

*Child  
Seeking  
the Light*

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LIFE'S MOUNTAINS



*Barbara Becker Donner*



PORTLAND • OREGON

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Cover and interior design by Masha Shubin

Cover painting by the author: Mixed media: The San Gabriel Mountains in Southern California (sans telephone poles and other man-made items) was the view from a recent home. The smog was left in the painting as a reminder of reality — the smog/fog with which we live.

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# Dedication

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Dedicated to the psychiatric professionals and to psychologists who are actively trying to change that part of the system governed by insurance companies and/or HMOs not qualified to make medical judgments concerning mental/emotional health.

To those professionals who really listen and respond – those who know that patients do not start new beginnings and become better by drugs alone in six weeks or even six months unless there is an ongoing therapeutic relationship and follow-up based on the patient's life experience, symptoms, and reality.

Also, dedicated to those persons seeking help who do not give up or give in to a few weeks or years of drugs alone. The best combination is talk therapy and drug therapy, in time reducing the latter.





# Thank You

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Thank you to my husband for my educational costs in time and money over the years, and helping provide my freedom to pursue classes and writing goals.

Thank you to my children and grandchildren for tech help, encouragement and responsive feedback, ideas, and art work. They know the value of care, respect, education, growth and becoming responsible persons.

Thank you to my friends and instructors, who helped me in their special ways – with learning experiences, listening acceptance, kind responses and critiques: Prof. Charles Walker, Prof. Maurya Simon, Prof. Thomas M. Johnson, Sally Johnson, Sue Patton, Sue Patton, and Cynthia Whitcomb.

My gratitude to my psychiatrist, and more recently, my PhD psychologist, who helped me through many years in order for me to survive with a decent ability to create, to see the joy in a child, to paint, write, dance, to live! And to discern what makes life worth the struggle: persons, a rose, reality of the “here and now,” birds, books and authors.

They helped me be the “Child No Longer Silent” (p. 113). They save lives.

Thank you to Masha Shubin, Linda Franklin at Inkwater Press for art work, helpful comments and computer knowledge.



A portion of profits from this book will be donated to trustworthy organizations – help for youth and others needing therapy of several kinds.



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# Prologue

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## Life Began at Thirty-Something, Not Forty

*“...this experiencing of the communications of the patient on many different levels at once is one aspect of what the existential psychiatrists like Binswanger call presence ... Harry Stack Sullivan uses the phrase ‘participant observer.’... Existential Psychology is the disciplined effort to clear one’s mind of the presuppositions that so often cause us to see in the patient only our own theories or the dogmas of our own systems.”*

FROM *EXISTENTIAL PSYCHOLOGY*,  
EDITED BY ROLLO MAY, P. 21  
(A STUDY IN ECLECTIC THINKING,  
EXTENSIVE BIBLIOGRAPHY INCLUDED)  
1962

Psychotherapy was not something I had expectations about – I just knew something was not happening in my life, something missing, lost, or (now I know) stolen – probably all three. My life story is so similar to Marilyn Monroe’s, I think it is not a mere coincidence that I started talk therapy weeks after her death in 1962. I had already felt some depression and a general sense of being alone, though I was married with two beautiful baby girls.

“I don’t know where to start.” I said.

“Wherever you wish.” Dr. Haim said, his steady gaze attentive, patient, relaxed.

So I took my time deciding where to jump into my life story. The room was fairly large, soft daylight through the colorless drapes. And so quiet. My chair in front of his desk. His chair had movement to it. I sensed when he noticed my nonverbals

– something important. The chair stopped rocking. He listened and responded occasionally. Someone really listening and responding was so new to my experience, I felt a creeping new freedom that would not be pushed, shaped, or formed by some church doctrine, one school of thought, or one system. Later, I learned that my psychiatrist is eclectic – such a fortunate fact for me. Looking back, I know I was awestruck being with a man who truly listened, responded, smiled sometimes at me, and treated me like a worthwhile woman. Even though this is a psychiatrist’s chosen work, not many are this good. (I met several more therapists in later life journeys, since I had to move so many times.)

More than a year of weekly therapy sessions was not enough to lead me out of the “woods.” I write my story because I know that, today, the millions who need talk therapy are probably only getting a pill and perhaps a few hours of talk therapy. The medication is important, and if the brain has become out of balance, as is now often said, the why of it needs to be talked out or it is likely to come back again and again. Likely, an early trauma is part of the cause.

True and lasting help is in the form of learning about oneself, recovering in order to live a life (not to say in perfect shape or some silly idea as that), a decently creative existence, discovering unique abilities and reasonable goals. The aware patient will do some “homework” and will not assume that answers will be handed to her/him.

