

The Poet Magazine: Poetry for Mental Health

Interview with John F. Zurn July 23, 2022

John's experiences with mental illness began when he was 14 years-old. Depression, manic episodes, psychotic breaks and alcohol abuse resulted in hospitalisation, homelessness and jail. Now on the road to recovery, a combination of counselling, medication and creativity has completely transformed his life.

Thank you for talking to me John. When did your first experiences with mental health begin?

My experiences with mental illness really began when I was 14 years-old, growing up in upstate New York. At that time, the legal drinking age for alcohol was 18; so 16 year-old teenagers could make fake identification and buy alcohol, and 14 year-old students could buy from them. So I drank every weekend, and all summer throughout high-school. But, alcohol notwithstanding, I was also a pretty good student, played the trumpet, and ran cross-country and track. Eventually, I was awarded a partial scholarship to St. John Fisher College in Rochester, New York. But, in the summer of my freshman year, I had a life-changing experience: while I was jogging around my uncle's resort, I became violently ill with severe cramps. By the time I arrived at the hospital the next day, I had to have an emergency appendectomy and, back in 1974, if my appendix would have burst, I surely would have died. For the first time I realized that death was both real, and inescapable, and over time became obsessed with death. Depression began to overwhelm me and I lost interest in almost everything.

And then what happened?

Eventually, when the depression finally lifted, I experienced what could be described as three consecutive "manic" episodes. During these "psychotic breaks", I deliberately raced my thoughts as fast as possible, seeking answers to my questions about death. During these episodes I was hospitalized for months at a time, and since my symptoms were manic, I was also consistently misdiagnosed as a consumer (patient) with schizophrenia. Then, two years later, I finally made a very serious suicide attempt and was a patient in intensive care for about a week. Ironically, however, that desperate act provided the vital information needed to correctly reach my diagnosis of bipolar disorder.

How did things develop from there?

I eventually got into very serious trouble. I hired a cab from Elgin (Chicago) to Champaign - a journey of around 160 miles, costing two-hundred and fifty dollars - so I could visit my brother. Since my brother was more interested in studying than seeing me and partying, we quickly parted company, and I ran out of money. A university counselor gave me a bus ticket back to Chicago, and when I arrived at about 2 a m, I began wandering the downtown streets directing and blocking traffic because I firmly believed I was the fifth Beatle, and that one of the group members was coming to pick me up. People from a nearby bar threw bottles at me, and a man tackled me to the ground. Before long, the police came and I was taken to the psych division of Cook County Jail, called Cermak.

What was that like?

To be honest, it was a vicious, brutal place. After about four or five days, I was pushed out the front door by two officers. I had nowhere to go, had no belt or shoes, and was told to "behave myself." I wandered around the Chicago area again for a while. I was then re-incarcerated in another section of Cook County Jail. This jail was also a violent world of savagery and despair. To be honest, I didn't think I would survive it.

How did things start to change?

Acceptance, for me, has been a process over time, and I finally realized that taking medication was a safety issue. Taking medication, and going to counselling, was a very humbling experience for me as for many people, including myself, taking medicine and receiving counselling was a sign of weakness and a lack of courage. But they are not, they are a road to recovery, and now, my bipolar disorder no longer rules my relationships nor dominates my life. Instead, it has made me a more creative and compassionate person. By accepting my illness, I have become more disciplined and productive because I better understand and manage my thoughts and feelings. With the help of my wife, Donna, I now cherish a life I once considered worthless.

Generally, how do you think poetry, writing and being creative can help people with mental health challenges?

Creativity helps redirect delusional impulses, so we express ourselves in more socially acceptable ways. For example: writing stories and poems may help channel and manage this energy into something tangible before it overwhelms. A number of us with bipolar disorder have a high degree of intelligence. However, we can't handle a lot of stress, partly because of the anxiety that is often part of the diagnosis. Creativity, like writing and painting, for example, are practiced with no one else around. Working alone, we can fully engage our intelligence without any outside pressure. In fact, the only stress we usually

experience is the pressure we put on ourselves. In addition, it is very difficult to find any job that has high intelligence and low stress. Creativity gives us a chance to build our self-confidence, maintain a genuine sense of purpose, and overcome boredom.

Creativity expands awareness because, in the process of writing, we can grow spiritually by developing self-discipline. After creating a poem or story, we become a different, more mature person. In other words; thoughts and actions that once led to mental illness like "wrong turns" and "crash landings" no longer influence us. We have evolved to a new expanded level of understanding.

And lastly John, how has poetry, writing and creativity helped you personally recover?

For me, creativity also provides a sense of closure, and helps resolve festering emotions and unresolved conflicts. I think about a problem, such as a terrible memory like Cook County jail, and then I write about it, and then I often experience a cathartic feeling of moving past the experience. Sometimes when I'm depressed, I can capture the actual feeling, then describe it, and then let it go.

"Creativity keeps my mind positively occupied, so it doesn't have the chance to focus on doubt, anxiety, and restlessness."

MANIC WIZARD

Today the wizard actor plays,
a role he has created.
He energizes every cell
and wanders streets elated.
Above his head he calls the clouds
with mantras filled with rain.
Thunder and his waving arms
keep time within his brain.
This wizard knows the secret signs
in every spruce and willow.
He counts the numbers 6 and 9
and dances but none follow.
Back at home the TV screen
gives messages of grace.
Music from the phonograph
affirms the wizard's faith.
But mortals clad in black and blue
begin to close the noose.
They come and talk of things to do
beyond the wizard's room.
Finally, the wizard rides
into an institution.
Believing wizards ought to hide
they make his reservation.

LEMONADE STAND

The cutesy slogan
on my counsellor's almighty wall read:
"When the world gives you lemons make lemonade."
Of course he was paid, and I doubt he had ever tasted
"real" lemonade in his entire blueberry
life

PRIDE

A delusional prophet
sits on his self-righteous ledge
surveying his garden below.
The furious wind
rushes at him,
till his pride and his balance
let
go.

THE JOHN LENNON SHOW

Lennon sang and danced in the sun.
He sings and dances still.
Lifting the veil with the ritual
with only the picture-the show.
The music is great if I stay up late
and turn down the volume too low.
The images pass, the sound bites are trashed,
and only the music can flow.
Projecting my image in time and in space,
I discover the future is now.
I give peace a chance
and join in the dance,
believing that love is around.
But the storms in my mind,
deceived by desire,
I shoulder the karmic wheel.
The mantra I chant is merely a chance
for my ego to turn me to steel.

MYSTICAL WORLD

A freight train whistle
fills the clear night air,
like a ghost patrolling
some mystical world.
The melancholy droning
invites contemplation,
as the click clickity wheels
keep time in the sky.
Crickets join the gathering mantra,
while deep in the mind
the buzzing seeps through.
Slowly and deeply all sounds intertwine
dissolving the world into energy.

ABOUT JOHN

Despite his life long struggle with bipolar disorder, John written and published numerous poems, short stories and sci-fi fantasy novels. As an advocate for mental illness issues, he has given over four hundred presentations for the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI). In his most recent work called, *Metamorphosis: From Mental Illness to Spiritual Awakening*, the author describes poetically, his journey through mental illness and its effect on his spirituality. John taught for many years at a variety of private schools and sheltered workshops. He is also an avid hiker, gardener and social service volunteer. He has an M.A. in English from Western Illinois University and has been married to his wife, Donna, for over forty years. She has been his best friend and the strongest element of his support system.

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