

Affirmations of Hope: Reframing Mental Illness

By Alice A. Holstein, Ed.D.

Table of Contents

8	Distillation
9	Reframing
10	Being A Witness
11	Seeking Alternative Treatments
12	Fighting for Strength
13	Considering Trauma
14	Being Tested
15	Lemonade from Lemons
16	Finding Solace
17	Self-Care
18	New Vistas
19	Balancing the Body
20	Out of Despair
21	Spiritual Openings
22	Self-advocacy
23	Healthy People
24	Work Redefined
25	Free Listening
26	The Gold of Insight
27	Openness About Mental Illness
28	New Standards
29	Valuing Dreams
30	Safe Places
31	More Than A Brain Disease
32	Writing Companion
33	Removing Shame
34	A Support Diagram
35	Spiritual Lessons and Gifts
36	A Renewed Purpose
37	Prisons
38	My Story
39	Tough Grace
40	Self-Knowledge
41	The Hero's Journey
42	Ending Stigma
43	Religious or Not
44	Empowerment
45	Coming Out of the Closet
46	Only for Me
47	Beyond the Brain
48	Saving Lives
49	Pushing Pills
50	Building Blocks

51 Finding God
52 Fighting
53 Group Help
54 In Retrospect
55 Not Being Consulted
56 The Psychic Split
57 Free Healing and EFT
58 Intention
59 Regaining Self-Esteem
60 Self-expertise
61 Taking Time
62 Building Community
63 Normalcy
64 Wounded Healers
65 Warriors
66 Friends
67 Self-examination
68 Wholeness
69 Affirmation
70 Pride
71 Bounty
72 Parallel Realities
73 Mortification Transformed
74 Relentless Search for Truth
75 Self-knowing
76 The Blame Game
77 A Mysticism Correlation
78 Better Than “Normal” Behavior
79 Sources of Trauma
80 Underlying Wholeness
81 Creativity and Mysticism
82 Anger At the Medical System
83 A Whole Person Illness
84 Claiming A Reservation
85 Rituals
86Trauma Gifts
87 Doing the Work
88 A Spiritual Path
89 Everything
90 Writing
91 Insurance
92 Deep Faith
93 Writing Your Story
94 Drug Warnings
95 A Healthy Diet
96 Forgiving Medicine

97 Recovery
98 Winning the Hard Way
99 Surrendering
100 Lightening the Load
101 Forgiveness Tactics
102 Unresolved Trauma
103 Music
104 Pets
105 Isolation
106 Psych Wards
107 Helplessness
108 The Backbone
109 Thank Yous
110 “Little” Things
111 Learning
112 Living in the Moment
113 “Small” Things
114 Support
115 Hurt Transformed
116 Diving Deep
117 Recovery Revolution
118 Spiritual Havens
119 Missing Resources
120 Clearing Negativity
121 Native American Wisdom
122 Completing the Circle
123 Ritual Explained
124 Dragged to Wholeness
125 Feminine-Masculine Balance
126 The Doctor-patient Relationship
127 Exerting Every Effort
128 Too Much Religion
129 Depression’s Gift
130 Honoring Suffering
131 Being Open
132 Surveying Damage
133 Wisdom
134 The Hero’s Journey II
135 Death and Resurrection
136 Lacking Accurate Models
137 New Standards of Success
138 Limits of the Scientific Paradigm
139 A Self-made Job
140 Transforming Bitter Memories
141 Grieving Untreated Losses
142 The Blessing of Not Having

- 143 The Blessing of Illness**
- 144 Seeking Strength Versus Solutions**
- 145 Multiple Causes**
- 146 Suffering and Hardship**
- 147 Cultural Wounding**
- 148 Charting Losses**
- 149 Crying for Ourselves**
- 150 Reframing Grief**
- 151 Pilgrimages**
- 152 Journey Toward Faith**
- 153 Reflection Clarifies**
- 154 When Pride Doesn't Matter**
- 155 Doing It the Hard Way**
- 156 Suffering as Purifying**
- 157 A New Beginning**

Introduction

During the 12 horrific years of my struggle with manic depression I longed for a book of inspiration and hope. There were plenty of reflection books in general, such as for teens, mothers or fathers, the addicted and more, but there was none for the mentally ill. What I wanted was something simple yet deep that would help me reflect in a positive way about the path that seemed such a terrible struggle. I didn't want the clinical view of my illness at all nor did I want things about "courage" and "love" and "hope" in general. Certainly I didn't want platitudes. I did want ideas or pithy paragraphs that were specifically about mental illness to help me cope and find hope, especially when there was none.

This, then, is that book. The best way to use it is to take it one bite at a time, pondering it for example, at the start of a day, then journaling about it if at all possible. I can imagine it being shared with family members, or family members sharing it with those on the road to health. But here is no hard and fast prescription other than to use the entries for reflection and encouragement. Each thought has a reflection question or several.

You will find in this work a different slant on mental illness than the usual. After nearly 25 years of dealing with manic depression, five of which have been solid recovery, I conclude that mental illness can be a spiritual path, full of growth and wholeness beneath the suffering and hardship. In fact, it is this very suffering, that reframed, constitutes the "hero's journey." The true spiritual path is more about tests and trials than it is about piety and sweetness. Reframing things, making lemonade out of lemons, thus

affirms our experiences as noble and proud versus ones of shame and doom. We are not “damaged goods” but rather, people struggling for wholeness just as ordinary people do. We may even have some advantages over others because we are forced to the task of finding our humanity amidst considerable obstacles.

This proposition that mental illness can be reframed, seen significantly differently than is usual, is a revolutionary idea. It is a paradigm shift. Insight alone can be a healing force. What we believe matters greatly. For me the reframing of my journey made all the difference in the world. It helped me see that my bone-crushing path had been “a tough grace.” May you similarly find food for thought, breakthroughs and hope.

Distillation

So much of what happens in life has deep meaning and purpose, but we cannot just pluck it from a tree. It is up to us to distill experiences to create meaning. Mental illness is an especially fruitful ground from which to distill what matters.

How do you distill meaning? (Journaling, reading, talking with others, walks in nature, sitting quietly to reflect and ponder, writing your story?)

Seeking Alternative Treatments

The idea that manic depression or mental illness in general is merely brain disease leads to a blind alley that only chemical solutions can be successful treatments. It causes researchers to look for answers only in our genes or in the constant emphasis on drugs.

Candace Pert, the Ph.D. cutting-edge researcher who wrote *The Molecules of Emotion*, found that emotions come not just from the brain. Rather, they are found throughout the body. Most body workers know that emotions become lodged in the cells of our bodies. Our issues are in our tissues. Such therapists seek the blocked energy flows and the suppressed experiences that are the source of much illness. “Body work is such a powerful healing art that it can facilitate a process whereby the recipient can get in touch with their feelings and bring about a healing of mind, body, heart and spirit to be set free.” (Glassey, undated)

Pert’s work has profound implications for treating mental illness. Her scientific conclusions demand that alternative complements to drugs be considered and implemented. (This is not a recommendation to get off medications!)

What alternative approaches have you tried or considered?

Being A Witness

At one point I thought I was dying. I was in a way, for I had been without thyroid medication for months. This is a life-threatening condition. During my worst hour I found a Catholic nun who merely listened to me without advice or logically trying to talk me out of my death thoughts. She held my hand in silence and we prayed together. Later I realized that her witness to my soul death had saved my life. To be listened to with such compassion, to have someone “be with” you at the bottom, is to be valued and strengthened for the next steps out of the stark dark.

In what ways have you had a witness to your pain? When have you been able to be a witness for another?

Reframing

To reframe something means to see it in an entirely new light. In relationship to mental illness, it means to look for the good beneath the bad, to see the gifts beside the hardship, to realize the lessons that have come from tough experiences. Thus can we transform the “ain’t it awful” part of mental illness to reframes that change our minds and hearts. To do so is healing; in fact, it can make the difference between being sick or well.

What lessons have you gained? What has made you stronger despite difficult times?

Fighting for Strength

Getting well, or as well as we can be, is not for sissies. First, you have to hold the *intention* to get well and then you have to do the inner and outer work. Fighting for this wellness can make us strong.

What are your beliefs about recovery? How do you fight to be well?

