

The Un-drugging of Annie, Part II

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Unable to support myself, I applied for and got Social Security Disability in the summer of 1991, and got a new therapist. Dr. Paul Cohen was a psychologist and a nice Jewish boy from Long Island who had devastated his mother by deciding not to go to medical school, although both his aptitude and his achievement qualified him for entry. I saw him twice a week. He told me he thought I had sleep apnea, and I told myself he was crazy.

I went to an “alternative” doctor who had abandoned pharmaceuticals and was treating with nutrients. He diagnosed me with a severe intestinal yeast infection, neuroendocrine imbalance, food allergies, and hyperinsulinism. I asked the endocrinologist what hyperinsulinism was and she said it was diabetes mellitus, type II. I stopped eating foods with sugar or yeast, and severely curtailed my carbohydrate intake. I took such nutrients as the doctor ordered and I could afford. I got a little better.

In the same office with the alternative medicine doctor was Dr. Stephen Wechsler, a chiropractor. After my first adjustment, I pitched into a screaming black depression. At the second adjustment, Dr. Wechsler claimed responsibility for causing it, and reversed it with another adjustment. Follow-up adjustments seemed to make no difference in my overall health, so I stopped seeing him.

I went to more psychiatrists who put me on more medications and gave me more diagnoses. I now had personality disorder NOS, borderline personality disorder, and obsessive-compulsive disorder. I was apparently disordered all over the place. I also was diagnosed with fibromyalgia. I took birth control pills for PMS, painkillers for fibromyalgia, antihistamines for God knows what, and whatever else the doctor *du jour* ordered.

I hadn't had a date in nearly two decades, which I attributed to having become grossly overweight. My depression was more or less constant, and when I would get suicidal, my hospitalizations would now last five to ten days. I had frequent infections—gastrointestinal, urinary and vaginal.

I acquired yet another psychiatrist, who prescribed yet more drugs. Dr. Nasri Ghaly was both an Egyptian and a Coptic Christian, and he—and he alone—accepted Medicaid. Actually, he thought Medicaid did not pay for psychiatry so he freely treated poor patients. He believed that sick people should be helped, period, end of discussion.

I was suicidal again. Dr. Ghaly prescribed a new antidepressant and I remained suicidal. He increased the dose and I continued suicidal. He increased the dose again and I was still suicidal. He admitted me to the hospital and we talked. I was lying in bed; he was standing with one foot on the windowsill, his elbow on his knee, his chin in his hand, looking out the window. We discussed the pros and cons of increasing the medication versus discontinuing it, then he asked me what I wanted to do. I was happily to learn that when Dr. Ghaly knew what to do, he did it; when he was uncertain, he would ask me what I wanted to do.

I took a long look inside myself, breathed deeply, divided by eleventeen, and said, “Stop the drug.” He did, and I slept for two days and three nights, then woke up happy—*withdrawing the antidepressant stopped the suicidal feelings.*

I worked as an administrative assistant at the Mental Patients Liberation Alliance, and listened to George Ebert rail against ECT and forced drugging, and talk about how

drugs were being used to control us. Secretly, I thought he didn't know what was good for him. Drugs would have been good for him—that was clear to me. After all, they helped me, didn't they? We had a falling out, and I moved on.

Dr. Ghaly was the only local psychiatrist who did the new ECT. As we ran out of drug options, he encouraged me to try ECT. The preparatory work-up included x-rays that showed spinal arthritis. The ECT was weird, frightening, had short-term side effects, and didn't do me any good.

The kidney disease frequently caused me to dehydrate. Semi-conscious, I would be mistreated by ambulance attendants who didn't understand my illness, then transported to ERs where I would be subjected to the pain of tourniquets, IVs, and abusive nurses who looked more at my psych history than at my kidney disease.

Somewhere along the line, I complained of some physical problem and Dr. Ghaly told me he could fix it with acupuncture. I tried it and it worked, so we continued to use it occasionally for bodywork.

By 1999, I was so fatigued that I had to have home health care aides. I had lost most of my teeth to caries and infection, and had to go for dental checkups every six months. I was diagnosed with moderate sleep apnea, but could not tolerate the necessary breathing machine. I alternated between anger and depression and, therefore, rarely had any close friends. I could no longer get up in the morning, and so was unable to continue to worship with the congregation of which I had been a member for twenty years.

I rarely had enough energy to travel the two hundred seventy miles to where my family lived. My family did not come to visit me. Two of my sisters and my father were randomly angry at me for being unable to go to the mall and “shop till I dropped,” or get up early, or conform to planned activities. I was in pain most of the time.

Then Dr. Ghaly got sick and was out for six months. I was admitted to a strange hospital with a stranger resident who wrote that I had taken “every antidepressant known to man,” including but not limited to Prozac, Anafranil, Vivactil, Effexor, Serazone, Pamelor, Zoloft, Celexa and Paxil. The resident diagnosed me with borderline personality disorder again, and when I came back from pass with acute sciatic pain, he refused to treat me, viewing it as the behavior of a “borderline” person. The resident's attending psychiatrist diagnosed me with bipolar disorder, type II. They both dumped me on the street without treatment.