Mental Illness: Poems of Hope, Poems of Despair

a Kurt Sass chapbook

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Just Think Better, Stupid!

When I was 22, It was a very bad year.

Spent part of it in the Psych Ward

I had <u>three</u> therapists. Their opinions varied, yet still the same

Therapists # 1 said:
The <u>only</u> reason
I was suicidal
Was my alcoholic father
And I felt embarrassed.

Therapist #2 said:
The only reason
I was suicidal
Was my 2 brothers
And I felt jealous
Therapist #3 said:
The only reason
I was suicidal
Was my good life
And I felt undeserving.

But therapist #1

And therapist #2

As well as therapist #3

All agreed.

The only solution

To my being suicidal

Was to change my thinking.

If only I stopped Feeling <u>so</u> embarrassed And <u>so</u> jealous And <u>so</u> undeserving, Then I'd be just fine! A-OK! All Okey-Dokey!

Yes, I did tell them, All 3 of my therapeutic wise men, Of my Grandmother's suicide And of my father's constant sadness.

But I guess <u>fuck genetics!</u>
And <u>fuck</u> chemical imbalances!
According to these 3 therapeutic stooges,
All I had to do was think better.

In other words,
It was all my doing.
All my fault.
And back then,
They had me **thinking** that.

Sometimes its Worse When You're Better

Sometimes its worse when you're better. When the psychosis and paranoia have vacated. And the clarity and memories have stormed in.

The loved ones you've hurt. The friends you've deceived. The innocent you've violated. The trusts you've annihilated

They all seem justified while ill. But when mental sobriety kicks in: You realize the monster you were. Sure, a psychiatric-induced, involuntary monster, Yet a monster still.

You can betray the closest. You can injure the vulnerable. You can cheat the naïve. You can destroy those who care.

It all seems so right at the time. Thats what the demons Have <u>forced</u> you to believe. But then you get better, And the past makes you worse.

Professor Birnbaum

I saw this woman last month. Dirty, quite filthy, in fact. Taking a dump. Right on the subway platform.

I'm sure she had an odor, Though I ventured not close enough to determine.

But there was **something** about her. Couldn't place it at first.

Then I got a good look at her face. Could it be? Was that? No? Maybe? Holy shit'! that's Mrs. Birnbaum!

Hunter College 1975 Mrs. Birnbaum. **Professor** Birnbaum.

She made literature,
So <u>full</u> of <u>life!</u>
But now she seemed drained of hers.

I didn't approach The <u>present</u> Mrs. Birnbaum. And she hasn't appeared again.

I've often wondered: Why didn't I approach? Was I embarrassed for her? Or embarrassed for me?

5 Minutes of His VALUABLE Time

I see my Psychiatrist once a month.

He likes to call himself
A Psycho-Pharmacologist,
Whatever that means.
I guess it makes him seem more important.
At least to himself.

But I digressed.
As I was saying,
I see my Psychiatrist once a month.
5 minutes a pop at most.
Takes me an hour each way!
That's 96% Travel Time, 4% Doctor Time.
Excuse me, I'm a number guy.

Anyway,
As I was saying,
In this 5 – minute max
Its always the same:
How are you?
Any major problems?
Stay the course!
Prescription, prescription, prescription.
See you next month!

I hate wasting an entire morning each month on this, But Controlled Substance Policy Dictates: No refills allowed!

(continued)

But I digressed again.
As I was saying:
I see my Psychiatrist once a month.
5 minutes tops.
And I've even seen his bill
He gets 80 bucks for his 5 minutes.
That works out to nine hundred and 60 bucks an hour,
Or just under 2 mil a year.
Excuse me, I'm a numbers guy.

Wow! 80 bucks for my 5 minute visit. I guess his time is valuable

You are Cordially Invited

Come one, come all! You are cordially invited To the 25th Anniversary Of the union of me and my mental illness.