Considering Trauma

I am convinced that emotional trauma is one of the chief causes of mental illness. Uncovering it and treating it is the challenge. Medicine has admitted that there is often a correlation between a mental illness and early loss experience, meaning the loss of a parent or significant other. But there are plenty of other losses that can be traumatic, or merely emotional trauma of one kind or another.

My own experience included sexual molestation, an emotionally distant mother, parental rejection when I was in my 40s and other “blows” to my sensitive nature that were only uncovered with alternative methods. There are two problems here. One is that merely asking questions about one’s background will seldom uncover the repressed issues. Secondly, the traditional medical model prevails so that the trauma is seldom raised or treated.

Are you aware of trauma in your life experiences? Have you ever considered methods that might raise such trauma or help them be healed?

Being Tested

One of the gifts of mental illness is that we are tried and tested in ways that others are not. This can help us know ourselves in deep ways that are soul-satisfying.

In what ways have you been tested? What strengths has this produced?

Lemonade from Lemons

There are several familiar sayings that apply to mental illness. One is to make lemonade from lemons; another is to see the glass half full rather than half empty. Thus it is that mental illness can be a spiritual path, a route to wholeness.

What “lemonade” have you made on your path?

Finding Solace

When one is in the presence of someone who truly listens without judgment, the meeting can be enough for a soul in total despair to find solace.

Have you ever been in despair and found someone who truly listened? To whom might you have listened non-judgmentally?

Self-Care

Manic depression taught me how to take care of myself, including eating healthily, getting enough sleep and staying on a regular schedule. When I was so debilitated I could barely function, it taught me how to go slowly and be gentle with myself.

What has mental illness taught you about taking care of yourself?

New Vistas

Mental illness can unexpectedly push us to do new things, whether to face something that takes courage or merely moving out of our comfort zone. Before I was propelled out of Tucson, AZ by the paranoia of a manic episode, I was too frightened to make the geographic move that was needed. I just couldn't face finding a job and rebuilding a community network when I was so worn out by my illness. Then a manic episode propelled me out of the city. Traveling across country by car, bus and on foot put me back in my hometown where I began a new life. Without the manic depression and the hardship of my trek, I would have stayed stuck in a place I no longer belonged.

What positive life events have been created through the burden of mental illness?

Balancing the Body

The brain is one of the most sensitive organs in the body, yet paying attention to our diet is one of the things that is virtually always neglected in treatment. During the 12 horrific years of my struggle the only reference I heard from a doctor or nurse was to “eat a healthy diet.” There was no further guidance.

Neither was there any mention of what alcohol or smoking does to create imbalance. People with mental illness often self-medicate, and there is evidence that the alcohol is dangerous when combined with medications or when combined simply with the illness itself. In addition, smoking robs us of vital nutrients and puts us at risk for many dangerous health conditions.

Doctors seldom address these factors that affect brain chemistry. Neither do they address things such as beliefs, imagery, music, energy work and more. It is up to us to find our way.

What things have you done to balance your body? What do you plan to do? What support, such as from a “buddy,” can you find to reinforce your efforts?

Out of Despair

When someone is in total despair, there is almost nothing that can reach them. They are lost to their pain and their fate. Only someone who is fully present with unconditional love can help that soul turn back toward the light.

What or who has helped you deal with despair?

Spiritual Openings

Mania often produces what many describe as enormous creativity or spiritual insights. Visionary powers are not unusual. When we are wounded within ourselves, however, then we can't withstand the creative forces that bombard us. The energy is blocked. The experiences turn psychotic rather than turning into works of art or mystical insights. Some people, however, have managed to produce valuable results despite their illness. The larger challenge is to become healed (versus cured) to the point that spiritual openings can be handled while staying grounded.

What creativity has manifested amidst the ravages of your illness?

Self-Advocacy

Many years passed before I stopped being so dependent upon the doctor's standard, by-the-book medications. I had to become adamant about my ultra-sensitivity to drugs. One time I had to fight for a change in my doctor because the one assigned to me was authoritarian and unsympathetic. He didn't listen and he threatened me. That experience taught me to stand up for what I needed. I learned to be an advocate for myself.

In what ways have you become an advocate for yourself?

Healthy People

Healthy people who function at a high vibration level can help heal us by their very presence. Besides this invisible effect, they are usually inspiring and should be sought for their insight and wisdom. Even authors can transmit this healing effect, making it paramount that we seek positive books and movies. Keeping positive people around us is essential to getting well.

How many healthy people are a part of your life? What do you do to become positive yourself?

Work Redefined

One time I applied at a Taco Bell for a peon job, believing that that was all I could handle at the time. I had come from a career as a self-employed management consultant and college teacher with a doctorate degree and some impressive clients. While I didn't get the Taco Bell job, the experience was a valuable lesson because I decided that if this was all I could do, then I would do it as a life of service.

The mentally ill are often denied the opportunity to work at the career they once had. The prospect of doing so-called demeaning work by comparison can present a huge challenge. What helps is to see any work as an opportunity for service, knowing that you can make a difference to anyone in your surroundings. And then there are volunteer opportunities beyond the job that can create meaning. The spiritual lesson is to surrender to the possible, seeking its virtues after we have grieved the loss of a former life.

How do you find meaning, such as a paying job, volunteer opportunities or doing kind acts for others?

Free Listening

Listening costs nothing and means everything. It heals. It can strengthen us in the moment, even save lives. It's too bad "the system" does not know how to do this better, but we can do it for and with each other.

How many times have you experienced the life-saving effect of good listening?
How can you do more of it yourself?

The Gold of Insight

Insight is a healing tool that is mostly overlooked because it is so subtle and has not been “studied” as helpful. Nonetheless, it sets up new connections in the brain and heart. It does, however, cost us the time to read or write or talk or think and reflect. It is worth gold on the road to recovery.

What things do you do to gain insight?

Openness About Mental Illness

Coming out of the closet to admit mental illness can have mixed results. On the one hand it can increase stigma and mean that we don't get a desired job or a relationship. On the other hand, being open can be tremendously freeing. No longer do you have to hide, deny or lie. In fact, you may become a role model, able to speak for the voiceless ones. It is wise to be discrete, however, depending upon your circumstances.

What decisions have you made about how open to be?

New Standards

Our illness may be hard, even cruel sometimes. That, however, does not mean we are a failure. Instead, it often means that we must define “success” by standards other than most people do. Such standards include the courage to battle our illness, the grace to exhibit kindness gained through compassion and the discovery of inner strength forged from outer hardship.

What standards of success define your life? If your outlook is presently negative, how might you reframe things to claim nobility and purpose?

Valuing Dreams

Dream work can be helpful. One of my dreams told me bluntly that I had “abandonment issues.” How can a dream be so specific? I do not know, but I accepted it and unwound its truths. What followed in my awakened state was a wave of memories that illuminated instances where I had been abandoned. This is when I realized that rejection from my parents in my early 40s was connected with the first of my mood swings. (They had rejected me because I defied my father during a family business crisis.) But there were many other instances too, such as lovers leaving or a beloved friend saying goodbye when my illness became severe. The insights about abandonment set off what felt like healing connections in my brain. I wrote them down to help me move them out of my system. I also took this subject to therapy sessions and gained additional insights. The dream turned out to be a huge healing gift.

What tools do you use to gain insight about emotional trauma? Do you record your dreams and work with them?

Safe Places

The deep trauma we experience is often buried in our subconscious. That is why we need the help of a therapist or energy healer or guide. Besides their methods, of which there are many, what they do in part is to hold the space for us to feel safe enough to raise painful experiences so that they can be released. Without such safety we would be afraid to plunge into the pain.

Are you willing to reach out for help without considering it a weakness?

More Than A Brain Disease

Experts everywhere proclaim that mental illness is a brain disease. Even NAMI, the National Alliance of Mental Illness, claims this to be true and the Supreme Court has followed suit. As much as we must not return to the days when parents were blamed for their children's illness, I think this label of brain disease absolves us of crucial insights about trauma and poor personal habits. Drugs and alcohol, smoking and unhealthy diet all affect the brain. These contribute to chemical imbalances. Changing these habits may not cure you, but they can make a huge difference in how well you feel.

The trauma issue is a trickier one. It can be hard to raise it to light, much less find the help to heal it. Unfortunately too often parents and the mentally ill themselves are afraid of examining and healing trauma. To do so might mean that others are blamed, and the family system cannot stand to face buried truths. Examining a process like Hellinger Family Constellation Workshops can be a key to finding how the patterns of love in a family, including going back generations, have been disrupted. (Google this subject on the internet for further information.)

