

# CHOICES



*"To be, or not to be: that is the question" ~ William Shakespeare (from Hamlet).*

Our lives (whether we are conscious of it or not) are comprised of choices to be made in every moment of every day. And perhaps the greatest choice we make in each waking moment is our choice to BE...



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I woke up gagging. Disoriented to my surroundings, I looked around in a mad frenzy trying to make sense of what obstructed my throat and left me speechless and breathless (but somehow I was breathing). My eyes caught sight of my husband. I desperately wanted to scream at him, "Chris, I can't breathe. I can't talk. I love you. Please MAKE THIS STOP!" I pleaded these statements with my eyes, but my eyes were

like the voice of a newly deaf child who has no means to convey her most earnest thoughts.

A kind, sympathetic nurse walked in to what I now knew was a hospital room and spoke to my husband about how I seemed to be doing much better. She needed to check on my vital signs. She told my husband that they could probably remove the tube in a few minutes, explained that she would have to talk to the doctor, and then she rubbed my arm and left the room.

Then, I remembered.

I became even more frantic. I wanted to yell, "*Get it out! Get it OUT!*" I had to explain I knew why I was there. I needed to tell them about the blackness that was all that surrounded my mind before I "woke up." I wanted to ask a million questions: "How did I arrive in this obvious ICU room filled with machines? How come I wasn't breathing on my own? Exactly what happened? How come I couldn't TALK?!!!" I wanted to ask these questions, but I was already answering them for myself. I was realizing I had almost died. I was realizing that I might have actually died and been revived. Suddenly, I wanted to say how sorry I was to my husband for trying to take my own life, for causing him obvious fear and concern, and for the pain I must have put him through for him to see me in such a state. These bonds of no voice left me growing more distraught every waking moment.

Finally, the nurse returned. She spoke softly to me and told me she would tell me everything she was going to do before she did it, so I just needed to be calm. She said she would be taking the tube that was breathing for me out ("FINALLY!" I thought vociferously. I wondered for how long it had been my sole survival. If it was a long time, this taking-out-of-the-tube would really hurt!) I was informed that I might feel some discomfort, but that if I tried to breathe out while she was removing it, that it would help. Then, abruptly, she said, "Here we go. Breathe out now." I did as instructed. At last, the voice restricting, life-giving tube of fear (and salvation) was removed.

I cried in a raspy voice to my husband, "*Baby, baby, I love you so much. How long has it been? How long have you been here?*"

"The whole time," he said in a soothing but matter of fact way that reassured me of his loving dedication and devotion to me.

I cleared my throat; it was a bit sore. "*I am so sorry.*"

He told me how he had stayed with me, how my therapist had come to visit, how I was taken from her office to the hospital, and finally, how I wasn't able to breathe on my own,

so they had to bag me and then intubate me. I spoke of what I remembered: I was sitting in the bathroom at my therapist's office; my thoughts of despair coupled with an uncontrollable impulsiveness prompted me to make a choice that I assumed was really only a lack of any other options;



these thoughts then led to all of the 150 pills I subsequently devoured; then, lastly, I remember the fading of my therapist's office as those pills kicked in. Now, I had a feeling of being incredibly frightened -- not from the tube and no voice; it was something else. I was so incredibly terrified because from the last time I closed my eyes until I woke up, all that there was in my head was blackness -- no dreams, no pictures, no white light -- just blackness.

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This would be my twenty-second visit to a mental hospital. Throughout the past fifteen years I have been in and out of mental hospitals for various reasons, mostly because I had thoughts of wanting to hurt myself and was in need of a safe place. For fourteen years I was misdiagnosed with Major Depression. The true diagnosis, all along, was Bipolar Disorder. I also have Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder as a result of the survival of molestation from a priest when I was five and a gang rape when I was seventeen. This disorder has led to a few inpatient hospital stays, as well, due to flashbacks and other symptoms of the disorder. I have been to this particular mental hospital (Broughton Hospital) once before. I hate it. I hate the sight of it, the smell, the staff, the food -- everything about it.

As I walk reluctantly through the doors, I know my fate. I must endure this wretched institution's restrictive walls for an unknown period of time until it is determined, in the doctor's eyes, that I am competent enough and stable enough to be released. I know the drill.

But there is something different about this particular hospitalization. I have some kind of realization that I have not had before. Don't get me wrong. There was not a single time that I was an inpatient to any of the various facilities that I have frequented that I did not learn something, but somehow (perhaps it was my close encounter with death and the haunting vision of blackness), I know there is something more here.

I enter the facility, and immediately the pungent odor of the 1930's strikes my nasal cavities. I know within a few hours I will grow accustomed to it, but it reminds me of how old and decrepit this institution is. How could they not care enough to even just get rid of this detestable odor? The walls! Had they not been painted in all these years? Of course they had -- maybe once. There are signs of chipped paint on door jams throughout the wing I am sentenced to, and I can see the color (almost the same shade of boring cream) through the chips. The view from my room is terribly uninviting, reminding me I am not a guest; I am a prisoner. Looking through the narrow window, there is a plain and insipid view of the towering red-brick hospital walls twenty feet across from me. I cannot even see the sky, but it lets in more light than the blackness I remember.