That's Right! A quarter century of Depression, Mania, Psychosis, Self Abuse and Suicidal I-De-Al-Li-Za-Tion!

Oh,! Its been a tested relationship, This mental illness and I.

Many have tried to break us up. Psychiatrists with their medications. Psychologists with their advice.

Countless others with programs, evaluations, trainings, etcetera, etcetera.

Meditation, prayer and even Shock Treatments gave it their best, But this bond between mental illness and I can't be broken.

No matter how hard they tried, Good intentions and all, My mental illness is here with me to stay, Forever and ever.

So please, RSVP, And if you can't make it, Don't you fret! There will always be a 26th, And a 27th.

So, don't you worry! We'll always be together, My mental illness and me. We're not goin' anywhere!

Continuing Day Mistreatment

They told me otherwise at CDT. That's Continuing Day Treatment!

They said I'd get employment assistance. Learn valuable computer skills! Have a full day of productive activities! Bullshit!

Their employment assistance Consists of want ads and a phone book, Occasionally even a phone. Real good odds, eh?

And the computers?
There are <u>2</u> of them,
But 35 consumers.
Will I <u>ever</u> even <u>see</u> the computer?
Let alone get skilled.

And productive activities? Try 1 TV and a pool table. For 35 consumers. That's it!

And lets not forget
The weekly <u>Non-Support</u> groups.
Where everyone tells everybody else
How stupid they are
And how <u>this</u> won't work, and <u>that</u> won't work.

CONTINUING DAY TREATMENT:

Continuing – Unfortunately, yes Day – That's obvious. Treatment – I don't think so!

Creative or Crazy?

I'm in the psyche ward.

Actually feeling quite better.

Quite lucid, in fact.

That's what happens when the <u>Un</u>-Sedate you.

In fact, my creative spark is back! You see, I'm a halfway decent writer. Been paid and everything! Vivid imagery, fans say.

So I'm really looking forward
To the hospital's Creative Writing Therapy Class.
Perfect for me!
And I'm in great spirits.
Just 2 days to discharge.

I write this beautiful poem.
Actually, its not new.
Wrote it 2 years ago.
Fans at my readings and open mics love it.
It delves into the great debate:
Is orgasm more akin to a flower in bloom?
Or a canon blasting away?
Lots of vivid imagery.

Maybe too much vivid imagery.
The class "facilitator" is concerned.
She calls in my therapist.
My stays been extended a week!
Or more!
Their worried, they say.
I'm slipping, they say.
But I learned my lesson.
Next 7 days, drole stories about the countryside, And non-threatening poems.

It works. My writing is dull, drab and boring, But I'm getting released!

And I Thought I Was Ill!

They told me, Both doctors and therapists, That I was very ill. Severe and persistent Mental Illness Major Depressive Disorder.

Apparently, My insurance company
Has a <u>much</u> higher opinion of me.
My therapist said I require weekly sessions
Yet they only authorize 20 each year.
My psychiatrist claims I need constant monitoring,
Only every other month, according to them.
They must really have confidence in me!

Double - Edged Sword

The meds slayed my depression, But they killed my penis.

On the meds, I gained confidence. On the meds, I gained 46 pounds.

With the meds, I lost paranoia. With the meds, I found confusion.

Thanks to meds, insomnia abdicated. Thanks to meds, lethargy reigns.

Due to the meds, a calm has been persistent. Due to the meds, my right hand quivers.

The meds gave me the abilities to function. The meds gave me the disabilities to live.

Unwanted Tattoos

Slicing and burning oneself sucks! We <u>all</u> know that!
But what I did-not-know
Was that after you stop
Long, long after you stop
The visible reminders remain.

Now, I'm luckier than most.

I kept all abuse to the legs.

I <u>can</u> wear short sleeve shirts in the summer.

Strangers <u>don't</u> think I have track marks.

But there's still limitations. I could never go swimming. Too many unanswerable inquiries.

