

Preface

When I was formally diagnosed with bipolar disorder in my early twenties, as a new immigrant to Canada, I had no knowledge of its mental health system, nor of the many different kinds of available treatments, nor did I know how to access support. Neither did my mother, my main caregiver, know much about the Canadian health system; she believed that taking medications was the only way to recovery. We both thought that I was unique, the only person to have ever suffered from mental illness. My mother thought it was shameful and discouraged me from opening to others about my bipolar illness.

I kept my silence until I began studying creative writing at Yale University under Dr. Richard Selzer. Though English was my second language, he recommended that I write down the story of my illness. I subsequently wrote a first book, *The Tormented Mind*, and a second book, *Free to Fly: A Story of Manic Depression*. To my surprise, many readers responded positively; some even disclosed that they or their loved ones also suffered from mental illnesses.

On the strength of my books, I was invited to be a plenary speaker at a World Health Congress International Conference where I met a lot of men and women from around the world. I then realized that people from all walks of life, regardless of age, race, financial or intellectual backgrounds, were vulnerable to mental illnesses, especially mood disorders.

The World Health Organization states that one in four people worldwide suffers from mood disorders. Four hundred and fifty million people globally are affected by mood disorders, making mental illness a leading cause of ill-health and disability.

Through my enquiries and historical research, I discovered that there is nothing shameful about mental illness and that recovery, sometimes partial and sometimes complete, is possible, even probable.

I also discovered that the recovery movement that started in the United States and in Canada in the 1990s, as a complement to a purely medical model of treatment. The empowerment model of recovery has proven to be an especially powerful source of hope to me, as it has to others.

This book, **JOURNEYS OF RENEWED HOPE**, consists of seven stories set in Canada, the United States, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and Hong Kong.

The first story, **It's a Long Road to Freedom**, is my story about my struggles and my eventual recovery.

The second story, **Is There Hope?**, is about a Korean veteran with post-traumatic stress disorder and depression hospitalized at the veterans' unit of Sunnybrook Hospital in Toronto, Canada. His reconnection with his daughter gives him a new reason to live.

The third story, **Life Must Go On**, is about an African American pastor's wife in Alabama in the United States, who sinks into depression after the sudden passing of her husband. She comes to terms with her new life with the help of a supportive psychiatrist, a peer support group, and acceptance by her parish.

The fourth story, **Tree of Life**, is about an oncologist from New Zealand who is a lesbian. She does not have the courage to disclose her sexual preference, suffers severe depression and anxiety, commits suicide, but her parents carry on her legacy by devoting their lives to

advocating for mental health and LGBTQ acceptance.

The fifth story, **My Star of Hope**, is about a new immigrant woman from China to Toronto, Canada, who develops a postpartum depression. Support by hospital staff, by interpreters and peers, and by her own determination ultimately lead to acceptance by her husband and her mother-in-law.

The sixth story, **Searching for My Dream**, is about the harsh experiences of a Somali refugee mother and daughter, first in a refugee camp in Kenya, and then in London, UK. The mother's symptoms of schizoaffective disorder and post-traumatic stress are alleviated by professionals at an immigrant centre and by her daughter. The university art scholarship her daughter receives is a dream come true for her.

The seventh story, **Gifts of Love**, is about a teenage boy in Hong Kong who, after his parents' separation, displays symptoms of a bipolar disorder. Mother and son eventually come to terms with the illness and determine to combat social stigma and whatever other change life places in their path.

I hope that, through the characters in these stories, awareness of mental disorders can increase. The general public and also mental health professionals need to know more about a)the ubiquity of mood disorders and b)the fact that recovery from mental illness is the rule, not the exception.

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