

Life's a Botch

by Kevin Parish

So I've got a bad back. One in four of us have similar problems (now where have I heard that before?). The problem is it didn't grow straight, giving me as a teenager a peculiar bent, some pain, susceptibility to injury and a slight level of disability. Well you know how it is; we get on with life, ignore the problem and do the best we can.

But that's a physical (organic) problem – it's obvious, visible. Doctors and therapists can prod, tease, and recite phrases in an incomprehensible language with bits of Latin. X-rays become the norm, diagnoses can be clear, proven and substantiated.

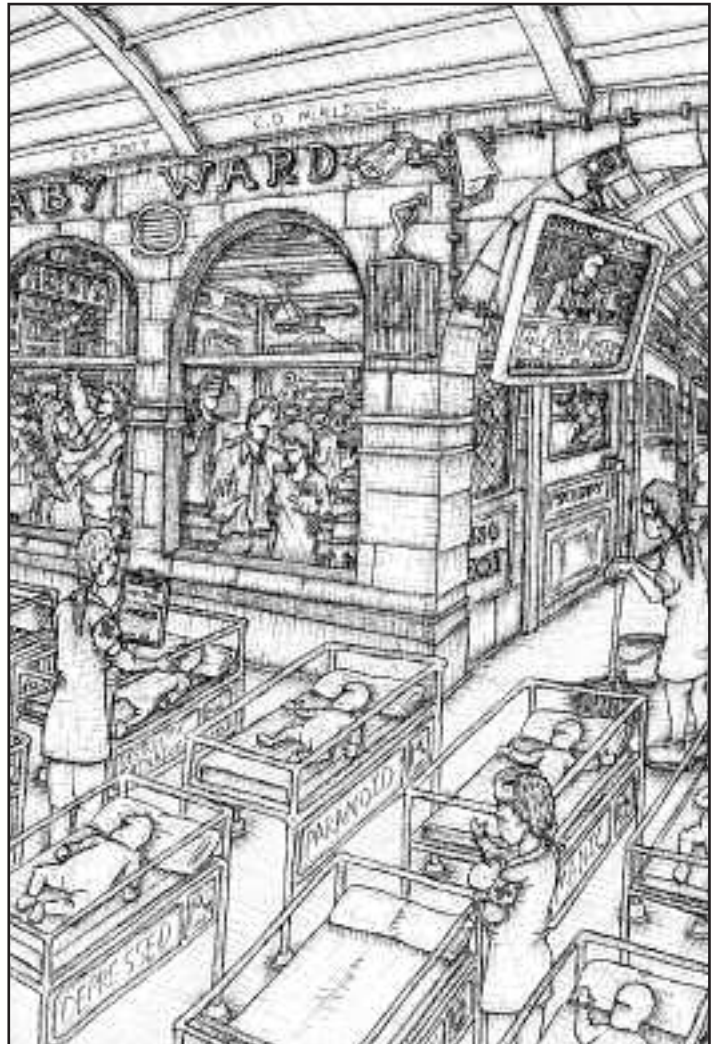
Not so obvious was the real pain in my life, also stemming from teenage years. Periods of intense anxiety that crippled me for days, weeks of lethargy and

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hopelessness, then wonderful times when I could do anything but would inevitably burn out under the self-induced pressure. No surprise that at the age of 35, after three suicide attempts, a psychiatrist floated the words 'manic depression' across the ether of my confusions.

My reaction? Well, the words meant nothing to me, the medication made me feel like a zombie. I just plain didn't understand how what for me was normality suddenly became quite a serious mental illness. So I went sky-diving. In those days it didn't involve 'buddies' – you just left the aircraft and sorted out the mess yourself.

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managing my back pain. Compliant with medication, respectful of the limitations and very well 'read', it came as a shock to find that pain and

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disability levels increased exponentially in a year. My consumption of prescribed opiate pain relievers increased to frightening levels, and depression became a fact of life. Two more

coma-inducing suicide attempts later I was sectioned, and my psychiatric career had begun.

One year on. I was left with just the clothes on my back and a long list of questions that went a bit like this:

- How can I get a life back?
- How can I recover?
- How can I cope with these mind-numbing drugs?
- How can I be safe?
- How can I pick myself up by the shoelaces?

The reader will note the 'I' appears in every question. Unknowingly the prerogative just

appeared. In the middle of my nightmare it became obvious that:

- This is my illness
- This is my life
- These are my problems
- These are my shoelaces

The ownership carries with it a level of power over outcomes

Recovery

I'm not buying into 'Recovery'. Contentious? With good reason. It's become a buzz word in recent years, got a real political context and is much too useful for the Government and Department of Health to bandy around. Over the last few years I have spoken extensively with a couple of the top psychiatrists from Trieste on the subject. Guess what? They don't buy it either!

What we do agree on is that symptoms can be managed, can be integrated into the 'Whole Life' experience. At worst, symptoms may persist but with the right help be rationalised by the person themselves. At best there may be a remission. What we really mean could be described as 'thinking with a limp'.

Illness?

Sorry, but I'm not buying into that either. We know that the symptoms are episodic; there will be some really bad, tough times. But in between the tough times, any disorders will be behavioural, and I can slap my own wrist if I'm naughty. So I will call it a 'disorder'; I'm not going to elevate it to the status of 'illness'.

The same with medication: over a period of years I got the dose down to an acceptable

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minimum. When the going gets tough the dosage goes up. Self-monitoring is essential here, and if I need help then I get it before things get out of hand.

