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Recovery, One Story at a Time

My eighth grade Social Studies teacher strode into class one day and said, "Hey, kids, did you know that surveys are showing one in four adults is going to suffer a nervous breakdown?" His eyes scanned the room and locked onto mine. "Oh no," I thought. "With odds like those and the way things have been going I think I'll just get mine out of the way early." Over the next three years a mountain of misfortune would meet a mudslide of bad judgement and something inside of me just snapped.

When I was sixteen years old I experienced severe mental illness. After multiple suicide attempts my frightened parents took me to a mental health clinic on the upper floor of the closest medical hospital. While there I paced constantly. I pulled out my hair. I called my mother repeatedly asking her the same questions over and over again, not remembering that we had just spoken. When the art therapist asked me to make a pattern with small different colored tiles I was overcome with exhaustion, paralyzed with the choices and unable to make any order out of the tiles strewn in front of me. I found myself one morning in a dark closet. My therapist was trying to coax me out. When I emerged from that dark cocoon of confusion the doctors told my parents I needed more intensive long-term care than they could provide. Arrangements were made for me to be committed to Southwood, the adolescent unit for troubled and disturbed teens at the St. Lawrence Psychiatric Hospital in Ogdensburg, NY. How did I get to that point when I was sixteen? It didn't happen overnight. Instead, it was a long and complicated journey that was intertwined with family dynamics and events.

Southwood was made out of curving red stone with two turrets on either side, a slate roof, and bars on the windows. When I first entered a pudgy attendant whisked me away from my parents and up a spiral staircase. We walked down the hallway and past a series of rooms. There was a dentist's office, a doctor's office, an electric shock therapy room, a padded cell with a straight jacket hanging on the doorknob and then there was the fifth room. The fifth room was a plain unadorned room with two uncomfortable chairs in it. It was in the fifth room that I would meet my salvation when I was introduced to a tall, freckled, red haired, red bearded man with big hands and huge feet. My therapist. "Hi, my name is Jim Flounders. Flounders, like the fish." There were other girls and boys in Southwood. We were all between the ages of 12 and 18. The boys and girls had separate wards divided by a long hallway where no fraternizing was allowed. We weren't allowed to wear our own clothes or go outside. We didn't have gym class and our usual evening meal was creamed chip beef on toast. We could watch television in the dayroom, listen to the radio and play records on our portable hi-fi. Carol King's *You've Got a Friend* was followed by Jethro Tull's *Aqualung*. *Snot is running down his nose*. It sounds fairly Dickensian, doesn't it? It was in many ways. These were the first days of lithium that made us drool and walk in a stupor, straight jackets, and something called "the sheet." This was the harshest punishment. We were put into straight jackets, tied to a bed and then covered with a thick canvas sheet. It had a hole just large enough for our head. We were left in there until we calmed down, usually overnight. And yet, there were untold kindnesses.

The staff threw us a prom with a local rock and roll high school band playing all the greatest hits from the late 1960's and early 1970's. We were allowed to wear our own clothes and shoes and perfume and so much trailer trash blue eye shadow we could have started our own mobile park. I danced with the boy of my dreams, George. He was egg shaped with eyes that turned in and feet that splayed out. He rocked back and forth all day thumping on an invisible drum. His language of love was "Do you like Pepsi?" We swayed to the strains of Led Zeppelin's *Stairway to Heaven*.

One of the attendants took me to a high school musical "Annie, Get Your Gun." Annie came on stage at the beginning of the play and started shooting. I startled and hid behind the chair but eventually calmed down enough to sit and hum along to *Anything You Can Do I Can Do Better*. The attendant took me out for an ice cream sundae afterwards and bought me new underwear at the variety store.

Our social studies teacher, Laurie, signed a number of us girls out one sunny summer day and took us to her "farm." It was really a commune. Women walked around without shirts while rolling cigarettes and sitting around a large table. They had a big vegetable garden that sold produce to neighbors. Laurie showed us edible plants and told us to go for a walk on our own and come back when we were ready. She said that "strangers are just friends you haven't met yet."

I had an English teacher perceptive enough to read me Hamlet. Shakespeare gave me language for feelings, thoughts and experiences I couldn't put into words of my own. "How is it the dark clouds still hang upon you?" "To thine own self be true." And the most important "To be or not to be, that is the question."

