Removing The Blindfold: Identity in Mental Health

"Character cannot be developed in ease and quiet. Only through experience of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened, ambition inspired, and success achieved."

-Helen Keller

Summer, 2011
The Mental Health Association in Tompkins County is composed of people working together to improve the mental health of our community. The goal of this publication is to inform the community about ideas, different viewpoints, developments and activities in the field of mental health; its contents are not intended to provide advice about individual problems. Such advice should be offered only by a person familiar with the detailed circumstances in which the problem arises. Unless otherwise noted, opinions expressed in *States of Mind* are the opinions of the authors and not necessarily those of the Board of Directors, staff or membership.

Submissions and announcements are welcome. Please call (607) 273-9250 if you wish to submit an article, poem, story or drawing, or send it to:

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MHATC is a United Way agency
Dear States of Mind Readers,

We at the Mental Health Association in Tompkins County have the wonderful advantage of meeting and experiencing the most interesting and inspiring people in our community. We consider ourselves very fortunate. As you read through this issue, I think you too will find yourself moved and inspired by the stories.

This issue has provided me with renewed hope and a stronger commitment to continue the push for the elimination of stigma surrounding the words “mental health.”

We all have mental health! It varies from time to time and depends on our physical health as much as our physical health depends on our mental health. We can take care of and nurture both. Sometimes despite all of our great efforts, we find ourselves ill.

Soon, I will say the words “mental health” and people will not look uncomfortable and will be able to talk about it as easily as they do about their physical health.

We just need to keep talking and sharing our stories. With information and stories we arm ourselves against misinformation and discover that goals and dreams can be and are realized.

For me stories help fill in the missing elements. It is similar to a paint-by-number set. As you begin to paint, adding colors and hues, the picture you are seeing changes before your eyes.

The same feeling occurs for me when I read a story. The story becomes complete. It becomes real. I can imagine the pain in the eyes and face. I can see in the eyes and face the dawning of hope and recovery. The film covering the individual begins to lift. I can no longer ignore the person. I begin to understand what they have experienced. I am a changed person.

My belief is that these stories, poems and pictures will help to give you that personal perspective. Once we begin to see and feel, real change can and does occur. We build our compassion and understanding, one individual at a time. I hope you enjoy the stories these brave individuals have shared.
Tear

by Jessica Havens

It’s behind her eyes,
Where the secrets lie.
A glossy cover hides
What she feels inside.
It’s a pretty shimmer
To passers by, but
There is a tear caught in her eye.
When it captures the light
She can keep her secrets
Out of sight;
But when the light fades,
The tear will fall;
Betraying her,
Her secrets fall.

Frightened how she’ll run away,
Until a new light can make the tears stay,
Unless she finally runs away.
The fright remains, there
Through the night.
How does it work that daylight
Can bring her such delight?
Just by blinding her
From what’s there,
And how no one stares,
Or seems to care,
Because he’s right,
And it’s not fair.

The curse she wears,
Behind blank stares.
She needs to see,
“someone notice me!”
But he just glares,
And keeps her there.
If only someone could just see,
Behind those eyes,
And notice me.

The Reference

by Tom Dates

Look, there is this river here.
As if
On two shores pacing,
With many beginnings—
Swimming out for a ways,
But always turning back toward shore.

A bridge has started here,
Or there, a boat waits for you.
While I remove this stonework
Flood that boat.
This river must not be crossed.
No, not even for an instant.

Cruel it is said, yes,
But crueler still,
The look of the distance,
When turning away from you,
I am lost.

Look there is this river here.
It ebbs and flows,
Rises and falls with its season.
And never an idle moment
In preventing its crossing.
It has this constancy about it!

It is great,
And there are those you know
Who have the same constancy of themselves.
Forever hold to them,
That you would not know the distant fields.
Rather, a social hue for yourself,
Away from the cold secrets of silence;
And always, there is this river here.

Photo credit to Amaury Ñinones
Two Poems by

S.K. Scolaro

No separation.
No identity.
No me.

