

My name is Naomi Stenberg, and I have been in recovery from bipolar for almost twenty years. Here is my story and a few things I've learned along the way.

A friend of mine has two Asian pear trees, one stunted by an early frost and yet to produce a pear, and the other covered with pears. I used to view myself like I was the stunted tree, stunted by my mental illness. The best I could hope for was just surviving. Now I believe if I work hard, I can flourish. I am flourishing. Metaphorically, I am putting forth new blossoms and growing and changing all the time.

For me, recovery is a verb not a noun.

It took a while for me to figure that out. When I was first diagnosed at age thirty, I used to allow my moods to take me hostage. If I woke up down or out of sorts, that was it—there went my whole day. I hadn't discovered yet the Zen of mood surfing. Didn't know how to surf a mood, just get on it and see if I could turn it around. Go for a walk. Make art or music. Dance. Meet up with a friend. Find a support group. I recently created a WRAP, Wellness Recovery Action Plan, which has given me a lot of resources for mood surfing.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

I'll start at the beginning. From my grandfather, I inherited my love of words and fascination with vocabulary, and, I inherited bipolar as well, as did his daughter, my aunt.

Of course, growing up, I didn't know what was ahead. I think if someone then had explained my illness to me and given me the option of saying, "No, not this lifetime," I would have said, "No."

I began having symptoms when I was nine. At first, my mood swings were brief and took me down not up.

Once, I was in a snowball fight throwing snowballs fast as I can make them, and suddenly I didn't care. I walked away with snowballs hitting me in the back and friends calling after me, and I didn't have any thoughts. I just felt dead. What I felt was depressed, but I didn't know that word or have any context for it.

Winston Churchill, the great British statesman, called his chronic depressions, "the old black dog." Sometimes it helps to give something unnamable a name. After several months, I gave my mood swings a name as well, a secret name: "moments of strangeness."

Years later, I talked about those moments while presenting to a group of clinicians for "In Our Own Voice," NAMI's speakers' bureau. After my talk, a therapist came up to me. "I had a secret name too," was all she said.

Why didn't either of us tell our parents? I don't know that woman's story, just mine. My parents were fiercely reserved Norwegians with a spiritual practice that did not condone even feelings of discouragement. I can't imagine what they would have said if I'd told them I was experiencing increasing depression.

When I was diagnosed almost twenty years later, they were dumbfounded. Somehow my nine years of depression in my adolescence and early twenties and years of the same in my late twenties had completely escaped them.

“We just thought you were sensitive,” my mother said.

“You don’t have bipolar,” my father added. “I know what it looks like and you don’t have it.”

He never spoke of my illness again nor did my mother.

I have learned that just because people fail you, at times in monumental ways, it doesn’t mean they don’t love you. Shortly before my mother died, I got to know her well enough to know she had been deeply concerned about me throughout the difficult patches of my life and had never been able to express it.

The people I found that could express themselves to me, particularly as a teenager, were poets. “What fortitude the soul contains [...],” Emily Dickinson wrote. Her courage was indelible as ink. I also loved Langston Hughes. “Life for me ain’t been no crystal stair [...] But I’ve been a-climbin on.” A poem by Nikki Giovanni was also a favorite. “My mama moved among the days like a dream walker in a field [...]. She got us almost through the high grass and then seemed like she turned around and ran right back in [...].”

After my diagnosis at age thirty, I thought I’d made it through the high grass. I proceeded to have seven amazing years.

A wonderful case manager assisted me in getting back to work.

I scored an enviable job working with gifted college students at the University of Washington. Two years later, I was promoted to a position as head writer.

I had responded quickly to medication and stayed on a steady course with few med changes.

“My bipolar is not an issue,” I told the women I dated, and there was nothing apparent to cause them to argue the point.

On August 20, 1997, my parents were killed in a car accident, and everything changed. I remember standing in a doorway at the church on the day of their funeral and having a moment of optimism, laced with shock. “Well, this isn’t going to be so bad.”

I had no idea.

After five years at the UW, I had just left my job to pursue another one. Instead, I tunneled inward.

Nothing could prepare me for the loss. No one could provide me with a How-to-Handle-This manual with highlighted portions.

My friends and three siblings did their best to care for me. One of my best friends, Deborah, took me in after she discovered I had begun to spend my days in a fetal position wrapped around a boom box listening to the sorrowful tunes of Sarah McLachlan. “You’re coming home with me,” Deborah said and talked to my landlord and helped me move out. Soon I had a pug dog for company during

the day and someone I loved coming home for dinner.

