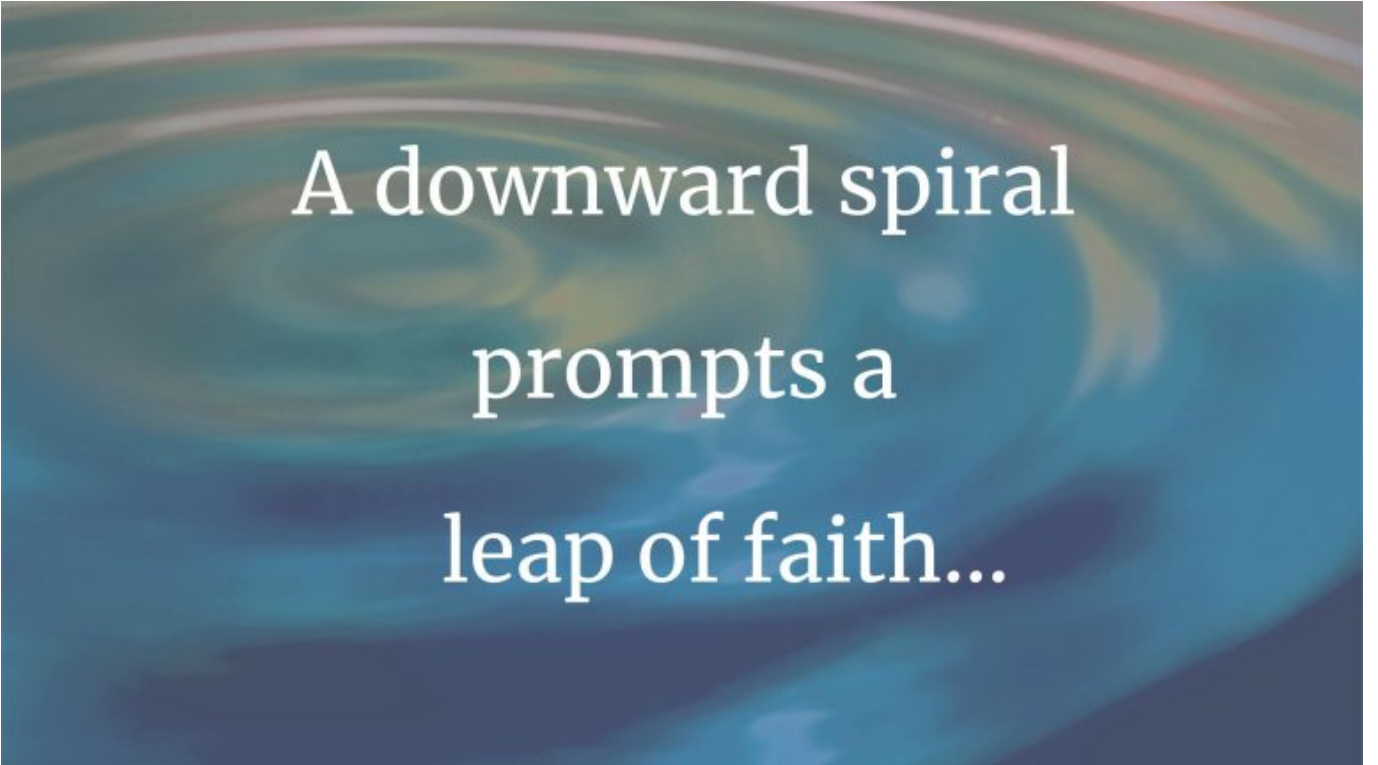


ECT Saved My Life

Category: Stories

written by Shannon Weisleder | March 11, 2022



A downward spiral
prompts a
leap of faith...

It was July, and the weather outside my window was sunny—but inside, it was a different story.

At the beginning of the summer I'd been diagnosed with bipolar disorder. I myself thought that I suffered from major depressive disorder.

I felt as though I were sinking into a black hole. My medications didn't seem to be working, and my psychiatrist was out of the country for the summer. I wanted to feel engaged in daily life, but nothing seemed to matter. I'd get up, take my three boys to school and, when I got home, get back into bed. I was barely eating and seldom showered.

My husband and I had recently moved to a beautiful home on eight acres in Virginia. We had a pool and a barn, and I had six raised vegetable beds to garden. I thought this might be the perfect home in which to start writing again: I'd been considering writing a memoir about losing my brother to suicide, but stopped when the depression came on.

Summer came and went, and the autumn leaves turned bright yellow and red. Between long naps I'd sit in my front-porch rocking chair, letting the cool breeze run over me.

My husband left with the sunrise and came home with the sunset; he loved it out here. I'd thought that I would love it too, but as the days grew shorter, I realized how lonely I felt. Because we were twenty minutes from town, my city friends seldom visited. I missed popping into coffee shops, or the quick

run to Target.

