

"Dear Friend:

I believe you when you say you are giving up. I can hear the exhaustion in your voice. I can hear the pain in your heart. I can hear your anger and your sense of betrayal. You are right. Sometimes it seems like a cruel joke to dare to get our hopes up and to think that we are really beginning to live a really real life and then to find ourselves sliding backwards with our hopes and dreams crushed but one more time. It makes perfect sense to want to give up. To keep working on our recovery is very hard sometimes. Sometimes giving up seems like the better alternative.

It's such a scary thing to begin to hope again. When we were younger, before we got sick, we dared to dream dreams for our lives. We dared to think of becoming professionals, or going to college, or getting married or developing a trade or craft. But once we got put in mental hospitals and were told we had incurable illnesses, our hopes and dreams seemed to shatter all around us. Once we got out of the hospital, we desperately tried to put the pieces of our dreams back together again. But with each subsequent hospitalization, with each relapse, or with each failure, our dreams got crushed all over again.

Our dreams and our hopes got even more crushed as we watched our friends get jobs, or get married, or start their professions. We were not stupid. We knew that with each passing day we were falling farther and farther behind our peers. In time, it became apparent that we would probably never catch up with them. And I understand the cynicism and anger in your voice when you tell me that compared to where

your high school friends are today, your "progress" in the clerical unit seems like a joke. And that type of comparison, which we all make at times, crushes our spirit and our hopes even more.

And finally there is the stigma and the prescribed role of learned helplessness and patienthood that we have had to endure. It seems that we were systematically told that we could never follow our dreams and hopes and really become real people who live in the real world. Rather, we were consistently told to avoid stress and to learn to cope. But let's face it, avoiding stress translated into being bored. And we know that being bored is stressful. That's quite the double-bind, eh?

In any case, the stigma and despairing messages did not just stay in our environments. Slowly we internalized all of the stigma and despair that surrounded us. We came to believe that we were as useless and as helpless and as hopeless as we were being treated. We learned to settle for less and less and actually began to believe that was all we could be. And this was the most dangerous part. It was like a darkness began to settle over our hearts. The flame of hope and dignity began to fade under the dark shadow of oppression. It was a type of dying: the death of hope, the death of dreams, and the death of humanness and our individuality. And the answer, the only way to survive this kind of living death, was to give up. The professionals called it apathy and lack of motivation. They blamed it on our illness. But they don't understand that giving up is highly motivated, highly goal-directed behavior. For us, giving up was a way of surviving. Giving up, refusing to hope, not trying, not caring: all

of these were ways to try and protect the last fragile traces of our spirit and our selfhood from undergoing another crushing.

And so today you tell me you are giving up and quitting your work of recovery. And I understand that way of surviving. But there's only one problem with that strategy: although it's possible to quit, to sever ties and to give up trying, it is not possible to completely stop caring. To be human means to care. In a sense, to be human means to be condemned to caring. There is an old myth which says it this way: Once when the goddess named Cura (or Care) was crossing a river, she saw some clay. She thoughtfully took up a piece and began to shape it. While she was meditating on what she had made, Jupiter came by. Care asked him to give it spirit, and this he gladly granted. But when she wanted her name to be bestowed upon it, he forbade this and demanded that it be given his name instead. While Care and Jupiter were disputing, Earth arose and desired that her own name be conferred on the creature, since she had furnished it with part of her body. They asked Saturn, the father of time, to be their arbiter. He made the following decision, which seemed a just one. "Since you, Jupiter, have given its spirit, you shall receive that spirit at death; and since you Earth have given its body, you shall receive its body. But since Care first shaped the creature, she shall possess it as long as it lives. And because there is now a dispute among you as to its name, let it be called 'human' for it is made out of the earth (humus).

So you see, to be human means to be condemned to care. Care is what shapes us and gives our humanity its essence. Care

possesses us as long as we live. Only in death will we be freed from care. And so, my friend, even though it is possible to give up. It is not possible to stop caring. It matters that you are giving up. It matters to you and it matters to me because we care. You are giving up because in some way, you are trying to be "care-full." You are trying to protect yourself. And that is okay. It's part of the recovery process.

My friend, it is so important to remember that recovery is a process. In the process of recovery we make progress and we slide back. We live through the vicissitudes of hope and despair, and above all we learn to survive, not just as victims, but as people who can turn reaction into action that is self-directed. Thus, we never get 'recovered." We are always on the way.

However, our Western culture often confuses the model of the hero with the process of recovery. In our culture the model of the Hero is the model of a superior individual who, in one or two acts of dramatic courage, overcomes all obstacles.

And all of us who have begun the journey of recovery have, at one time or another, fallen into the trap of confusing the process of recovery with the model of being a hero. At these times we summon huge amounts of determination and strength and with all out effort become heroes who try to slay the dragon of mental illness, learned helplessness and oppression.