What habits have you changed to be well?

Writing Companion

Journaling can be like coming home to the soul. It helps me know more than I knew when I began the writing session. It brings insight, relief and understanding as long as I do not judge the content too harshly. It moves me to action. When I am away from it too long I feel forlorn.

Why or why not do you journal? Do you feel comfortable just writing stream of consciousness without having to be logical? Do you have a private place to assure that this is your journal alone?

Removing Shame

Knowing I had done crazy things was mortifying. I wanted to hide; I wanted to deny them; I wanted to cower in regret. One of the things that helped was to send “fence-mending” notes. These were not an apology for being sick, but rather an explanation of my situation and my regret for having intruded on someone. Whenever I sent one of these I felt less shame and guilt.

What events might be bringing you shame? Have you dealt with them?

A Support Diagram

I was feeling so alone during one recovery period that I could hardly bear it. Fortunately, I had the money for a therapist who was helpful. She sat with me while we drew a support diagram on a sheet of newsprint. In the center was me; around me were people such as a minister, my dentist, three friends who lived out of town, my caseworker, my banker, the realtor, a neighbor and a few more that I can't remember. While they were not bosom buddies, they were people who knew me and cared. Just drawing the circle helped, and today I would draw one that is quite complex and rich with detail.

Who is in your support network? How might this be expanded if they are too few?

Spiritual Lessons and Gifts

There have been several important lessons and gifts of my journey. Among them are a deepened compassion and empathy. Never again will I see a bag lady, a homeless person, a drunk, a mentally ill person, or anyone hurting, with the judgment I once possessed. When I lived on the streets periodically, I was one of them, and walking in their shoes opened my heart spiritually. Not being afraid of death is another gift. I faced it so often in various ways, including psychic, that I see it easily now as just another transition.

Have you identified the gifts of your illness? In writing?

An Expanded Purpose

Recovery has brought an expanded sense of purpose. When I tell my story I hopefully speak for the voiceless ones. I have the skill to write and speak and I want to maximize the opportunity. At age 65 I was hired as a Peer Support Specialist for the Veterans' Administration. At the mental health clinic in my hometown I speak with clients on a "been there, done that" basis. I represent the consumer viewpoint in several community organizations. At age 67 I renewed my writing career which I intend to carry into my aging years. This is not a bad outcome after battling manic depression for 20 years, 12 of them horrific. I am blessed with a new life.

What are some of the purposes in your life? Do they need redefining?

Prisons

Some of our biggest, busiest psych wards are jails and prisons. Some 25% of inmates are mentally ill. Regardless of what the inmates have done, they deserve the proper treatment and rehabilitation that too often is totally denied. The war they fight is unheralded, unclaimed, disdained, full of sacrifice and pain. We need to honor them for their plight and for the heroic deeds they undertake just to live.

How much do you know about your local jail or prison and its mental health population? Is there anything you can do to shed light on their plight?

My Story

Being sick brought me in touch with my distinctly individual story. I know what I endured and that I am both fragile and very, very strong. I know the people and events that “saved” me countless times. I know how listening heals. I know how much of my recovery I claim as my own dogged work. I know the sources and depth of my faith. I know how much is grace.

What is your story? Have you written it or told it in whole or in part? Without worrying about publishing something or being a public speaker, do you understand the healing effect of knowing your story and making it intelligible to others?

Tough Grace

I see that my illness has been a profound journey to the soul, a blessed path and I am just beginning to share my bounty. I know the journey has been a bone-crushing path, but I *choose* to call it “tough grace” and that has made all the difference.

In what ways can you reframe your experiences to recognize the “tough grace” that has been your path? How can you help others do this?

Self-Knowledge

You find out who you are when your back is against the wall.

When have you had to dig deep to find out who you are? When have you endured things that made you strong?

Hero's Journey

The Hero's Journey is not for sissies. Author and anthropologist, Joseph Campbell defined its stages as *Departure* (from all that is known) *Initiation* and *Return*. There are tests and trials all along the way. The final test is to bring something back for civilization that is new and creative---and to find a way to share it.

What can you learn about the "hero's journey" by Googling this concept? How does it apply to your experience with mental illness?

Ending Stigma

Stigma batters us with its cruel words and concepts. Even the very labels of mental illness end up being stigma. We can be shamed, judged unfairly and experience discrimination. There is stigma from others and self-stigma, both of which can make us depressed. Sometimes there is justifiable anger. But to reframe mental illness means we can go a long ways toward ending stigma while we regain healthy self-esteem. We can be our own worst enemy until we claim mental illness as a noble and courageous path.

What has been your experience with stigma? Does it come from other people's labels and perceptions or does it come primarily from you? What can you do to counter stigma within yourself and with others?

Religious or Not?

“Spirituality” is not the same as being religious. Everyone should define “spirituality” for themselves. For me it is that which guides and supports me, that which gives meaning and purpose and that which reveres life. I am highly spiritual but not religious, but I am still involved in a faith community.

What are your views on spirituality and religion? Do you have a faith community that supports you with its beliefs and activities? Can you imagine being associated with one even if your beliefs may conflict? Have you considered that social benefits and community-making might result?

Empowerment

In a conversation with a friend I redefined mental illness as a hero's journey, a profound spiritual path. She brandished her fist, pursed her lips and declared, "this makes me feel strong. Really strong." She promptly ordered Joseph Campbell's book, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*.

What reading has made you feel really strong about yourself? Do you seek out healing books in general rather than ones only related to your illness? Have you considered that wide-ranging reading can often do more for our self-esteem than reading within the field?

Coming Out of the Closet

Coming out of the closet was a great relief. I had been publicly ill anyway, so I figured I may as well tell my story. But I didn't have a job to risk. Thus, indiscriminate sharing can be dangerous. My own openness, however, has successfully helped others. It has contributed to lessening stigma, helped educate the public and inspired my fellow travelers.

How do you feel about telling your story in public or at least openly with others? Do you fear rejection and discrimination? Can it be a chance to educate others or is it wiser to keep the silence?

Only for Me

Some of my memories of crazy things I did are just too painful to share. I feel no need to do so. I cannot bear being entirely naked even though I am fully out of the closet.

How do you deal with your most painful memories? Have you found a way to process them so that they do not haunt you? Can you forgive yourself, knowing that you were ill when they happened?

Beyond the Brain

Yes, mental illness is a brain disease, yet it is more than that, which is a profound key to healing. We are physical, mental, emotional and spiritual people and what goes on in one realm affects all the others. This is holistic thinking which is becoming more and more recognized as truth rather than the narrow confines of the traditional, scientifically-oriented medical model. Healing can be pursued on all these levels with the good chance that significant recovery will be the result.

What healing have you pursued physically? Mentally? Emotionally?
Spiritually?

Saving Lives

Every time someone tried to logically talk me out of paranoia they succeeded only in isolating me further from an already alienated self. Thus, who was the illogical one--- them or me? The only thing that helped “bring me home to myself” was when people really listened. Several times that gift helped me go on another several hours or for another day. Listening can be life-saving.

What has it felt like when people try to talk you out of your paranoia or hallucinations or the otherwise weird ideas that can accompany mental illness? Have you been able to successfully get people to listen more and talk less? Have you tried to tell people in your saner moments how much listening counts?

Pushing Pills

Psychiatrists are too often merely pill pushers. Out of some 18 that I encountered I can count on one hand those who knew something of the art of healing. Even then, however, they were so tainted by the traditional medical model that it was hard to share my search with them. Eventually I learned to keep my mouth shut about alternative healing approaches I was using.

What has been your experience with psychiatrists? Can you accept the best of them, which are mediations that help, yet also seek holistic healing?

Building Blocks

When the manic episodes stopped, after 12 tortuous years, I still had to reconstruct a life step by step. That meant a regular exercise routine, writing my stories, volunteering and applying for a part-time job as a peer support specialist for the Veterans Administration mental health arm. While I was waiting for the latter to happen, I also built a support network through church and other activities, changed my non-fiction reading tastes to fiction and adopted a cat. Now I have a fuller life than I ever had before. My life is not glamorous, but very rich in its simplicity. Each building block made me stronger.

What steps have you followed on the path to recovery? What can you do to strengthen this search and process?

