

Capturing Hope from a Deep Cavern of Shame

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The early autumn sun is strong, but it is so windy the bucket won't stay still on the water.

Waves lap hard at its metal sides, water seeping over the top. I had collected big, shapely stones from the surrounding land, filling the bucket, hoping that it would sink. I attached a rope to it with a bowline knot I learned in Girl Guides and tied the other end around my right foot.

My plan was that I would be pulled down and drown in the deep lake. To my great consternation, it didn't work. I kept bobbing to the surface, the only damage a rough scrape on my face from the bucket's rim as it skittered about on the waves.

No-one knew how desperate I felt. Or that I wanted to end my life in the most private and excruciatingly beautiful place I knew. A lake in the Gatineau Hills, only an hour from Ottawa but where you were more likely to see deer than another human being. I had gone there to be alone and to bring months of suffering to an abrupt halt.

Six months had passed since I'd turned thirty years old in a forbidding ward at the local mental hospital. There the doctor had pronounced me bipolar. There was no discussion permitted. She prescribed lithium. When I asked if I could take lithium and still have children, the nurse told me -- rather meanly I thought -- that this was the least of my concerns. The diagnosis felt like a life sentence, a tool of oppression unleashed upon me. One overworked nurse had barked at me, "You'd better stay on your meds or we'll see you back here in no time." I was offended by her haughtiness. To me, that hospital stay had been a total power struggle. I would *never* give in to the medical establishment and their insulting labels. I was young.

Instead, I carried around a deep cavern of shame. There was a constant debate in my head, an overbearing babble of voices, judging me at every turn. Low self-esteem and humiliation were my M.O. I walked in Ottawa for hours every day, the dangling conversation a constant companion.

Ten years later, the darkness pounced on me again. I had two children and was in the middle of a divorce when I smacked into a wall emotionally. I saw no hope on the horizon. I prepared to kill myself with a puree of pills and fruit juice made in the blender. In a suicide note I expressed the belief that my children would be better off without me. In the gathering darkness, I drank my potion. As it turned out, my ex swung by the house unexpectedly. He ferried me to the emergency ward, where I insisted on calling my psychiatrist at home even though by that time it was close to midnight. He told me that it was the illness speaking. I so desperately needed to hear that. And I had reached a point where I *could* hear it. For the first time. I wasn't just a screw-up, I had a disease. It was a relief.

After years of struggle, and umpteen therapies combing my psyche for the origin of my faults, I accepted that I have an organic illness, with an inherited component.

It is acknowledging that, accepting that I have an illness – without giving in to it – that is gradually liberating me from constant fear of a life punctuated by scary hospitalizations.

Speaking frankly today of my battles with depression feels like “coming out”. I live with bi-polar illness, to be exact. So far, it’s the lows that pack the worst punch. The highs have cost me money I did not have, but up till now I haven’t declared I can fly.

But she’s an evolving hurricane, this vexing visitor of mine. Her storms brew up and blow in differently each time; my task is to stay a step ahead, using all the medical and complementary health assistance I can muster. I can’t say I’ve ever conquered the shame entirely, but when I begin to feel better, it recedes.

Finding understanding can be a reach. Few truly appreciate the unspeakable desolation that accompanies the heavy cloak of darkness when it descends. It’s a most terrifying loss of control.

But experience has yielded a route that can bypass hell. While I insist fervently on remaining in the driver's seat, I promise not to hog the roadmap. The people who love me must know how to intervene when my brain biochemistry goes awry. Before it's too late.

I am more hopeful. Being bi-polar is not the sum total of who I am, nor is it a life sentence. The world is still my oyster, although it's a dialed-down version. The pearls are plentiful. Work, family, heartache and fun are all possible, so long as I heed my limits. The label, so crushing in my youth, is now allowing me -- with help -- to liberate myself from its most nasty symptoms. I am learning to keep the shame at bay.

I don't know what's around the corner, but I hope that the arsenal of counter measures I've developed work to keep me safe when the depression next roars. For the moment, life is good. I am winning the battle against self-shame, with the help of my community of loving family and friends. Accepting that I have a chronic, episodic illness becomes easier as I get older. I am less afraid now. Hope emerges on the horizon. I strive to capture it, to mold it in my hands and create a promising future.