

Madness Prevailed

By
Susan Rose

My head is in a paper bag; I can't get out! Pain floods my inner being; there is no escape from this unbearable torture. My mind is a runaway train with no brakes. When I manage some sleep in snatches, my soul descends into a black bottomless pit. Numbers and words form and disappear at an alarming rate. My body turns numb as my thoughts vanish into thin air. Time stands still, and everyone is a statue except me. Other people are unaware that my mind, spirit and body dance in different realities at the same time. Sex becomes the driving force in my life—sex without limits.

This was my dream state that lasted six years, when time stopped. I danced with the devil in my depression; I danced with the angels in my euphoria when I became one with the universe.

This was my free fall into insanity.

In the early 1950s my three aunts were committed to mental institutions for life. I heard stories from my father about our relatives in Canada. During the night a room in the house was bolted shut to keep everyone safe. Mental illness runs deep in my mother's family. My sister escaped this curse, but my younger brother wasn't so fortunate. He refuses to take medication and still suffers to this day. He believes that medicine is poison and hears voices that tell him negative things. There were times when he believed that I was threatening to kill him.

Mental illness is a curse and a blessing. Although being out of control ended my marriage, this was a blessing in disguise; otherwise, I would have remained trapped in an abusive relationship. Still, I am labeled and disgraced. People are prejudiced; jobs are hard to find. I vacillate between alternate realities like a seesaw; agony and ecstasy co-exist. Is this here-and-now the true reality? Or could an alternate reality be my true state of mind? Returning to the true reality is the key. Now I have the insight necessary to discern between these parallel realms. I fear getting stuck in the other one, unable to return.

Mother was heavy-handed. She yelled, "If you duck again, I'll hit you!" Cereal dripped down the side of my face. Mother had dumped the bowl on my head, because I wasn't eating fast enough. My older sister had already started school. Watching her get on the bus was important to me, but mother wouldn't allow it. She said, "You have to learn to tie your shoes first." This made me angry. Mother was always punishing me for something. When my sister had to write her times tables 12 times each, mother helped her; but when it was my turn she said, "Do them yourself." I only learned that my mother never hit my sister after I turned 40. My abuse started with mother, and then gradually rose to another level.

Sexual abuse reared its ugly head outside our family. Here is my memory. My doctor walks slowly towards me. There is an overwhelming medicinal smell in the air. My nostrils sting from the alcohol that permeates the exam room. His snow-white hair is all I can see. The touching starts and lasts for years. There is no way to stop it; I am just a child. Later, the doctor dies in his sleep. He leaves me no opportunity to accuse him. Years later the scent of alcohol triggers these memories. Trying to understand the past becomes a lifelong quest.

Other doctors unknowingly took part in my healing. I gave them a part of myself—something I had made, such as a piece of artwork—and they put my gift in a special place. Somehow such gestures helped to heal me.

Night terrors started at an early age. My sister's bed was my safe place. She wet the bed, but I didn't care. Nightmares were so real: snakes wrapped themselves around my legs and caused excruciating pain; Dracula bit my neck. Grandmother's house was another safe place. Every time I stepped over the threshold a feeling of peace came over me. It was a short bike ride over the bridge. The water was dark and deep. The river beckoned me; I wanted to jump. These were my first thoughts of suicide.

Tom was a good friend who brought me to the hospital. I didn't know I needed help. I told the nurse at the hospital what I saw in my mind and that was enough to get me admitted. I remained at the Broadside psychiatric unit

in New Hampshire for 2-1/2 months. My husband was divorcing me at the time and ignored the problem, which was me.

I have 3 sons from this marriage, and they all inherited my mental illness. When they were really sick, they asked for help. Cain called out first: “Mom, help me.” He looked like a prisoner in a concentration camp, all skin and bones. Andrew and Saul are twins, and both became addicted to drugs. After living ten years with their father, they came home to live with me. My house became a hospital and a police station. Saul was hospitalized 20 times during his teens and early twenties for drug addiction and bipolar disorder. His life was total chaos for 10 years. It took Andrew a decade to finish college with a baccalaureate degree in psychology. Saul still struggles with his illness and addictions. He completed his GED in prison.

I felt guilty. My sons had inherited my genes and I was not there to give them any guidance. They were all hyperactive as children. Cain was the one most afflicted. When he overturned his desk at school, the teacher gave him a time out. He couldn’t sit still for long periods of time. Their father gave them a good foundation, but that was not enough. Andrew was the only one of the three that graduated high school.

My oldest son Joseph is from a previous marriage that lasted 4 years. Joseph's father was an abusive alcoholic. Joseph was also hyperactive as a child. He was 15 when the twins were born. He helped me with housework and anything else I asked him to do. He graduated from high school. When he was 23, Joseph was sentenced to 15 years in prison after he refused to plead guilty for a crime. Since he returned home after his release 4 years ago, I haven't laughed so hard in my life—he’s my personal comedian. Joseph is wise and intelligent and respectful to everyone.

When I became psychotic, I lost everything: my house, my kids, my job, my marriage, my health. I found myself in the street, homeless. Trying to keep my highs and lows in check was like walking a tightrope. I felt like I might fall at any moment. I worked hard to break free from a reality beyond time. Eventually, I wiggled through a hole in the universe. I said, “Oh my God, this is reality!” There was no mistaking it—I was back. After 6 years of therapy and medication, life was a shock. It took 2 years for me to accept that my mental illness would be a constant battle. Decades later, I remain hyper-vigilant. These candid recollections reveal my journey with this foe.

Author Bio: Susan Rose is a retired respiratory therapist, a mother of four adult children and an artist. She worked as a respiratory therapist in the Boston area most of her adult life and now resides in the beautiful blue hills of Berkshire County in Massachusetts.

" Over the last few years. I have enjoyed some success as an aspiring artist. Currently my ink and water color paintings are on display at North Adams Regional Hospitals Art Show which lasts until October, 22, 2010. Art and writing have played an important part in my recovery from Mental Illness."