Finding God

Living on the street periodically was unbelievably hard if not traumatic, yet it yielded some of the best memories of my journey. My life was “saved” hundreds of times through acts large and small. And “God,” however you understand that term, came often in the form of ordinary people who gave me money, a kind word, listening or shelter. I was protected and taken care of all along the way, however, harsh was the path I trod.

How has your illness increased or decreased your faith?

Fighting

I fought tooth and nail for my recovery and have reaped the results.

In what ways have you fought to get well? Who can you enlist to help you keep on fighting?

Group Help

Several times in my journey support groups have been invaluable. There is nothing like walking into a group of strangers and being able to speak your truth. All of us need a place where we are heard and understood. No problem-solving need take place there---merely sharing pain and joys and listening. If we are lucky we can learn from others, feel affirmed that we are not alone and be inspired by other's stories.

What has been your experience with support groups?

In Retrospect

One time I became involved in an unhealthy relationship because my judgment was clouded after a manic episode. I was very needy at the time. The relationship was short-lived, but one of its pluses was not. With this man, a fellow sufferer of manic depression, I could talk about all the forbidden things. I felt less alienated from my self because he understood. There is something to be learned or gained from almost everything.

What have you learned from your “mistakes?”

Not Being Consulted

Too many doctors didn't listen to me. Too many did not consult me about a treatment plan. I was supposed to just take what they gave. Too often I did not realize that I could speak louder, more assertively, more convincingly. By the time I learned this I was already getting really well.

What is your expectation of the doctor-patient relationship? Do you do your "homework" so that you can speak up about your needs?

The Psychic Split

Dealing with the “psychic split’ was the most painful of all the pains. That means integrating the crazy things I had done in an episode with the “normal” Alice. Sometimes the reconciliation took months, and overall it took me years. We do not wear bandages, use crutches or sit in wheelchairs, but we must nonetheless repair the damage that remains invisible.

How do you take care of yourself while you are putting the pieces back together?
How can you help others help you?

Free Healing and EFT

Some of the things I did to heal were free. These included journaling, support groups, forgiveness and gratitude exercises, imagery, music, self-designed rituals, even patting my body into greater feeling and Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT). I found several of these in books. I found EFT from a friend although you can Google it to find all kinds of information. It is becoming a leading edge therapeutic method in the Veterans' Administration. Once you are taught this you can realize miracles. I once tapped myself, over a five day period, out of a load of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) experiences.

What self-help methods have you found and utilized? Have you been to the public library healing section to obtain new ideas?

Intention

There were many manic episodes with terrible ramifications, so I often felt desperate to be healed. I had eight adverse reactions to various medications, so this offered little solace until late in the game. Nonetheless, it was not unusual that “the next thing or method” would appear in these desperate moments. My list of them is some 50 different approaches. No one of these or several was the total answer, but I believe that the overall effect was substantial to help me heal in a holistic sense. I walked through these doors primarily because I had set an *intention* to be as well as I could be in 1998. I got mad at the doctors for their bleak prognosis. Both the anger and the intention fueled my search.

What is your intention about being well? How can it be strengthened?

Regaining Self-Esteem

When depression hits, self-esteem plummets. When crazed behavior occurs, self-esteem is bashed. There are several antidotes. One is to do some grief work. Another is to reframe your experience in terms of the hero's journey, identifying your bravery and courage to stay the course. A third aid is to speak your truth to a group that understands. Perhaps all of this and more are required, for the self is fragile even under the best of circumstances.

What are your coping mechanisms to enhance or restore self-esteem?
Have you realized and acted on the fact that there are some remedies?

Self-Expertise

As I've otherwise written, it took me years to learn that I had to be at least partially responsible for my own treatment. This means talking WITH a professional rather than passive dependency. It means getting educated about our illness so that we can become the expert on ourselves. It means insisting on a consultative relationship even if we have to "ask" loudly and specifically. Research shows that most primary care doctors are ill-equipped to deal with bipolar, making it even more important that we become our own experts. And regardless of the type of doctor who treats us, we are solely responsible for the additional healing actions we can take.

What things have you done to become an expert on yourself?

Taking Time

Healing “the psychic split’ can be agonizingly painful. This means integrating the crazy self the normal self after the crisis is passed. How can one accept the crazy behavior after feeling so mortified? How do you put yourself back together when no one understands? It takes time, so be gentle with yourself.

How much patience do you have to allow time to heal? What do you do when you are taking this time for yourself?

Building Community

Creating community is one of the most overlooked but important aspects of getting well. Somehow you have to get involved. Churches are one of the best avenues; perhaps you have to pursue this even if this or that one does not fit in complete ways. Perhaps you are joining mostly for social reasons. Clubs and activities are another route. Family and support groups can help. This is one of the most difficult of tasks, but also one of the most healing. To the idea of healing physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually we must add---socially.

In what ways can you develop community for yourself?

Normalcy

Finding drop-in centers where we might find potential friends, computers, games, meals and crafts can be both helpful and difficult. They can be partial solutions to our need for socialization and recovery. But even there we are segregated according to our own kind. What we seek is “normalcy” and acceptance despite our wounds.

What kinds of things help you feel normal despite your wounds?

Wounded Healers

Emergence from the darkness of mental illness can mean finding our capacity to become “wounded healers.” This means we can help others, often better than the professionals can. We are “the real thing,” not a clinical presence. We have walked in another’s shoes. Besides helping others with mental illness, it also may mean we have the compassion and wisdom to help anyone who might be hurting. We have special strength to offer those in need.

In what ways do you see yourself as an actual or potential wounded healer? What opportunities do you see to act on this compassion?

Warriors

Having dealt with pain and wounding of the most severe nature and having survived should mean that we claim our “warrior’s badge” freely.

In what ways are you a warrior?

Friends

Losing friends, colleagues or family members can be one of the most heartbreaking aspects of mental illness. It calls for grief work. It also teaches us who are friends really are and it can force us to the task of finding and nurturing new ones. Finding new relationships means that we must risk again.

Have you done grief work after the loss of relationships in your life?

Self-examination

Isolating ourselves is a natural reaction. Sometimes that is harmful because we all need people and involvement in daily life. Sometimes, however, isolation, if not overdone, can be healing. It allows us time to put the pieces back together. Knowing when it is healthy or unhealthy is the trick.

When have you felt like isolating? Is it healthy or something that requires action on your part to change?

Wholeness

The idea that mental illness can be redefined as a hero's journey, a profound spiritual path, is a revolutionary one. It suggests that our suffering, when transformed, can make us more whole than many so-called "normal" people.

Why might this be true?

Affirmation

To be affirmed and inspired about our difficulties as mentally ill people can be life-saving and transforming.

What or who has inspired you? What does affirmation mean?

Pride

When we understand the true nature of the spiritual journey and relate it to mental illness, then we can stand proud as more whole and healthy people.

What is your definition of wholeness?

Bounty

Bringing back the bounty of a journey full of difficulty and tests can create a sense of solidity and strength in the center of one's being. It seems as though a new sense of wholeness has been forged in the belly of the beast.

What have been your tests and triumphs? Have you claimed your bounty?

Parallel Realities

Doctors label some symptoms of manic depression as hallucinations or delusions. When I “saw” the breakdown of the Native American culture, however, I wondered about that opinion. A sort of veil hung over a scene of broken-down wagons, underfed horses and a desperate people, sorrowing in their dilapidated state. Having this vision seemed to be a truth from the past. It made me wonder about the nature of reality and the possibility of parallel realities. Perhaps the veil between past and present is thinner than we think.

What mystical experiences have you had? Have you shared them?
What is the difference between these and delusions?

Mortification Transformed

The aftermath of a manic episode or a psychotic break can be painful beyond belief. I was usually mortified about the crazy behavior, including intruding on people's time and space, spending sprees, packing up my belongings, living on the streets and much more. I remember the support group where I heard a man share that he had bought seven cars during a manic episode. I no longer felt so shamed by the one that I had bought. It helps enormously to know that you are not alone rather than hiding in isolated shame and fear.

What acts have mortified you? Have you found ways to transform them?

Relentless Search for Truth

When you read about your illness in order to become educated, do not stick only to the “experts” in the field. There you will learn only the traditional opinions from the standard medical model. In addition, read people such as Alice Miller and her thoughts on how childhood trauma, which is far more common than we realize, affects us. Read Judith Lewis Herman on trauma. Read Joseph Campbell on the hero’s journey and watch his video series on “Mythos.” Read Marion Woodman and Jungian, John Sanford. Read transpersonal psychology, Shamanism and more. There you will find ideas about the effects of the past as well as ideas about altered states of consciousness. Be relentless in your search for personal insights and truth.

