

October 7th, 2007

A Promise of Hope

The Astonishing True Story of a Woman Afflicted with Bipolar Disorder and the Miraculous Treatment That Cured Her

By Autumn Stringam

HarperCollins, 283 pages, \$22

Reviewed by Chris Summerville

AUTUMN Stringam is a 34-year-old Alberta woman who chronicles her journey to hell and back with bipolar disorder.

A Promise of Hope delivers on its promise. It provides a fascinating account of how people with mental illness can recover to lead meaningful and purposeful lives.



THE ASTONISHING TRUE STORY OF
A WOMAN AFFLICTED WITH
BIPOLAR DISORDER
AND THE MIRACULOUS TREATMENT
THAT CURED HER

Exactly how the one in five Canadians who will experience a significant mental-health problem can find hope and healing is as controversial as the subjects of religion and politics.



A PROMISE OF HOPE
AUTUMN STRINGAM
With an afterword by Charlie Payne, MD
HarperCollins



There is no public consensus as to what mental illness is, what causes it, how it is to be treated and whether recovery is possible.

Many will not believe that the miracle treatment Stringam finds -- pig pills -- would possible work.

"Hogwash" has been the response of the medical establishment, the media, parent mental-health organizations and even Health Canada.

Insanity

Stringam grew up in several Alberta towns and now lives in Coaldale, just west of Lethbridge. She writes about the insanity in her family, and how they didn't know how to cope with mental illness.

Shame, blame, denial, ignorance, fear and stigma characterized the Stringam family, which experienced generational episodes of mental illness and suicide.

The first half of the book documents the painful, uncomfortable dance between a mother and daughter who endure a love-hate relationship, while the father passively enforces the rules of dysfunctionality: "Don't talk, don't feel, don't trust."

Though mental illness, like schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, is not caused by dysfunctional families or poor parenting, it is well documented that such unhealthy family systems can exacerbate the illness and contribute to relapse.

That's why family "psycho-education" is important along with medication in the recovery process.

As "mom's time on the couch stretched from days to months," a pre-teenage Autumn is terrorized by the sexual abuse of an uncle who "licks his fat lips."

She prays that Jesus will come and take her away from the chaos and the existential hopelessness.

Her greatest fear is "I am like my mother," and indeed she soon develops bipolar disorder, as did her brother and uncle.

Even as her mother attempted and eventually succeeded at suicide, Autumn contemplates killing herself in order to end the hell of psychosis that can plague even the mind of a "genius," another label Autumn wears. Mental illness does not discriminate.

Marriage at age 18 brings no relief. "My marriage was only as good as my moods," Stringam writes.

Obsessed by "suicide, homicide and infanticide," she drifts from post-partum depression to psychosis to a comatose state of "zombie-ism" caused by a cocktail of antidepressants, antipsychotics and anti-anxiety medications that do not deliver hope or healing for her.

Still, the doctor tells her husband, Dana, that he'll be able to find a balance of medications for Stringam.

"Be patient," the doctor says. "There's a combination somewhere that will work for her."

Here the story takes a turn. In church one day, Stringam's father, Anthony Stephan, confesses his frustration to former high school teacher and livestock salesman David Hardy, who recognizes some of the symptoms as being similar to those of agitated pigs.

Experiment

Hardy and Stephan create their own experiment. They begin giving the vitamin



Autumn Stringam



Author and her family

and mineral supplements to both Autumn and her brother, Joseph. Stringam is in her mid-20s at the time. Within weeks both are "free of voices, floating faces and fear" of psychosis.

Other sufferers hear about Stringam's recovery and start taking the concoction, called Truehope at the time and today marketed as EMPowerplus.

The battle is no longer with bipolar disorder, but with Health Canada officials, who wage a war to shut down Truehope.

Determined to allow people to have the opportunity to experience the possibility of recovery from mental illness, the Stringam family takes Health Canada to court and eventually wins.

Do vitamins and minerals have mood-stabilizing effects? The experience of many thousands is yes. And you can never deny a person's lived experience.

Stringam, who has four children of her own, quotes Harvard psychiatrist Dr. Charles Popper and Dr. Bonnie Kaplan at the University of Calgary, both of whom have been supportive of her recovery method:

"The only way to know whether a vitamin-mineral approach is effective for people with bipolar disorder generally is by conducting a series of large-scale, scientifically rigorous clinical trials."

For many, medication is their "miracle." Unfortunately, it is not for far too many. Science is still searching for a better understanding of mental illness, how it should be treated and how it might be cured.

Chris Summerville has personal experience with mental illness as a family member and as an individual. He is the executive director of the Manitoba Schizophrenia Society and a mental-health advocate.