And there's still many moments: Like the physical for my new job: Questions, questions, questions! Or my first time with Estira, Or my first time with Doreen. They never got used to the scars, really. Darkness proved that.

And the worst is the shower.

The daily reminder of my horrific past.

The years have seem fading,

But still far, far away,

If ever,

From complete fade-out.

l Hate People

I hate people who complain their mortgage is too high. Or not getting into their college of choice. Or financially unable to have a third child.

I hate people who complain about their jobs, Or failing their audition, Or losing in the stock market.

Excuse me for being so cynical, But I have to battle suicidal thoughts every day. Now **that's** something to complain about!

Look in the Wirror, Pal!

I used to despise Passing the local Methadone Maintenance Clinic.

But I had no choice. Only one path to work.

I'd see them every morning. Laughing and joking. The druggies. Getting their free drugs. With <u>my</u> tax dollars. They choose to take drugs While I foot the bill.

For months I despised them. Their canes, their missing teeth. I hated everything about them.

Then one day,
In an instant,
My viewpoint changed.
I realized that,
When I was so, so, so very depressed,
And so, so, so very anxious,
And so, so, so very suicidal,
If I had the offer or opportunity
To stop the insanity,
If even briefly,
With just one pill, or snort or needle,
I'd have jumped at the chance.

So I realized That the druggies out there, That I hated so, so, so much Could so, so, so easily be me.

In a Manie State - 1984

i am writing this in a manic state i am aware i am doing this but once this is typed out i know it wont look manicky but if you see this handwritten you would see what i mean I just wrote this in 12 or 13 seconds i am so proud of myself

The Day Pass

After 11 days of "good" behavior, Mostly due to mind-numbing drugs, I earned a coveted day pass.

Problem was,
The staff was too damn lazy
To requisition my coat,
And the temperature,
A brisk 9 degrees.

Now the problem was **not** the cold, But the sight of me with just a tee shirt.

Cops stopped me on 3 occasions. Twice asked if I was crazy. I told them: "Guess so!" And pointed to the hospital.

And each time, They just let me go As if this was A typical occurrence.

But Protect Yourself

Please save me from myself, But protect yourself in the process.

Accept me, please do, But only to a point.

Guide me through the maze, But stay out of my path.

Lead me to the light, But travel alone if safer.

Help me fight the demons, But not at your own peril.

Save my life, But don't risk your own.

You'd Think I'd Know Better

After all, I'm a mental illness expert. Been sick since 1979.

So when my wife had her first, Instantaneous psychiatric breakdown I thought "no sweat."

I can deal with this!

After all.

I've been on both sides now!

Guess what? I mimicked the same frustration, Guilt, anger, sadness and helplessness As my wife when I was ill.

And I'd thought it would be <u>easy</u> on the other side.

Today Is a New Day

Yesterday I couldn't get out of bed. Yesterday I was wracked with suicidal thoughts. Yesterday I didn't accomplish anything.

But today is a new day, and so is tomorrow.

Little Pieces

The absolute BEST Part of recovery Is its reclamation.

Slowly, Little by little, Piece by piece You reclaim:

Your dignity.
Your joy.
Your playfulness.
Your creativity.
Your soul.
Your being.
Your purpose,
And your life.

So I Changed

My first therapist made Mr. Rogers look like a terrorist. "Everything's going to be j-u-s-t fine." "Everything's going to be great." That's all he ever said. So what if I was still suicidal and not functioning For 8 months solid "Things will work out, you'll see." SO I CHANGED

My 2nd therapist was just the opposite. "You'll have to accept this."
"You'll never get better."
If I weren't so damn weak with depression
She would have been my 1st dead therapist
SO I CHANGED

My 3rd therapist told me That we are a team. That we'll work together In good times and bad. To do what's best for me. SO I STOPPED CHANGING

For MICA's Sake!

"I don't take drugs."
"I don't get drunk."

I told them that Over and over again.

