

bill.wilkerson's
Line on Mental Health

“Elaine’s Truth”

I live with asthma, arthritis, glaucoma, eczema, thyroid disease and a rogue protein charging around inside me trying to find a place to land.

Can I work? Yes, always have. Do I take medications every day? Absolutely. Have any of these conditions kept me off work? Asthma – in fact, it nearly killed me once.

As a result of living with this stuff, do I feel ill, angry, aberrant from time to time? You bet – that’s what chronic means.

As a general proposition, though, would you say I have a thing called physical illness and, if so, does this define who I am?

Enter Elaine. She lives in Montreal. She also lives with serious depression. Can she work? Yes – in fact, she’s a corporate lawyer. But she can’t find a job.

Does Elaine take medication every day? Got to. No problem. Has her depression ever kept her off work? Yes – in fact, she took a whole year off to get her health back. This was her choice. And a gutsy one.

Like me, does she feel crummy and aberrant from time to time? You bet – that’s what chronic is. Would you say Elaine has a thing called mental illness that defines who she is?

Let’s consider Elaine and me.

Depression is as physical as arthritis is emotional. It is a biological event. Like glaucoma, caught early, depression can be treated and defeated.

Misunderstood, like any presence – like asthma when I was a kid – depression becomes something it isn’t. A sign of weakness. A character flaw.

Eczema, literally, is skin deep. But when I was a kid, the red patches on my arms and legs made me hate wearing shorts during basketball practice.

My wheezing won me a nickname – the iron lung. My lungs were actually more like paper than iron.

Then along came steroids. My breathing got better. My skin wasn’t enflamed as much for a lot of years. Then it all came back, bigger and badder than ever.

Analyze this. When I huffed and puffed, who was I? When my skin turned red, who was I then? When both cleared up, was I someone different?

What about Elaine? Is her depression – her?

It was late afternoon. Elaine’s voice came across the phone upbeat, lyrical, nice to listen to. How does she explain the “lost year?” The year she took off to handle her depression.

Elaine isn’t just any lawyer – she’s an accomplished lawyer – and the word is “is” – not “was” – it’s the present tense.

In that year off, she got a handle on the kind of recovery that she (as in “she” not “they”) wanted to achieve – the kind that didn’t have her walking on eggshells every time her mood swung. She learned a lot about herself.

But now she had to sell herself all over again. In every job interview, the same thing happened, where did last year go.

The question hung in the air like a heavy mist.

She talks to me. “How can I say where I’ve been for a year – how can I say that I took a year off to get my health back – how can I say I achieved

something – that I really feel did achieve something.”

“I’m a better lawyer now than before. I have more insight into myself. And I listen better. I pay more attention to body language, to what people are trying to say.”

Big name CEO’s pay executive coaches thousands of dollars to learn things like that. She did it on her own.

The missing year? It came down to the truth. The real truth. Not the stigma truth, the stereotype truth, the black dog of depression truth. But Elaine’s truth.

Defending her health was a smart idea – not a sign of weakness. And what it takes to be a good lawyer. Elaine has plenty more now than she used to.

The missing year? Elaine’s truth is the only one worth telling. She’s working again. Which is good news. Especially for her clients.