What I am, comes from her.

Every thought. Every decision. Every day is about her.

My other life is there somewhere, in the background, in the wings, waiting.

I live in fear of missing something, of forgetting something, of not taking care.

Trying to stay one step ahead; trying to keep her between the lines.

She has always been the one to steer her own course of Destruction.

To keep her free from harm, my futile job.

Then, one day, one day like any other, something happens.

What it was is no more.

All that you were is gone.

What you did, how you defined yourself, who you thought you were, gone.

The one job you knew you did better than anyone, you have failed at.

Disturbance

It is not a comfortable place to inhabit; to peer so closely into your life that every action is dissected, scrutinized, taken apart.

Who could survive intact such crimes, such sins, such unconscionable transgressions laid before them?

With no path to atonement, no possibility of forgiveness, of reconciliation of course we run, of course we hide; the strength needed to confront such things, beyond most of us: the misdeeds, the intentional hurts, the little lies, the everyday acts of unkindness.

These are the small infractions. We have no skills for dealing with life altering events. Our weak foundations provide little comfort.

For some, escape is the method: self-destruction, denial, anger.

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Hi, my name is Ben Brancato. This year I received the Mental Health Association (MHA) Award for volunteer work. I would like to say ‘Thank You’ to everyone who nominated me for the award. I appreciate the thought. This award means a lot to me. It feels good to be recognized. I would like to tell you about myself and why I always offer to help at MHA’s peer program SPACE- The Starlight Peer Advocacy Center for Empowerment.

As a baby, I was classified as someone who would need services from The Office of People With Developmental Disabilities (OPWDD). However, my family and I didn’t request or receive services while I was growing up. My first contact with mental health services came when I was seventeen. I saw Dr. Bezerganian, whom I still see, at Tompkins County Mental Health (TCMH).

When I turned eighteen I wanted to leave my father’s house and have my own apartment (like any teenager would want). As much as I loved my Dad, things weren’t working. I was tearing up his house, lacking the impulse control to stop myself when I disagreed with him. I felt bad about this, and thought having my own place would solve the problem. My father understood my point of view-having my own place would be my opportunity for independence. However, he questioned my ability to live totally on my own, and thought I would need some type of supervision. It took me about six months to get him used to the idea of me living without supervision. With my Dad coming around to support me, I was ready to move ahead.

Two poems...continued from page 5

Others,
begin a quest,
leading them in new directions--
yearning for answers to questions they did not expect.

No, it is not a comfortable place to be,
when you realize you cannot rationalize,
rewrite or re-imagine what you did or what was done to you.

You can, however,
embrace the shadow of your humanbeingness.

You can accept who you were and who you are-
a searching, striving, soul filled someone who will try to do better next time.

Thank You  MHA

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I started with a twelve-page letter to the OPWDD administration office in Ithaca. I explained why I would succeed at independent living and asked for their help. I thought OPWDD would support my having my own apartment, but their response said they didn’t agree. They thought I belonged in a group home or institution; independent living was not an option for me. They said they didn’t think I could take care of myself well enough. I believed I could and wanted to prove it. My reasons for wanting my own place were very important to me. I don’t like strangers checking up on or supervising me. I don’t like anyone nosing around my stuff. And just like my dad, I don’t like being bossed around.

OPWDD’s arguments for turning me down didn’t convince me. I thought OPWDD would change its decision if I could meet with them and explain myself. I asked my father to help me appeal. My Dad liked how I wanted to fight for what was important to me, so he really got behind me and hired an attorney, Scott Miller, to appeal the ruling. I had five meetings around New York State with OPWDD psychologists. My father was at my side throughout everything. Next we went to Albany. I advocated for myself before the Mental Health Subcommittee of Albany legislators. Barbara Lifton, our legislator and member of the subcommittee, was there. Bob DeLuca, Commissioner of TCMIH and Beth Jenkins, Executive Director of the Mental Health Association in Tompkins County (MHATC), came to support me.

