



Chuck's Story (2005)

It ain't easy being mentally ill!

I know it looks like a lot of fun. Wandering around in Oz or Wonderland, cavorting with your imaginary companions. Learning life lessons from a giant invisible rabbit. Eating people's livers with some fava beans and a nice Chianti.

True, some of us do get lucky that way. For the most part, though, it's a stone bummer. More than once, I have found myself wishing that my grasp on reality would shatter completely, dumping me forever into some twilight world where I was too crazy to suffer any more. Despite my best efforts, it never got off the drawing board. I was sick, but not sick enough. I could not make myself well, and I could not make myself too insane to care. So I changed tactics. Remember how Hamlet playacted at madness so nobody would take him seriously enough to put the skids to his plans for his Uncle Claudius? I spent a number of years doing the exact opposite. To the best of my ability, I pretended to be well, hoping to fool everyone around me, especially myself. I kept at it for a long time.

Mental illness has a number of bonus features, which set it apart from other health problems. The same is true of addiction. When you have both at once, you are a member of a very elite group indeed. If suffering builds character, we are some of the finest characters you're ever likely to run across. Of course, no mental illness that I can think of is in and of itself fatal. Not in an organic sense. Suicide, on the other hand, generally is. Addiction is more risky because of the twin terrors of withdrawal and overdose. While there probably is a genetic component, addiction is a behavior-based malady. You have to go out somewhere to find the stuff and then introduce it into your system. A person could be "cured" by some simple method, like being bound in a straitjacket and locked in a closet for the remainder of his or her life.

Okay, now cue the violins, because here comes a sob story. A true sob story.

A lot of my sobbing got started on account of an SOB who by some accident of nature or poor judgment on my mother's part ended up being my father. They say not to speak ill of the dead, but if I followed that I could never speak of him at all. He was very ill. Illness defined his existence. He was sickness personified. If it hadn't been for his bad qualities, he'd have had no qualities at all. He was mentally ill, severely so, I have no doubt of that. It began to manifest itself in a major way after my mother died. He was paranoid, childish, self-centered, self-pitying, mean spirited and stupid. All of these, I have to add, have played their parts in my own life. I have them too. And I know I got them from him, either genetically or as a consequence of his abuse. And then of course there is monkey-see-monkey-do. I cannot recall him hitting me. (I need to add here that there are a great many things about my life that I don't recall, many of them relatively recent. I never lucked up and had a complete psychotic break, but I guess repressed memory and trauma-induced amnesia are a decent consolation prize. Better than nothing.) I wish he had hit me. I wish he had beaten me with a baseball bat. Anything, ANYTHING but what he actually did. Which was letting me watch him fall apart. For a kid, that is beyond scary.

As a child, I had virtually nothing in the way of adult guidance and nurturing after my mother died. My father was worse than useless. My ethical education came mostly from comic books. I could have done worse I guess. Superman, Batman and Spider-Man were far better role models than my father. It could be that I owe to them the fact that I am not now a homicidal maniac. But every benefit you get in this world comes with a price. As I gained my morality, I lost most of whatever connection I had with reality. I lived in my own head, and everything I took in came from books and movies. I just didn't want to live here in the real world. I was tired of it. Things

quite naturally got worse after my father died. I had held out a small hope that his removal from the world would make everything right again. I still think it was an improvement, but not by much. So, thus orphaned, I had to leave my home in Ohio to go live with my mother's people in Alabama. I have neither the time nor the inclination to start digging in that pile right now, so let me enlist your imagination in a brief exercise. Think back to the worst day you ever had in your life. Now picture yourself experiencing it every single day of your life for six or seven years. Your humble narrator had fallen out of the frying pan and into the fire. But it was a slow fire. A war of attrition rather than my father's frequent guerilla raids. My aunt and uncle in Alabama were good people, but they had no business trying to raise a child. My aunt in particular was seriously mentally ill herself. Of course, back then I never thought in those terms, and neither did anybody else. That's why I never got therapy when I was a traumatized child. It just didn't occur to anyone in my family. They were bone stupid, most of them, and it showed. The two or three that weren't were borderline psychotic. Maybe not even borderline. I should strive to give credit where credit is due. Some of them were true champions of dysfunction. They would have been legendary if neuroses were a professional sport. Damn shame, that. I could probably set a few records myself.



