

# Carol Fuller

## A PERSONAL STORY

When I was at primary school my mother became unwell. So unwell she was hospitalised for long periods at a time. Eventually she started to have weekend leave. I can remember her sitting in a lounge chair staring at the lounge room wall, smoking a cigarette. I had not seen my mother smoke before, and I wondered why she found it so interesting to stare for long periods of time at a blank wall.

I can remember at my sports day some of my school friends' mothers asking me whether my mother was again in hospital. My mother did not attend my sports days like the other mothers. I did wonder why. I wondered why my school friends chose to play with me some days, yet other days avoided me like the plague.

As my brother and I became a little older, Dad told us that Mum was not well. She had had a 'nervous breakdown'. This 'nervous breakdown' was very hard for my brother and I to understand. Mum just looked like her normal self on the outside and we wondered just what the problem was.

My brother and I could not begin to comprehend the heartache and pain our parents were going through. Dad as a carer of an unwell wife, caring for two children, and trying to run a private business. Mum, suffering severe depression, experiencing terrible pain.

One day my brother and I came home from school. We found it difficult to open the kitchen door. When we combined our strength and finally pushed the door open enough to slip through, to our horror we found the weight on the other side of the door was our mother.

Mum had attempted suicide, to ease that terrible pain. My brother and I thought she was dead. We ran as fast as we could to an aunt's house, hysterically screaming 'Mum's dead. Mum's dead'. Mum was taken to hospital. My brother and I thought that our mother had died and come alive again!

We had not heard of the word **suicide** and we knew nothing about **mental illness**, but we had experienced **STIGMA** because of Mum's illness. We had experienced the 'whispering' and the 'finger pointing' behind our backs.

Dad experienced difficulties. Mum was given ECT many times, no anaesthetics in those days, and eventually had a Lobotomy. Then a second Lobotomy when the first one was not successful. These new 'techniques' were in their infancy and were trial and error, hit and miss. There were no patients' rights, no carers' rights in those days. Nothing was ever explained. No pamphlets or courses to educate oneself. What the Psychiatrist said was needed, was done. Done without challenge or questioning. **'God hath spoken!'**

To ease Dad's workload I was fostered out, in all a total of six times. One time I stayed with a family friend, the other occasions I did the 'rounds' of relatives. It seemed like an eternity. Sometimes I was allowed home to stay on a Saturday night. But on Sunday I was to return to my foster home. I fretted for my own home. My brother was older and was able to stay at home with Dad, he was to report to a neighbour's house after school, and wait there until Dad arrived home. Eventually Mum's health improved and she was able to come home. Dad employed a live-in housekeeper and we were 'whole' again. Mum was fortunate, as her wellness improved and she stayed well, we were able to live as a normal family.

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Looking back over these difficult years, I have never said 'I wish my life had been different'. I have never felt deprived. My mother and father offered my brother and me the very best. I was still able to attend my private Grammar School. My brother had his interests. Stability was considered of great importance.

My brother and I did not have lots of flash clothes or toys like our peers. What we did have was a family unit and the best our parents could offer. We had life's priorities. My parents, I felt were the ones who were deprived.

In hindsight, and compared with present day standards, I feel that my mother's treatment was extreme. I do realise that in those early days it was the best the profession had to offer. My mother says that it was 'life saving' to her, although she has lost ten years from her life.

Dad worked very hard as a carer, he would come home from work, cook the evening meal for my brother, see to his needs, attend the normal running of a house and business, visit my mother every other evening, visit me on a weekly basis. Sometimes I would come home, other times I would be taken to see my mother.

In those days Dad's means of transport was a jointly owned Austin A car. This joint ownership was between Dad and his brother. Dad had to walk a mile or more to access this transport, no matter what the weather. Dad for his respite, would try to fit in an overnight fishing trip. This was his touch with reality.

Dad's expenses were considerable at this time in his life. My mother was unwell for quite a while. Dad had business and household running costs, school fees, board for my fostering, and the overhead medical expenses

must have been overwhelming, because only the best would do.

I have found that through my childhood experiences I have **GROWN**. Maybe I had to mature a lot sooner than some of my friends of the same age.

I have grown to appreciate what I have and take nothing for granted.

I have grown to understand the chronic pain associated with a mental illness and the effect mental illness has on family members.

Through this strength I feel that I was better equipped to cope when personal tragedy struck my own family in 1991, when Clive, my husband, suffered a massive stroke.

Through my childhood experiences, and that of my parents, and experiences of stigma and ignorance of others towards mental illness, I have developed a strong driving force to promote advocacy, enforce change, change for the best quality life has to offer, in extreme circumstances, and stand for correctness of rights.

When discussing this article with my parents, it was as though a cupboard storing these memories had been unlocked, a gush of stale air had rushed out, brushed the cobwebs aside, and a flow of fresh air had taken its place. My father is in his 83rd year, still a carer, and my mother in her 78th year, still a well person.

I wish to thank my parents for allowing me to share their personal life in a public arena.

Love you Mum and Dad. **Carol xx**

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[Addendum - My mother (aged 79) suffered a stroke in 1997 and came home to live with Dad (83 years) her main carer, with me taking some of the load. I pledged Saturdays for Dad for his respite and had Mum stay some weekends, and both Mum and Dad together other weekends. I also had services put in place for them to enable Dad to manage. I became both my parent's advocate. Sadly, Mum died from a secondary stroke on January 31, 2003 in her 85th year.

Mum and Dad were married 64 years.

My father came to live with me December 2006 at the age of 92 as he needed additional care. He was nearly blind, profoundly deaf, suffered osteoporosis and spinal fractures, and had a pacemaker. Until the end of 2006 he was independent in his own home and did 80% of his own cooking. Sadly, Dad died on October 6, 2007 at the age of 93].