But they didn't care.
"You must be a MICA,
'cause you're in the MICA ward."

If only they had read
The little teeny, tiny note
Scrawled by the intake doctor
Stating the regular wards were full
I wouldn't be in this predicament.

Be it as it may,
For 3 days
I <u>must</u> attend AA meetings.
I <u>must</u> attend NA meetings.
I <u>must</u> attend Double Trouble meetings.

I tried being honest Oh, yes I tried. But each attempt Met with the same fate.

The fate being a 5 minute lecture on denial. I got to know it by rote:
"The first step in stopping your abuse is admitting your problem."
I won't bore you with the rest.

(continued)

(For MICA's Sake continued)

On Day 4, somebody finally woke up. I was transferred to a regular ward, With a ton of apologies.

Whether these apologies were real,
Or out of fear of legal action,
This I do not know.
But, apologies coming <u>from</u> them <u>to</u> me for a change,
Sure felt sublime.

My Client

My client arrives
For visit number one
He seems calm and relaxed.

Since this is visit 1 I must ask questions. Many questions. Many personal questions.

When we get to the medical part, My client starts to tremble and squirm.

He mumbles his answers to his psychiatric history. He looks away as he tells of his hospitalizations and ECT Treatments. I simply tell him, "Me, too." He is instantly restored.

I Didn't Need the Psychiatric Medication

On May 1st, I didn't need the Psychiatric Medication.

On May 7th, I could have used the Psychiatric Medication.

On May 12th, I was offered the Psychiatric Medication.

On May 12th, I refused the Psychiatric Medication.

On May 23rd, I still refused the Psychiatric Medication.

On May 29th, I again refused the Psychiatric Medication.

On June 17th, I was forced to take the Psychiatric Medication.

On June 24th, they trusted me to take the Psychiatric Medication.

On June 24th, I faked taking the Psychiatric Medication.

On July 10th, I could have used the Psychiatric Medication.

On July 10th, I was offered the Psychiatric Medication.

On July 10th, I took the Psychiatric Medication.

On August 12th, I was glad to refill the Psychiatric Medication.

On January 7th, my doctor offered a holiday from the Psychiatric Medication.

On January 7th, he gave me less of the Psychiatric Medication.

On February 14th, he stopped the Psychiatric Medication.

On February 18th, I could have used the Psychiatric Medication.

On February 24th, my new doctor gave me the Psychiatric Medication.

On May 1st, I was still on the Psychiatric Medication.

Now everyday, I thankfully take the Psychiatric Medication.

Acceptance Equals Power

I've been mentally ill Since way back in 1979. That's right! Jimmy Carter was President. Reggie Jackson was a star. Brittany Spears wasn't even a fetus.

I didn't acknowledge my mental illness Until 1998. Bill Clinton was President. Michael Jordan was a star. Brittany Spears a developing teen.

It took me that long, 19 years, to accept my mental illness.

So what if, During these 19 years, I had 8 mental breakdowns And 3 hospitalizations.

The point was,
Once the breakdown was over,
There <u>was</u> no breakdown.
I lived in the present.
Forget the past.
Forget the future.

Lived like that for 19 freakin' years! But in '98, After a horrific 11 month ordeal I finally came to terms with my situation.

The great thing is:
When you accept mental illness,
You acknowledge the enemy.
And you get <u>really</u> mad.
I mean totally pissed off!
And you fight the enemy.
And you feel stronger.

The Little Boy Who Took Meds

There was a little boy. Just 5 or 6, actually. Who was very violent and self-abusive.

Diagnosed (Finally!) with Bi-Polar Disorder. You know – Manic Depression.

But what to do? You see, this little boy had other factors. He was Mentally Retarded. Severe and Profound. So talk therapy was not a viable alternative. So they started the little boy on meds.

Pills 1 & 2 had no effect. So they were adjusted, up and up. Many times. But still no effect.