Let us view a bare outline of the rake's progress, from Feb. 2001 until today. I started in my own apartment. I had lived there for two years. It was a nice place. Before long, I lost that. I had intended to enter a weird church-run rehab program of some kind, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. In Jan. 2002, having already been given an eviction notice, I left my apartment, left all of my belongings behind, sold a bunch of my precious old comic books, and set out. I went to Gadsden, Alabama. Friends there. I stayed with them, made a nuisance of myself, sank deeper and deeper into pain and hopelessness, lacked the money to stay as drunk as I wanted to. I had nothing. I was nothing. I was miserable. A second DUI came in 2002. Court ordered a stint at a Salvation Army "rehab" program. Three of the worst months of my life. I can't even begin to tell you. After that ordeal, back in Gadsden with my friends. I met a woman and moved in with her. I became intolerable, she asked me to leave, I got drunk and crazy and had to be dragged out. Another brief hospital stay, followed my committal (commitment?) to the state hospital in Montgomery, and if I thought I knew misery, I was about to enter a whole new league. And keep in mind, I felt utterly alone through all this, as I certainly was. That adds the spice to this stew of despond. One month in that mausoleum, then to a group home for people who were much worse off than me. Not sure why the doc sent me there of all places. But we had no Transition House there, so you took what you could get, and if it did nothing whatsoever to advance your recovery that was too bad. After about a year in this group home setting, I came to OK to take up with my friends, the ones I had "visited" in Gadsden. I felt no sense of belonging to anything, or anything belonging to me. I wasn't a man. Barely a human being. I felt low. I felt sick and pathetic. I wanted it to end. Living in strange, depressing places, wasting my life, year after year. I have to admit now that the only reason I approached Transition House was because I hated the halfway house I wound up in when I left inpatient treatment. Halfway house is a good name for it because I was still halfway nuts when I got there, and every facet of the place seemed designed to help me go the rest of the way. To stay where I was would have led to another disaster. I know this. I was headed in that direction. The whole thing was just too bleak. I could not handle that place. At the time when I most desperately needed a home and a family I was living in an environment with all the charm and warmth and welcome of a bus station men's room. I was alone. I was scared. I was very, very depressed. And why not? You would have been, too. I have no living relatives. None. And precious little of anything else at that point. No job. No wife. No money. Certainly no self-respect, and no real hope for the future. I was a wreck, I was submerged in self-pity, and

somewhere deep in my mind I was trying to put together my exit strategy. From the world, I mean. Why not? My father did it. I saw him do it. It wasn't complicated. Point and click, so to speak. From a clinical standpoint, I had all the qualifications. I was nothing BUT red flags. About all I was lacking was the gun. That and a certain level of courage or cowardice, whichever one of those you need to take the plunge. And I was working on that.

The halfway house had this policy. You had to go out every day and stay gone from 8 in the morning until 4 in the afternoon looking for a job. With no car, no ID, no friends in town, no money... I was on disability, so I could pay my way, but that didn't matter. Nothing wrong with a little shot of the old work ethic. I worked all my life up until I got sick. And I will work again, very soon. I'm not lazy. I'm not a bum. I am in fact a very sensitive little bugger, and the atmosphere at the house was dreadful. I was still sick. Terribly so. I could not tolerate that pressure just then. And then, in the midst of this desert, an oasis manifested itself. I had heard they didn't run it like a combination boot camp and cheap hot-sheet motel. The accommodations were actually pleasant. The staff seemed genuinely interested in me. My sole purpose in approaching them was to upgrade my standard of living a bit, and to be allowed to sleep until 9 if I wanted to. But what I found was so much more.



