

How to live with the black dog

RECOVERY

I was the eternal domestic,
cheerfully throwing the plates, cups, teapots, everything
out the window, so I'd never have to face washing up again.
I was a wild woman, driven by the moon,
begging the west wind to blow through
and clear all the cobwebs from the house.

Now, I'm a castle in ruins
after years of siege and attack.
I'm the land laid bare
by rising salt and insufficient water.
I'm the shipwreck high and dry
on the sand, rusting quietly away.
I'm a skeleton, stark white,
picked clean by scavengers.
I'm compelled once again
to rewrite my story.

My story is quite a simple one; how the world changed in a day. One day I was 'normal', next thing I wasn't. I'm no longer in a position to take things for granted. I can't even count on myself and my own judgement anymore.

My poem, **Recovery**, was written after another bout of mental illness. They call me a manic-depressive, a handy label for a cluster of experiences I would rather not have to deal with. It's not that I'm in denial. I make every effort to take control. To do otherwise, would condemn me to repetitive cycles of hospitalisation – an experience that I'm not keen to repeat in a hurry. The loss of personal freedom is a bitter pill to swallow, no matter how nutty you might be, or even how much it might be necessary and 'for your own good'. All those people shuffling, shuffling around the locked ward looking for a way out, are not tapping into how good it is for them. They are just missing freedom and wanting out.

When I was diagnosed, I was twenty nine, mother of a five year old, working, writing and performing poetry, and highly sociable. It blew my life apart. Reaction to finding out about a mental illness is like any other grieving. Different parts of your self react differently. Part of me became very stoic. Another part was a blubbing fool. Another part just wanted to make the most of the time I had. What other option is there? Get on with it. You also go through the stages of grieving – of anger, of 'why me?', of acceptance, of despair. As with any grieving, these stages fluctuate and you swing between them depending on what's happening out there in the world.

While I accept the convenience of a label; it makes sense to have a shorthand way of conveying a complex cluster of symptoms, it becomes a problem when the label is seen as the extent of the person and the individual differences are not teased out nor taken into consideration. We are all many things. I am many things. I am a mother, a handyman, a painter, a gardener, a writer, a musician, amongst other things. While none of these things takes away from the fact that I have a mental illness, having a mental illness also does not take away from these.

When people find out I have a mental illness (and living in a smaller centre makes it hard for them not to know), I am often amazed by their reactions, which tend to reflect their attitudes. One is 'Oh, you're not mad' (well, not all the time!), or 'You can't have manic depression'. Do they think I made it up? Do they say that to a diabetic? From some I get patronizing tones. Is it to distinguish me as an object? Or is it to denote quite firmly that they are different/OK/ or even better than I, because they don't have a mental illness? Do they think I chose this? Do they see it as a weakness on my part? Do they blame me for having a mental illness? Do they also blame diabetics for being sugar intolerant and having insulin embarrassment? Despite all the best efforts, there is still a long, long way to go before the stigma of mental illness is overcome.

But these are all grist to the mill. When I'm having an episode, what I have called in another poem 'the time bomb in my head', I do everything I can to minimise it's impact. Too many times, as in my poem, I have had to pick up too many pieces and 'rewrite my story', putting my life back together. It's never easy, and if it can be avoided it's far better. So I tend to reduce social contacts, limit alcohol and tobacco (tobacco limitation would be impossible in a hospital setting), and just remember that I've visited this place before and will come back again. This too shall pass. Despite my best intentions, I can still sink into an unutterably black hole, a well of despair. All actions become inaction, and just to do the most simple of tasks requires more effort than I have. It feels like I'm pushing my body through treacle, or some other heavy, viscous material. All hope and optimism flees. The world caves in and becomes a grim and ugly place. It seems like other people's energy is scraping my soul, leaving deep welts and scars.

In these situations, all the exercise, meditation, good food and good thoughts in the world do not suffice. Only drugs seem to help pull me out, then it's up to me to utilise all my other resources to keep climbing out. I have to keep reminding myself that I've been quite ill, and to take it easy. Once out of the black hole, I want to get as far from it as possible, as fast as I am. As I recover and regain energy, I find that things drain me quickly; social activities on the whole, but more specifically those where there's more than two others present. Life decisions bigger than the everyday still present a challenge. I still doubt myself. Can I function again in public? How can I lift my battered self esteem to a reasonable level?

This is not one of those happy endings. It wasn't like going to the doctor thinking I had cancer and finding out it was just a cyst. This is a you're-stuck-with-it situation and I have it for the term of my natural. It's impossible to get life insurance. It's pretty tricky to get work. Luckily my son is now grown and I don't have to try and get him to a safe place when I feel myself losing it. I have become reasonably adept at reading the neon signs, the cues that warn me that all is not well. I have methods

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and strategies in place that keep me on a reasonably even keel. I eat well, I exercise, I only smoke when the pressure gets beyond a certain level, I treat alcohol with respect and I have perfected forms of meditation, one of which includes lots of time in the garden nurturing plants. I have tried working after a stint on the pension. One casual job worked. The other has been a disaster. I don't blame myself for this. I spend a lot of time writing. I am trying to move on from poetry, and I'm enjoying the challenge. I have a lot of love in my life – a loving partner, a loving son, loving family, and loving friends. I have some friends who are great reality checks for me. When they see things are amiss, they call it like it is. I have had to let go of friends who were aggravations to the spirit. I have a good doctor.

Still I have episodes. The trick for me is trying to minimise their severity, and lessen the time taken in recovery. Keeping things as simple as I can.

When those blues come up to meet me

Unheralded and unexpectedly
the past rose up to meet me,
as I drove down Hume Street mindlessly
thoughts in a fog, consumed by the reverie,
until saved from increasing misery,
by the sun, shafting golden through the greenery
of the camphor laurels, with their curious topiary,
capable only then of making it safely
to the sanctuary
of my home.