

DROWING IN THE DARK
My Decent into Hell and the Long Road Back

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MY DESCENT INTO HELL AND THE LONG ROAD BACK

BY DANIEL C. FRIEND

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to Liza and all the other people who lost hope and took their own lives because they could not find the help and understanding that they so desperately needed. I wrote this book in the hope that we will someday find the wisdom to understand that mental illness is not a character flaw, but is a treatable condition like so many others that once ravaged the earth.

Daniel Friend
Los Osos, 2011

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INTRODUCTION

Mental illness is the last unpardonable sin in America. It carries the stigma of the Scarlet Letter, but rather than A for adultery, it is C for crazy. It is tragic when you stop to think about it. We have come so far in so many other areas, but where mental health is concerned, the public perception is still firmly locked in the 16th century. After an initially rough start during the 1980s, today those individuals suffering from AIDS enjoy more public sympathy than do the mentally ill in this country. Perhaps, because we have hospitals for the criminally insane, people believe that everyone with a mental illness is a candidate for “going postal.”

It is not as if mental illness is rare or uncommon. About twenty percent, or one out of five Americans suffers from some form of diagnosable mental disorder. Ten percent of that number suffer from a depressive disorder. Nearly 35,000 Americans commit suicide every year, making it the eleventh leading cause of death in the United States. Ninety percent of those individuals suffered from a diagnosable mental disorder.

Depression is just one form of mental illness, but it is one of the most dangerous, because of the potential for suicide. Millions of cases of depression go unreported every year for two primary reasons: the cost of treatment, and the stigma attached to mental illness. The real tragedy of suicide, besides the lost lives and broken hearts left behind, is that it is totally preventable.

Can you imagine being so hopeless that killing yourself sounds like a good idea? When your brain is working properly, you don't act on those types of thoughts, but depressed people's brains are like your car when it starts malfunctioning. When your car isn't working properly, you take it to the mechanic and get it fixed. It's the same way with your brain. When you start having self destructive thoughts, it's time to see a mental health professional.

As long as the public at large feels that depression is a character flaw, or is something that people need to "snap out of", and continue to maintain a prejudice against mental illness and refuse to see it as a treatable condition, like any other illness, there will be no hope for the 35,000 people who will kill themselves this year. Only after society makes the decision to de stigmatize mental illness, will we be able to step from the 16th century into the 21st, and start making progress in getting those who suffer from depression diagnosed, treated and back to being the productive citizens they so desperately want to be. Where there is no hope for the future, there is no will to live. We have the science, we have the means. Will our will continue to be hobbled by fear and prejudice, or will we finally display the courage to acknowledge the problem, de stigmatize it and do something about it?

1.

A PREVIEW OF THINGS TO COME

Cold. Bitter, bone chilling cold. Cold and dark. Silence. Absolute silence, except for the sound of my own breathing: "Sussh...blub,blub,blub", and undulating silver bubbles dancing toward the surface. It was the dead of winter, in a flooded rock quarry, 90 feet down.

My ears still hadn't cleared. The pain was so intense that it felt as though ice picks were being driven into my ears. I had tried the standard techniques for "clearing", or relieving the pressure. I had worked my jaw up and down. I had pinched my nose and blown out, hoping that my ears would pop. No luck. The pain had become severe at 30 feet, gotten worse at 60 feet, and was unbearable here at 90 feet. I have had people tell me that I couldn't have gotten to 90 feet without clearing my ears, the pain would have been too great. All I have to say about that is that they weren't me, and they weren't there. My entire life had conditioned me to living with unbearable pain.

If my ears didn't clear soon, I would have to go up. I didn't want to do that. This was my basic SCUBA certification test. Just a little longer at this level and it would be over. I thought that if I just kept on doing what I had been doing, I would get through it all right.

I reached up and opened the wetsuit hood in front of my ears, hoping that by letting in water, I could equalize the pressure and relieve the pain. The water in the quarry was 34 degrees, just a little above freezing. It didn't relieve the pressure, but the jolt from the cold water onto my head almost made me forget about my ears. I did it once or twice more over the next few minutes. My head became completely numb. It felt as if someone were disconnecting the circuits in my brain. I began to feel extremely tired, as if I couldn't stay awake, or keep my eyes open.

