

A Seven-year Prison Sentence

I do forgive thee, Unnatural though thou art¹

I remember reading this quote from *The Tempest* in a year 11 English class. Shakespeare uses the word 'unnatural' in the context of sinful or villainous behaviour, not depression, but I just remember sitting in class and thinking: 'Is that what it is? Is that what I am? Unnatural?' The finer points of a Shakespearean play or any other academic pursuit were not my main concern in the final years of secondary school. It was a long time before I accepted that what I was suffering from was a periodic but debilitating form of depression. Sometimes I wonder how I got through that time without even having a name for what I was experiencing, let alone seeking help.

I have 'compartmentalised' this period of my life, put it to one side as seven difficult years (from age 15 until 22), but to look back on it now is a valuable exercise. I have enduring memories of this time. I remember a Biology teacher standing in front of me and angrily demanding why I hadn't handed in a major assignment (an assignment that I had barely started). It is hard to be a successful, or even functioning, student when your world is turned upside down by depression, when you can't sleep, when you come to school each morning with a dry throat and sweaty palms and when each day is a struggle. I often wish that I could go back in time and do things differently. When you are 15, negotiating a change of school and all or any of the obstacles that life can throw at you at that age, understanding, acknowledging and dealing with depression is hard.

I remember an acquaintance saying to me, at the end of year 12: 'You are going to end up in the gutter!' I didn't have the confidence or self-assurance to argue with that, but what I did have was time, and to me that is one of the keys to dealing with depression in adolescence and early adulthood: to make that link in the mind of the sufferer that they have plenty of time and to put the problem in a wider perspective; that mental illness is one obstacle on the way to fulfilling life's possibilities, that the good things in life are too good to be overshadowed by depression.

I wish that I had had an epiphany, a moment when everything became clearer, where I could see how to overcome the depression and 'turn the corner'. I didn't have that epiphany but I did have time and did have the resilience to get through this period (albeit slowly and at the cost of many friends, academic success and most of my youth). I remember thinking that there must be an upside to what I was experiencing, that something good might come out of it. I do think

¹ William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*.

that getting through any personal crisis, no matter how clumsily or imperfectly, can make you a more philosophical, insightful and empathetic person, can help you to look at life with a broad perspective and be in a better position to understand and help others.

I think of the experience as a seven-year prison sentence (or more accurately a periodic sentence where the periods of depression impacted on everything else in my life) during which, on at least one occasion (aged about 20), I felt suicidal. I wish that I had tackled the problem head on and seen a counsellor or psychologist straightaway. I knew that I should see a counsellor but feared that that was my last option, that if it didn't work I would be left with no other options.

Not seeking help was a mistake but by just getting on with life, however imperfectly, I feel I did something right. This confluence of seemingly contradictory approaches is important: to seek help early (professional help or just talking to someone about the depression) without having unrealistic expectations, without being disheartened if, after seeking help, there is no immediate improvement. To use the black dog analogy, depression should be treated as a dog that can be kept at heel but will or may walk with you for a bit longer.

How do we ensure that adolescents with depression seek help early? I am convinced that anyone and everyone involved with adolescents (parents, older siblings, teachers, school counsellors, coaches, extended family, family friends, even neighbours) should be hyper-vigilant about mood disorders in adolescents and young adults. I often wonder if things might have been different had someone made a concerted effort to come with me on the journey, as it were. It was very hard to explain what I was feeling, the opportunities to do so were rare, and when an opportunity did come up I didn't take advantage of it. Or the opportunity was too fleeting, like the time when a former high school teacher offered to drop me home. I could sense that he knew I was having problems, but in the 15 minutes that it took to get home neither of us talked about it. I don't for a moment blame anyone for not seeing what I was going through or for not helping me, but I'm sure that had someone asked the right questions, lots of questions, and really tried to find out what was going on in my mind, I might have opened up and made that first step to try to deal with the depression rather than stumble on not coping with it. It is easy to be in denial but harder to be in denial when you have shared your experience with someone else. I wish I had.

I think that often we (adults) are too busy to really get below the surface, maybe reluctant to ask personal questions or we assume that someone else should be, or is, taking on that role. In

my experience, people often went close: one day a concerned school librarian contacted the school counsellor who (perhaps not being able to ask me directly if I needed help) asked if I wanted to come out with her to my old school (where she was to give a presentation to prospective students). I'm sure she had hoped that in a neutral location such as this I might have opened up and discussed my problems. Why I never took that step I don't know. When faced with a crisis the instinct can be to either run or face up to the problem. I ran.

I also remember the school counsellor telling students to come and see her, no matter how big or small the problem. I was convinced that the problem *was* too big for anyone to help. I believe that anyone in a position to help an adolescent with depression may have to run too. By that I mean that once they know or suspect a person is suffering from a mood disorder and that they may be able help that person, that they should run with them, be persistent, keep creating opportunities that might or will eventually lead that person to seek professional help. It could be one moment that turns things around. Ultimately it is the person with depression that has to come to terms with their condition and seek help but I firmly believe that if someone close to me had really seen what I was going through and talked to me about it, that I would have sought help and faced up to it much sooner. I don't think for a moment that it is easy for anyone to help an adolescent with depression, but they should persevere.

The health and welfare of students should always be a far higher priority than academic success. This sounds obvious but I wonder if it is effectively put in to practice in most schools, especially in under-resourced schools. I failed college but went on to complete undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications as a mature age student. It is never too late to study but failure to deal with depression in adolescence can obviously have far more serious or even tragic consequences.

In my experience there can be many obstacles to seeking help (denial, fear, the stigma of mental illness, becoming trapped in a routine) but for me the main obstacle was the lack of a language to deal with depression (I was never equipped to deal with depression as a teenager, partly because I didn't know what it was). This is an area where school teachers and the school curriculum can play an important role. Perhaps if mental health had been a significant part of the curriculum when I was at school (I don't ever remember discussing mental health issues at school) that instead of thinking of myself as unnatural I might have seen the problem for what

it was: a temporary and treatable form of depression that needn't have dominated such an important period of my life to the extent that it did.