I waited a year for OPWDD’s ruling that I “wasn’t qualified for their housing services”. I wasn’t happy about the ruling, but now I agree with it. OPWDD expects its clients to be dependent. My family taught me to be capable and independent. People are often surprised at how well I care for myself. My parents are both teachers, and the way I see it, I am their great success. My family taught me the skills for independent living. My Mom took me grocery shopping and took the time to answer my questions. My sister taught me to do laundry. My Dad told me to be persistent. Most of all my parents taught me how to learn, how to go about getting answers to my questions.

I have the confidence to ask questions. If I don’t get an answer that satisfies me, I’ll ask my question until I get an answer that makes sense to me. I am thoughtful in my habits. I have a disciplined approach to life. I know I’m a good person. I intended to continue talking to people about getting my own apartment, just not OPWDD. I wasn’t going to give up. I never expected it to be easy. I just didn’t know that OPWDD was the wrong place to help me until I talked to them. Suddenly, it happened. I was at Tompkins County Public Library and came across an advertisement for the Red Cross saying they help people find places to stay. I walked two blocks to the Red Cross and met with Case Manager Aloja Airewel. I was accepted as a client that day. I moved into the Economy Inn the next day.

Within a month, Aloja found me an apartment on the Ithaca Commons. That was my start. In the five years since getting my first apartment, I have moved twice with the help of my CSS worker Nick Berg. I am waiting for an opening in a building that I really like.
By Edward Hazel

Washington Irving’s story of Rip Van Winkle is an interesting tale of a man who loses years of his life to time. Mental illness has to some degree the same effect. Imagine going into what is supposed to be the beginning of life, with ambition and excitement, only to be lost to time indefinitely. That is very much what has happened to me and like Rip Van Winkle I awoke from a long sleep eager to experience a new world.

After being hospitalized in 2006, I was determined that my illness would no longer control me, but change came slowly and sometimes with great difficulty. Through six months of trial and error, I found the right combination of medications after over fifty years of searching. I had a great desire to attend church again after thirty years of absence; it was no easy task because self-imposed isolation influenced my ability to interact with people. I could not sit in the same room as the congregation for two Sundays in a row, but on the third Sunday I sat with my wife along with the rest of the congregation.

I recognized that to achieve lasting health one must nurture the body as well as the soul. Therefore I needed to make drastic changes to my lifestyle through exercise and eating a healthy diet. I lost over 120 pounds and came down from a size 50 to a size 38 waist in six months. My passion is walking, whether by trail in good weather or in the snow, for this is when I meditate and give thanks for a healthy mind.

Thank You MHA continued from page 7

My life is much better since proving to myself and the people in my life that I am capable of living independently. I realize that I belong with TCMH and the MHATC. Dan Kornblum and Joe Lyman, counselors at TCMH, have been helpful to me. At the MHA I pretty much know everybody. I am close with Beth Jenkins and David Bulkley, the Director of Adult Advocacy. They were there for me when I was up against OPWDD and are still helpful to me.

The MHA has the peer program SPACE in the Henry St. John Building, which has social events, educational programs and advocacy, that I really like. Gary Tracy, the SPACE coordinator, is a good guy who I trust. I attend two groups at SPACE in which I am learning good stuff: ‘The Mental Health Topics Group’ and the ‘Wellness Recovery Actions Planning (WRAP) Group’. Lynne Biefeldt, Josephine Cohen and Evan Perin, are good group leaders that I enjoy being with.

I like helping out the MHA at SPACE. I often volunteer to move furniture, serve food and be part of the cleanup crew. I look forward to volunteering at our events: setting up tables at our Thanksgiving dinner and shopping for our New Year’s Party. Gary knows any time he asks me to volunteer, I will say “Yes”.

