

“Consumers / Producers” For IAPSRs* Employment (1998)

Perhaps I'm an oddity, someone with a sometimes severe mental illness who has run a successful self-run business for 18 years, still serving some of my original customers.

We adopt stereotypes as a kind of shorthand to understand as simply as possible our complex world. I buy into them as much as most people do: "People with m.i. are shiftless types, unable to commit to work, those with mood disorders are inconsistent, unreliable, often ill, causing all kinds of difficulty for those who employ them." Even I imagine "leagues of overmedicated, unkempt, dull-eyed and dim-witted ex-patients who will never be employable."

I personally get a kick out of publicly dispelling those stereotypes with my own case, but I'm kidding myself in thinking I'm one of the few who are disproving the myths.

I'm meeting more and more people who are doing admirable work in our community who, because I've been public about my struggles, reveal to me that they've been there too. Tradesmen, doctors, artists, theatre owners, entertainers, custodians, - up and down the job descriptions are people whose lives have been profoundly affected by m.i.. I'm just one, locally, who is talking about it publicly.

I have manic depression. It's in my family. My sister died of suicide when she was 26 and I was 24. I wasn't diagnosed till I was 39, but depression had dogged me all my life. There have been several studies showing that moderately depressed employees make extra conscientious workers - I have been one of those. I applied that work ethic to a mottled career; photographer, Laundry worker, archeology field worker, telephone book assembler, cook/deckhand for a year on a Federal Fisheries patrol boat. Never got fired. The job always ended or I decided to change.

I landed a job as carpet warehouseman 25 years ago and, on the strength of it, married a year later my still "main squeeze", Laurel. I conscientiously worked my way up in that business but 8 years later, when the housing market stumbled, the company failed and I had to find a new job. I started odd-jobbing and soon fell into building a garden maintenance /handyman trapline that has become a way of life for me now and a modest living.

My dad had been a greenhouse operator and having worked some summers in the business, being instilled with that kind of work ethic, it felt good to be doing "wholesome, honest physical work" again. I cautiously started out with an Austin sedan and a few simple tools, sometimes with a mower carried on the roof. I've upgraded my equipment over the years but have never liked to organize others, so try to keep a workload that supports me year-round with a couple of slack months in the winter.

It has been a rocky road. The job itself is subject to the whims of weather, drought, vermin, vandals, the fickle customers - the epitome of the unpredictable. It's physically challenging as well, much of it is just plain hard, dogged work. I'm not a powerful build, weakened by major surgery 6 years ago. I have poor feet, a back that often gives trouble, and have a certifiably bad memory as well as recurrent challenge of manic-depressive illness (answers to the name "Lucky"). Being a self-starter is essential. At times I'm sure I'm in entirely the wrong line of work.

The biggest challenge is to guarantee performance in yearly contracts with more than the usual

reasons to expect disruptions. Sometimes the goal is to "prove them wrong". The One Armed Paper Hanger. After years, I've realized I am probably going to be as likely to pull off a few more years as the next guy.

The hardest part of being self-employed is that your boss can be miserably critical when he's in a bad mood - and even when you're off the job he's still there harassing you.

On the positive side, I'm self-employed, totally free-lance so I'm not struggling in a bureaucracy where prejudice against my psychiatric background might be more significant. I can earn loyalty of each customer. My performance feedback is very direct. It's very people oriented. The main task is making it as easy as possible for homeowners to enjoy their home without the hassles of unreliable help. Perhaps my life experience makes me more empathetic to my clients' needs.

If they like my work, I'm paid at the end of the month. I have no bad accounts. I've never advertised, the best advertising is referral and being seen working on a smart looking property. The longer you're in the business the better and steadier the jobs, bigger projects come along, and people start valuing year-round management rather than hourly value. I really enjoy the physicality of the outdoor work most of the time, the variety, finding practical, creative solutions and most of all the flexibility.

Many times over these 18 years I've struggled with depression. I was hospitalized twice and was fairly open about it. A couple of churches I work for took ownership of me and prayed me back to health. Persistence being one of my traits, as soon as I could, I got back in the traces I earned my way into their confidence.

The second time I was suicidally depressed, five years ago, I was in hospital just squirming to chuck it all over. Anything for a job less complicated, less lonely, less self-determining than being a self-employed gardener. Just a simpler, straight forward job. (Of course, there are no jobs like that when you need one) But I was able to keep up my obligations till I recovered with the help of a network of fellow gardeners and supportive, loyal customers.

Now I consider my free-lance employment a terrific asset. Last year I billed out \$40,000 for my day job. I pay income tax and remit a bunch of GST. Having set up my work to give me complete flexibility, I have the freedom to organize my pet project MOVIE MONDAY around my work schedule. My blemished mental health record is out there for all to see, but so is a record of consistent, quality work in both my day job and in the mental health field.

Now I'm well known in Victoria for my "Manic-Depressive Ministry" and still as busy as I can stand in my day job. I've got a terrifically supportive wife of 24 years and two teenage sons. I volunteer at Rogers Cable weekly, run my movie program, which demands about 20 hours a week, and jam in as much activism as I can bear in the corners. It's a push to keep it all together, but on a good stretch, it all works together, compatibly, no lies, lots of best wishes.

*IAPSRS - International Association of Psycho Social Rehabilitation Services

[On my first edition of Movie Monday T-shirts I added the slogan "Be a Producer!" to the back, a reference to this theme and a nod to shakers and movers in the film industry.]