I do have to walk a fine line between acknowledging and understanding the problems that led to my distress, and making excuses for myself. In the past, I have usually swung back and forth from one extreme to the other. Either it was everybody else's fault and I was a poor victim, or I was a rotten bastard who was responsible for all the ills of the world. Neither one of these gets you anywhere near solving the problem. The truth is actually smack in the middle somewhere. I had some rotten breaks when I was too young to do anything about them, and I was further hampered with two illnesses. Well, more than that actually because I have three psychiatric disorders. On the other hand, I have always had the most wonderful

friends and I also had many, many opportunities to straighten myself out, which for one spurious reason or another I always passed up. Some of it was fear. Some of it was laziness. Some of it was, frankly, a desire to sponge off people. But some of it was very severe major depression, some of it was post-traumatic stress, some of it may have been manic depression (we have not yet determined if I actually have that one or not), and probably 11 or 12 percent was me being a jackass. Well, okay, 20 percent. Okay, dammit, fifty. But that's my final offer. I've got to save something to plea-bargain with when I get to the Pearly Gates. Be that as it may, if I ever start losing faith in my higher power or fairy godmother or the Force or whatever it is, I need only look back at the day my path crossed that of Transition House.

The staff here makes a point of reminding us that whatever success we enjoy is the product of our own efforts. And of course they're right. But they work equally hard to provide us with a place in which to do it. That's all many of us ever needed. If I had been obliged to spend the past year in some kind of an institution or whatever, I am very certain my sense of alienation would have hit critical mass. But once I had been stripped of my distractions and my anxiety, paranoia and depression sunk to manageable levels, I did in fact start thinking in terms of genuine rehabilitation. I dedicated myself to working as best I could toward that goal. And, by God, it is working! I have made huge strides. Believe me, I have never, ever been this open in my life. All that secrecy was a terminal condition. And it really wasn't easy. Once or twice I just had to put my hands over my eyes and jump. I have said things that a lifetime of secrecy had sealed so tight that I just KNEW I could never say them and I hoped I could just kinda work around them. But they showed me different. They nurtured me and helped me to heal. The fact that I was not required to tromp through the streets of Norman until I found a job flipping burgers gave me the free time I needed to recover, and it also allowed me to attend conferences, meet people, share ideas, learn as much as I could about co-occurring disorders and just generally prep myself for a career of my

own in the mental health field. A year ago, I had no direction whatsoever. But they helped me find myself. And they have been so encouraging and so supportive of my ambitions. They have done everything in their power to help me. And this has truly changed the course of my life. And not just my life. Please allow me to set aside false modesty for a moment and tell you that I am extremely smart, amazingly capable, talented to a fault, determined to do what is right and almost unbelievably good-looking. I firmly believe that I will make a valuable addition to the mental health community. In addition to my innate magnificence, I have some fantastic role models to draw on for inspiration in my own endeavors. And if I can touch the lives of others the way the staff at Transition House has touched mine, I will consider myself a complete success. I want to be a ripple on their pond, and spread far and wide the things they have given me.

So you see, the lives that are touched and enhanced by TH go far beyond the "official" tally of residents, outreach clients and former program members (all of whom, I might add, are encouraged to keep in touch and avail themselves of the groups and activities offered here at no cost whatsoever). Add that to the incalculable inspiration that flows from the butterfly effect and what you have is something extraordinary.

If I had had a Transition House 20 years ago, who knows what I might have done? TH is thus far still unique in my experience. If there are any other programs like this one, I've never heard of them. That is a shame. I would love to see Transition House become a template for programs all over the country. The world. The galaxy. And I plan to maintain contact and help whenever I can. Because of what the staff has worked so hard to build here, I have options that I never would have dreamed of. Were I a fabulously wealthy man, I would build and finance them all over the world and staff them with clones of Bonnie, Jeanene, Katie, Elizabeth and Ilene.



What is a dream worth? What price can be placed on a life, and, perhaps more importantly, the quality of that life?

It is actually quite easy to save a life-- an act which can never be more than a relatively brief reprieve from the inevitable, since life is, by its nature, temporary. What is more difficult is to maintain that life in such a way that it is worth living. The fact that life is fleeting makes it far more precious than it would be if we were immortal. If the only goal we have is to save lives, to keep the organism functioning, then we have already lost.

I used to say that Transition House saved my life. But I have recently come to realize that they did something much more profound than that. They helped me get to a place where mere survival was the beginning, not the end.

