictability of highs.)

My eventual capacity for openness and appropriate self-disclosure has widened the circle of people who know there is more to me than any medical condition. They join with me in debunking the thing. You can't be a victim of something you send up! On a more important note, shared vulnerability is most often a source of intimacy. Sharing simply any of my vulnerabilities (including the bipolar diagnosis) has led to like responses, leaving me and others standing together on 'holy ground'. These experiences have been part of the 'upside' of being bipolar, or part of the upside of taking the risk of other self-disclosure.

There is another positive side-effect of having a bipolar disorder. It led me for the first time to experience the truth of myself as a woman who is both flawed and gifted.

I am grateful for the blowout of my worst manic attack being so extreme that I was forced to get psychiatric help. I had to 'call things by their right name', a process I often resist at first. Naming my weakness, instead of using so much energy denying it and trying ineffectually to control it, freed energy I was able to use for the first time to live more with much more happiness and health.

Acceptance of myself as both flawed and gifted was deceptively simple in the freedom it gave. I am part of the flawed and gifted human race, not a misfit after all!