Pills 3 & 4. The same disappointment of sameness.

Pills 5 & 6 however, made his folks miss pills 1-4. Twitching and drooling became the norm. So pills 5 & 6 were abruptly terminated.

After this fiasco his parents said NO MORE! But they let the psychiatrist; (The so-called PROFESSIONAL) talk them into continuing.

Pill 7
replicated pills 1 through 4
in their nothingness
Pills 8 & 9.
Well,
what can I say!
You know.
It's the weirdest thing!

Pills 8 & 9, They actually worked! The violence went down, 90% The Self-Abuse 100% Gone!

And that little boy who took meds? Well, he's now
A 6' 2" man of 20 who takes meds. He still takes pills 8 & 9.
And the violence and Self-Abuse?
Still 90 and 100% eradicated.

And to the doctor who urged and pushed and prodded to continue even after the pill 5 & 6 disaster? His parents say: Thanks, thanks, thanks

Why Support Groups Work

My therapist understands my mental illness and how it affects me.

My psychiatrist understands. My family understands. My friends understand.

But,

The people in my support group KNOW.

My 21st Thought of the Day

I wake up each morning To the sweet sounds of birds In their makeshift nest.

I wake up each morning Next to my beautiful wife Of 23 years.

I wake up each morning
And my very first thought of the day
Is how best to kill myself!
"Suicidal Tendencies," the professionals say.
These same professionals
That can't figure out
Why I have them.

Thoughts number 2 to approximately 20? Much of the same, Suicidally speaking, But with a sprinkle Of what a horrible person I am, Along with a dash Of just how I should end it.

But around thought 21 or so, Comes salvation In the form of realization That these thought retreat each morning, About an hour after arrival, And don't return til next morning.

And its this thought number 21 or so, That makes thoughts 22 to about 60, Though similar to numbers 1 through 20, Much easier to deal with.

One Tooth at a Time

I told my therapist, Straight out!

"You say I'm better, but I can't do <u>anything</u>. I <u>used</u> to make 40 Gs a year. I <u>used</u> to supervise others. I was considered an expert! Now I can't even find a job In my chosen profession. 97 rejections will attest to that!"

Then my therapist told me
"Lets talk about Goal-setting."
Then I told her:
"What's to discuss?
I want my career back.
That's my goal."
Then she told me:
"You have a serious illness.
A serious mental illness.
Recovery from any serious illness
Can't come all at once."

(continued)

Then she told me the story:
The story of a man more ill than I.
In bed almost 2 years, in fact.
He was in despair
Because his plan,
His goal,
Was simply to get up,
Go into the bathroom,
And brush his teeth.
But,
He was so debilitated
By his catastrophic depression
He couldn't even do that.
What a failure, he told her.

Then <u>she</u> told <u>him:</u>

"You have a serious illness. A serious mental illness. Recovery from any serious illness Can't come all at once."

She advised the man
To have someone put the supplies near his bed.
And his goal was solely
To brush one tooth,
Which he the next day accomplished.
And he felt a little positive
For the first time in months.

I got the message.

A WOMAN

Example: What most women would do and most men wouldn't.

I'm in bed.
4 months straight.
123 days, to be precise
Major Depressive Disorder they call it.
294.6 in the DSM-IV
Barely can eat,
or bathe,
or make it to the bathroom
to piss or shit.

My wife goes out one day, returns with a bag. A small, thin bag. Won't show me the contents.

I'm in bed, completely. 24/7, as they say, for the next 36 hours. When I finally get up (to take a leak)
I return to the bed, now with a bag on it. That small, thin bag.

I open the bag.
There's a greeting card inside.
The title says it all:
"That Man Is A Success."
That man is a success?!! I think:
What is she, nuts?

But then I get it. She knows I'm trying. She knows I'm fighting. She knows I don't want to stay in bed. She is actually proud of me.

She knows that, although the depression is winning I am still fighting. She is actually proud of me.

