

My life through the eyes of my mother: From Adversity into Integrity, a discovery about the nature of manic depressive illness into remission or recovery

I was born into a family of three sisters who were extremely competitive socially, and I honestly felt quite out of place. My father was sometimes recalcitrant and quite obstinate in his beliefs and as children we were required to sit at the table at mealtimes and participate in equal family discussion about many different related topics including having to go to regular Sunday school at Woodhouse Grove church whilst we resided in Box Hill north Melbourne during my childhood. I did not have many friends but I cherished and was loyal to my peer group until my teenage years when the school bullying set in and I was principally suffering from substantial personal anxiety stemming from this procurement to date.

I had two grandmothers in my life and grandma was truly the favourite as Nana had told some objectionable lies whilst she was intoxicated with an alcohol problem for many years to come. My mother was pregnant with me in 1969 and I was born on 21 May 1970 as I was conceived out of wedlock and my Nana had told me that I was only an excuse for their marriage and speeded up the process when my parents actually got married. We were all living in Middle Park at that particular time and my father was employed as an accountant in the mining industry. I was bullied at school in my primary years and subsequently throughout secondary college in the eighties until I successfully completed my Victorian Certificate in education in 1988 – not with a high tertiary score, but enough to get me into university in Tasmania in 1990.

I worked for a few months in 1989 with the ANZ Banking Group until my employment was terminated for drinking in the job and too many late nights being unable to concentrate on things and manage my time effectively. I moved to Hobart from Perth in 1990 for the purposes of seeking appropriate employment in Hobart in the eastern states and to attend university studies as well. Much to my demise it was a continuous drinking binge with everyone getting blotto in orientation week and throughout the academic year too. My results suffered vehemently and it was relatively fortuitous that I was placed on academic probation for 1991 by repeating the year but after having returned home to Perth later that year I was chronically depressed and paranoid of others in crowds. I had no delusions or hallucinations but it was apparent that I was suffering from some sort of mental illness, namely manic-depressive illness depression phase. My family was supportive of the need to take medication but I thought that I would fight it with alcohol and largely enough it had the reverse effect, making me transcend into a manic state, and my family did not know what was happening to me because of the severity of the mood swings. I had a good recall of numbers so I always remembered my number for everything. I moved back to Perth and was drinking quite heavily, harassing patrons in pubs and hotels, insisting upon my rights and values being respected which invariably resulted in altercations with security and management and I was thrown out on the streets as a street kid was.

I got into trouble with the Western Australian police force for drunken disorderly conduct, car stealing offences and petty larceny and I was convicted with two years recognisance by the WA court of Petty Sessions in Perth on 19/02/1992. I moved into a group home before being discharged from a psychiatric hospital that drugged me to the eyeballs and frequently locked me in seclusion. Principally, my anger manifested itself when my mother refused to allow me to move back home because of the inherent impact my illness had had on the girls in the family. I hence moved into the Richmond Fellowship of WA in Victoria Park Perth where I learned living skills to be less bombastic and intolerant, irascible in my behaviours exhibited in Graylands Hospital.

In 1992 the family moved to Sydney following an interstate transfer with dad's job but I was still not able to live at home as I moved into a psychiatric rehabilitation supported accommodation

home in Wahroonga for a year until I moved out in 1994 where I made many friends with a similar circumstance to myself. I later moved into a NSW Department of Housing housing commission flat in 1994 whilst in a hypo-manic state and got many of the residents offside. I was living on the mighty northern beaches of Sydney at a place called Dee Why where I actually belonged to the surf club and became qualified as a lifesaver in 1995, and I was in a relationship with a girl called Katrina. Although we don't see each other anymore we stayed as friends later until 2000. I returned to study and successfully completed a certificate in office skills, drug and alcohol work, diploma in community welfare through Sydney TAFE and a bachelor of Social Science (Social Welfare). I had the verbal and written support of Milton Luger (founder of Odyssey House) who remained as my confidante and counsellor until 2001 when unfortunately he passed away attributed to prostate cancer. My relationship with my family grew and grew and I had support for my drinking escapades and I worked for McDonald's for six months at Brookvale store near Manly on the northern beaches.

It was 1996 and I met a lovely future prospective girlfriend called Kirsten in a northern beaches nightclub. We have been friends for 15 years to date. She is from a place called Bilgola and she suffered from a mental health problem like me, and we were very supportive to one another on the phone until she became my girlfriend. She helped give me insight into God our lord as we attended church in Oxford Falls in Sydney and she provided the light to me eventually accepting my illness, dealing with associated problems and putting them into their real context.

I had met David and Jillian in Dee Why. They also encouraged me to come to church, but if it were not for the support of the Dee Why Surf Club, my life would be in a shambles right now as they helped to stabilise my mood swings. I successfully completed my degree in 2004 and completed additional studies at the University of Western Sydney (UWS) in 1999. A kind lecturer from UWS helped me with an appeal to Charles Sturt University in Wagga Wagga to help me effectively complete my studies on my terms, and my family was overjoyed and happy with my level of achievement, as dad wanted all of his kids to achieve milestones in their lives as all the children possess a tertiary qualification to date.

The family relocated from Sydney back to Melbourne in 1999 and my father kindly purchased me a property in the quaint suburb of Seaford in Melbourne's Mornington Peninsula for \$105,000. It is now worth a staggering \$360,000 and I live with my puppy dog Buddy. He is a cross between a cocker spaniel and a border collie. He is three years old and he is a beautiful and wonderful dog that is quite obedient and productive to say the least. I have been living at Seaford managing on a pension and my father has paid off the mortgage on the property. I had started to go to church and have established a network of Christian friends who are quite helpful and honest and supportive of my medical condition. I have stopped playing competitive tennis now and concentrate my energies on walking the dog on the beach, swimming and riding my bicycle for everyday fitness and routine. I now suffer with type 2 diabetes but it is under control with medication and good insight, and I check my blood sugars on a daily basis. My family relationships are improving somewhat due to their ongoing support and values and the recent passing of grandma actually serves to reinforce the need for compliance with appropriate medications. Anyone with a mental health problem should seek support from a psychiatrist, counsellor, GP or other relevant health professional, as bipolar illness can be managed with Lithium Carbonate and other antipsychotics as from here we learn insight into the condition.

This book excerpt is a tribute to the late Milton Luger, died 14/08/2001, Sydney, and wife Ros McDonald-Luger.

Stephen Ross