Waking Up
Waking up...continued from page 8

I was not satisfied with my accomplishments thus far even though I had made tremendous strides in my recovery. I wanted much more from myself. I became disabled in 1978 and had not worked since then, but now I wanted a job. I knew I had to prove to myself I could maintain employment, so I began volunteering at the library in McGraw. I worked hard cleaning, shoveling snow and anything else they asked me to do. It was not long before I received respect from my supervisor, but even more importantly, from myself.

Just as it was before, I was not satisfied with my spot in society. I longed to be a productive citizen. I knew I had to find employment, so I tried Catholic Charities and was hired immediately. It has been my responsibility to take individuals to health appointments or court appearances. I am now a per diem resident advisor for a halfway house. In addition, I will graduate from TC3 in May of 2012 with an Associate’s degree in Chemical Alcohol Dependency Counseling. In 2010 I founded Active Minds at TC3, the first mental health education/awareness chapter in the history of the college. I am also a Phi Beta Kappa member and listed in Who’s Who of Student Colleges and Universities. In the fall of 2012, I plan to attend David Christian College and fulfill my lifelong dream of becoming a minister.

Rip Van Winkle and I have much in common. I, as it was with him, “dreamed in darkness to one day live in new light.” This is my time.

Even more than our experiences, our beliefs become our prisons. But we carry our healing with us even into the darkest of our inner places. A Course in Miracles says, “When I have forgiven myself and remembered who I am, I will bless everyone and everything that I see.” The way to freedom often lies through the open heart.

From Kitchen Table Wisdom: Stories that Heal
By Rachel Naomi Remen, M.D.

The phoenix is a mystical bird of legend, said to undergo a process of rebirth every 500 to 1000 years. It builds itself a nest which the sun lights on fire, scorching the bird to ashes. From these ashes a phoenix will be born anew, to pick up where its predecessor left off and at the same time start a new life.

The Value of Therapy is so that one day when you knock on yourself somebody answers.

--Jemma Macera
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Special thanks to Cara Luddy, Amaury Quinones, and Christopher G. Brandli for their beautiful photos and artwork.

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I don’t always have a
Way of feeling
The purblind opacity of a granite wind,
Earth foam in the transvescent light—

But to know the touch,
without mentality,
Of warm earth in the hands;
The sound of small waterfalls;
Of the sight of a plum tree
Blossoming in the clear morningtime
Under a blue spring sky—

It is a caring
Without judgement.
For these things.

The aching hope of humans
Seeking a different play in the stars
Is this:
A hope of things somewhat the same
With an open definition of existence;
And the way of being, a gentle urging
That the ripple of discovery
Would not turn inward
And the circle close upon itself.

The very first labyrinth was from Ancient Greek mythology. Daedalus built it for the King of Crete to hold The Minotaur so that it couldn't escape. That labyrinth was a confusing maze, but by 430 BC labyrinths and mazes were becoming two different things. A maze is multicursral with many dead ends and it is easy to get lost. A labyrinth is unicursal—there is one way in and one way out. Labyrinths are used for spiritual renewal. By walking the path to the center and back while reflecting and meditating, a person can begin to find enlightenment.

“Discovery” — by Tom Dates

Pattern of the Labyrinth at the Cathedral at Chartres
If I could keep this sweep of hills in sight,  
And breathe this space of quiet country road,  
If I could catch the tempo and the might  
Of that slow moving cart, its swaying load  
Of grain, a golden autumn's rain  
Upon the wrinkled visage of this field,  
If I could claim this all as my domain  
And then walk back into the city, healed;  
Yet somehow take those crimson maples there  
That flame against this season's brilliant blue  
To be forever mine, though unaware  
I needed them, inevitably true.  
(But now the breeze turns cool upon my arms  
As shadows spread their wings on distant farms.)

When you’re young, it all makes sense. The first part to your day is school, filled with coloring and cootie catching. After-school tea with crumpets and backyard swing-sets are enough to suffice a child’s flourishing curiosity of the outside world. And you were sure your parents were meant to be.

His business suits fit him just so, and he never swore unless he thought my sister and I weren’t listening in. His stoicism cast him as the strong, silent type. In reality, his stoicism was much more troubling. It would take me years to find that out.

