

My Story

By Ann

“The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain.”
By Kahlil Gibran

This is not my fault, nor is it your fault. I inherited a genetic disposition for bi-polar disorder which shows itself in many of my family members and took my father’s life. When you understand your illness, seek proper help, and are monitored by a psychiatrist who prescribes necessary medications, you can have a balanced and meaningful life.

Family and friends are important but don’t expect them to understand what is happening to you. Very few families are well-informed and they can be critical, afraid, in denial and hurtful. You need only a few loyal family members, if you have any capable of understanding bi-polar disorder, and a few close friends to validate you. Once you get through the roughest periods, your happiness, and well-being are proof to those who belittled your problems when you were fighting for survival. One day you will have the respect we all crave. Sadly, one receives flowers, occasional meals, cards and visits when recovering from surgery, breaking a leg or losing a loved one, but a depressed person can be isolated, in great pain, suicidal, in need of friends, and no one seems to notice, or understand the agony of depression’s grip. When we resurface, most assume we have been on a glorious trip, have been busy with exciting activities or enjoying our lives in other ways. I try to impress upon my friends that if I am not seen or heard from for two weeks, to give me a call. I do benefit from human contact. My husband and I often carry the burden alone.

When I realized I had an important story to share with all of you, I began to search my memory for significant experiences in my past. I had wonderful stories to share about my husband, son, family friends, doctors, therapists and all who had helped me reach a point of hope, balance and understanding. I believe a sense of humor is something one needs to survive in this world, whether mentally ill or not. We all face burdens and hurdles in life, and without being able to laugh about some of the situations and experiences we have, I’m afraid we would walk around with gloom and doom written on our faces. What I did not expect was the pure agony of reliving periods of serious depression and mania. The pain came to the surface, again, and I was left, for a time, almost paralyzed by the battles I endured during my times of utter despair. I cried like I have not cried for twenty years. It is good to go back to refresh our minds to realize our success. It has sparked even more empathy for others who have not sought help or are being treated for the first time. My Grandmother used to say, “Be not impatient with despair, but wait as one who understands.” This is more easily said than done, I know.

I believe that people, who suffer from mental illness, are among the finest actors in the world. When Dick and I have attended functions, been on business trips, or spending time with family or friends, I often turn to Dick when we are finally alone, and say, “The envelope, please.” My academy award winning performance was magnificent. I could

not possibly count the times I have heard, “I can’t believe you have ever been depressed!” “You never seem depressed.” “You are always happy, good humored and I can’t visualize you depressed.” I wonder, “Do I need a wheel chair, a white cane or a cast to prove my disease exists, or would I be wise to call friends to stop by when I look as though my face has been run over by a truck?” We see Hallmark cards about coping, getting well, and hospital stays. Are there any for depression specifically? Where are the notes saying, “I am thinking of you during this difficult period?” Because of this flaw in our society, I spend time with people who are dying. I truly understand their loneliness, isolation, hopelessness and pain. Pain comes in many forms. My mental illness has given me compassion, empathy and discernment for those literally neglected during times when human contact is of utmost importance.

Like diabetes, bi-polar disorder remains a part of our genetic make-up, although proper treatment allows us to have fulfilling and happy lives. That does not mean that we don’t need tune-ups with our psychiatrists or the benefit of psychotherapy on a regular basis. I now see my psychiatrist approximately four times a year to review my medications, and give her a chance to observe my behavior. When I come in with a high pitched voice and talk more than usual it is a sign of possible mania. I may be depressed or simply not able to cope with certain obligations and limitations. I might feel overwhelmed and anxious. On the other hand, I usually arrive eager to see my understanding doctor who is concerned about coming events, my planning ahead, not over-extending myself which can lead to either mania or depression. A psychiatrist asks the questions which give the answers needed to know their patients needs in terms of medications and remaining balanced in behavior. Medications are much like soup, in my mind. A little too much salt or pepper can completely ruin the flavor of a soup. Medications are the same. A little less of one medication, a little more of one, or cutting something out altogether makes all of the difference to my sensitive brain. I believe you now will want to hear the beginning of the story of my mental illness diagnosis.

