

Jenny Read

An Illness in my Thinking

The following article describes in detail a most painful experience which had been brewing up since my earliest recollection to the year 1957. Following the account of this experience, some of the many difficulties I had to cope with between 1962 and 1976 are given very briefly, and how I find myself at the present time.

After the birth of my third child, David, I never regained my strength. I had very little energy and was finding it extremely difficult to cope. This state got progressively worse. I visited my doctor and he gave me a tonic which did not help me. I continued to feel weak and began to lose interest in everything, including my food. A little later I felt too weak and ill to go out but still managed to attend to essential duties. Bruce, my husband, summoned the doctor. After he had examined me he said he did not think I had anything seriously wrong with me and felt that in time I would be my normal self again. He told me to take the baby off the breast as this could well be contributing to my condition. I did this *most* reluctantly as I had fed both Peter and Louise until they were able to drink from a cup. David was now five months old and he had to get used to National Dried Milk. Still no change in my condition, it was decided I should go to Addenbrooke's hospital for a thorough medical examination. I had everything tested, X-rays taken etc. from my eyes to my feet, but all results proved negative. There remained one thing for them to do and that was to refer me to their psychiatric clinic. Bruce had to accompany me on all my visits to the clinic as by now I was afraid to leave the house alone and I did not want to meet anybody. The psychiatrist at the clinic told me I was suffering from puerperal depression. He gave me some anti-depressant and sleeping tablets. I cannot describe to anyone how I was feeling, I only wished I *had* got something physically wrong - something that could be cut out by a surgeon. Joyce and Andrew, our neighbours, kindly offered to take David from me and look after him until I was well again.

At my fourth visit to the psychiatric clinic I had to confess that there had been nothing but deterioration in my condition. The psychiatrist saw Bruce and it was decided I would benefit by being admitted to the psychiatric hospital and receiving whatever treatment was felt necessary for me. I was heart-broken, absolutely heart-broken. I had never been into a hospital of this kind, not even as a visitor. Dear God, whatever was I going to find there?

I cannot remember how I got to the hospital or who accompanied me - I expect it was Bruce - I only remember the date, 15th December 1957 and it was my 31st birthday. I entered the Admissions block and can still clearly see a large decorated Christmas tree; the ward was also decorated, but all this meant nothing to me. I felt as if I was in another world and it was difficult trying to live in two worlds at the same time. I was not in the real world enough to think of what was going on at home. I was severed

from my family - a victim of circumstances - I had lost my place in society.

A consultant saw me the day after I was admitted and all I can remember was him repeating: 'you will get better'. He said he wanted me to have a course of Electro-Convulsive-Therapy and prescribed six treatments, two weekly. He told me this would help lift the depression and added that I would feel rather confused after each treatment but that this feeling was normal and would pass off. I did not care how it was going to leave me, all I wanted was to get better. Treatment was on Tuesdays and Fridays. Six of us travelled in a van in our dressing gowns to the block some distance away where the ECT centre was situated; we said little or nothing to each other. On arrival we were told to get on to a bed. Next came a premedication injection to make us feel sleepy. I don't remember much more on this occasion apart from coming round and finding myself lying in the opposite direction covered with a blanket. A cup of tea was brought to us and we were left for approximately half an hour before making the journey back to our ward. We had been told not to expect any results until we'd had the prescribed course of treatment.

The days seemed endlessly long and all I wished for was bedtime and my sleeping tablets so that I could depart from this weird existence for a few hours. It was difficult to sleep the night through as patients were in and out of bed and the least disturbance would rouse me. At weekends a lot of patients went home but I was not eligible until after my course of treatment. In three weeks treatment was over and I was due to see my Consultant again. It was not easy to see one's Consultant, he was a busy man. However, the day came when I was called and I had to confess to him that I did not feel any better. He had a little talk with me and prescribed some drugs in addition to the anti-depressants that I was already taking. He suggested I went home the coming weekend and I said I would go but I was not very enthusiastic about it as I knew I would not be able to cope. During the week all the patients had to attend occupational therapy for about two hours each morning. There were lots of things one could do there, but not many of us had the ability to concentrate or the inclination to want to do anything. I had to decide on something although I would have preferred to curl up in a ball. So, with no enthusiasm whatever, I proceeded to make a stool. At 5 o'clock on Friday Bruce came to take me home for the weekend, he had Peter and Louise with him. Whilst it was nice to see them there was no incentive on my part, I was lifeless. Having collected my weekend supply of drugs, we set off for home. I tried hard to be in their world but everything I undertook was done in a half-hearted manner. I stayed in the house over the weekend because I did not feel like going out and meeting people - I had nothing to say. Monday morning I was due back at the hospital at 10 a.m. I had made friends with two or three people who were admitted at the same time as I was and we told each other how we coped (or rather, how we had *not* coped) over the weekend. About 11 o'clock the House doctor summoned four of us. He told us we had had our course of treatment and a weekend at home, now we were to be shipped from the Admission to the Rehabilitation ward where we would be expected to do light work on a rota basis; this ward was run more or less by the patients themselves. Rehabilitation! - the four of us raised a smile for about the first time for none of us felt in the least bit ready for rehabilitation, but we had to obey the rules and off we went. This ward had only recently been built and had all mod cons. The large lounge was superbly fitted with luxurious furniture, carpets, and beautiful curtains I

remember. But all this luxury didn't mean a thing to me, I was so deeply depressed and not in this world that no curtains, no carpets and hard chairs would have suited me just as well.