My therapist, Like the Fish, was the most remarkable person of all. He got a piano and tuned it and told me I could go and play anytime I wanted. I loved music and singing and he gave me the gift of creativity, discipline, and a safe place outside of language to express my feelings. Most importantly though was the one thing he did for me that I had never experienced in any other therapist's office, in group therapy, with any psychiatrist or person in my family. He listened. He listened as I told him things I had never told anyone. How worried I was about my father's operations. How my mother didn't want to talk to me. How I tried so hard to be good but was never good enough. How the other kids made fun of me. Of my constant dieting. My love of music. My desire to go to music school. How I hated and loved my parents and how they hated and loved me. How afraid I was to never be released from the hospital and how I didn't know how I could live at home anymore but how I had nowhere else to go but home once I was released. The attendants, the teachers, and my therapist nursed me back to sanity and safety with small acts of humanity. Mostly, they listened. Something I had never experienced in a busy household of seven. Dave Iskay, the founder of Story Corps writes that "listening is an act of love." Listening, true listening without interruption or judgment or need to fix was the grand gesture of generosity that eventually lead to my freedom. Listening told me I mattered. Told me that my thoughts, feelings, wonderings and experiences were important. Listening pieced my shattered self, back together.

For me being listened to was an act of love that strengthened my broken heart and mind enough to eventually lead me to recovery and freedom. But listening wasn't enough. There was something even stronger for me to overcome before I could tell my story.

When I was released from Southwood an unwanted guest climbed into my suitcase and slipped between the socks and shirts. It was an invisible contagion that infected my parents and me. It bore into us and corrupted our identities. It would eventually blot out all hope of true love and connection.

I was released from the hospital in July and we struggled to renegotiate family life. My parents and I never talked about my being gone, what it was like for them or me and how I could adjust to being back. During the school year my parents never notified anyone at school so that natural question of, "Hey, where ya' been?" was answered with unintelligible mutterings and quick getaways. Friends had no clue where I had gone. My parents had been told by the psychiatrists to not visit me very much or hug me when they came so I thought, erroneously, that they had abandoned me there. They felt it was their fault and mine. I felt it was their fault and mine. We tiptoed around one another like burglars walking on potato chips. We didn't talk about it because we didn't know how to talk about it. When I was released from the hospital something moved into our house and slept in our beds, ate at our table, drank our water, and lurked in the shadows. Its name was Shame. My parents and I moved in separate orbits of confusion and shame. The silence that shame needs to grow in became more profound as time passed. I was now "the crazy one," forever defined by those months I spent in Southwood. Being hospitalized became the singular story of my life from the time I was admitted until I was nearly 50 years old.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a Nigerian author of the bestselling book *The Things Around Your Neck*. She has an amazing and insightful TedTalk called *The Danger of the Single Story*. In it she speaks about how Africans are portrayed by a singular story that others use to define them. A singular story shows a people as only one thing and that one thing is what they become. But what of the singular stories we tell ourselves. The ones that overshadow our complexities and paint us, to ourselves, as one thing? When we are stuck in that singular story whatever it might be, it's like a loop that won't let go. It becomes the only story we can tell because it takes up so much room in our psyche. The many other stories that define and express us are drowned out.

Adichie says:

"Stories are defined by power - who tells them, how and when they are told and how many stories are told. Power makes the single story the definitive story of that person or country. When we insist on a singular story to define a person or a people we flatten the complexity of our identity and it robs people of their dignity. Stories matter because they humanize us and repair our dignity."

She is referring to systemic and sanctioned racism of Africans. But I believe we can also apply her understanding of the singular story to people with mental illness. I told myself a singular story about my depression. *I am irreparably broken. I am flawed. I am unable to handle life. I am unworthy of living.* These were some of the stories I told myself, it's true. But some of the singular stories were told about me. Sometimes singular stories are told about people with

depression and the story becomes a rut in the road that everyone drives in never seeing the possibility of another path.

How can we broaden our understanding of our experience? By telling our story.