It was in the fall of 1978 when my dearest friend, Phyllis, whom I had met in my freshman year of college, was having tea with me one afternoon. I had been very inconsistent which she recognized, especially since her older sister had been hospitalized not long before because of mania. Phyllis’ mother suggested to her daughter that perhaps I might want to read the book Moodswing by Ronald Fieve. Though this wasn’t mentioned at the time, Phyllis said to me upon leaving our house, “Ann, if you don’t call a psychiatrist and make an appointment I won’t be your friend anymore!” This was a huge jolt. The friendship was and still is, of great importance to me. She left the house and I called her sister’s doctor immediately.

Not long before her ultimatum I had been with her, and went from great laughter about who knows what, and then burst into tears of grief and despair. We were friends who had gone through college together, knew each other’s families, and had some extraordinary common bonds. Most important was that our fathers committed suicide, and each of us was the mother of an adopted son just six months apart in age. I’ll add that we are both dyslexic, but that has provided great amounts of humor and laughter as we compare some of our mistakes. That would be another talk. We love to laugh

together about many shared incidents in the past which we are remembered by our families and friends.

When I went to my first appointment, told my family history to the doctor, expressed how I was feeling, and gave him the chance to ask significant questions about my past, he was convinced I was a candidate for lithium, which would even out my fluctuating moods.

I felt enormous relief since our son had been diagnosed with learning disabilities, and we planned to have him see a child psychiatrist. This would determine if he had emotional problems. I felt relieved because I could tell the doctor that I was bi-polar and could have caused problems. I was grateful that his doctor would not have to point that out to my husband and me. It turned out that Paul was extremely sensitive, verbal, and loving and won the heart of the psychiatrist. He now had an advocate who would help him with self-esteem issues surrounding his learning problems, his bi-polar mother and his Type A father. I remember saying to Paul when he was just thirteen that I was glad he was adopted since if he were our natural child Dad would blame me for his learning disabilities. Paul said, "But I could have turned out like Dad!" I asked what he meant, and he said, "I could have been a bit of a nerd." I love that story!

Before children, I was able to be erratic, was considered very funny, and my moods were not causing problems for others. My husband said he was going to have "she wasn't boring" inscribed on my gravestone, and I told him his gravestone would say, "Please hold." The two of us had good times in spite of my inconsistencies. There was no doubt I was a handful and that there were times, when I was out of control.

In my freshman year at college, I had a boyfriend at Colgate. He was someone I had dated in high school, and the romance once again started to flourish. I went to see him at Colgate. He was devoted to me at the time, and when I discovered he had dated a girl from Wells College, I was horribly jealous and unreasonable. Children of suicide victims do have abandonment issues to begin with, and I was a mess the entire week-end as hard as he tried to comfort me. After returning to Wheelock, I got a letter from him saying, "Ann, you are truly hyper-emotional to the point of imbalance." My roommates and friends thought it was wildly funny and I loved reading the letter out loud which always brought laughter. Had I known that my boyfriend, a major in Philosophy was, as they say now, "spot on", and had I known what bi-polar disorder was in 1960, I would have known to seek help. The only good thing that came out of that accurate diagnosis was that, years and lots of medications later, a dear nephew of mine, needed advice from his Aunt Ann as to how he could end a relationship with an unstable girlfriend. I repeated the quote, which he thought was brilliant, and wrote as I quoted, "You are truly hyper-emotional to the point of imbalance," in his break-up letter. Oddly enough, the Colgate fellow continued to date me and set up a romantic evening on New Year's Eve. At that point he asked me to wear his fraternity pin which is the sign of a very serious relationship often leading to an engagement. I had it one night and returned it in a panic because I really didn't feel right about wearing it. That ended the relationship.

I remember not feeling comfortable with the advances of the man who is now my husband of forty-two years. He said that the moment he met me he knew he was going to marry me, and had the gall to ask my father for my hand in marriage before asking me to marry him. I was a mess, complaining to my mother, and as I met my father coming down the stairs, he said, "Dick is a fine young man." My response was, "Don't push me!" We met November 10, 1964 and were married in June of 1965, just seven months later. We were living in different places, he had a month-long Navy cruise, and at one point I took an all night train from D.C. to Newport, R.I. to end the relationship. I arrived to find Dick had a date for the week-end. I had a complete about face and never turned back.