The bathrooms hold three stalls with doors that don't lock and fly open whenever they feel like it. There is one community shower with half of a curtain. It feels extremely violating, especially for someone who suffers from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and already has privacy issues. If I want to wash my hair, I am reduced to using body soap and because I have long hair, the tangled mess that is left afterwards takes half an hour to undo and takes nearly half my hair with it!

The food is nearly as bad as the odor of the hospital itself; they are virtually one and the same. I suppose it is edible if I enjoyed eating lukewarm, unseasoned, noxious mush. I imagine it has all the vitamins, minerals and calories that one would need nutritionally, but I'd have to actually eat it to digest those necessary nutrients. I opt out of most of the meals. I would have to be tube-fed (did I really want any more tubes in me?) before I would eat that pot-luck casserole.

What irks me the most about this prison is how unconcerned the staff is. No one here seems to care (not like I imagine healthcare workers should). The CNAs sit together and gossip; the doctors spend approximately five minutes with me. I always thought that to be in the mental healthcare profession, a person would have an empathetic, if not sympathetic, characteristic about themselves. I am proven wrong. It is not just the CNAs and the doctors. It is the lack of concern from the nurses if I ask about a medication. It is the rigid schedule that they claim to adhere to and scold me if I do not, but they only adhere to that schedule when it is convenient to them. It is the lack of any sort of activity that would be in any way therapeutic; there are no groups, no individual counseling sessions. Unconcern lurks the halls, and I become accustomed to it, just as I did the smell of this place.

At one point, I am sitting down with a man who is supposed to be my social worker. I'm actually excited to finally have the opportunity to talk with someone. I am going to explain how my thinking has changed and how far I have come and he does not want to hear ANY of it. He stares through me as if I am a ghost. I am not a living human being – breathing, speaking. He cuts me off repeatedly, and when I'm asked if I have any questions, and I reply that I do, he proceeds to tell me to ask the doctor. I feel worthless. I didn't feel this way before I met with him. I was busy making myself feel worthwhile. What a jerk! I imagine all he knows how to do is read from his clipboard, pretend to show concern with an occasional forced furrow of the brow, and then get out of there with as little "social" contact as possible. Some "social" worker!



How could these people believe they were helping if they didn't offer anything therapeutic? There is absolutely nothing to do unless you like soap operas. I never did. I try to think of ways to pass the time that aren't vegetative. I try walking the halls. I think that at least I am getting some exercise, but I am reprimanded like a child and told to "go to my room" where I can do nothing some more. I am not even allowed paper and a pen, although I plead my case incessantly. Finally, after a full day of merciless begging, I am given two sheets of white paper and a dull pencil. I think miserably, "This will barely get me started," but I am genuinely grateful. I begin to write. This is, in my own way, therapeutic.

I write of all the things I want to tell my doctor as I have not seen him yet. He will be the same doctor of Irish descent that I saw last time I was here, and I am afraid that he will speak to me as he did then -- bitterly and curtly, nonchalantly, and all within five minutes. I want to be absolutely positive that he hears what I have to say.

***I do not realize it then, but as I am writing out the words I want to share with him, I am in the process of advocating for myself.***

## ***This is my first tangible sign of change.***

The last time I spoke with Dr. Kilbride, we spoke in only five minute increments. Looking back, I know why. Before, I didn't really want to hear what anyone had to say. I was set in my thinking – stubborn. Now, I was going to meet with him, but things had changed. I am still stubborn, but more assertively so and I am wanting to hear. I want to hear everything ANYONE has to say. I would be all ears. Then I would hope with the renewed spark of life I had in me that he would be all ears, as well.

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It was finally time for my first meeting with Dr. Kilbride, whom I had not seen since my return trip to this miserable asylum, and I had been thinking for days about what a terrific lesson I thought I had learned. I thought I truly had quite an epiphany -- not just since I walked into the nauseating, rank, and stale madhouse, but since I had awakened in the hospital ICU room.

***This epiphany had been growing in me and bringing me hope from the moment I gagged. I had not only physically awakened in that ICU room, but somewhat sublimely awakened, as well.***

I wanted desperately to tell the doctor all of what I had realized. I must have been visibly excited to be meeting with him as I smiled a sincere smile that could not have been forged. He mirrored back a like smile and said in his Irish accent, "So, we meet again."



We sat down, and I grew nervous. Outwardly shaking, I still did not let it overcome me. I was going to be strong, assertive, and open-minded. He asked me some basic questions, and then asked me the one I was waiting for: “You say you have changed. How have you changed? You were just here a month ago. You just tried to kill yourself a few days ago. What could possibly have changed in this time?” He was challenging me to convince him not only of what my epiphany was, but how deeply I felt about it and how sincere I was in those feelings.

