

**Opening our eyes**  
***Imagining life without a mental illness***  
**by Nan Dickie**

Sometimes I try to imagine living a life vastly different than my own. I try to imagine what would be like to be blind and deaf throughout my life, but I can't because, fortunately for me, I have always been able to see and hear.

Why do we try to imagine a life that isn't our own?

I think we do this because curiosity in any human being is a natural, usually healthy, activity. Where would we be if we didn't imagine at all in our lives? Life would be flat and we would be stuck. For those of us who live with clinical depression, we may hesitate to venture down an imaginary "better" path, as it can quickly become fruitless and frustrating. But it needn't be so.

Recently I dared to ask myself how much time I have spent going into, being in, and coming out of depressive episodes. I was shocked and dismayed when I summed up the months and months—actually, too many years.

Then I asked myself, "**What could and would I have done** with my life had it been otherwise?" Merely asking the question frightened me, as I thought I might conclude that my life, so marked with black holes, has been a terrible waste.

For the first time in my life, I allowed myself to fully consider and honestly respond to that question. It was a very sobering exercise, as the would-have-done was quite different than the what-has-been. But I quickly came up with the more important question, "What have I done with what I've been given?" Yes, life has given me this disorder. I came by it partly through family genes. I didn't "make up" my illness for some perverse or compensatory reason.

In terms of my own real career, I took on meaningful work, though I couldn't do that work constantly due to my episodes. I have carved out a meaningful life style and have nurtured many friendships. And I have been writing about mood disorders for twenty years.

The short answer to "What have I done...?" is "The best I could do," and I am doing my best now within the existing parameters of self-understanding, compassionate friends and family, and competent medical care.

My life couldn't have been different back then. I had not lost valuable opportunities. I had merely missed out on impossibilities. Having asked and answered the "back then" question, I can quite honestly say, "This has been my life. This is my life. And it *is* worthwhile."

The most I, or anyone, can do today is live fully in the present. The future for those of us with mood disorders looks brighter than ever before. On the personal front, I will continue with

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the excellent ongoing medical care I have carefully chosen and maintained, and I will continue to seek and apply new techniques of self-care.

Now instead of asking myself, “What if I didn’t have this disorder?” I ask “What more can I do, given that I have it?”

*[Nan Dickie is the facilitator of a peer-led depression support group in Salmon Arm. Meetings are held the first and third Mondays at Askews Uptown community room at noon. Everyone, including supporters, welcome. Info: [ndickie@telus.net](mailto:ndickie@telus.net); 250 832-3733.]*