My mother was an inclusive woman. From hair care to nightmares she was an open book, for those lucky to be close enough to read. She sat in a permissive manner as my sister and I ran around her, creating dents in the walls and provoking her to yell.

When you’re young enough that you sleep in your sister’s bed and are afraid of everything past 7:30, it is easy to mistake a broken family for a happy one. It is often said, “the more you know, the less you understand”; could it be that this saying pertains not just to the ancient world or space-time continuum, but also to the looking glass reality of my young life?
“What do you think? Too much?” asked Paige, walking out of the dressing room.

A little, I thought.

“Not at all” I said.

A peek under the dressing room door revealed her pivoting calves. I imagined her turning in the mirror, checking the dress from all angles.

“I never look good in mall lighting,” she said. “Whatever, I’ll just get it.”

In the summer heat, it was most refreshing to confine ourselves to artificial lighting and cooled food courts. Anything or anywhere to not be home these days. As if she could read my thoughts across my face, Paige asked, “How is everything at home now? Things better with your parents?”

As if on cue, I felt the subtle vibration of my phone in my hand. The perturbing knock announcing itself to be answered. I picked up, recognizing my sister’s voice immediately.

“Char, what’s wrong?”

“You need to come home now.”

Through her tears, I barely made out her words. I imagined her exactly as she was, sitting cross-legged in bed staring at her swollen face in the full length mirror.

“It’s really bad this time. You need to come home.”

“Tell me what’s happened, tell me.”

“Dad’s been having an affair,” she said. “For years.”

My face grew hot. I looked up and saw myself in the dressing room mirror, reflecting how I pictured my sister on the phone. Tears welled up under my eyes as I pushed through the racks of summer clothes and casual shoppers. Minutes elongated as I leaned, in a panic, against a backdrop of white walls and summer dresses, the spectacle of a teenager in distress. Paige ran up behind me, clutching my keys.

“Let’s go now.”

As a teen it was easy to get out of the house when I could no longer listen to my parents fight, but it was never easy to get over the words I had been too young to hear.

“Anything to get a reaction out of you,” my mother’s voice after a plate made its way towards my father. “I’m done, I’m done,” one of them had said. Nights when others cozied up to their parents on the couch, working out math problems and sharing a bowl of ice cream, I sat nestled in my sisters arms as she tried to read me a book for the purpose of distraction. While the years between then and now treated my family well for the most part, no one was ever able to say out loud how much pain remained.

I dragged my body out of the store and made my way through the parking lot in an attempt to get behind the wheel and make it home. I pushed the fog that clogged my eyesight out of the way, hoping to make sense of the road. “You shouldn’t be driving right now, Jemma.” Paige insisted. I said nothing. In what seemed to be slow motion, I looked around, entered the highway, peered into other cars as people sang poorly to their radios, having no idea what the neighboring car was experiencing. One red light became two, two became three. I held God accountable for the collection of traffic.

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**States of Mind**
My heart and head still in a panic I began to imagine the worst.

Who was this girl he had been cheating on my mother with? How long had it been? Do I know her? Does she have a family? Can she feel this pain of mine right now?

When it was feasible to pass cars I did, and upon making it into my driveway I braced myself, imagining what I was about to see. I pushed open the front door, saw my nonchalant dog in the hall, and made eye contact with my mother coming down the stairs, my father’s clothes in hand.

“I’m so sorry,” she said, looking down at me. “You shouldn’t have to be around this or your asshole of a father. Pack your bags and leave with your sister for awhile, I don’t want you to be home when I confront your father.”

“But how do you know? How did this all happen?” I asked.

“Love letters. A whole pile of them, since you were six they say.”

I grabbed my keys and my sister, kissing my dog goodbye.

“I love you girls.” my mother said.

“We love you too.” we said in unison.

Without packing a bag or having time to make sense of it all, my sister and I left. We walked through the front door and uninformed into the world, hands clasped like when we were little girls. The house that had filled itself with memories of little girls nestled in each other’s arms had been further stained with the events of an impossible day.