Until I was nearing the age of my father when he died, and our son was the age I was when he committed suicide, life was not really unusual to me. I remember when Paul was not more than four, and I was crying in my bed, where I stayed for days when depressed. This was all delayed mourning for my father, or so I thought. My precious son said, "Don't cry Mommy, you have a Daddy who loves you, a boy who loves you and two kitties and that's all." The "that's all" brought on more tears.

I needed extensive therapy to work through that part of my childhood, and found a surrogate family with whom to act out my grief. They thought I was great fun, added life to the family, were neighbors and all through the many years of friendship, I felt worried that the husband would commit suicide and that his wife was mean to him. He was a worrier, anxiety ridden and I in my regression felt I was helping him by making him laugh, adding joy to a difficult time in his life, and doing for him what I couldn't do to save my father. In the end, after shared vacations and deciding I wasn't really seven years old, I realized I had to see friends who treated me as a contemporary. Our perceptive son at one point said, "Mommy, I don't see why you think of Mr. so-and-so as a father figure. He isn't even a very good father." When I was diagnosed as bi-polar this couple was appalled and thought it not true. They had majored in psychology in the fifties and considered themselves authorities on the subject. I finally ended the friendship by standing up for myself and not wanting to partake in an unhealthy situation, although I will forever be grateful to them for trying to understand me and listening. I resented the fact that they preferred my ups and downs and unpredictability to my being an honest- to-goodness adult with renewed responsibility for my wonderful, understanding and loyal husband and son. I had strong opinions which I held back so that I would not be abandoned or criticized. My self-esteem started to rebound.

My wonderful husband went to the psychiatrist with me and afterwards bought some very scientific books about brain chemistry and mental illness. He is the scholar in the family. He had observed me as I read Moodswing, and underlined what seemed like every other sentence. Dick said, "Why didn't you just buy the book on yellow paper?" We actually went from the book store to the Ritz Carlton to celebrate the fact that we knew the problem and that I was soon to be on the road to recovery. We shared a bottle of champagne and toasted one another and our steadfast relationship, in spite of the fact one of my siblings has said on more than one occasion, "Can you believe Dick has stayed

with you all of these years?” I relayed the story to Dick who insisted I go back to say, “Dick said to tell you if he had to do it again, he would marry me in a minute!” He wasn’t angry, just completely sincere in his statement.

The following day I began my medication. I remember our going to the old Exeter Theatre to see a documentary about a schooner that had just been built. She was on her maiden voyage, ran into horrendous problems and sank. The lithium was taking effect, and calming me, and I slept through the most exciting parts of the film. I was entering the state of balanced chemistry.

Our son was eight at the time, and was aware of the change in me, and realized he was too young to comprehend it. I still have a copy of Ronald Fieve’s book Moodswing which I saved for Paul. It was on March 14, 1979, shortly after he turned nine. Paul said, “Mommy, will you save me a Moodswing book so I can read it when I grow up?” I wrote his comment in the book immediately. He wanted to someday, understand my illness and what I had been going through. I continue to buy this book for others and recommend it highly.

One night when I put him to bed, he said, “Mommy how did your father die?” He had observed my long period of grief. I told him that he had committed suicide. Paul put his arms around me and began to cry. He said, “I’m sorry Mommy. I’m sorry Mommy. I’m so sorry.” I told this to Dr. Arnold Kerzner, the best child psychiatrist one could know. As our son’s advocate and trusted friend he said, “The reason Paul responded as he did is because all adopted children on some level feel abandoned, and he learned then that you also were abandoned. It has created a beautiful bond between the two of you.”

Now that the medications were working, I wanted to have a psychiatrist at McLean Hospital since I live in Belmont and it would be very convenient. I contacted my childhood friend, and prominent McLean psychiatrist, Dr. John Gunderson. He is internationally known for his work with Borderline Personality Disorder. I met with him, and he recommended Dr. Alan Schatzberg, who is an amazing Psychiatrist who is now Director of Psychiatry and Behavioral Science at Stanford Medical Center in Palo Alto. He was the perfect doctor for me. Dick joined me on many visits which I recommend highly. When a child is lost in a supermarket he will scream and cry for his mother, as soon as she appears the child is often fine and acts as though nothing has happened. When I went to see Dr. Schatzberg, upon seeing him, I immediately felt safe and comfortable and naturally said I was feeling fine. At that point, my husband, Dick, would pipe in, “Is that why you were talking about suicide last night?” He brought reality and the seriousness of my illness to light. Another time he said, “Is that why you backed out of the driveway in a fit of anger and knocked down our trash cans?”

