

The Journey of Recovery is an On-Going Road Trip

By Victoria Maxwell



It's 1990. I'm dancing with John Travolta. No really: on the set of *Look Who's Talking Too*. My dream of working as an actor has come true. I have no idea in two short years I'll be strapped to a gurney in a florid psychosis, fighting bipolar disorder with my livelihood disintegrating.

Since childhood, I fought anxiety and bouts of depression. From 17, I struggled with binge eating, over-exercising and feeling suicidal. But I put on a mask, kept the despair, self-loathing and anxiety hidden, even in counselling. In my 20's, mood swings began in earnest, shifting sometimes in a matter of hours from depression to euphoria. Then in 1992 I became so manic I catapulted into a psychosis (literally a break with reality) and landed in the psych ward. "You have" a pale, humourless doctor explained to me "rapid-cycling, mixed-state bipolar disorder and generalized anxiety disorder with psychotic features." Easy for him to say.

The road to recovery is an arduous one. The longest leg for me was the journey to acceptance. I refused the diagnoses, medications and treatment for five years. As a result I had manias, depressions and several psychoses. Then a psychosis propelled me to run through a genteel neighborhood naked.

Ambulance. Police. Psych ward. The whole shebang.

I was in debt, on welfare, had lost my job, boyfriend, car, alienated my friends and lived in a rooming house. I stood at a crucial crossroads. I could continue to reject help and plummet into further illness or accept the disorders and begin to carve out a life. I choose the latter.

I moved back with my parents, saw a psychiatrist, sought counselling. It took three years but we finally found the right medication. I left the world of acting to others with a higher tolerance for rejection. I didn't need stardom; I needed stability.

My psychiatrist came from the school of medicine that was simple, strong and unequivocally caring. His suggestion: find a job, learn to support myself and stay that way. Something I could barely imagine. I entered a vocational rehabilitation program for individuals with psychiatric disorders. The 3-month program was pivotal. My job coach and work placements (WP) were invaluable (and nerve-racking). During a WP, the boss offered me a position. I didn't know whether to jump for joy or run screaming. With reassurance from my wise parents, psychiatrist and job coach, I accepted. As my time on the clock accrued, so did my self-assurance. I discontinued welfare, settled my debt and a year later moved out on my own.

But once the acting bug bites – the itch usually stays. I began writing about the very illnesses that put me here. I read excerpts and people asked for more. So I wrote my first play *Crazy for Life*. I began performing it and offering talks about psych wards, shrinks and limited hospital apparel. I kept my job until I could support myself with performing and speaking. To stay well I had to maintain a healthy lifestyle and financial stability. Slowly I moved towards my dream of running my own business. Performance requests came, referrals to speak and lead workshops started to flow. In 2004: *Crazy for Life Co.* was born. I now have written four one woman plays. I perform across the US and Canada at conferences, public events and corporations to dismantle stigma and increase understanding of mental illness.

I have a healthy respect for the disorders I live with. I still grapple with depressions and 'mini' manias, but they aren't knee-buckling. With the right choices, I live almost symptom free. Today I take medication, see my doctor, do psychotherapy and exercise, to name a few tools. I am forever grateful to my parents, psychiatrists, the voc rehab program and my husband who continues to help me walk this road of recovery. It is through them I discovered how to reclaim my joy and sense of self. My hope for all who face mental illness is that they have strong support and know recovery is possible. As I like to say 'sometimes the harder we fall, the higher we bounce'.

For more info about Victoria's shows and workshops, visit: www.victoriamaxwell.com. She welcomes questions and comments.