What have you read beyond the traditional psychiatric literature?

Self-Knowing

One of the positive outcomes of having a mental illness is that you can become an expert on yourself. Not only do you understand a particular diagnosis, you learn about your strength, resilience and particular lessons. Most people are not forced to such self-awareness. Most people do not know their own story.

In what unique ways do you know yourself better because of bearing a mental illness? What constitutes your story?

The Blame Game

The mentally ill are often blamed for not taking their medications. Sometimes this is justified. Other times, however, I had many a manic episode while I was on medications. I also got separated from them in the disarray of my crazed behavior or else I was too paranoid to take them. The blame game makes me sad and angry.

What does it feel like to be accused of something when you are not guilty? When might you actually willfully stopped taking medications?

A Mysticism Correlation

Even some of the great mystics of the world said that you had to be of very sound mind and body to be able to endure incoming spiritual insight.

In what ways have you been ungrounded, subject to creative forces that you cannot handle? How might you explore this concept further?

Better Than “Normal” Behavior

Being as well as you can be requires being even better at what doctors advise for general health. That means don't drink or smoke. Do get regular exercise, enough sleep and be extra careful about your diet. We can be better than “normal” in these respects. And it makes a difference.

What are your health habits? How might they be improved?

Sources of Trauma

Candace Pert, Ph.D., pharmacologist and researcher, wrote a landmark book called *Molecules of Emotion*. In it she proves that emotions exist throughout the body, not merely in the brain. My mind shifted when I found this information. What it means is that “heartaches” and emotional blows become lodged in the body as any body worker knows. Somehow the pain of them must be raised and dissipated to heal them. Discovery of them, however, is difficult, because many of them are lodged in our subconscious. Only unconventional approaches can reach them. We need responsible healers and guides for this process.

Have you read this book? What might it mean for your healing?

Underlying Wholeness

My winding course of self-discovery eventually yielded spectacular results. There is an underlying wholeness pattern beneath the illness. Such wholeness can be encouraged to unfold, creating health rather than assigning us the status of damaged goods. But I still take my medications.

Where are you in the process of recovery? Can you imagine spectacular results?

Creativity and Mysticism

Spiritually related material can be experienced during an episode. Often these are related to the “highs” of mania. They can contain glimpses of higher consciousness. They may mimic some of the experiences of mystics but with the unfortunate result that we go mad rather than maintaining coherence and mental health. There can be a thin line between mysticism and mental illness. So too the thin line between artistry and madness. Hence we have many creative souls who have suffered from mental illness.

Have you ever experienced mystical insights? Have you ever looked up on the internet the list of famous people who have suffered from mental illness?

Anger At the Medical System

During one of my recoveries I realized that I had so much anger with the medical system that my back was aching from the load. I decided that there was nothing to be done except to try to forgive the doctors and nurses for the inhumane treatment they sometimes delivered. I spent three weeks with an hour of forgiveness exercises each morning that helped free me of my anger and hurt.

I wrote these out, one incident per page. By the time I got to the bottom of the page of my stream of consciousness writing, I realized that the perpetrators were not so much vindictive or mean but rather, unconscious, uninformed or victims themselves of bad treatment. Regardless of the ability to truly forgive or not, I was emptied of the avenging feelings by writing them out and letting them go. My back straightened up and stopped aching.

Have you been a victim of inhumane treatment? Have you thought of doing forgiveness exercises?

A Whole Person Illness

This entire book and the one before it, *A Tough Grace: Mental Illness As A Spiritual Path*, amounts to one gigantic challenge to the medical paradigm. They are wrong to call it merely “a brain disease.” This lets sufferers and families off the hook from exploring trauma and changing unhealthy behaviors. The truth is that this is a whole person illness at the physical, emotional, mental, spiritual and social levels. This means that healing must be pursued at all these levels. You have to do the work.

What does it mean to do the work?

Claiming A Reservation

A Native American, encountered during a manic episode in Northern Minnesota, taught me the importance of building community. He described his family, the clan and their reservation as the cornerstone of his life. The insight sent me home to claim my hometown as my reservation. Then came the spur to join a Unitarian Fellowship as my faith community. Both the city and my involvement in this spiritual community are integral to my wellness.

Do you recognize the importance of community? What does it look like?

Rituals

Designing a homemade ritual can be a witness to your wound that also helps you heal. One time I buried a stone inside a decorative tin can in a wooded section of a local park. A friend accompanied me. The stone symbolized the soul my father had stolen from me through abuse. The ceremony helped heal that part of my past and put it to rest. I remember this moment in the park with crystal clear clarity even though I cannot tell you just when or how I healed. There was a sense of being finished with the issue. Rituals help us mark the arrival or the passage of things that matter to the heart.

Have you ever designed a personal ritual? Where do you find healing rituals in life, such as at church, at an altar, at home or in other places?

Trauma Gifts

Almost everything in life that seems a trauma or a hardship can be addressed in terms of the gifts it has brought. Learning this tactic is life-saving, for the insight helps you transform the pain and heal the wound.

What is your attitude about the suffering you have borne?

Doing the Work

The entire medical paradigm encourages us to hang onto our wounds rather than drop them and heal. They often treat us as “damaged goods.” The sentiment behind the treatment is “ain’t it awful” that you have this illness. It’s true that it is awful on the one hand, but on the other it can be a blessing that we are forced to the work of transformation. Only reflection, reading, seeking and reaching unorthodox insights can overcome these burdens. You have to do the work.

What methods might you employ to change your mind?

A Spiritual Path

Learning to see mental illness as a spiritual path happened for several reasons. First, I set the *intention* to be as well as I could be. Then I pursued every opportunity to heal. In the process I redefined mental illness as a whole person illness. I built a hopeful faith based upon my experiences and I reframed just about everything.

How do you see mental illness?

Everything

Everything is grist for the mill.

Are you willing to do the work?

Writing

One of the gifts of not being able to work is the time to reflect upon your life, do some reading and write about your lessons and gifts. You do not have to be an accomplished writer to do this task. The writing can be solely for you; who cares about the grammar or the spelling or the flow? The point is this---writing is one of the most effective healing tools.

What writing have you done about mental illness? What insights have you gained from the attempts?

Insurance

Just because I write about the unconventional modes of healing does not mean that I do not take my medications. They are insurance. There is a difference between being “cured” and being “healed.”

How are you approaching healing?

Deep Faith

Knowing the sources of my faith and the nature of my story are two of the largest gifts of my journey. Finding them took lots of distillation. My pen has been my ultimate friend.

In what ways has mental illness contributed to (or destroyed) your faith?

Writing Your Story

As I began to construct a new life at age 63, I wrote two manuscripts with the thought of publishing them. Then I learned how difficult it was to get published. But I used that material for giving speeches, expanding one step at a time as I grew more confident about sharing with an audience. From those draft manuscripts came the book, *A Tough Grace: Mental Illness As A Spiritual Path* and then this one close behind it. The moral of the story is that it is worthwhile to write your story for therapy and crystallization. The healing is significant no matter its later use.

Have written your story it or made notes purely for self-healing?

Drug Warnings

Why is it that we don't issue a dire warning to kids that drug usage increases their risk of mental illness? Drugs alter brain chemistry, and chemical imbalance is known to be part of mental illness. This is basic information and does not need to be proven. The correlation is well established, but unlike smoking, where we've connected it to cancer, we have yet to issue the proper warnings about drugs and mental illness.

How can society raise the alarm about this basic truth?

A Healthy Diet

A friend of mind came to live with me for a while. She too suffered from manic depression. I fed her fresh fruits and vegetables, lean protein, beans and plenty of salads. Her system cleared out quickly and she felt better.

Do you eat healthily? If not, what are you willing to do about it?

Forgiving Medicine

I forgive the medical establishment for their limited, insufficient treatment of us. They know not what they do. Their whole orientation is the scientific paradigm, which is only one worldview. Thus, they are rigid and cannot see the wisdom of more holistic methods.

What role does science play in your worldview?

Recovery

I do not waste time trying to change the medical establishment. They are entrenched in their views. Instead, I focus on the consumers, who, once empowered, can help shake the psychiatric field to its roots.