The summer of 1982 was when we were building our retreat on an island in Maine with the help of family and friends, Dr. Schatzberg decided to see how I would be able to handle no medications for a while so he could observe my behavior with a clean slate. During the building of the house, I was short-tempered and overwhelmed by the activity. Our son was twelve at the time, and did everything from A-Z in terms of building with

his father. I was fearful as I saw him going up ladders, with only a little framing around which to maneuver. When the roof was up, there went Paul with a small pine tree and a hammer to nail it to the peak which is a tradition in Maine. That was time for some panic.

When we returned to Belmont, I went about purchasing every single item to furnish the house. I had the dining room furniture taken away to have the table top refinished and the chairs properly cleaned and polished. This gave me the entire room to fill with chairs, tables, beds which would later be assembled, futon chairs for extra sleeping in the loft and waste baskets, fire extinguishers, dishes, glasses, sheets, towels, and all of the other furnishings needed for the house. I went to Filenes and got bedding and towels, and by the time I went for dishes and pots and pans word was out that someone was over charging like mad from department to department. I had to switch from my Filene's card to a credit card and explain my mission.

It was time for my appointment with Dr. Schatzberg, and Dick came along. As I showed photos of the new house and the island to my doctor as well as photos of the dining room crammed with furnishings, he began to roll his eyes as he looked over toward Dick. "Ann, I think you are on the manic side, and that perhaps it is time to put you back on medication." At that point, my husband said, "Can we wait until the house is finished?" In spite of being put back on medication, I completed the project and was a lot calmer and easier to live with, to say the least.

You may wonder whether I was ever hospitalized. I was never hospitalized, but as I look back at times in my life, I realize that there were four times when I basically hospitalized myself! I imagine I could have made it at home with the support of my husband, son and friend Phyllis who were my greatest advocates, proud of my enormous progress and openly spoke of my problems with me. November, April and May are times I am most likely to sink into depression. Twice I went to Pritikin Longevity Center which is a month-long program of eating healthy food, exercise and listening to health lectures. There was structure, exercise and time to be alone. I went to Duke Longevity Center for a month one May. Another time I went to Canyon Ranch for a period of time in the Berkshires where I met my psychotherapist who because I was stable, helped me come to a new level in therapy. I would truly benefit from years of Cognitive Therapy with her because she left Canyon Ranch to practice in Boston. I had a number of therapists over the years and yet I finally found someone who could help me with my childhood issues, family relationships and teach me to see things from all points of view. It is difficult when one is self involved, deeply troubled and not understood by uneducated people or those in denial. I said to Paul's teachers at the beginning of the school year that they may hear some pretty crazy stories about our home life and my behavior in general, and that whatever Paul says to them is TRUE. Having taught school I knew this was an unusual statement on my part. I had parents say, "My child never acts like this at home!" There were always many defensive comments like that.

Paul visited Dr. Schatzberg so that he could ask questions about depression and my problems. He told Paul to imagine being asked to go on a hike with his friends, and

having trouble deciding whether or not to go because of a sprained ankle. Imagine you decided to go, and couldn't really enjoy it. Dr. Shatzberg said, "For your mother, it would be like going on a broken leg."

I decided that there was absolutely no shame in my being bi-polar. This was not my fault. I was proud in fact, that I was chosen to be in an FDA Prozac Study which proved to be successful. Dick was disappointed when the medication was prescribed to the public, because it meant we would then have to pay for it! The success of the medication was so dramatic; I literally felt that an alien had been taken from the pit of my stomach. Every few weeks I took a test which determined the status of my mental health and outlook. You would not believe the person taking the first test could possibly be the person in later tests. I was emerging from the black hole for good. Every year new medications became available. After Prozac, Celexa was a better choice for me, and now my favorite all time SRI (serotonin reuptake inhibitor) is Lexapro. There is something for everyone as long as we realize that medications are themselves diagnostic indicators.