For a long time, my husband didn't know I was depressed—but when it reached the point where I was sleeping most of the day, he took me to the doctor to adjust my medications.

"Dad, is Mom depressed?" I overheard our oldest son say. I felt so sad, as if I'd failed them.

I started with a new psychiatrist, who changed my meds—but nothing seemed to work. I still slept all the time, and my friends were wondering what was wrong. I tried to keep my depression a secret from everyone except my husband.

One morning I had a routine visit with my primary-care doctor.

On the surface, the appointment went fine. I should have told her how empty and disengaged from life I was feeling, but I was too embarrassed.

Afterwards I headed back to my car, which was parked atop a four-story parking garage nearby. After climbing the stairs to the top, I glanced down at the sidewalk below. A strange feeling came over me.

In my head, two words rang out:

Don't jump!

I felt startled and scared: *I don't want to jump, so why would this voice warn me not to? Does it mean that on some level I do want to jump?*

I considered going back to my doctor—but what would I say? I called my husband, crying hysterically. That's when it all changed.

The next day, I saw my psychiatrist.

"Because your medications don't seem to be working, I'd like you to try electroshock therapy," he said. "I think ECT might provide the relief you're looking for."

For many people, ECT has terrifying connotations, à la *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. I was no exception.

"No, absolutely not!" I said.

"If you don't try ECT, you could be looking at hospitalization," he replied gently. That got my attention: I felt I'd do anything to avoid that.

I asked about the side effects, which can include memory loss, but he assured me that ECT has come a long way, and that it's a proven treatment for depression when drugs don't work.

"Okay," I said. "Let's do it."

My first treatment was scheduled for the following week. Driving with my

husband to the hospital, I felt paralyzed with fear. I didn't know what to expect.

It was a cold, crisp, sunny day. Walking inside, I saw patients in stocking caps sitting in the lobby, trying to keep warm.

That's the difference between us, I thought. I don't look sick to others. Then a surprising thought arose: *But I am sick, too.*

I rode the elevator up to the psychiatry ward, was buzzed through the locked door and escorted to a waiting room where I sat, clenching my hands restlessly, for thirty minutes. Then I was taken to an open waiting area and given an IV.

It felt awkward to sit there, a needle in my arm, staring at nearby patients who also had IVs. Some were inpatients; I wondered what that was like.

I could have been one of them, I thought, feeling glad that I would go home after my treatment. These folks had matted hair, hospital socks and a sad, empty look in their eyes. I knew that look: I'd seen it in my own mirror for months.

I wonder how I look to them, I thought.

A teenage girl with long, dark hair and a pretty smile had brought a stuffed animal for comfort. I wished I'd brought one, too.

Then it was my turn. They walked me to what looked like an operating room, full of people: a psychiatrist who would administer the treatment, several nurses and a team of anesthesiologists. Five medical students were there as part of their rotations. It felt surreal.

"Okay, Shannon," the doctor said. "Here's how the treatment will go. You'll be given anesthesia, and then a small amount of electric current will be passed through your brain in order to cause a brief seizure, about thirty seconds. You'll then be wheeled to recovery, where you'll slowly come to. You'll rest for an hour and then be discharged.

"It's a very simple procedure," he concluded. "And very safe."

I lay on the bed, looking up at the ceiling as everyone bustled around me. The medical students placed electrodes on my chest and arms, then the doctor put a cool liquid on my temples to hold the electrodes.

It was comforting to see painted butterflies on the ceiling, along with big, puffy clouds.

"Take a few breaths," the anesthesiologist said. "And pick a butterfly to focus on."

"Can you please hold my hand?" I asked one student. As she took my hand, I felt so thankful for her warmth and humanity.

"Think of a calming place you like to go—maybe the beach," the anesthesiologist said. "And get ready for a nice little vacation." As she said this, my blood-pressure monitor began beeping, signaling a sudden spike.

"Don't be nervous," she said. "We'll take great care of you." She asked me to count backwards from ten, and I fell into a deep sleep. □□When I woke up, my husband was holding my hand.

"Is it my turn?" I said.

"You're all done," they said.

I was so grateful that it was over. For the rest of the day, I felt very queasy. My teeth were clenched tight, and my jaw hurt—a common after-effect. I could barely talk. A headache was coming on. Once home, I got right into bed.

Over three months, I received twelve treatments. It never got easier, and I was always terrified. Each time, I felt terrible for the rest of the day. Sometimes I did throw up, and my head and jaw always ached.

But, remarkably, the treatments made me better.

Within three weeks, my eyes were bright once again. The brain fog and heaviness dissipated. I didn't need to sleep all the time. I was starting to feel alive again, and soon I was back to my normal routine.

I'm now down to one medication and have been depression-free for three years. I worry about a relapse; the thought of going through ECT again terrifies me. But I'm resilient. I'm one of the lucky ones: I did it, and it worked.

And I would do it again if I had to.