Remember how you said that for the past two years you have been trying to climb a mountain? Like a hero, you were trying, in a magnificent and glorious act of fortitude, to climb the mountain of normalcy. You wanted to slay the dragon of mental

illness and upon reaching the summit arrive at the goal of being normal. Upon reaching the summit, you hoped to finally feel like one of the "real people" who have not had to endure what you have lived for the past twenty years.

But the hard truth is that recovery is not about heroically conquering mountains. The model of heroism fails us as a model of recovery. Heroism assumes the existence of superior individuals who, in an all out effort, fight a single battle and win. In all models of heroism there is a defined goal and a clearly defined end. But for us the goal of our recovery is never completely clear. It is always ambiguous. We are never fully sure of who we are going to be in the end.

The model of the hero also fails us as a model for action and spiritual support because, for us, there is no clearly defined end in sight. There is no day, no one moment in time when we will be suddenly cured. The model of heroism fails us because there will be no one single moment when we will stand on top of the mountain of normalcy and triumph victorious over mental illness, learned helplessness and oppression. The task, our vocation, is not to become normal. Our vocation is not to become like everybody else. Our vocation is to become who we are called to be.

The model of heroism fails as a model for recovery. For me, the model of the survivor works much better than the model of the hero. Those of us with psychiatric disabilities know what it means to live in extremity. Thus we share many of the experiences of other people who have had to survive in

situations of extremity. For instance, many of us can relate to this experience of a survivor of Auschwitz: 'Every morning the survivors' will had to be renewed and it was not through some secret fortitude of the heart but through the physical act of getting up. The pain might be enormous, despair complete, but the commitment to that day, to that much more existence was made. I climb down onto the floor and put on my shoes. The sores on my feet reopen at once, and a new day begins.' (Des Pres, 1977, p.85)

Just like our fellow survivors, those of us with psychiatric disabilities know how hard it can be to swing our legs over the side of the bed and stand up to begin a new day. Sometimes the pain is enormous. Sometimes the despair feels complete. But nonetheless, we make the commitment to just one more day. We shake off the mind- numbing exhaustion of our psychotropic drugs and we step out into the day. We have no heroic expectation to conquer the day or to find a cure in it. The commitment is to simply live it.

Yet the miracle is that if we dare to make the commitment to simply live the day, if we dare to revolt against the prophecies of doom and stigma which surround us, if we dare to swing our legs over the side of the bed, stand up and seize the day one day at a time, something wonderful begins to happen. We begin to heal. We begin to experience a sense of dignity. We become more than a victim. We move from being passively pushed around by our environments to being survivors who are passionately pursuing our journeys of recovery.

Healing does not happen quickly. We cannot will or command healing to happen. Healing comes at a level prior to what can be willed. For instance, healing "comes" in the same way that sleep "comes." When we want to sleep at night we usually lay down on the bed. But we do not immediately fall asleep. In other words, we fake it for a while. We begin to curl up, fix the pillow in a certain way, perhaps let out a certain weary sigh, and finally begin to imitate the breathing and bodily posture of the sleeper. And then by some mysterious process which we do not understand, a moment arrives when sleep "comes." Sleep comes and settles on this imitation of itself which we have been offering to it. Thus we succeed in becoming what we were trying to be, one who is sleeping. (Merleau-Ponty, 1962)

The same is true for healing in the recovery process. We cannot will healing to happen to us. However, just like in the example of sleeping, we can assume the posture of one who is surviving and recovering. We can swing our legs over the side of the bed, stand up, face the promise and the pain of the day, seize the day and live it. This is the posture of recovery. And although it cannot be willed, healing will come in its own time, in its own way. Healing and recovery will slowly come and settle on this 'imitation' of itself which we have been offering it.

And so my friend, recovery is not about heroism. It's not about climbing mountains. It's not about trying to get normal. It's not about slaying the dragon of mental illness. It is about living this day and in so doing, not allowing despair to come over us. Recovery does not happen to heroes through some secret fortitude of the heart. It happens for ordinary people like me

and you who, upon awakening, swing our feet over the edge of the bed and stand up. We stand up and look the day squarely in the face knowing that today will not bring total cure or total relief from our pain. It means rather than despairing in the face of our pain, we seize the day with a fierce determination that only survivors know. It means that we head out for our supported work placement or our TEP or our pre-vocational work unit. It means that we do this work with pride and we are not ashamed. We do this work because it is part of our vocation. It is part of our recovery. It is a step in our project to become who we are called to be. My friend, we have not been called to lives of meaninglessness and uselessness. We certainly have not been called to be normal. Rather, we have been called to discover, share and celebrate the unique and precious gift that we are. That is our vocation.

Oh, and one final postscript. You said you were burning all your bridges. No way, my friend. There are no bridges between people. There are only arms that reach out and can be connected. Right now you are exhausted and collapsed from all that mountain climbing you were doing. For right now you have withdrawn your arms and wrapped them about yourself in order to protect yourself. That makes good sense. By my arms and the arms of the rest of us on the team are still reaching toward you. When you are ready, please reach back. Someday I'll need you to do the same for me."