Growing up with the shame of my father's suicide, my mother said, "You don't have to tell anyone your father committed suicide." After my diagnosis, she said, "You don't have to tell anyone you take medication." I decided I couldn't live that way. I had suffered enough throughout the years.

My husband gave Moodswing books to many complete strangers who suffered with depression and suggested they call me. Our son, in an English class, read a book which had a manic/depressive person in it. He told the teacher of my illness. He was sixteen years old. She said, "Paul, I am sorry; it must be very hard for you. He said, "No, my Mom is doing great. She has a good doctor, takes medication and I am very proud of her."

Along the way I have reached out to help others whom I recognize are dealing with mania or depression. It is amazing how responsive people are, how glad they are to talk, and how many people have family members, friends or acquaintances who are suffering. I have a library at home with books I give to people on a regular basis. Some of my favorites are: Moodswing by Ronald Fieve, The Unquiet Mind by Kay Redfield Jamison, Darkness Visible by William Styron and Conquering the Beast Within by Kate Irwin who wrote and illustrated the book when she was eighteen years old. There are hundreds of books in bookstores, second hand bookshops and on line, to help those with bi-polar disease, depression and all types of mental illness. Kay Redfield Jamison is a psychiatrist at Johns Hopkins, is bi-polar, and has written many remarkable books on the subject.

I am a better person after all I have been through over my life time. Even as a child and growing girl, life was harder for me in ways, but I compensated. I was energetic and active, and was happy to see that in my high school year book, the chosen quote to describe me is, "Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm." I didn't even know that there would be exceedingly rough times ahead, and that I would one day be

standing before an audience sharing my story. Naturally, I could not begin to lead you through my entire journey, for which I am sure you are grateful!

My greatest satisfaction and success in helping another has been my ongoing friendship with a remarkable young woman I met on my way to Washington, D.C. She now has a brilliant blog about her horrifying depression, and painful year trying to get the right doctor and treatment. As a writer she is totally honest, open, and able to find humor as well as comfort in her strong faith. I urge you to read her blog. It is for everyone who wants to better understand mental illness. Her research is unlimited and her dedication is unequalled.

I will list the books I have suggested and add the address of Therese Borchard's blog which is www.beliefnet.com/beyondblue. As you leave I will pass out the list of references. In the month of June of this year, 2007, Therese had 200,000 visits to her blog with more comments than you can comprehend. Reading this is an education in itself and she is soon to publish a book with the title "Beyond Blue".

In closing I want to read one of Therese's Post on her blog which shows we can all make a difference in fighting stigma.

My Guardian Angel Ann

On April 15, 2005, I met my guardian angel on a train from New York City to Baltimore, a train I had to sneak onto because of an Amtrak strike.

With people standing in the bathroom, in the café car, and in the aisles, I searched for some open space. A woman in her 50's with platinum hair and a gentle face moved her bags from the seat next to her and said to me, "You can sit here."

It was the first chance to think about my manic day: throwing 25 book ideas at my agent, telling inappropriate jokes to a colleague, and scribbling furious notes about random thoughts. Suddenly, a gorgeous woman seated in front of me got up to leave. She didn't look a day older than 25, so when I heard her mention her adult children living in New York, I said to my train partner, "Genes: some people get all the good ones."

"Ha," she replied, "And I got mental illness."

"Me too," I responded.

"I'm manic depressive," she said.

"Me too," I responded.

We spent the entire three hours talking about diagnoses, medications, psychiatrists, and therapists. I told her that although I had been recently diagnosed as bi-polar I didn't like the idea of taking a mood stabilizer.

It turned out Angel Ann was the first sane, articulate bi-polar person I'd met. But I forgot to get her number.

Life is mysterious, though, because don't you know that in my rush to get off the train, I left my cell phone on my seat. When I realized I had lost it, I used our home phone to dial its number. My angel answered, and she gave me her phone number.

As my depression worsened, I carried her number in my pocket everywhere I went. Sometimes I phoned her daily to hear a nugget of wisdom. "It won't always be like this," she said, and I believed her because, unlike other friends, she had been there. A woman of strength and determination, she stuck her tongue out at her diagnosis, and went on living her life. I wanted to be like that. Like my angel. I still do.