The first time I contemplated telling my story was when my brother Tim was killed suddenly in a car accident. One of my first thoughts was, “Oh, there were so many stories I never heard from Tim.” This thought was followed by a second. “What story aren’t you telling?” And I knew it was the story of Southwood. I knew that my age was 48 but I knew inside I was sixteen. I had to go back or I would never get out of being sixteen.

Finding my story was a bit like going on a treasure hunt. Because of my dissociation I had large gaps in my memory. My mind was jumbled and confused. It was like my life was a sentence out of order. Once upon a time was now upon a once time. Since Southwood was a state mental hospital I was able to gain access to my records. They arrived in the mail in a large plain manila envelope. I read Jim Flounders notes, saw the attendant’s signatures, the psychiatric diagnosis and a note that read “She’s just a spoiled brat.” Reading the notes was so painful because it made it real. It wasn’t something I had dreamed or made up. I couldn’t pretend it hadn’t happened. For the first time I saw the proof of my hospitalization. It was real and it hurt. It hurt. Still, my mind was so confused. When did my depression start? What triggered it? How did it happen? My memory was like a chain with knots in it. It was a big tangle. I couldn’t find the beginning or the end of the chain. My memories were like scattered sailboats in a storm. They were untethered to time and place. I knew I had to tell the story or be crushed by the weight of it. I quit my teaching job and starting walking dogs so I could write more. I spent 60 hours a week for two years just looking at the records and asking my memories to come back to me. Slowly I began to piece my story together in order. Once upon a time.

I’m five and we’re playing with the crutches. I fall down the stairs.

I’m nine when my father starts to go into white hot rages. He doesn’t remember them.

I’m twelve when the violence intensifies. I feel sorry for my father. He is lost. I am lost too.

I’m fourteen and my mother stops talking to me.

I’m sixteen when I just want out. I want out. I am going to jump in front of a car. I am going to take pills. I am going to hide in the closet to blot out the light and the noise and the pain and the fear.

I followed my year through. Then something remarkable began to happen. Memories began creeping out of the background of my mind and now started coming to me. At first one memory and then another and another until I could remember smells and colors, sights and sounds as if I was right there again. My singular story began to break apart. I started to remember the kindnesses done to me. The prom, the musical, the commune, Hamlet, and Like the Fish. I asked the question, “Yes, you were in the sheet. Yes, you were frightened of some of the attendants. Yes, you were afraid. But what else were you?” The pain became tempered by stories of goodness, generosity and caring. I saw that the people in the hospital loved me and wanted me to get better. I saw the pain my parents were in and the guilt they felt. I saw them as humans. I was human. A mudslide of misfortune met a mudslide of bad judgment. My depression hadn’t just happened to me. It had happened to all of us.

For me, telling the story first to myself and then to others broke through the chains of shame and silence that had bound me for over thirty years and allowed me to reclaim my experience in my own words, in my own way. Once I wrote “Snap!”, I knew I had to tell it. Did I invite a few friends over for dinner and a story? Oh, no! I decided to enter the Boston Story Slam competition. I knew if I didn’t have to do it I wouldn’t. I had created a five-minute version of the story. I drove to Boston and my name was picked from the hat. I stood up and went to the microphone. I started to sweat. The audience went in and out of focus. I was trembling. *What will they think of me? Will people look at me differently now that they know my story?* These were some of the thoughts going through my mind.

How can we reverse the tide of the singular story? By the oldest form of social media: storytelling. Old fashion face to face listening and telling. As Mary Oliver says in her poem “Wild Geese,” “Tell me about despair, yours, and I shall tell you mine.”

Stories about depression are about so much more than despair. That’s part of the singular story. When we can find a way to share our story, we discover we are no longer alone and the shame that has been growing in the darkness of silence is brought into the light. It withers and the lies it tells us that we are alone, different, or unworthy lose their potency. They have to step aside to make way for a new story full of complexity. That’s what happened to me. I couldn’t have anticipated that I would see myself differently after telling my story than I did at the beginning. That I would feel compassion and gratitude, understanding and sympathy for myself and my parents. At first, I just wanted to know what my story was. And now I do. Now, I am a complex rich person with a history of severe mental illness who accepted the help and caring from others to share my story in the hopes that it will bring hope and strength and the very real understanding to anyone who may be suffering from the same that recovery is possible one story at a time.