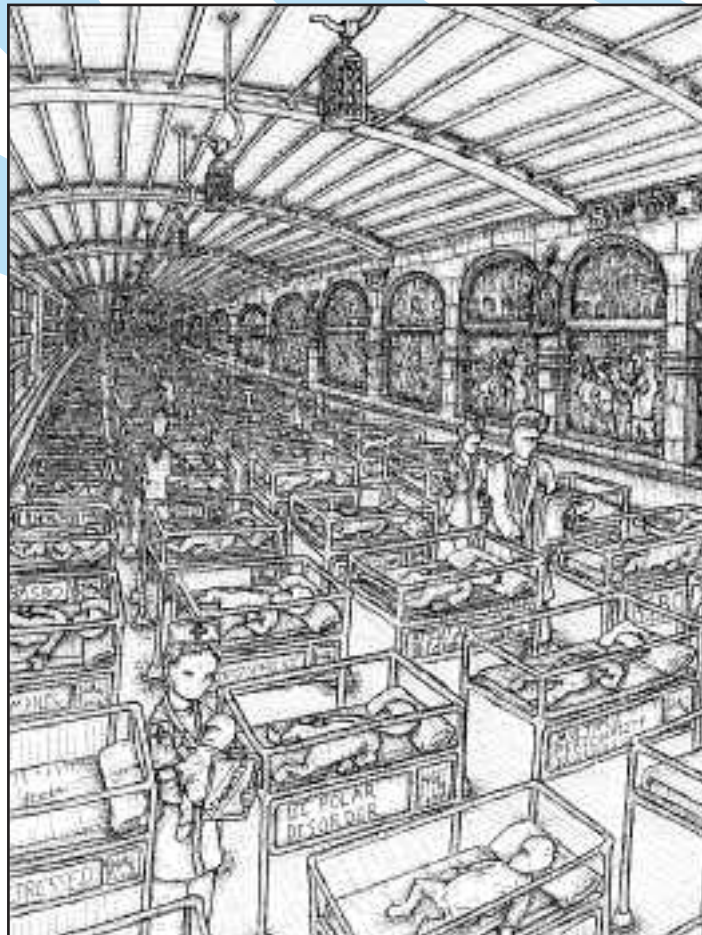
Most doctors and psychiatrists will not approve of this. It's good for me, but only after I worked things out for myself. I am lucky to have a brilliant GP who trusts me with myself.

I always take the minimum

necessary level of medication. This is not the only tool in the box, but it keeps me safe when all else fails.

Life

The true beauty of being homeless, broke or alone is that it re-defines one's view of life. Gone forever is the life you knew, but gone forever are the millstones you carried. At this level simplicity can be therapeutic. It doesn't overwhelm you.



Expectations too change in line with circumstances, (I am not going to save up for that plush car - I could never afford the petrol). Dreams are meant for dreaming, they cannot be

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bought in shops. The focus instead is on life's small things. There is more value in the satisfaction of cooking a good meal oneself than ordering a take-away.

Problems

Getting control of the disorder, giving yourself space to deal with it without it controlling you and being less than perfect has got to be top of the list. For this you

have to learn about it, know it inside out. It is after all an essential part of your being; doesn't it make sense to know your best friend, yourself?

I felt a victim of the 'professional divide', which is composed of only one thing – knowledge, and that you have this is paramount. Mental health services are not good at giving you this. They often take the view that if you are

informed of the details of your disorder, then you might 'acquire'

I've still got a wonky back, and suffer from 'thinking with a limp'. But I found happiness. I found it within myself on the journey to find out who I really was

those symptoms. In addition, they may feel that you are in no condition to absorb the information.

But you cannot drive a car if you don't know how to point it in the right direction, make it go and make it stop. These are the painful basics in the management of any disorder: having some kind of instruction book. Knowledge is power, but supplicants are powerless.

Eventually, if you can sit alone

with your troubles, and resolve even one of them, you've made a start on a different life.

Mental Health Services

Will want to protect you, and are allergic to risk. It is extremely difficult to discharge yourself from care. Accept all the help you can get, but don't make it the meaning of your life.

The best services walk beside you on this journey. Help you when you need it and yet maintain a light touch when you're OK.

Forgive a digression, but I remember the last time I spoke (as a patient) with a psychiatrist. Ten minutes with an SHO. He decided to change my medication and had some difficulty with my assertion that 'I'm doing OK as I am'. We got there in the end.

When I got home the cat climbed up on my lap and purred. After 10 minutes I felt a new man. Moral? My cat knows me better than my psychiatrist!

Lifting by shoelaces

Take back the power by owning the problem.

Keep life simple; if it gets complicated, something went wrong.

Dream your dreams but be real with reality.

Turn off the TV. What are you going to learn from soaps? Go get a book from the library, meet some 'normal' people.

Buy some cheap basic foods, cook them, burn them, bin them. Now you're learning how to make a meal!

Be proud of yourself, you've been to hell but now you're back.

And finally...

I've still got a wonky back, and suffer from 'thinking with a limp'. But I found happiness. I found it within myself on the journey to find out who I really was. It never occurred to me that happiness was there all the time, I guess we are educated to believe that it's a response to an external stimulus.

And I'm 60 now. When the Practice Nurse gives me a telling off about blood pressure she seems surprised when I point out that we might expect things to go wrong as we age. From age there is no 'Recovery', but I'm lucky nothing's dropped off yet!