I had to choose my words carefully. “Well, first of all, when I woke up in the hospital, it scared the hell out of me that I had almost died. I started realizing that my children would have been motherless and severely traumatized; my husband would have been grief-stricken; my whole family would have been affected. But what really touched a nerve in me was how I had done this to myself. There was no one and nothing to blame. I had made that choice to take those pills. Then, I didn’t even see I had a choice, but that is what has changed. Now, I know I have choices. I know I am responsible for what I do. I know there are consequences to my actions...”

He stopped me there.

His pronunciation of his next question brought out all of the 100% Irish in him, “You did not realize this before -- that there are consequences to your actions?” I responded by saying, “I knew there were, but it was never as clear to me as it is now. I have heard it hundreds of times from my parents. They’d advise me, ‘Audrey, you need to be responsible’ or, ‘There are consequences for the things you do,’ but I suppose you can hear things from other people thousands of times and it doesn’t ever really become clear until you realize it for yourself.” With this ending remark, he smiled. I knew I had made my point and had been clear about my change in perception. He had heard me, and now it was my turn to be “all ears.”

I will always remember what Dr. Kilbride added, next, to my revelations: “*You know, the commitment of the patient to manage their illness coincides with how well they are able to manage their illness. You will gain confidence by getting yourself through hard times. And that doesn’t mean you can’t ask for help, but when you do ask, you can feel confident knowing that you really are helping yourself. Each time you get yourself through, your confidence will grow stronger and stronger.*”



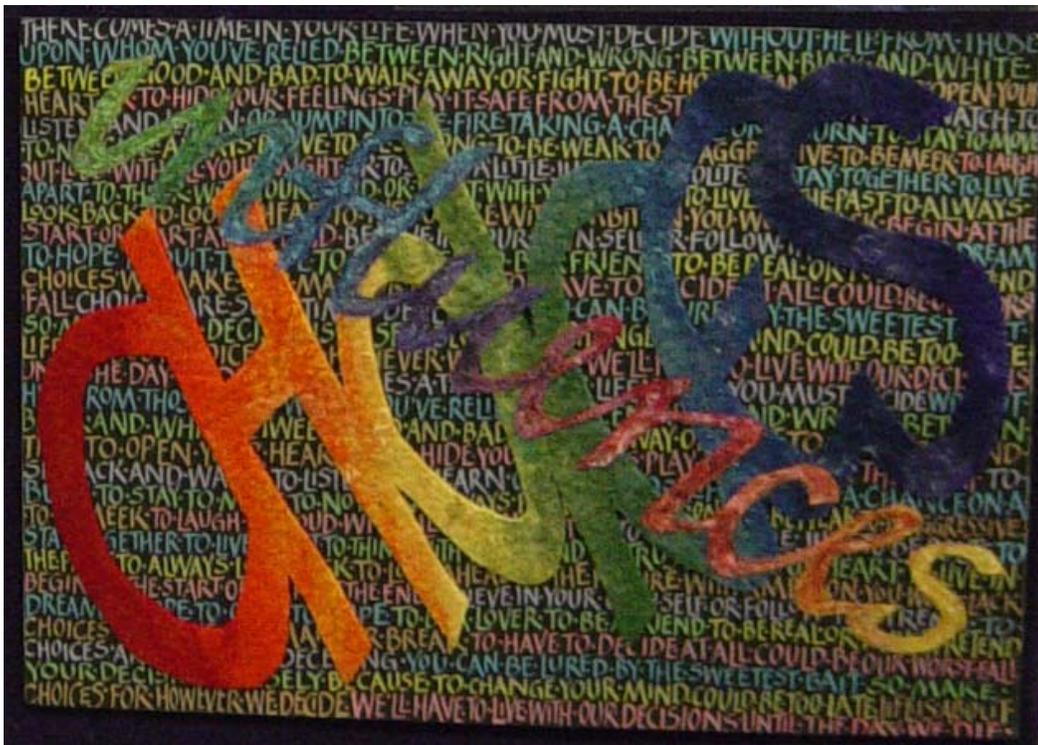
***That is when I really GOT it.***

Yes, even in the old, decaying infrastructure of Broughton Hospital (a place where days are filled with negative sensations at every turn), I found something positive. Something so positive, it almost made the food taste better!

Through this experience, I learned I have the capability to make my own choices in ALL that I do. For example, I choose whether or not to take my medications; whereas, previously it was no consequence in my mind if I skipped a dose or just took them whenever I felt like it. I also choose to visit with my doctor; whereas, before I felt I was obligated to meet with him. I choose to work with my therapist; before this experience I took our meetings for granted and pretended I was present at our sessions, only I was barely listening to a word that was spoken and barely speaking myself. I choose to listen or not (to anyone) -- to accept advice or reject it (from anyone). In ALL that I do and ALL that I am I have a choice. I had, until that moment, unconsciously assumed my life was full of circumstances that were beyond my control and, while there are such circumstances, I have come to realize that my perception of them is my choice, as well. I consciously make my own choices every single day, and the most paramount choice I make today (and through to my last unaided breath) is the choice to live.

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I hope you are consciously choosing your path everyday! And choosing to really LIVE ~ VOCIFEROUSLY! :-)



Picture of a Wall Hanging titled, "Life Choices" By Tricia Smout, 2001

In light and love and LIFE,

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