

2000: Insanity Letter to Myself

As you know, I have been on Lithium for 16 years and have two suicide attempts in my early youth, as well as two forced hospitalizations. I am even a graduate of the infamous Bellevue Hospital in New York City.

I say all this because I have been off all medications (Lithium and anti-depressants) since June 21st, the first day of summer, 2000. That makes it over six weeks now. Of course, I prepared for the removal of drugs from my system with months and months of attention to diet, supplementation and vitamins. It was hardly a spontaneous decision.

The road these last few weeks has been, for the most part, smooth. My rational thinking and behavior have been completely normal, but there have been moments of emotional difficulty. I've felt slightly anxious at times, which led to some belligerence. This is hardly abnormal, but in my case, it deserves special consideration.

This negative behavior has been coupled with many positive changes in my personality. I've become much freer, relaxed and mellow. In fact, Larry has had a hard time getting used to the "new" me. Even though I'm less rigid, more forgiving - it can be disconcerting to see one's partner change so greatly in such a short period of time. Larry, and a married couple - long standing friends - confronted me in a very hostile manner about my resistance to the skills of the physiologist, Joan McKenna who I've been working with. They accused me of "being in danger" because I didn't display the typical passive regard they have become accustomed to seeing in me. They insist that I make an appointment to see my psychiatrist immediately. The one friend said that she could no longer be around me because my behavior upset her so. Her husband yelled at me to seek help while Larry sat and watched in silence.

It was a very painful experience for me. I think I handled it well, though. I spoke in a calm tone and reassured them that the changes they were seeing were the result of health, not sickness. (I've been a very passive person for the past sixteen years while on the meds. My truer nature is now coming to the surface. I'm more motivated to take up the space that I need, rather than acquiesce to the needs of others.)

I assured my friends that I would see my doctor who I did see within 24 hours of their confrontation with me. After an hour with my doctor, he told Larry and me that he thought I was acting in the normal range. He also felt that it would be a good idea for me to see him regularly for a while to be sure that his observations of me remain the same over time.

Having once been jumped by four men in white coats, pinned down and shot with a needle full of drugs; having been forced onto locked mental wards and treated with little or no respect; having been misdiagnosed by the medical establishment and treated for years with drugs that only worsened my situation; and having been locked into a mental and emotional prison for 16 years on Lithium, I am understandably wary of psychiatrists and mental wards. When my close friends accused me of acting insanely, they only exacerbated my fears. They did nothing that I found to be supportive or friendly. The irony is that one of these friends has been a psyche. nurse for twenty years. You would have thought that her bedside manner would be more sensitive and skilled.

It's my impression that mental illness is still a terrifying nightmare to most everyone. People have so much difficulty quelling their own fears that they can hardly do any good to those with the "diagnosis." I spoke to this friend by phone again two days later after visiting my doctor to apologize for my stubborn behavior. After ten years of friendship

with me, she insisted that I'm still ill despite the clean bill of health from my physician. She reiterated that she can no longer remain my friend.

My response was to tell her that I wouldn't abandon our friendship. If, or when, she decides she can have me in her life again, the door to my heart would be open. I also added that I'd respect her decision by not contacting her until then. I left the matter in her hands. Her husband did not acknowledge a birthday card I recently sent him. After yelling at me to get help, he has shown no further interest in relating to me personally.

After many days of cool relations with Larry, he and I were able to sit down and calmly discuss the event. I told him that although the content of the message given by him and our friends had been loving, the manner of their confrontation was most unwise and hurtful. I told Larry that I was disappointed in his behavior because I would always protect him from the unkind comments of others regardless of the legitimacy of their complaint. There is, I believe, no excuse for unkindness, nor do the means ever justify the ends.

I believe that "tough love" means love that is tough on oneself, not others. It must have been for Larry to tell me that he suspected I was going over the edge and needed additional support; this, especially in light of my history and passionate determination to remain drug free. But there was no need to be tough on me. I sat quietly listening to him and our friends. I responded in a conversational tone of voice. I didn't yell back at them when they yelled at me, and I maintained my respect for myself and them throughout. That was my own "tough love" in action because it was certainly tough on me.

Larry has since come to understand my point of view, cried and apologized to me. Although he doesn't necessarily agree that it's his job to protect me from others - he feels that I should do that myself - he does see how three against one can seem like a very unfair number unless it's done with love. A kinder approach would have been more effective and less damaging to our friendships. He and I have mended our relationship and returned to a loving, supportive connection.

As for my opinion of my mental state, I described it to Larry thusly:

I imagine my mental world as everything I can see from our living room window. There's a rich and varied world out there. I see all of it clearly and with compassion and love. But, at the horizon I feel as though my toes are just hanging over the edge into the shadows of the night to a place I cannot see. I have discussed this with Joan, my physiologist. She has recommended changes in my regimen, which have already shown good results in my mental grounding.

But, going back to the metaphor of my mental health for a moment, I imagine the sun at my back just rising. A new dawn is approaching in my life. A day of sanity and clarity is breaking. As the sun rises higher in the sky, I can see that the light bathed on the view before me becomes clearer and sharper, and the horizon, too, becomes a clear sharply defined line. I no longer imagine that I can see past the horizon beyond the world in view.

The path from insanity to drugs to rationality and love has not been entirely smooth. Over the years, I became accustomed to a pill that would freeze the landscape and afford me control over my stagnant, neon lit world. The process of natural living is just that, a process. The return to the rhythms of my heart rather than the timed release of drugs in my system involves patience and progress without perfection - even some regression at times.

I think I am headed down a road that few mental patients have ever taken. My healing is as mysterious as Larry's is with HIV. Ridding myself of mental illness is no different, in my opinion, than shrinking a cancerous tumor although the results in my case are not

tangible. I see my physical, emotional and mental world as inextricably linked to my spiritual world. Without love and forgiveness for myself above all, I'd never have succeeded this far. Without a systemic change through organic foods, swimming in the icy waters of the San Francisco Bay as well as other changes in lifestyle, I would have failed in my endeavor as I did many times in the past.

I'm encouraged by my progress. It's inevitable, I suppose, that I will emerge from my cocoon without a struggle. Those closest to me have had no experience in this kind of healing. They can't see where I'm headed as yet, nor can they see the colorful transformation I'm experiencing. It saddens me that others with mental illness will be accused of being "sick" when, in fact, they may be exhibiting signs of healing.

The world is in great need of spiritual healing, but it, too, has little experience in healing. I hope that you're now beginning to understand my reason for writing this letter. I hope that your own fears won't crush butterflies in the making. It can't be easy for a caterpillar to transform, but there's no reason to make it any harder through ignorance and fear.

I feel that I'm sitting on a branch drying my wings, resting and anticipating my metamorphosis and what it will mean for me. I look forward with great, great optimism. I think that I've just accomplished the greatest achievement of my life. I'm so grateful for my sanity and for God's presence in my life. His strength and support have made it possible for me. I surely will want to use this experience to help others who are going through this kind of experience. More I do not know.

Thank you for reading this letter all the way through. If it has touched you, please pass it along to others. If you know someone who's struggling in a world of pills, scalpels and chemicals, I hope you'll remember this letter and know that you have at least one example of someone who has left the cocoon of life for the possibility of freedom and the soaring joy of "self" discovery.

Love,
Barry