(A devastating episode, which demanded psychiatric help, is detailed in Part Two.)

# PART ONE





I

# I Am

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*“I am, I said  
to no one there...”*

BY NEIL DIAMOND

I AM, or could have been one of today’s headlines:

Susan, who drowned her children...the child who shot his parents...the kid down the street who died.

Andrea, who killed her children because of a mental aberration... the high school kid, desperate and without sincere or meaningful help, who gunned down his fellow students...the person who overdosed and died. Wonderful family, it was said of most of them – is that the truth?

Almost no one investigates the depths of these tragic events. Cause and effect is rarely researched enough to bring about understanding and realistic prevention ideas. I am appalled by the cavalier comments in recent years trying to convince us that these incidents are unusual and small in number. These incidents in families are far too common and need research. Horrible events need to be more than just headlines today and insensitively forgotten tomorrow.

Indications are that millions of children who are at risk are waiting in the wings, pleading silently for help, education, release from aberrant parent(s), a beacon of light from spiritual

groups that will encourage, protect, give care and wisdom. Cold edicts, jail time, and inadequate foster care must be replaced with thoughtful and thorough planning – real and lasting help.

Since I survived early trauma (often the cause for later brain imbalance, and unacceptable behavior), I must write. I **am** (also) these youths (now, a much older youth), **except** I had real help. I am, I said, and I was heard in psychotherapy; encouraged to study, read, write, and take classes of my own choosing. Raising four healthy children and learning to write well have been my primary goals.

This is a memoir – a series of significant events in my life – and it contains my personal survival elements – a “window” into important and meaningful parts of my journey.

I was born into the same horror in the news today – guns, violence, neglect, divorce, abandonment, abuse – the difference being that I was born in the early 1930s.

My first five years of life were decently “normal.” My trauma did not last as long as some of today’s youths suffer. The common escapes of illegal substances available today were not visible in my time. I’m grateful for that. Cigarettes and alcohol were bad enough! I learned to control those. Had I been born in, say, the 1980s with the same conditions as I had in the 1930s, I feel I’d have been right out there with those kids hitting the headlines with the kind of debilitating news we hear every week.

“I **am**,” they said, and no one heard. Today, once-silent children are being heard in terrible ways. They are the neglected ones with no one to help – deaf hearts in parents, teachers, pastors, friends – a “welfare” system overburdened with sick families – underpaid and understaffed organizations. The ignored once-silent ones erupt in violence.

We are not protecting our children or ourselves by band-aid kinds of programs. We need funding in the billions of dollars for children, all children. Professionals, free of ineffective government intervention, can bring about realistic change at the grass roots (early life) level where prevention will have a chance at success. We will have eventual change and reduce the number of violent deaths of innocent youth if we start allowing the professionals

to do their work unimpaired by HMOs, insurance companies, and other ineffectual ideas, such as untrained volunteer workers, and untrained “religious” people.

My story will give clues to the “whys” of these incidents and ideas for better action on behalf of the whole culture. The numbers of psychiatric M.D.’s, psychologists, and paraprofessionals are increasing, but my opinion is that we need more psychiatrists who really want to listen and indeed who do listen. When I needed this kind of help it was available, and the government, insurance companies, and HMOs had nothing to say about it! I feel very fortunate about that, and cannot emphasize it enough.

The call for a creative and successful life does not mean some unrealistic idea of fame, fortune, and perfection – or thought of saving the world we did not create. These are burdens some of us feel, and a few of us learn early that these thoughts can be a truly unrealistic venture for the mind and heart. Surviving with a sense of purpose and responsibility is difficult enough. It’s a long journey, creating a life worth living!



When I was about ten years old, my mother was reading a book by Bob Hope. It was, of course, considered funny. Milly, my mother, thought so, and read some of it to me. I listened without visible reaction. This was the opening line, as I recall: “I was born, it could happen to anyone.” On one level, yes, funny. But I felt, “I was born, then what?” It was not so damn funny. That’s the way many youths feel today: “I was born (‘I am, I said, and no one heard’). It can happen to anyone.” We who do understand need to answer the children, because our experiences speak to the need.

Descartes said, “I think, therefore, I am.” More recent philosophies are closer to the truth. We think **and** feel. Human beings are one organism with brain, feelings, all the senses being involved in the life process. Woody Allen said in the movie *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, “It’s hard to get your heart and head together.

In my case, they're not even friendly!" Humor becomes part of the journey.

What follows is my story after the first five years of life. Ages six and seven yield almost no memory, except that which jolts me awake in nightmares. I have come to know that most of my nightmares reflect my traumatic experiences during the two years before my parents divorced, and subsequent abandonment and neglect. I have pieced together the puzzles of my life over a long period of time, after years of a variety of therapies. I know that I am living proof that new research will bring about needed change in the helping professions.