All my life, I have been blessed by such events, people, even strangers, who have reached into my dire situation and said, "Here."

I cried all the way to Seattle once on a plane from Bangor, Maine, and the man next to me kept handing me Kleenex and glasses of water. Was he on assignment from my higher power? I don't know and it doesn't matter. In my spiritual practice, there is a force of love in the universe, and it finds you.

Love found me again several years after my parents' death in the form of more exceptional caregivers. Once again I thought I'd made it through the high grass, this time of grief and depression, and discovered I had not. In 2001, my moods began cycling in and out of hypomania while undergoing the rigors of an MFA program in Boulder, Colorado. Inevitably, I fell off the ladder of high spirits I'd been persistently climbing, and hit the ground hard.

Deeply depressed, I returned to Seattle thinking my long-time psychiatrist would simply adjust my meds, and my moods would balance out in no time.

That didn't happen. My illness failed to respond to the first med, then the second, then the third, failed to respond to *all* meds. Later, doctors would figure out why but then it was a baffling mystery. Without any biochemical water wings to buoy up my brain, I quickly dropped into an almost vegetative depression.

I stopped being smart.

"Naomi has trouble completing simple tasks," my case manager wrote in my file, after I'd gotten back in the system again.

"I was the top college magazine editor in the nation in 1986," I told myself as I lay in bed late at night. I said it like a prayer even though I was clueless as to what it meant, could no longer remember what I'd done as a magazine editor, what the task entailed.

During the three and a half years my bipolar was completely med-resistant, I was on virtually every medication used for bipolar then, was hospitalized thirteen times for suicidal ideation, eventually undergoing twenty-five electroshock treatments.

"I feel hopeless," I said repeatedly to David Zucker, the director of the mental health ministry at the University Presbyterian Church. "You're one of the finest people I know," he'd say back. I would just look at him. I was depressed. I could barely think. How could that make me a fine person?

"I'll hold the hope for you," he'd say. And he just kept saying it.

He also gave me a job--to write a brief essay and three questions for his journaling group on Wednesdays. Sometimes it took me all week to write a few sentences. I had worked as a writer. Even through the moss that seemed to have filled my mind, the necessity of meeting a deadline was cellular. For three years, I felt I had to stay alive at least until Wednesday because I had a deadline.

Sometimes I got overwhelmed by my despair and had to go to the hospital and miss my group but having a weekly assignment gave me a sense of

purpose, a spark of pride.

That spark of pride was one of the factors that saved my life.

The nurses, doctors and social workers at my hospital of choice, the University of Washington Medical Center, helped save me. I once complained to a white-haired doctor named Dr. Verhulst that I had been cursed. He said with a Belgian accent, "But is there a blessing behind the curse?"

The blessings behind what seemed like a curse, my being so ill from 2001 to 2004, are plentiful.

In 2004, my psychiatrist and another doctor discovered that I had been developing a form of diabetes for some time. The biochemical factory in my brain had drastically reduced its production of a major calming hormone called ADH (Anti-Diuretic Hormone). I started taking ADH in a pill form. Gradually, my meds for bipolar began working again.

I could think more clearly. I had humor. Ideas. And, soon I had plans.

I went back to school. Two years ago, I earned my master's degree for mental health counseling at Antioch University.

Another lesson I learned long ago is that recovery isn't linear. You can head out for Pittsburgh and end up in Toledo—or at least not in Pittsburgh. After working for almost a year as an intake clinician in a busy community mental health clinic, I realized the job was too stressful for me; I was burning out. I needed to try something else. I will start as a peer specialist at Navos Burien in several weeks.

I am thrilled to have the opportunity to contribute and to learn from my peers, my supervisor, and the Navos staff. I can't wait.

I'd like to close with a brief anecdote. Several months ago, I spoke to a NAMI Family-to-Family group, a support group for families who have a member of the family with a mental illness.

One of our exchanges rocked me back on my heels. A parent asked, "If you had a magic red button, and you could press it and get rid of your bipolar, would you do it?"

"In a heart beat," I said.

"Then who would you be?" he shot back.

I almost had a sense that my cells were dissolving. Who would I be? Obviously, I'd be someone else. I've often joked that I wish I could be the kind of person who is relentlessly superficial. A blessing of recovering from a mental illness is that we often end up being people who care, ponder, pay attention, are artists of being alive. When you finally find your way back to the house of civilization after a long walk through the dark forest, you are definitely someone worth getting to know.

If I pressed the red button, I wouldn't be me, this peculiar, particular, at times baffling, mysterious, wondrous blend of memory and experience, the present and the past.

A fine person.