What is the evidence of the recovery movement in your community? Are there any peer support specialists?

Winning the Hard Way

The worst doctor I ever had in a psych ward was an authoritarian man who wouldn't listen. His reputation for being an ogre was widely held. He threatened me with long-term institutionalization at a state mental facility, which caused me to do everything possible to get my doctor changed. Eventually I won out, but not until I'd documented the situation through the patient advocate system (which was a joke) and testifying in court on my own behalf. The judge granted the change, recognizing that the doctor-patient relationship had been broken. These were lessons in standing up for myself and forgiveness. Both came hard.

Do you have examples of being treated inhumanely? Are there any positive lessons that came of them?

Surrendering

To forgive someone or a situation does not mean you forget. But you cease to let it have power over you.

What or whom do you need to forgive?

Lightening the Load

Forgiveness exercises and gratitude exercises are simple tools that feed the soul. Try writing out multiple forgiveness situations. The load drops away as you keep this up. Try writing a master gratitude list with everything from warm clothes and a friend to your illness and its lessons. I once wrote four pages like this and it lifted my spirits. Now I go over my daily gratitude experiences before falling asleep at night. Included are such things as the taste of a salad or a phone call or the warmth of my bed. It is good practice for remembering the goodness and gifts that make me happy.

Have you made a gratitude list? How do you give thanks?

Forgiveness Tactics

In absence of any training about forgiveness exercises, I invented my own. First I made a list of all the people and incidents that had “wronged” me. It was quite a list. Then I spent three weeks, about two hours per day writing out: 1) I forgive you for---2) I felt hurt and angry about this because---3) I choose to leave this emotion behind because it hurts me more than it does you. 4) I want to get better and heal. 5) I understand ---- about you that created the situation. I forgive you for this and move on.

Do you have another tactic for forgiving?

Unresolved Trauma

Scientists and researchers in the mental health are mainly searching for the genetic or DNA causes of mental illness. This is like the proverbial drunk searching for his lost keys underneath the lamp post because the light is there. In the meantime, the keys are lying on the ground in the dark beside the car. I believe that unresolved trauma (which can go back generations) is a major cause of mental illness. This is a whole person illness.

Have you done any work, such as Hellinger Family Constellation workshops, energy healing or Shaman work that reveals generational sources of mental illness? If it was available, would you be open to it?

Music

One time I was in such despair that the only thing that gave me solace was music. I put the headphones on and let the classical music wash over me. Only these sounds could distract and soothe me.

Have you tried soothing music as a healing tool?

Pets

A pet can be a great source of healing. Caring for them, touching them and talking to them is an act of love, which takes us outside ourselves.

What else takes you outside yourself?

Isolation

Sometimes isolation, or quasi-isolation, is essential for putting yourself back together. We may need silence and aloneness to strengthen us before we can come back out again. But overdoing isolation is not a healthy coping strategy.

What are your coping strategies after an upsetting time?

Psych Wards

Psych wards can be places of isolation and inhumane treatment or they can be places of comfort and recovery. Sometimes they are both. Focusing outward, to participate in whatever activities are offered, can be helpful. So can offering comfort to another. One time a woman said I saved her life because I held her in my arms while she sobbed in despair. But then the nurses told me that doing so was inappropriate behavior.

When have you had the opportunity to comfort another and how does it feel?

Helplessness

One time the patient advocate “help” that came was a joke and the promised visit from the head nurse to address my complaint never occurred. I was infuriated with helplessness and hurt. These situations required serious forgiveness exercises.

When have you felt helpless? Were you able to do anything about it?

The Backbone

By and large, nurses are the saving grace of the psychiatric healthcare system.

What has been your experience with psychiatry?

Thank You

Later in my recoveries I was able to tell some nurses how life-saving was their listening. They were grateful for the feedback because they seldom get such confirmation and affirmation. This was one way that I could make a difference in someone's day.

Can you find opportunities to say thank you for good care?

“Little” Things

When you are a mentally ill person, the smallest supportive gesture or word can make a difference. This teaches you the importance of the “little” things about ordinary human interactions and discourse.

In what ways can you be the giver of supportive “little” things?

Learning

There is something to be learned from everything. Sometimes it is only that the healthcare system is broken. Sometimes it is that you can be broken too. Later there can be pride that somehow you learned to survive.

When have you experienced brokenness? What have you learned?

Living in the Moment

Madness can be excruciatingly painful, but one of its interesting effects is that it gives you a taste of what it means to live fully in the moment.

What have you learned from moments of madness?

“Small” Things

There are lots of ordinary people who do kind things. They were often life-saving to me. I needed a free ride to the soup kitchen from a taxi driver. I needed the bus driver in Minneapolis to overlook the fare. I needed the hospital security guard not to call the cops. Another time a woman and her two children took me to hospital. A woman in a homeless shelter brought me thick-soled tennis shoes. A man at a laundry gave me \$20 without my asking as I sorted through discarded socks to use as mittens. I do not take “small” things for granted anymore.

What examples of “small” things have graced your path?

Support

Despite all the hardship, I learned that the universe did support me. I discovered that while walking down the street to the bus stop. It was a momentous discovery.

In what ways have you been supported on your journey?

Hurt Transformed

Those with mental illness often have their hearts hurt. Such hurts, however, give us the capacity to become “wounded healers.” A heart that has been hurt can know and practice deep compassion for others.

How can you practice compassion?

Diving Deep

If you will let it, mental illness can push you deep inside yourself. There you may find what you have endured, what is really important and the nature of your story. As painful as the process may be, you can take comfort in the fact that most people never plumb the depths.

In what way has mental illness deepened your life?

Recovery Revolution

“Recovery” is a relatively new concept in mental health. When I was sick, no one ever mentioned it. The revolution it portends has yet to be felt among the ranks of psychiatrists and psychologists. When they realize what it means they will be astonished and may have to reinvent themselves.

What does “recovery” mean to you?

Spiritual Havens

Mysticism can bear a close correlation with mental illness. The mystics, however, had or have the benefits of cloister and community. They have daily humble chores to perform as well as protection from the financial pressures of life. All of these are factors that help keep one's feet on the ground amidst infusions of creative or spiritual energy. I envy these spiritual havens and know that having one would have made a huge difference in my recovery.

What kind of supportive environment might have made a difference in your recovery?

Missing Resources

My sampling of some 13-15 psych wards tells me that they could be much improved. Having growth-oriented videos available, such as Wayne Dyer, Joseph Campbell and Caroline Myss are examples. More sophisticated group therapy sessions are sorely needed. I never thought, when I was in a hospital setting, to ask for more resources. Now I would in the hopes that the request would at least plant seeds.

What has been your experience with the resources in psych wards? What would you add to this list?

Clearing Negativity

I have some bitter memories of when I was treated inhumanely. In a psych ward in Iowa I was forcibly injected, kept in isolation unfairly and drugged for the better part of ten days. I did not deserve it, but a punitive, uncaring doctor was in charge. The only thing I have found for such experiences is forgiveness exercises that are repeated over and over. As much as I may have wanted revenge, I knew that the memories were more hurtful to me than to that person who was completely unaware of them. So I may as well clear my system of the negativity. This is hard work to do.

Can you forgive yourself for the mortifying things you might have done?

Native American Wisdom

Native Americans believe that all illness is a product of imbalance. How we restore it is the question. There are ways beyond medication. The Native Americans use alternative approaches and healing rituals. We need to learn from them and practice integrative medicine, which means combining Western science with non-traditional approaches.

What do you know about Native American healing wisdom?

Completing the Circle

Sometimes desperation led me to try still another alternative approach. One was a Shaman practitioner who took me through an enlightening rebirthing experience as well as a soul retrieval. Then he gave me instructions for conducting a ritual. First I was to wait until the time felt right. Then I was to choose a symbol. Lastly, I was to conduct a ceremony with someone else or others.

I chose to bury the stone as I wrote about earlier. This represented abuse from my father. My friend smudged the wooded area with sage. I spoke a prayer that surprisingly, acknowledged my parents as having given me the right stuff to fight this illness. I knew by then that manic depression had become my friend because of what it contributed to my development, but before this ritual I saw only that my family had contributed to it. They were dead by the time of this little ceremony, but the ritual surprised me with this insight. Now, with the restoration of our family in my acceptance and memory, the circle was complete.

Are you willing to be surprised by using ritual?

