

My Re-Birthday

The doctor sat and watched as I folded my head in my hands and burst into uncontrollable sobbing, mumbling "there's no hope". Through my tears I heard "Yes, there is!" I wasn't sure I wanted any more hope after such lengthy and total despair with so many false dawns in the past, but before I could argue my way out of it he asked me would I go into hospital. Was I really that bad? Was this the end of the line? What could they possibly do for me? I think I wanted to know but was afraid of the answer, though I readily agreed to go.

Twelve hours later I was "inside", clothes gone so I couldn't do a runner, not that I had the energy for that. Surrounded by caring nurses, all I could do for many days was swing violently from frantic crying to behaving "normally" and saying there was nothing wrong with me. I cried over problems real and imagined, and I cried simply because I'd forgotten how not to. It took time for the obvious to sink in – I was depressed. It took even longer for me to accept that my previous "normal" moods had been extended periods of hypomania. Surely it was quite ordinary to go to work with a temperature of 103°F? Did others not spontaneously make up poetry or incredibly witty jokes? Didn't everyone wake up after only four or five hours sleep with loads of ideas and plans? Apparently not! It was pretty devastating to discover that I was suffering from what the 1960s called "manic depressive insanity" but is now much more correctly named "bipolar disorder type 2". I wasn't sure I liked this diagnosis, but BPD2 I was, which explained the twenty-plus years during which it had not been noticed. Now in the hospital I kept hearing that what I had was treatable, though I hadn't fully accepted I was ill. I didn't look sick, and I could hold rational and intelligent conversations. But slowly, ever so slowly, reality dawned.

The first step involved letting me have plenty of time to come down off the dysphoric euphoria I'd been on for some months. That has to be one of the most unpleasant things a mind can experience, and it was only through the constant feeling of security, compassion and care that I started to balance out. Then I thought I was cured, only to be disabused of that notion rather smartish when I had another mood swing shortly after leaving the hospital. Nowadays, with my daily dose of lithium and after trying several antidepressants until I found one that suited me, I don't suffer such violent swings anymore. I do bob up and down a bit, like most people, but I don't fly or drown as I used to. If I'm honest (and one thing all this has taught me is to be honest with myself about my moods all the time) I say I miss the highs. Such creativity as I'd experienced just isn't found in my new life, though minor glimpses of it flicker through from time to time. I'm still not used to being "ordinary"; perhaps I never will. The tablets also have a downside for me (like putting on weight), but they do protect me and those around me from the worst ravages of my mood swings.

Not everyone is as lucky as I was with the support I got in difficult times, and I know that *Aware's* support groups and Helpline bring great comfort to many. For me, the turning point was going into hospital, a day I later named as my "re-birthday". I have been learning about myself and my illness ever since that rebirth, and though I still struggle occasionally when things get tough, I find now that I tend to take charge of my moods, rather than have them take

control of me. It's not all plain sailing, of course, and there are many days when I'm like a duck on water – apparently unruffled on the surface but paddling like hell underneath – so I find it essential to keep in close contact with my doctors, to take rests when I need them and to try to do things to stretch my imagination, such as reading something interesting, going to the theatre or trying to write something like this. I've always greatly enjoyed voluntary work too and I continue to find fulfilment through these activities. With varying degrees of success I have now live more than a decade of my new life and I am so grateful to all those who have helped me, particularly my long-suffering wife and family. My very best wishes go to anyone who is going through anything similar at this time.

Things will get better!

Robert Kerr