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“In the Mood”

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My favorite reassuring quote on mental illness comes from Willie Nelson, who says: “If you ain’t crazy? There’s something wrong with you.” I agree.

Seven years ago, I was officially diagnosed with a mental health challenge called a mood disorder. But that was also the year I found this wonderful congregation.

We folks on the broad mood disorder spectrum (which ranges from cyclothymia to severe bipolar disorder) are often advised by the mental health community not to name our particular diagnosis—because other people might make false assumptions about such labels—and no two of us struggle alike.

For instance, you’ve all seen Psycho—right? Well, that’s not me. Well, not yet, anyway. 😊

My mom had severe health issues, and my Army Colonel dad had PTSD. So I was buttoned down, early—and firmly. I grew up behaving myself. I never learned to act out, or scream—or even cry. I am no drama mama.

People often say “Oh, you seem so calm!” On the inside? Sometimes it’s messier.

I actually have to tap my husband on the shoulder and tell him when I'm in one of my "moods." No, not that kind of mood. Men never miss *those* signals.

I got my diagnosis the way many others do. Feeling confused and scared, I sought help. Over time, my psychologist told me my behavior roughly matched a list of symptoms. a I was concerned at first, you know, about being labelled. But I've benefited greatly from my meds, and my counseling—and by the way, I recommend my therapist, Ethan Bliss. I've also benefitted from reading widely about my—pretty accurate—diagnosis.

My wonderful psychiatrist—Andrew Johnson—agreed to start me out on the lowest possible dose of Lithium—a naturally-occurring mineral salt that is found in hot springs, and has been used for mental health for centuries. I've continued successfully on that same low Lithium dosage for seven years.

Some folks, hospitalized during a mental breakdown are preventatively *overdosed* on Lithium, so later, they hate it and go off their meds. Which is too bad. Solid research over fifty years has shown Lithium is successfully in regulating moods—with few (although some) side effects. Sadly, because Lithium only costs a nickel a pill, it has been deliberately, thoroughly and very harmfully stigmatized throughout all kinds of media. (Think about this.)

I was encouraged to open my mind to trying Lithium by a highly capable, charming, unselfish, and courageous professional acquaintance—and now, good friend—who trusted me with his own private information: hat he'd been taking Lithium successfully for over twenty years. I'm very grateful to him, which is why I'm passing his gift to me ON to all of you.

As it turns out, discovering that I have a mood disorder has been—a relief. Now I have an explanation, if not quite an excuse for all my past disasters, and of course, my 🤪 general outrageousness. Hey, everyone! I'm weirdly wired!

Ultimately, though, my wellbeing is up to me. One shrink actually congratulated me on not being a drug addict, or an alcoholic, or a prostitute, or dead, or in jail. Well, not yet anyway. 😊
Sort of a sideways compliment. Lucky me!

My husband and my children help me— *a lot*. At least when they're not making me crazier.

One big challenge has been accepting that my feelings and my perspectives are not always reliable reflections of reality. I've been encouraged to remember that, for me, things are rarely as catastrophic—or as perfect—as they might seem at any moment.

It's really hard though, not to be able to trust my own bright, dutifully-educated brain, and my own spiritually-scrutinized and extensively self-helped emotions. I have to remember that all the highly distracting emotional and mental stories that sometimes take over my brain might just be my stupid, untrustworthy chemistry doing its thing—and not some urgent reality that I must immediately react to, or fix, or change, or run away from, or do something about. No. They're just ... thoughts. Just ... feelings. Passing clouds I can let go of, at least theoretically, sometimes, when I'm self-aware.

As Jeffrey Kripal writes: "I'm learning not to feel guilty about my guilt, not to believe my beliefs, not to think my thoughts." Thanks, Rev. Carl—and Jeffrey.

My own peculiar brain randomly concocts unrealistically optimistic narratives, and sometimes, self-protectively cynical ones. This wide mood spectrum actually works pretty well for a would-be opinion-writer like me. It makes me more empathetic with the wide range of humanity's extremes. So, usually, given some time and conversation on my topics, I can offer a fairly level-headed middle-ground of experiential connections and insights all arising from my own lifetime struggle to make sense of things, to understand life—despite my confusing shifts in perspective.

By the way, I no longer try to understand life. I've given that project up as being a harmfully-ruminative, past-oriented activity. In general, I'm satisfied with concluding that life is what it is, no more than that, and a mystery. A terrible, beautiful mystery.

I'm steadier now than before. My family and my therapists say so, and I agree.

On the bright side, we mood-disordered folk have some really nice qualities in common. Solid research has shown us to be generally very bright, creative, funny, energetic, and intuitive. And, of course—we're great lovers. Which self-concept, at 72, makes me clearly delusional—right? Mental illness can be fun! 😊

Publicly declaring my official membership in Frederick's diverse mental health community is—embarrassing! Especially for a perfectionist-columnist! But it's not like it's some big secret.

And besides, struggling with mental health issues should never be something to be ashamed of. Because, diagnosed or not, labeled or not, helped or not—everyone struggles. Everyone feels shame. We all hide sometimes. And folks, there's no humanity in perfection. And thank goodness, we're all saved from perfection! Right, Rev. Carl? 😍 Thank you!

The day I walked in the door of this sanctuary, seven years ago, it felt like—home. It still does!

I am so grateful to be sharing this weird and wonderful life with my very own supportive, accepting, deeply-thoughtful, and deeply-caring Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Frederick.