Ritual Explained

Why do rituals work? They seem mysterious and it is often difficult to trace cause and effect to healing, yet every time we go to church we call upon ritual to help us become more whole.

Ritual can change the morphogenetic field that surrounds us, thereby interrupting the pattern of illness that is held in our bodies. Biologist, Rupert Sheldrake, developed this mystical but scientific theory. These fields are invisible pattern-making structures in nature. We are all like television sets, picking up transmissions from afar. Performing a ritual is a conscious act to change the nature of the transmissions. There are forces beyond the personal realm that have held us in an old pattern.

Do you believe in the power of ritual to help heal?

Dragged to Wholeness

Jungian, Marion Woodman, author of many books that illustrate the emergence of the feminine energy in the world, suggests that “most of us are dragged to wholeness.” Serious illness is often the route. My conjecture about why this is true is that such grave events push us to our depths to heal the wounds of family, present culture and history. The strongest “muscles” are required to do this work.

What does being “dragged to wholeness” mean to you?

Feminine-Masculine Balance

The wholeness we seek has to do, partially, with developing both the masculine and feminine within ourselves. Finding my warrior side was required to survive the dangers and the hardships of my odyssey. Finding vulnerability, compassion, weakness, helplessness, my need for community and relationship was the feminine that I now claim fully.

How do you understand feminine-masculine balance and its development within a person?

The Doctor-Patient Relationship

Traditional medicine would scoff at my use of a shaman practitioner, but regardless of the mystical aspects of their work, there is a very understandable benefit. The man I worked with approached everything with the deepest listening and regard for me. The doctor-patient relationship is a known factor in healing, but I seldom found it in psychiatrists. In contrast, the shaman considered our interactions a sacred event. There was no judgment except affirmation and support. This man made it clear that he was giving me undivided attention, the best of his life and training from a powerful personal place. Compared to the battering I received from the medical community, this stance alone was tremendously healing.

What has been your experience with the doctor-patient relationship? How might it be improved?

Exerting Every Effort

Setting the *intention* to become as well as I could be in 1998 set the stage for using everything possible to heal. Many of them were free and are worth noting. The included journaling, mindfulness practices, alternative healing lectures, Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT), colleague healing group, prayer, group meditation, Reiki circles, DMDA and Depression Anonymous Support Groups, inspirational/educational videos such as Joseph Campbell, extensive reading in fields beyond psychiatry, forgiveness practices, dietary changes, grief work and ritual, exercise, dream work, research on PTSD, self-help exercises from books by people such as Deepak Chopra, self-designed ritual, affirmations, gratitude exercises, writing exercises to clarify and integrate my thinking and inspirational/educational tapes.

Through these avenues I reframed my experience in a positive light; through them I found the stories of myths and mysticism that illuminated the “hero’s journey;” through them I found healers who supported me even when the mental health field did not; through them I found renewed creativity and wisdom; through them I found the hope to go on even in the darkest hours. While they are impossible to quantify in measurable terms of “success,” I believe that the total added up to significant wellness.

What self-help methods have your tried or can seek?

Too Much Religion

I've seen people who are passionately religious inhibit their recovery. They often pray hard to be healed or ask for any number of other things in life. Then they sit back and wait. The prayer request, and the idea that it will be answered directly, means that they do not seek or take action. They lose the ability to approach wellness as a step-by-step movement toward wholeness, but it requires action on their part.

Depression's Gift

Depression slowed my decision-making. It also meant being able to do only one or two things a day at times. Berating myself over this was at first common, but eventually I learned not to push the river. I simply had to take life very slowly, take as good care of myself as possible and allow that to be acceptable. Now that I am well, I still remember this lesson when I become over-tired or overwhelmed with trying to handle too much. One or two things is enough.

Do you berate yourself for not accomplishing more?

Honoring Suffering

Everyone experiences suffering at some point. It is the universal human condition. Yet we as a society shun its existence and expression. Grief is not OK. “Put on a stiff upper lip and get on with it” is the prescription. But somewhere between feeling sorry for ourselves and denying the condition there is an affirming place for honoring the suffering we’ve endured.

Can you honor your suffering without feeling sorry for yourself?

Being Open

For a long time I was afraid to admit that I suffered from manic depression. Gradually, however, I found people and places where I could be open. This acceptance alone was therapeutic. The more I found acceptance, the more that I could accept myself. This is the way that self-stigma is lessened and self-confidence is built. This experience, however, is not a prescription for everyone to do the same. Jobs may be at stake; relationships may be damaged. Everyone must decide for themselves how and when to be open if at all.

What have you decided to do about being open?

Surveying Damage

Most people do not understand the pain that underlies mental illness. Diagnostic manuals, chemical solutions and the opinion that we are “damaged goods” can destroy our humanity. We are seen in a negative light rather than as creative, extraordinarily sensitive, wounded people struggling to be whole and healthy if not necessarily “cured” forever. So many conditions of mental illness go untreated, such as the losses after losses we suffer, the stigma and shame, the PTSD, the trauma from psych wards, the illness itself and the grief we must bear.

Every doctor except one out of the 18 psychiatrists I encountered was wedded to the pharmaceutical approach to treatment. There was little if any attention to the emotional wounding that underlies mental illness. The wholeness of human nature as it relates to mental illness has been virtually ignored. It is up to us to search widely for healing and support.

How aware are you of the underlying pain of illness and what can you do about healing it?

Wisdom

William Styron, the writer who suffered a debilitating depression in his '60s, said, "suffering is an opening to wisdom." Many mystics and saints have touted this aspect of suffering---that it builds character and growth. Why, then, can't we better honor its presence in our lives and turn a compassionate face to it? To do so helps us find the storehouse of life lessons beneath the pain. To honor suffering can be profoundly life-giving and healing.

In what ways have you honored your suffering? What wisdom has that yielded?

The Hero's Journey II

The hero's journey, as researched and described by Joseph Campbell, is a universal spiritual path of psychological development. It includes stages of painful *separation* from all that is known, tests and trials of *initiation* and the extreme challenges of *return* with a new meaning in life. Reframing the experience of mental illness in this light is a stupendous source of affirmation. We are no longer souls to be pitied, but rather, noble fighters for a decent life.

Can you claim the pain and path of the hero's journey? (A suggestion is to Google this subject to see what you can learn. There is one "summary of steps" developed by Maricopa Center for Learning and Instruction, Maricopa Community Colleges, that is excellent.)

Death and Resurrection

The basic motif of the hero's journey is that a death and resurrection is required. One dies to an old way of being, suffering the loss considerably, but finding a new sense of life and meaning on the other side. This sequence applies to puberty initiation rituals, mid-life transitions, serious illness and other situations where people are tested in extraordinary ways. The trouble with mental illness is that too often the resurrection or rebirth does not occur. We do not believe it is possible, but we must rethink this to see it as a goal of recovery.

Have you experienced a rebirth or resurrection?

Lacking Accurate Models

The hero's journey is one of dying to one's little ego and finding the illumination that is beyond good and evil. In the process we come to know our inner selves, capable of unique gifts. The manic depression experience, however, is one where the person enters the abyss and too often does not find a way back. The way we are treated, the drugs we are given and way we are labeled prevents a safe return.

Most of us who suffer have no idea that our path is part of a noble journey; hardly ever are we encouraged to tell our stories; never are we told that underneath the outward symptoms of battle might be an underling search for wholeness. The opposite is the case. We are treated with negative labels, rejection and dehumanization. Both the illness itself and these reactions cripple us. We must reframe this path and claim the hero's journey for ourselves.

What inner work have you done to claim the hero's journey?

New Standards of Success

The guiding myth of the hero's journey is totally absent from the fields of medicine and mental health. These systems, in fact, represent the boundaries of the known world rather than the one borne by the hero who must go beyond them. Tragically, too few of us are equipped to fight the battles and bear the burdens of this heroic path. Instead, we allow ourselves to be judged by other's standards, to become beaten down by them, rather than having a picture of an alternate route to wholeness. Such a path requires far more effort than the one required of more practical "normal" humans.

How have you changed your view of mental health?

Limits of the Scientific Paradigm

Doctors are trained in the scientific paradigm that asks for proven answers from the physical world. This paradigm has become synonymous with truth itself, as though there is not other way to view the world. The Native Americans and other indigenous people know better. Their worlds are full of meaning, and they trust the invisible. The field of mental health is dominated by medicine and the scientific paradigm. In the face of this sterility, it is up to each of us create personal meaning, beyond medicine, from a difficult path.

