

A Light Beyond the Darkness

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This story is not about triumph over adversity, rather it is about making progress in the process of recovery from major depression, physical disabilities and a landslide of life-altering, untoward events. It is about loss, and in some cases, those things which contributed to the losses. It is about discovering new ways of doing things to replace the old ways which had stopped working at some point along the way. It is about realistic and unrealistic expectations. And it is about human frailty and forgiveness, particularly as they relate to self.

I did not realize when asked by the Texas Lawyers' Assistance Program (TLAP) to write about my three-year battle with depression that the words would not come so easily. To write about my experience would mean again looking into that whirlpool which had stripped from me my confidence, health, financial security, friends, dignity and all meaning in life. It is no easy task to stand here at this water's edge without still feeling some vulnerability to the dark turbulence that very nearly sucked the life from me.

I believed that what the mind could conceive, the mind could cure. Like many lawyers, I also believed that one need only identify and understand the issues to remove the obstacles and eliminate fear. It was incomprehensible to me then that, despite all my best efforts, I could not control what would prove to be a relentless depression that had swallowed down whole three years of my life. As it turns out, it was that "pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstrap-and-move-on mentality" which became one of the hardest lessons I would have to "un-learn" in order to find forgiveness for what I perceived were unpardonable weaknesses in me.

I'd become entrenched with the idea that my issues were primarily philosophical. I stubbornly refused to be one of those who used some "biochemical imbalance" as an excuse for bad behavior, personal shortcomings or unwise decisions. Admitting to the limitations imposed by my physical problems had been hard enough, without adding yet another "defective" component to my being. When I finally agreed to try antidepressants, each failed medication reinforced my belief that I did not fit the "medical model" of depression.

My offer of proof included a long laundry list of recent losses and stressors. I'd terminated an eight year relationship and my relatively new law practice at the same time. There were family deaths and the premature death of a few of my friends.

I'd been offered a job in another state. In preparation, I drove myself hard, ignoring my physical limitations, compensating with pain killers. There wasn't time to rest. I had less than a month to pack, conclude business, move out, find renters for my house, move in after driving a 75ft truck 2600 miles, and then start my new job in a

new area of law.

Unfortunately, I'd seriously underestimated the physical impact of the move and with a domino effect, it exacerbated my disabilities, chronic pain problem, and longstanding sleep deprivation problem to the point of my going sleepless for three to five days at a time. I had pushed myself beyond my limits so much that, in consequence, I began to fear I was losing my independence. The idea of having to depend on others was intolerable to me. It diminished my self image and worth far beyond an already extensive stock of coping skills I'd developed over the years.

There I was--a stranger in a strange town, far away from the support systems I'd taken for granted at home. Once there, I continued driving myself to the point that, despite my pain killers, I was miserable physically and had begun losing so much weight that my clothes looked better on hangers. Depression soon stopped tapping on my shoulder and within a few short weeks it took over my life. I couldn't sleep. I couldn't eat. I couldn't read. I couldn't write. I knew I was heading for disaster but I felt powerless to stop the downward spiral. Then the worst happened--for the first time in my life, I lost my job.

I'd crashed head-long into the bottom of life and it would never look the same to me again. I was furious with myself. I'd let my weaknesses prevail and I had broken under my responsibilities. There was no one else but myself to blame for the mess I'd made of my life. I had to return home and the shame was overwhelming. From that point on, I'd begun to feel sentenced to life without the possibility of pardon. The only thing I wanted was to die.

Each day required a new decision to live instead of taking my life. The only things keeping me from the other choice were my sweet cats, who had been with me for years, my unfailing physician who continued seeing me without pay to make the point that I mattered, and the legacy of not-so-silent scars left by family and friends who had chosen to end their own lives. It was during this time that I found out that one of my cats was dying. My reserves were depleted and I decided then I would never again care that much about anything--ever. I did not want to feel anymore. There was just too much pain.

After almost three years my doctor finally found a medication that worked. I could at last read something with comprehension. And although I still have my other medical problems to contend with, I've stopped obsessing about taking my life. I can sleep through the night with some regularity now, and I've finally conceded that I have to get adequate rest or suffer the consequences. Finding other ways to do things is frustrating sometimes, but I have discovered that most things won't cause the roof to cave in if they don't get done right away or like I think they should be done. I have finally admitted that there are both biological and philosophical components to my depression. I still don't know if the depression is caused by a chemical imbalance or if the depression causes the imbalance, but either way, medication is necessary in my case to restore, and perhaps to maintain, that

balance. Like it or not, depression is sometimes a medical problem, and just like a broken limb, it needs medical treatment to heal.

Although I am feeling better now, my purchase on solid ground still feels a bit uncertain. There remains much to do to put the many scattered pieces of my life back together and begin again. I'd be lying if I said that this wasn't a hard thing to do, or that on some days, it didn't feel like an overwhelming and hopeless task. If I take it an increment at a time, however, it is do-able. Instead of stock piling the negatives in my life, I try to recall at the end of the day the things I am thankful for, and/or the things that caused me to smile that day.

One of the things I am thankful for is the generosity of spirit I experienced from the people at the State Bar and the Texas Lawyer's Assistance Program who gave me assistance when I asked for help without once making me feel more acutely the embarrassment I felt under the circumstances.

What made the difference for me until the right medication came along and after has been the presence of others in my life who are meaningful to me and who continued to believe in me when I could not do it for myself. I am so grateful for the generosity and steadfastness of those who stood beside me and those who stood ready to lend a helpful hand, notwithstanding my all too many messy edges. When I could not find reason enough that mattered within myself to live, I found the strength to live because of those who would not let go or give up on me. It is because of them that I am here to write, but it is for those who find themselves in the jaws of life that I write.

Do not be lulled into thinking it cannot happen to you. It can. It happens to people every day within our society and within our somewhat unforgiving profession which is particularly fraught with demands, stressful situations and expectations. If it does happen, you can ask for help. I chose to make the call to TLAP. My call remained confidential. I asked for and received help without untoward effect to my license or reputation. I'm the better for having made that call. My point being that you don't have to go it alone. It is true that some people are too uncomfortable with another's illness and will absent themselves. And it is true that you must be careful about who you choose to share your story or ask for help. It is equally true, however, that there are people who do care and do want to help--you need only be willing to ask.