Mental illness and addiction can be devastating in their own right. And the stigma attached to them tends to make things a great deal worse. A life that has been shattered by such problems is doubly difficult to repair when one must face the sort of scorn from society, family, and even oneself, that often goes with these problems. One is made to feel inadequate on every level. The unspoken prejudices are always there in the room: mental illness is a "defect" that will prevent one from ever having a truly "normal" life; addiction is a moral failing that makes one worthy of contempt. One loses any sense of genuine entitlement. "I don't deserve to have anything good because of the way I am. I couldn't handle it if I had it. I am sick and I am also a bad person. I should just keep my mouth shut and take whatever I can get."

This perception, however faulty, is very common. I know this from personal experience. Once you feel sufficiently devalued, your dreams become impossibilities, and cause more pain than pleasure. The only thing to do is cut them out, discard them and forget them. And live in a world where your only goal is to stay out of the hospital.

And a life like that is one that has lost most of what made it worth living. The spirit withers and parts of it die. Life will never be what you once thought it could be. Everything goes gray, your prospects shrink to a pinpoint, and the future is nothing but more of the same. This is how it is. This is how it will always be.

And this is where Transition House calls B.S.

By the time I became a client in 2004, I had given up on all of my dreams. My life had become utterly degraded, a series of disasters that had moved me close to some kind of brink. I was not quite suicidal, but it wouldn't have taken much. I just wanted to be left alone somewhere to rot in peace.

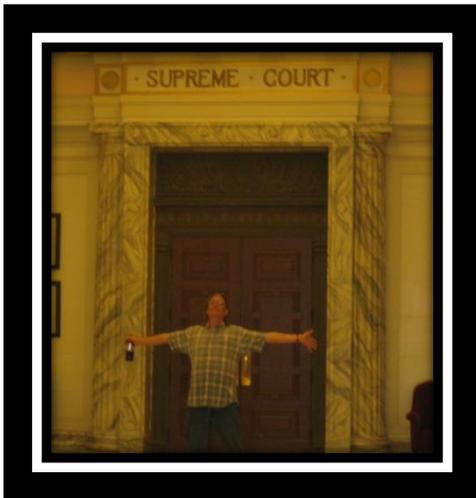
This, however, Transition House did not permit me to do. They badgered, provoked, challenged and nurtured me. It took a while to get me pulled out of the shell I'd wedged myself into, but they persisted. Never before had anyone demonstrated to me the things they did. And I had tons of



experience in therapy and rehab. this was something utterly new to me. Or it might have been something familiar, to which I had never been receptive. Either way, I was a tough nut to crack, but everything they did and said seeped into me and encouraged me to grow, until I finally outgrew my little shell.

Things changed. That feeling of crushing hopelessness lost its hold and began to recede into the past. And there finally came a day when I felt ready to confront those lost and discarded dreams of mine. The largest of those, the one it hurt the most to give up on, was the desire to become a published author. It took me a while to work up the nerve and the faith to entertain it once more. It gradually went from the seemingly impossible to the merely improbable. The process took time, and of course I had many other things going on as I worked to reassemble a life I once thought was shattered beyond repair. But the dream had returned to life, and it waited patiently until I had time to give it the attention it deserved.

Two years ago, I decided it was time to get serious. My attitude had changed drastically, and I do not believe that would have happened if not for the knowledge and support I got from Transition House.



To cut a long story short, my first novel was published in September of this year (2011). The dream I had once declared dead not only came back to life, it became reality. And it was part of the process that I started in 2004. It is not by any means the end of that process. That process will never end. I am now doing much more than just breathing, eating and sleeping. I am living-- living in ways I once thought would be impossible for me. For almost three years now, I have been in a healthy relationship with a wonderful woman, another dream I had pretty well given up on.

The book is a major dividend of the time and effort, without regard to a dollar amount, that Transition House invested in me, and that I was finally able to invest in myself. So is the relationship. Thanks to the chance I got from Transition House, I have managed to reboot my life.

I have truly had a brand new beginning. It took a while, but that is the kind of thing Transition House specializes in. Things that are worth having take time to cultivate. It cannot be done in 28 days or six months or six years. It takes however long it takes, and it should be a celebration, not a burden with an arbitrary deadline. They understand this, and they spare no effort to keep it working. There are many, many stories like mine. The details are different, but the basic foundation is the same.

Transition House does more good with less money than anyone I have ever seen, and my experience is vast. The more resources they can muster, the better they can help clients find and maintain a life that is more of a dream come true than a living nightmare.