What aspects of physical, mental, emotional, spiritual and social wellness have you pursued?

A Self-Made Job

For years I allowed myself to be beaten down by the way mental illness is treated. We are labeled into a diagnostic category and given pills. No one spoke to me about “recovery” until I had already charted my own journey to that result. No one treated me as a whole person, urging me to heal physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually and socially. I had to discover all this for myself.

What have you discovered for yourself and your healing?

Transforming Bitter Memories

A few people know about some of the bitter memories I have, such as how I was treated by certain doctors or survived various less than humane psych wards. They ask me why I don't talk much about them. I tell them that the suffering has been reframed enough that the path has become noble.

How have you transformed bitter memories?

Grieving Untreated Losses

There are so many losses with mental illness---loss of jobs, friends, structure in our life, self-respect, money, dignity, freedom from fear and on and on. The system seldom sees these invisible pains and almost never treats them. Grief groups should be far more prevalent. In the absence of these, I undertook a self-designed ritual one evening. I had a list of losses, a candle, a grief book of prayers and time by myself. I recited the losses slowly. I did a lot of crying that evening, which lightened my load.

What losses have you experienced and how might you deal with them?

The Blessing of Not Having

Our Western culture is sorely lacking rituals, stories and meaning. Our “temples” have become money, success and materialism. Many people heard Mike Douglas utter “greed is good” in a movie and followed that heartless path. Those of us denied these options have the time and opportunity to define ourselves by the stories, rituals and meaning that the culture lacks.

How has your life been affected by loss of materials goods?

The Blessing of Illness

Being healed is not the same as being “cured.” I still take my medications, but I consider myself enormously healed in mind, body, spirit, soul and community. In fact, I am more healed than many “normal” people I know. This is why I say that mental illness can be a path to wholeness. The blessing of our illness can be that we are forced to the task whereas others often don’t take the path at all.

How many people do you see who have pursued a holistic path?

Seeking Strength Versus Solutions

Several doctors ridiculed me for seeking alternative medicine treatments. There were energy healers, a naturopathic doctor, a meditation group, even a shaman practitioner, the latter of which I never admitted. The mistake I made in pursuing these avenues was hoping that they would provide solutions that medicine could not. What I should have done is merely sought them as a source of strength in a total approach to healing. There is a difference in seeking strength versus solutions.

What sources of strength have you sought without expecting that they will supplant the role of medicine in healing?

Multiple Causes

Psychiatry and the mental health system would do well to investigate multiple causes of mental illness. Hidden trauma is particularly difficult to quantify and difficult to treat, but their acceptance as part of the healing journey would do wonders for our ability to heal ourselves. Right now clients are too often passively dependent upon only medications. At the very least we should be educated about these causes if not steered to alternative help that could be undertaken with safeguards. This multiple approach could provide hope for millions.

What multiple causes do you identify as pertinent to mental illness?

Suffering and Hardship

Energy healer and medical intuitive, Carolyn Myss, suggests that “spiritual madness” is the defining spiritual path, not the one characterized as the sweet, easy route to enlightenment that we usually think. Instead, it requires courage, endurance, hardship and suffering, all of which cleanse us of old roles, behaviors and attitudes.

What roles, behaviors and attitudes have you dropped as a result of illness?

Cultural Wounding

Our imbalance is not just personal. It's cultural as well. The feminine energy has been abandoned in our culture. Both women and men have suffered this wound. This means that society values doing over being, achievement over relationships, material success over love. We are an unbalanced, still patriarchal world. The masculine-dominant, scientific-rational society negates feelings, the inner life, the darkness and the slower, softer pace of the feminine energy. Seeing the larger picture helps take some of the sting out of our personal struggles.

In what ways do you identify with these ideas?

Charting Losses

Among the losses we incur are body-image (because of weight gain from medication side-effects), finances, income, jobs, structure in our lives, self-worth, dignity, hope, physical strength, our minds, ability to think and make decisions, friends/family/colleagues, the company of companions who provide acceptance, freedom from fear or worry, faith in ourselves, the will to live, security of knowing we can care for ourselves while aging, possessions and belongings, healthy eating and a sense of safety. We lose our health and the core of our being. The term, mentally ill, has connotations like no other illness and it is a loss to our self to hear and know that. These losses are untreated by the mental health system.

What have been your losses? How might you find new ways to deal with them?

Crying for Ourselves

We must learn to cry for ourselves to heal the wounds of loss.

What other methods have you found to help heal loss? Do you know how to cry for yourself in a healthy way?

Reframing Grief

Most of us are alone with the load of grief that comes with so many losses. Again, I turned to reading help for transformation. Peter Levine, Judith Lewis Herman, Stephanie Mines and Alice Miller all identified how easily trauma can be incurred. This was another part of my reframing process, legitimizing the pain that so often goes unacknowledged. The power of insight to heal is overlooked.

What reading have you done to help understand the role of trauma in mental illness?

Pilgrimages

For a long time I bought into the “ain’t it awful” opinion about my manic escapades. Some of the incidents are still difficult to accept, but for the most part I have reframed them as pilgrimages. As Shirley MacLaine points out in her book, *Camino: A Journey of Spirit*, being helpless and vulnerable, suffering hardship, is what pilgrimages should be. Similarly, a Catholic Bishop remarked to me that pilgrimages should require endurance so as to appreciate the suffering of others; they should help us establish a dedication to live a life of service. Gradually I saw my hair-raising trips in a new light.

What pilgrimages have you made?

Journey Toward Faith

Only later did I see many horrific incidents as a journey toward faith. Claiming my warrior's badge freely, I realized how often I had been cared for by acts large and small. Despite hunger and deprivation, I was always provided "the next thing" or person that kept me going. Serious hardship and outright physical pain were my lot, but I had not been harmed physically by anyone. Instead, I had received countless examples of tough grace. A rock-solid faith became firmly anchored, trust that the universe would support me. I had been a pilgrim learning indelible lessons to help transform my life.

In what way has your faith been increased or lessened?

Reflection Clarifies

A free cab ride, \$20 that I didn't ask for, a compassionate, listening nurse, a pair of thick-soled tennis shoes, a windbreaker wrapped around a tree, a pair of oxfords just my size, a caring doctor who held my hand when I thought all was lost---all of these and more were barely noticed when I lived out the days of hardship. Upon reflection, however, they stood out as beacons of hope and light that kept pulling me forward. Reflection time clarifies things and makes meaning out of special moments.

What has reflection time yielded about your journey?

When Pride Doesn't Matter

When you are in the midst of trauma or struggle, it is time to let pride fall away. Asking for help is critical to survival. This does not mean you are weak, incompetent or a free loader. Instead, it merely means that you need help in an interdependent world where we are meant to both give and receive.

How easily do you ask for help?

Doing It The Hard Way

I was once a proud career woman with a doctorate and a privileged life. There were some prestigious clients in my management consulting practice and I lived in a beautiful home in Tucson, Arizona. But manic depression reduced me at times to being a genuine bag lady and I otherwise had continuous manic episodes that kept knocking me down over 12 years. Over the course of these horrific times, however, I gradually developed the conviction that mental illness can be a profound spiritual path. Getting there wasn't easy, but I did the work and I am grateful.

What is your conclusion about the path of mental illness?

Suffering as Purifying

Sister Joan Chittester wrote a book about suffering in a book called *Scarred by Struggle* in which she writes about suffering. “I learned that struggle tempers the steel of the soul. It straightens the backbone and purifies the heart. It makes demands on us that change us forever and make us new. It shows us who we are. Then we make choices, maybe for the first time in life, that determine not only what we’ll do for the rest of our life, but what kind of person we’ll be for the rest of it.” (p. 85)

Has suffering purified you or made you bitter?

A New Beginning

Among the spiritual lessons and gifts I received is the fact that I tapped core self-knowledge that feels very deep and rooted. You find out who you are when your back is against the wall. I know my capacity for suffering, I know what I endured and that I am both fragile and very, very strong. I know the people and events that “saved” me countless times. I know that listening heals. I know what I claim as my own dogged work. I know how much is grace. I know the sources and depth of my faith. I see this illness as a profound journey to the soul, a blessed path and I am just beginning to share my bounty. I know that this journey has been a bone-crushing path, but I **choose** to call it “tough grace” and that has made all the difference.

What will be your story?