And 6 years later, feeling just fine, thanks, I still constantly remember that card.

She is actually still proud of me, and me of her.

Laundry Therapy

I have problems in the morning. I mean <u>BIG</u> problems!

For 60 minutes,
Each and every morning,
I feel depressed,
Anxious to the extreme,
Even suicidal.
To put it in medical terms;
I feel downright shitty!

Now I'm somehow able to drag myself (literally) Out of the bed on weekdays. I have a job to do!

But those dreaded weekends! What can I do? I need incentive!

So I created Laundry Therapy.
Step 1: Treachery!
I convince myself that Saturday mornings,
6AM,
is the <u>only</u> chance for clean clothes that week,
being my busy schedule and all.

Step 2: Set alarm to 6AM Step 3: Put big sign covering clock, reading "Do Laundry, Kick Depression's Ass!"

(continued)

And my therapy works!
I get up at 6 and head to the 24 hour laudermat.
I look ghostly.
I <u>still</u> feel depressed
And extremely anxious
And even suicidal.
But I'm getting something accomplished,
And I'm kicking Depression's Ass!

But that leaves Sunday. Day of rest? Not for me! Sunday is Pathmark Therapy!

A Random Act of Kindness

My very first hospitalization, Way back in the 70s, Was most noteworthy For its lack of humanity.

Verbal abuse from the staff was a norm. A Them versus Us atmosphere was palpable. And I can't count the number of times It was stressed we "behave," And "stressed" in various forms.

There was <u>one</u>, rare exception. Due to the plethora And volumes of medications Like Haldol and Mellaril, Hallucinations entered my life.

One most prevalent Was that all blood Had left my system.

I would tell anyone who'd listen. Very few did.
And then mostly laughed.
Except for one.
One very sweet human being.
She listened.

Not only did she listen to my plight, But actually took my hands in hers, An action unheard of back then. She looked at my hands, And reassured me That I did not void my blood. But just to make sure, That she would check Again tomorrow.

And she did.
And the next day, too.
She became my link back to trust,
Back to belief in humanity.

Ant this one, Random act of kindness Still rings profoundly With me to this day.

A Tale of 2 Coffee Shops

On Monday, I was in a coffee shop. I won't say their name, cause Starbucks would get mad. Oops!

A man was talking to himself. Very softly, in fact. Bothering absolutely no one.

Then an employee entered the picture.

He had to prove his manhood, I guess,
So he yelled at the man to leave,
Bothering absolutely everyone.

The man left quite compliantly,
Which made it quite surprising
that the employee continued his tirade
well past the man's exit.

(Perhaps the employee had too much caffeine)

On Thursday, I was in a coffee shop. I <u>will</u> say their name, cause Repast Coffee Shop deserves it.

A man was talking to himself. Very softly, in fact. Bothering absolutely no one.

Then an employee entered the picture.
She had <u>nothing</u> to prove, I guess.
She asked the man how he was,
Bothering absolutely no one.
They spoke for a while, then she went back to work.
10 minutes later, the man left,
bothering absolutely no one,
which makes it <u>quite</u> surprising
Why Starb—
Oops!
I mean,
Which makes it quite surprising,
Why the other cof fee establishment

Couldn't have handled it the same way.

6 Senryus

(A Senryu is similar to Haiku in style: The first line is 5 syllables, the 2nd line 7 syllables and the 3rd line 5 syllables. A Haiku poem is written about Nature. A Senryu poem is written about Human Nature)

I know for a fact That the medicines don't work Unless you take them.

Major Depression It doesn't discriminate. Everyone's fair game.

Warmth of a friend's hand. Like a new medication Without side effects.

"You've had ECT?"
The shock that shows in her face Equals 3 treatments.

2-Part Senryu

When I am manic I write thousands of poems That make little sense.

When I feel better
I write much fewer poems,
But they mean much more.

Mental Illness: Poems of Hope, Poems of Despair

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