

Interview with Evonne Agnello about *Shaking Shame from Mental Illness*

What's the message of your book?

I want people to know that mental illness is a highly treatable and manageable disease. I want people to know that having a serious mental illness doesn't have to define their lives. Talking openly about mental illness and educating the public about it are crucial. To anyone suffering from depression or trauma, I offer the strongest hope. Rather than a life of wasted days of misery, treating mental illness can significantly enhance the lives of millions. I know because I'm one of them.

Why is your story important?

1 in 4 Americans will have a serious mental illness sometime during their life.

1 in 17 Americans will have a serious mental illness this year.

Each day in America, about 100 people take their lives—one every 15 minutes—and 90% of the suicides are related to mental illness.

I believe it's time we look in the mirror and in each others' eyes and talk more openly about this. There's no need for the pain of watching someone deal with it or facing it yourself. Those suffering *must* know this. Too many suffer alone from experiences that are common to countless.

What would our country be like if every American in need of mental health care received full treatment? How many homeless would find worthwhile lives? How much sadness could be replaced with vitality? How many suicides could be prevented? Who will be the next American we allow to die on this doorstep?

Why did you write this book?

As a newspaper journalist for thirty years, I wrote stories about other people and decided I wanted to tell some of my own story. I felt the growth I experienced during and after my trauma and depression might inspire others in similar circumstances to find peace and seek help.

I wrote to understand and tame my sorrow, to preserve my sanity, and to insure that my son would have no unanswered questions about the tragedies that befell his uncle and grandfather.

Describe your writing process.

I began my book by considering the events I wanted to include and started writing them. I worried not about how to begin or the sequence of the stories and learned to quiet the chaos in my mind about how it would all fit together. I trained myself to trust the process. After a while, I had about twenty-five stories that evolved into chapters. I enjoyed that period as whenever I tackled another round of editing, I had twenty-five choices about where to begin. Some were pleasant and confirming and others challenging and took more time to evolve. I found as I repeatedly went over the difficult material, my emotional pain slowly dissipated. As time passed, I could see my perspective changing for the better.

I did most of my work on Washington's Olympic Peninsula, nestled in rainforest cabins or camping in lush, dense forests on the banks of gushing glacial streams, watching glowing campfire embers from my tent.

Did you have shame about your mental illness and how did you get over it?

Yes. In the beginning, I resisted the label. I knew I had periodic depression, but never thought of it as mental illness. When my doctor needed to provide a diagnosis to my insurance company, he told me I was bipolar and I argued with him. While I'd certainly been depressed, I was never manic. He explained that there are various levels of bipolar, and I was bipolar II. He said that with bipolar II, the absence of a strong manic stage is not unusual. People, instead, have periods of hypomania where they're busy, focused, and often highly productive.

I didn't like the diagnosis as I was trying to separate myself from my brother's illness. I fought the idea that since he was ill, I would be ill. Then I learned that while mental illness can be *related* to genetics, DNA is *not* destiny and I was *not* my brother. Ultimately, it doesn't matter what you call it—it's how you feel and function that counts.

What do you want readers to learn from your book?

I'd like readers to find greater acceptance and peace about the mental illness they find in their own lives and in their families and friends. Ideally, candid talk about these issues would lead to more people receiving the treatment they need to be healthy.

What would I know after reading your book that I don't know now?

You would learn how mental illness was manifested in one family—mine—and how it affected us. You might be inspired to find ways to improve your own life and some new books that you'd like to read. You'd learn about the magic and majesty in the Pacific Northwest rainforests and be reminded how nature can restore the soul. You'd learn a bit about life in small towns and what it was like growing up in a weekly newspaper family in Seward, Nebraska in the 1950s and 1960s.

And, you'd learn some of the facts and spiritual power of the Buddhist Goddess of Compassion, Kwan Yin.

What advice do you have for aspiring authors?

Read lots of books about writing. Take writing classes from a variety of teachers and organizations. Get feedback from others and write. Then rewrite, rewrite, rewrite—twenty times or more. That was my recipe.

Books about writing that helped me were:

Writing the Memoir: From Truth to Art, Judith Barrington
On Becoming a Novelist, John Gardner
Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within, Natalie Goldberg
Writing Was Everything, Alfred Kazin
On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft, Stephen King
Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life, Anne Lamott
Writing from the Inside Out, Dennis Palumbo
Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir, William Zinsser and others.

What authors have influenced you the most?

From the eighty-six books in my bibliography, these are among the most memorable:

All Said and Done, Simone de Beauvoir
Opening the Lotus: A Woman's Guide to Buddhism, Sandy Boucher
Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi
Embraced by the Light, Betty Eadie
Personal History, Katherine Graham
East of the Mountains, David Guterson
Our Lady of the Forest, David Guterson
The Gift of a Year, Mira Kirschenbaum
Angle of Repose, Wallace Stegner
Seat of the Soul, Gary Zukav

These are books on mental illness that helped me:

The Noonday Demon: An Atlas of Depression, Andrew Solomon
Darkness Visible, A Memoir of Madness, William Stryon
Unholy Ghost: Writers on Depression, Nell Casey
Night Falls Fast: Understanding Suicide, Kay Redfield Jamison
An Unquiet Mind: A Memoir of Moods and Madness, Kay Redfield Jamison
On the Edge of Darkness: Conversations About Conquering Depression,
Kathy Cronkite