In my early thirties, overcome by feelings of fear and abandonment, I could not function adequately to take care of my three children (ages 6 weeks to 4 years old). My husband was gone on a business trip, and I knew we were soon to move again. I had just started psychotherapy. It was 1963, and my fear and anxiety overwhelmed me. My psychiatrist and excellent care in a private hospital saved my life. These fears, which can be overwhelmingly incapacitating, returned, but in time I learned how to recognize the early signs, and became aware of what kinds of situations might bring on stress. Learning to understand myself, and live accordingly, brought about new feelings of confidence, new joys here and there – like observing the wonder in children, nature, and new lasting relationships.

The strength to face sadness or the unexpected will also develop.



My brother remembers the sexual abuse; I do not. I know that the horrors revisit me in nightmares flashing me awake in terror, but most of the content stays in the unconscious.

There are some clues to events not meant for children. There was a woman who took care of my brother and me for an extended period; we think she had a male friend she invited over to our house. I obliterated my "godfather's" picture from the family album. My father had drinking buddies who sometimes stayed

over. Several of my mother's boyfriends after the divorce are also suspect. I have pieced together some events, studied the results and reasons for myself. Silence was the answer when we did ask questions. Those who may have answered honestly are now dead.

Many traumatic events pushed my mother over the edge, I feel sure. She never really got the kind of help she needed. This is why these stories need to be heard. Help needs to reach more and more children and adults – real help, lasting help. When institutions are necessary, as in criminal cases, great reformations need to replace the inadequate systems currently in use.

Our culture is now in a time when huge numbers of young people need therapy of various kinds, and the indications are that this trend will continue unabated for a long time. Children, especially, are not getting the kind of lasting and meaningful help that they need – and not getting it early enough as well.

Various therapies, for those in need, are likely necessary for as long as the trauma existed. Humane follow-up will prevent future upheaval and trauma.

Healing rarely takes place in the time prescribed by the insurance companies, HMOs, or hospital administration's policies. "Cure" is not some goal of unending peace, happiness, and success. This idea is entirely unrealistic, but some systems tend to promote the idea. Cure is a process – learning to take on the future and path of one's life – the goal of which is freedom with responsibility.

Caring professional persons are keys to a reasonable state of being – along with the patient who is willing to work and to unlock that which causes symptoms or a slave-like life.

Signs and symptoms that need addressing as early as possible:

- Vague wishes without action
- Indecisiveness regarding small matters
- Recurring nightmares and dreams
- Inability to be honest about and talk about feelings to anyone
- Sleep deprivation for days at a time
- Excessive and debilitating fear

The earlier that symptoms are addressed, the better one's life decisions will become. In the life cycle, old wounds may reopen when circumstances cause symptoms to reappear. When this happens, a time of withdrawing and reevaluation is necessary. Family members and friends (with good intentions or unconscious brains) can inadvertently trigger old memories and feelings of unworthiness and fear.

The goal is not conforming to one school of thought or one idea of success in life; rather, the unique life of the person needs to unfold in a process that is as individual as that person.

There are no "shortcuts." The "perfect" life does not exist. It is an individual process. Talk therapy, appropriate medicine, and further professional help will create a life for those of us who have suffered early trauma.

I do not think in terms of "not me" or "why me?" nor do I want to be an exception to any "norm" – there is no "norm." I see myself as the possible anyone, everyone. If I hear a story that is two or three times worse than mine, it does not make me feel "lucky," it makes my pain infinitely worse. It happens to me.

At various times in my life, I have felt the words Neil Diamond wrote: "I am, I said" and no one heard. People with lives intact and little room for psychological thought go about their business unaware of others' pain. Or, they may offer unsolicited advice that can be harmful or useless. I found it necessary to talk first to my psychiatrist, then to read, study, be with, and observe my four children. I read all the recommended child-care books, which helped my self-confidence, and I could see the children were developing in healthy ways. Only then did I feel able to branch out into more activities, some of which are my own definition of therapies. Adding to psychotherapy: college classes, philosophy, music, dance, psychology books, meditations, religious studies, and developing friendships.

My journey, at times, has felt unbearable – like climbing mountains with a very fragile engine. (Yes, I read *The Little Engine That Could*.) Re-fueling the spirit is as constant a need as food for the body.

## I Am... I Said

WRITTEN BY NEIL DIAMOND

“I am” I said  
To no one there  
And no one heard at all  
Not even the chair  
“I am” I cried  
“I am,” said I  
And I am lost, and I can’t even say why  
Leavin’ me lonely still...

PROPHET MUSIC, INC., 1971 (ASCAP)