

Interview with a Bipolar Member of DGBS e.V.

When did you first ask yourself if you were ill?

In 1973 after my stay at St. Luke's Hospital Psychiatric Ward 8 in New York City . I was discharged but undiagnosed for bi-polar disorder. There was a preliminary but short-lived diagnosis of schizophrenia. Most bi-polar received a "schizophrenia diagnosis" during this time.

In what way did you realize that your illness was a real problem?

Throughout periods of my life I was unable to function at my accustomed level which was energetic, positive and successful. I experienced periods of hypomania and mania which intensified my energy ten-fold and made it impossible to function in a regular and consistent manner. In my depressions I was equally unable to function well because I lost the desire to do so. My relationships and involvement in social situations were passionate, full of love and mutual interest but but did not function. This pattern established itself in 1970 and by 1989 I'd been through six severe manic-depressive episodes occurring in three year cycles.

What did this mean for your family and friends?

My family had a poorly shrouded history of mental illness which only became clearer after my diagnosis in 1987. Because of this, my mother in particular (and the extended family as well) was in denial and felt guilty. My grandfather suffered from manic-depressive. He attempted suicide in the 1930's. My uncle was bi-polar and committed suicide in 1982. My first cousin is also bi-polar and alive. My mother had been hospitalized several times in the early 1960's, received shock treatment, was diagnosed as a schizophrenic and several years later swore off the psychiatric community entirely. My relationships were full of love and potential but disturbed by my inability to reliably participate in these relationships when I was ill. I was unable to pursue healthy relationships because I was an undiagnosed bi-polar who had grown dependent on my manias as a way of finding myself. The rocket fuel of mania catapulted my life into exciting, dangerous and ultimately self-destructive patterns. Over the years my body and soul were seriously wounded by the wear and tear of it all.

What did you try to do?

Since my hospital discharge in 1973 during my Columbia University years I was in therapy. Therapy was supportive and very practical although it could not foresee the next manic-depressive episodes and therefore functioned as an illusory stop-gap (since I was undiagnosed). The therapy was useful when I was stable (in between phases) and helped me to better know and understand myself.

With which problems could you deal relatively quickly?

It was during my severe depressions that I was able to come to grips with my actual reality and survey the damage that my manic behavior had wrought. I began taking lithium in 1987 (although I was extremely resistant and ultimately non-compliant in the first 2-3 years). I had not fully accepted the devastating consequences of non-compliance. I went off my medication in 1989 and what followed would be my most destructive and final episode (a last hurrah!) before becoming compliant and getting stable as of 1990.

Did your illness have any influence on your profession?

When I was stable I could pursue the creative work of an actor, writer and dancer. I had talent and was developing skills and experience. When I entered a manic followed by a depressive episode, at first it seemed as if I was extremely talented, even inspired by some special gift but not long after I was overcome by the demands of the work both physically and mentally. I was unemployable when I was ill even though my behavior created a kind of romantic mythology to my character. Peter Rose, "the moody and wild one, touched by fire. Stay away!"

When I was stable I was still creative and professional but my long list of jobs: taxi-driver, truck-driver, floor-sander or waiter all attest to the difficulty I had to earn a living. Earning a living as an undiagnosed bi-polar was an ongoing struggle, painful and at times desperate. Sometimes in a mania I could make money fast but I spent it just as quickly and never saved a cent.

When did you first seek systematic professional care? How was your life after received professional help?

In 1990 (I was diagnosed in 1987) I took a barrage of blood and organ tests, found a lithium level that worked for me (no extreme side effects) and for several years I was stable but unmoved, unmotivated, adrift in my stability. The roof was on my manias but the floor was sinking as I was depressed daily. It wasn't a severe depression but an ongoing lack of drive or will. This was not how I wanted to live!

Nonetheless, I persevered and after 3-4 years with psychotherapy, blood-lithium level visits, personal identification with the illness in the lives of my family as well as known artists, a physical exercise program, I trained to become an English teacher for foreign students and consistently developed my trust in a spiritual path. A path that was ongoing, adventurous, not free of danger, but full of love and understanding.

I began to rebuild my life. I was more stable and independent than ever before. I attended a self-help group in Santa Monica, California and began to have no shame or fear about being bi-polar and sharing that fact with particular people. The self-help group supported this. We were human-beings with a similar illness, often able to share our unique problems, the difficult journey and the path ahead. We worked to treat each other with respect and with the human value we often missed from others. The self-help group was a great source of hope and strength toward re-entering society in an active and full way.

What helped and didn't help in overcoming some of your problems? When did you connect with a self-help group and what motivated you to do so?

From 1990-1993 I was stable but felt semi-comatose. I was aware that this was better than being institutionalized or dead. I'd been through the worst. I dragged myself through the "low level depression" in a kind of methodical 'gut check.' I gradually felt lighter, rediscovered my body which was always so essential to my identity. I paid more attention to my diet, even opened up bills and paid them beginning to take some responsibility for my affairs. I had a job but wasn't ready for a relationship. 1994 was the year I felt some new wing span, four years after my last mania, compliance and a "treatment program" that I created along with doctors. I gave expression to some of my ideas and impulses, even ambition. I felt less like a patient, the walking wounded and more like a human-being with a life to lead.

I first participated in a self-help group in 1991 in Santa Monica, California.

Can you briefly describe the work in a self-help group? How do you try to help someone with a special problem?

Self-help groups function on the basis of solidarity, mutual respect and an inter-personal trust that can evolve over time. In this way the participants are involved and committed to speaking of and for oneself. We shared many similar horrific experiences during our illness but our way back to health is an individual journey that the group dynamic and energy can support. We can bolster and motivate one another, help each other to see and accept painful truths as we look at our own lives. Friendships emerge through intimacy and understanding. Self-help groups are not professional entities capable of giving medical advice or helping those who are seriously ill and in need of professional care or hospitalization. Of course, many bi-polars are often better equipped than doctors to see the individual reality as created by the disease and the destructive symptoms. Often we are more sensitive to problems than doctors but our medical mandate is limited.

We help one another through honesty and sympathy, feedback and challenge. We discuss medications, doctors as well as the wider world that interests us. We hope that participants can make the right choices for their lives, in their interest and with positive consequences. We want to live with our illness, not only carry it around on our back.

How do you feel today?

I am healthy and feel that my years of diagnosis and treatment from 1990 and ongoing have enabled me to feel fresh, ripe and ready to live with the energy and love that God and my parents envisioned for me. I still have many of my talents, experience has given me some wisdom and I know that I've been through several dangerous moments. I feel lucky.

I earn a living, have relations with colleagues and friends as well as my family. I have an intimate relationship although we do not live together. My health is the number one priority. From this flows any other human activities such as creative work, organizing in the bi-polar community, writing, acting, etc. The self-help group in Berlin is an important source for me. I have been a regular participant for almost seven years. I am on a spiritual path which is a source of simplicity and peace when the stresses of daily life become too great.

What is next for you? What would you like to do?

I would like to continue working in such a way that the issues surrounding bi-polar disorder are injected into the social discussion more and more. In Germany, The European Union, et al. Social consciousness about the reality of mental health needs to raise a notch so that stigmas can be removed, people can get help and that doesn't mean only the people who have the illnesses! Doctors need to learn more and families and relatives have to also learn and be alerted to symptoms, acceptable care and not to run in shame. The stigma against bi-polar disorder and mental illness must be addressed through education and advocacy. The time is ripe for this.

Thank you for this interview.