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My Best Teacher

My journey through severe depression and beyond has had a positive and profound impact on my professional practice of psychiatry. Recurrent periods of depression during the majority of my twenties had caused me to initially postpone major life goals. Eventually, I came to a point of despair and hopelessness and had all but given up on myself, my goals and my life. I had begun to believe that I would not be able to have a career or pursue my goals for graduate school and other meaningful activities, including meaningful relationships. I feared that I would not be able to be financially self supporting and if things did not get better, I thought I might not survive past my mid 30s.

I finally sought and obtained the help I needed through mental health services, peer support and spirituality. Peer support was especially helpful in instilling me with the hope that I could get better. I saw people in these groups who appeared worse off than myself, and I saw them gaining hope, recovery, the joy of living, relationships, employment and other meaningful roles. I was inspired and persuaded that it might be possible for me to get better also. This process took time, but the hope and courage and proactive steps I took towards recovery increased over time. Other benefits of peer support were the feeling of not being alone, the support and friendships, and practical suggestions on how to get better. There was also the sense that I was being of service and helping others when I offered support to them. Thus I was able to gain a sense of value and the ability to help others in the midst of struggling towards my recovery.

I wanted to pass on the help I had received by giving back to others and the community. I decided to become a psychiatrist. My work as a psychiatrist has been influenced in a profound manner by my experience and recovery from depression. I have realized the importance of a multi-faceted approach to recovery from mental illness. Hope, self determination and responsibility, taking on meaningful roles, and surrounding yourself with others who believe in you, are all important in recovery from mental illness. Peer support, spirituality and mental health services are helpful for many in the recovery process. I have learned this both in my recovery from depression as well as in my ongoing training and work with mental health clients.

Through all of this I have discovered that my wound has become my gift. My weakness and my deepest source of pain, my chronic depression and hopelessness, have been transformed into my strength and an ability to help, inspire and teach others to recover. My struggle through and beyond depression to recovery and helping others has truly been my best teacher.