We were standing on the side of a submerged bus. It lay on its side and angled down toward the bottom of the quarry, which was completely obscured in darkness. The instructor and Joe, the other student, swam off and disappeared into the murky water. I attempted to follow, but my coordination was rapidly deteriorating. I slipped on the slimy side of the bus and fell halfway into an open window. Something was wrong with my brain; I couldn't remember how to swim, and when I attempted to stand, I slipped again and slid down toward the obscure abyss.

The underwater world was turning, or was I turning? I couldn't tell. I had lost my equilibrium. I tried again to push off and swim, but couldn't. I sank back down onto the bus, slipped off the side and tumbled into the mud. The world was whirling and refused to stabilize. I felt myself start to lose consciousness. "No, no. This isn't right", I thought. "Fight it! Stay conscious!" I commanded myself. My left hand found the emergency inflation handle on my buoyancy control device. I pulled it and I could feel myself suddenly start racing toward the surface. As I shot up, I vaguely remembered something the instructor had warned us about in class. "Don't ascend faster than your bubbles. You will rupture your lungs." I tried to focus on the ladder of bubbles that led to the surface, but was having trouble focusing my eyes. When the bubbles finally came into focus, it looked like a race between them and me, and I was winning. I was leaving my bubbles behind like the contrail of a jet streaking across the sky. I was even passing my old bubbles, the ones which had started up when I was still down on the bus.

“Breathe!” I thought. The instructor had said not to hold your breath when you ascend. I couldn’t remember why at the time. It was because the air trapped in your lungs expands dramatically the closer you get to the surface, where the pressure is proportionately lower. Ascending too fast can have fatal consequences. I blew out some air and felt for the release valve on my BCD. When I pulled it, it released a flood of bubbles, completely enveloping me in a shimmering, silver cloud. I slowed. I pulled it again and watched the bubbles begin to pass me on their journey to freedom on the surface. I was having to battle to stay conscious. My brain was foggy and even though I could see the bubbles clearly now, I couldn’t remember if I was supposed to pass them, or if they were supposed to pass me. I kept fiddling with the valve on my BCD until I equalized our rate of ascent.

I lost track of all time and motion and hung limply, suspended in liquid space, with the bubbles my only companions. After what seemed like an eternity, my head broke through the surface. I bobbed there for some time, unable to move my arms and legs, before I realized that I no longer needed to suck on the regulator to breathe. I spit the mouthpiece out, leaned my head back and closed my eyes.

When I opened them again, I saw the instructor swimming toward me. I remember his face through my mask. His eyes were open wide. I don’t recall having ever seen anyone’s eyes open that wide before. He grabbed my head and ripped off my mask. That’s when I noticed the blood. The mask was half full of it. He yelled: “Spit in my hand”. “That’s stupid”, I thought. He yelled it again. I spit in his hand. He looked at it, swished his hand in the water and yelled it again. I spit again. He looked at it again. Then he opened my mouth and looked inside. He tilted my head back and looked up my nose. Confident that I was not hemorrhaging internally and that my lungs hadn’t ruptured, he held my chin and focused on my eyes. “Can you breathe?”, he yelled. My ears felt like they were stuffed with cotton and I could barely hear him. I took a couple of breaths and nodded. “Can you swim?”, he asked. “I can’t move”, I answered.

He hooked me under the chin with his arm, the way that a life-guard does, and started paddling toward the shore. I was too groggy

to feel stupid or embarrassed. I was aware of this whole scene as if I were a detached observer watching it play out in front of me on a television screen. He dragged me up onto the shore and removed my tanks, BCD, and fins. “Can you stand up?”, he asked. “No. I don’t think so”. I responded. He disappeared and came back a few minutes later with a blanket, which he put over me. I closed my eyes and slept, or passed out. When I opened my eyes I didn’t know where I was. There was just pale, diffused light above me. “Man!” I thought, “Have I been having a bad dream!” I squinted and turned my head to the side. I saw water dripping off a set of tanks, with fins leaning against them. I raised my head and looked past my feet. Water. Lots of water. This wasn’t a bad dream. This was real! It was all too real. I didn’t realize it at the time, but this experience was to become a metaphor for the direction my life was to take over the next decade. It was a preview of things to come.