I thought back to what my life as a child really was, not what I had always assumed. When you’re growing up, nothing makes sense. After-school tea with crumpets became a respite from loud voices, and swing-sets were a pretense for removing little ears from adult words. Nights when I hid under tables giggling and waiting to surprise my parents, they spoke in whispers about their discontent. Now you weren’t so sure your parents were meant to be.

Years later, his business suits still fit him just so, and he swore openly. He shaved off his stoicism in attempts to make purpose of what had happened, so as not to be in vain. It was still too troubling, and much too late.
Identity was chosen as the theme of this edition of States of Mind because I was struggling with my personal definition. It is something anybody could struggle with, no matter their mental health. So much can be said about it, and I was excited to put together what people had to say and get it out there in the world. The submissions began to come in and I was able to read all of these wonderful pieces, and I discovered I deeply related to many of them. Many frustrations or feelings I had but had never articulated to myself were there on the page in front of me. More than anything, this gave me a sense of validation and comfort. I am glad to have the space to say a little bit about how I've learned to think of and deal with my own sense of identity.

My idea of who I am has shifted many times, especially in the past three years. When I graduated high school in 2008, I was confident and hopeful. I figured I would go to college and take the horse by the reins, so to speak. When I got there, I found I didn't have the focus to handle it. I had not prepared myself for such responsibilities. Partly this is my fault, and partly I just had no basis for handling that kind of experience. After freshman year, I went on a leave of absence and allowed myself to sink into a physically and mentally abusive relationship which lasted for one and a half years. During that time, the sparkly confident girl that I vaguely remembered was absent. My identity was his woman and it was my only one. It polluted my actions so much that it kept me from my family, who have known me through everything and were therefore likely to notice the difference. When I decided I'd had enough of that broken, bland version of myself, I left him and was redefined, yet still totally blank and unprepared. It took me another year to climb out of the pit I had dug. In the month or so before I began volunteering at the Mental Health Association, I was working through one last, big, problem.

My problem was, I had the illusion that I had to separate myself from the girl who had gotten me through all that darkness in my past. I thought that since that girl was not who I aspired to be, I had to cut her out, as you would the rotten part of an apple. Ignore her as irrelevant. The week before I began this magazine, I had a personal revelation. I sat huddled in the corner of my steamy shower, head on my knees and mind filled with all the work I had ahead of myself. With my eyes closed and the hot water running down my back, my senses dimmed, and I became aware of my thoughts more so than my physical circumstances. My mind slipped into a very vivid memory....myself, about six months before, huddled in the same position in the driver seat of my car, with very different thoughts on my mind. Tears burst down my cheeks with the strength of that past and the present overlapped, and this is what I realized: it was no good to avoid that girl. If I cut her out, I would be in the present moment with nothing to show for having been on hiatus for two years. She had been through so much, and possessed amazing strength to have gotten through it....even if she just barely made it. If I embraced her, as I did in my mind at that moment, then I was the same girl from 2008, but stronger, more knowledgeable about the world, and with a very voracious appetite to accomplish everything I had not been able to before.

The moral of my story, I suppose, is that when contemplating our identity we must accept and appreciate all of our parts and pasts, embrace them together to gain the momentum to start building the person we want to be. Wise old women mean it when they say that mistakes are to be learned from, not seen as a reason for shame or embarrassment. With the parts of ourselves that we do not like, we can see what to avoid. With the parts we are proud of, we can see our strengths and gain from them the confidence to handle every day. No one can really tell you how to like who you are, or be who you want to be. For me, I have recognized what I have and how multifaceted and special of a person I am, and I think that with knowledge like that one can work on doing good for themselves and, with time, stop worrying about who they are and enter a time of becoming who they want to be!
“One of the most wonderful things in nature is a glance of the eye; it transcends speech; it is the bodily symbol of identity.”

— Ralph Waldo Emerson

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