

Chronic Disease: the Upside of Down **A Soulful Perspective**

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Les conceptions du rétablissement en santé mentale : recherches
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Recovery Concepts and Models in Mental Health: Quests for Identity,
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Chronic Disease : the Upside of Down A Soulful Perspective

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Écho de la communauté • Echoes of the Community

Just recently, I came across a great biography, *Broken*, which is basically a first hand account about a white woman's encounter with a shaman and the impact he had on her life. What makes this story particularly intriguing is that the shaman didn't receive his healing gift until after he had a serious accident that rendered him a paraplegic. And even this he resisted at first.

While I would never lay any special claim to being a member of the spiritual big leagues aka one with special healing powers, I could most certainly relate to his work as a Wounded Healer, since I too have spent the better part of my working life helping others navigate their way through their own personal struggles such as is part and parcel of any chronic illness.

Likewise, I can see in retrospect how my calling to enter the field of social work came as a result of my wrestling with my own daemon; albeit one that I remained largely in denial about until I hit my forties. I am speaking about my struggles with bi polar II, which essentially is manic depression's poor sister cousin. In other words, you are pretty much confined to the lowlands, and don't get to venture to the higher altitudes.

Fortunately, through the benefit of a great family, supportive friends, caring health providers, meaningful work along with understanding supervisors and colleagues, and yes meds, the good days have outnumbered the bad. Still, I would be lying if I was to say there haven't been times when I've felt cursed, punished, and thoroughly trounced by an opponent far greater than I.

At the same time, what I have come to realize is that this very affliction I have desired so greatly to be rid of has had a profound impact on my life, and not necessarily for the worse. Indeed, as I once blurted out to my therapist, "why is it that I am always a better person when I am hurting?" The implication being, why am I such a jerk when I am not.

This, in turn, prompted me to step back and see my illness from another vantage point. That is, rather than approaching it as a problem to solve, what if I consider what other hidden gifts might be contained in my own brokenness. What unclaimed treasures might there be in this largely rejected side of myself that I was so frightened to let others see; lest they see me as I really am.

Damaged Goods. Return to Sender.

To be sure, there is no question that the onset of my first major depressive episode provided me with sufficient motivation to ponder the big questions in life. What is it all about? Why am I here? What is the meaning behind this suffering? For, in all honesty, prior to this descent, I was pretty much living on automatic pilot. Content to fritter away my life playing my own rendition of trivial pursuit.

Hence, it was through my **brokenness** that came courtesy of my illness that something far greater than I **broke** through. Forcing me to veer off the trajectory I was on towards another path, another way.

Does this mean I consider myself to be enlightened.

Not in the least. A saint I ain't.

But I do know a thing or two about what it means to be endarkened!

The latter being as potent – although admittedly far less celebrated in our culture that has a fetish for anything high, and an aversion to anything deep – if not more so than the former; largely because it comes against our will. Why? Because it HURTS! Such is the alchemical process that is part and parcel of Vulcan's forge.

In my case, there is no question that the whole experience of being swallowed by Jonah's whale taught me to live with far greater humility than I might otherwise have done. For once I hit rock bottom, which is very often the case with the onset virtually any chronic illness, I had no choice but to acknowledge my own weakness, fragility, neediness.

And this I most certainly did not like. On the contrary, I had been born and bred to be strong and self sufficient; live by the maxim: ask for and give no quarter. Yes, mine was a stingy heart, not in the least inclined to generosity.

Clearly, though, the fates had something else in mind.

Now, what I hadn't anticipated was that the very thing I most feared; namely, losing my grip (I saw my mother when she was hospitalized for depression when I was in my teens and later learned about an attempted suicide before that) ended up providing me with an incredible sense of liberation. As I really did feel like a hard nut that was cracked open; pardon the pun.

At long last I was free to be who I really am. No more make pretend. Putting on false airs. Playing hide and seek. I am who I am, take it or leave it. All of this made possible because of my chronic illness, since I experienced first hand that this false persona that I had invested so much psychic energy in was the root source of my deep loneliness.

Plus, all the big plans that my ego had previously concocted no longer interested me in the least. Job title. Who Cares. Bigger pay cheque. Do I really need more. Beautiful women. Okay, well maybe that one has remained as something of a weak spot. But, as for all the other nonsense. That is essentially what it became. No sense.

No sense wasting my life pursuing from the point of view of my soul.

It was through my chronic illness then that I was able to enter more genuine relationships and build greater levels of intimacy. Precisely because I was able to be who I really am – this, in itself as I was later to find out being more of an ever changing verb than a stationary noun. Besides which, how can anyone be in an intimate relationship when they are forever trying to keep their real self locked up in the attic?

Regardless, as the years unfolded I found I was able to live with a greater level of empathy and compassion for my fellow members of the invisible tribe: The Walking Wounded. Furthermore, it was through my own experience of suffering that I was able to not just relate to others, but desired to alleviate their pain by sharing and giving away all that I have learned along the Way. Mind you, not out of any clever maneuver to try and bargain easier terms with my Maker, but rather out of the sheer joy that this brings!

And so, did any of the above rid me of my chronic illness?

Provide me with some magical cure?

Maybe it helped turn down the volume at times. Tune into another station.

As for finding a cure, most definitely not.

However, what it did provide me with is a very powerful lens by which to see the hidden meaning in my disease; this in itself making it much more bearable. A disease that far from being a curse, may very well have been my saving Grace. Moreover, I have come to see



that far from being alone, how many others have had their own lives transformed in very liberating ways by the onset of chronic illness.

By far, the greatest lesson I have learned in this journey of Full Catastrophe Living is that the soul grows by subtraction. That is, through the gut wrenching experience of loss. Starting by letting go of the ultimate illusion that posits we are in control of what happens to us. All of which begs the question: Who is managing whom. Do we manage chronic illness? And/or has it entered our lives to transform us?

Speaking of which, I can't help but wonder, given the current state of this planet and the dire need for transformation of a very radical nature □ at the level of the heart □ could it be that the very thing we are trying to prevent from happening is in fact the only thing that will save us. Since only the experience of profound loss has the power to wake us up from our collective cultural trance.