After a month in the Rehabilitation ward and no sign of improvement, I was prescribed another course of ECT - eight this time! I began to dread the treatment and halfway through this course the premedication injection refused to work and I was wide awake when the electrical apparatus arrived at my bed but the pentothal soon made sure I felt nothing of the actual treatment. I hated the confusion afterwards, going to the wrong wardrobe, the wrong bed, etc. And so time went on and on like this. After six months, I was prescribed another six ECTs! I signed for them as usual. The premedication never took effect and it was taking much longer for the pentothal to work, so I withdrew from the last two treatments, I just could not face any more. I had had a total of eighteen and I told my Consultant that I felt if this kind of treatment was supposed to help lift my depression it was clearly not doing so and I preferred to remain on drugs and wait until such time as the depression lifted on its own. How much longer could I tolerate an existence like this?

One day, suicidal thoughts entered the conscious thinking part of me; they just came spontaneously, I did not put them there. I was terrified and at my wits end in case I should give in to these *real* thoughts. Others in the ward had successfully destroyed themselves, why should I be an exception? Bruce, Peter, Louise, David, kept running through my mind at this time, it mustn't happen for I was wanted by my family and I in turn dearly wanted them. I went to the toilet and had a private weep, I had never wept before, I always bottled up all my feelings, but this was something to weep about I put in a special request to see my Consultant at the earliest convenience. I wasn't until a week later that I saw him and told him about these thoughts. He said they were perfectly normal in a case of endogenous depression and I was to let them come and go, they would not last forever. I asked him on this occasion to tell me the clinical name of my illness. He said I had a kind of psychoneurosis and that my prognosis was good. Of course by now my drugs had been changed and increased. I was on drinamyl and sodium amythal. I depended so much on these drugs for a bit of comfort, but *how* could they cure me, they were just mounting up and they would only allay my symptoms for a short time.

It was after nine months at the psychiatric hospital that I decided between the Consultant and Bruce that I would sign myself out, I was under no obligation to stay. The Consultant agreed this would perhaps be the best thing for me to go. I felt a little encouraged when packing my bags to go home for good. The time was now early September 1958. Of course I had to visit my doctor (who was also a qualified psychiatrist) for chats and to replenish my drug store, I couldn't cut down at all.

For four weeks after leaving the hospital I had a Home Help in the mornings to ease my burden. My mother came once a week to do some cooking. On the one hand I

enjoyed her visits but on the other I dreaded them - she could not understand why I feared going out, why I was depressed, why I had to take drugs, or even why I had to go to hospital. In fact on more than one occasion over the past year she had said: 'don't be silly, this is not like you, just pull yourself together and snap out of it'. Incidentally, during my stay at the hospital, not one member of my family came near; from what they told me when I was young about people in Asylums (the name used in those days) I can understand why. But it was not like that at all, it was 1958, not 1930.

Bruce had been relieved of a lot of extra work that I had unfortunately imposed on him. He had done a lot for me and I am sorry to relate I was not yet very good company for him. I was disappointed with my progress or rather, lack of it. Drugs, drugs, and more drugs, where would it all end. The weekly chats with my doctor sometimes lifted me but not to the extent that I could reduce my intake of barbiturates. He suggested seriously that, now I had got three children, I might be finding a little unwanted tension in the form of fear of becoming pregnant again for we used Nature's Own birth control which had never failed, and what if we wanted a fourth child when I recovered? However, it was agreed all round that I should see the Gynaecologist at Addenbrooke's and before you could say Jack Robinson the job was done. This meant a ten day stay in hospital and yet another burden for Bruce. Did this action reduce the tension and anxiety just a little bit? - my answer is decidedly no.

It was in July 1959 that we had David living with the family again and I did my utmost to cope to the best of my ability. As I glance through my diary for 1959 I see that some days I was up and some days I was down but I note that I gave everyone a good Christmas that year - I even made the puddings and the cake myself. Now what did 1960 bring forth?

I had lost a considerable amount of weight since I became ill, I'd dropped from 9 to 7½ stone. Having no desire for food my doctor put me on a course of Multivite injections. I wasn't quite so confined to my home as I was in, say, 1957, but I never felt well, pains everywhere, sickness, diarrhoea, etc. I put all this down to my huge intake of drugs which will be named later. My doctor came to the house about three times a week and gave me an injection of omnopon-scopolamine (middle strength). This put me out very quickly but I would invariably be awake by 1 a.m. These injections became regular and more frequent.

1960 was passing and I was still most dissatisfied with my condition. What ought I to do? It was no use returning to the hospital, that had been given a good trial. I found myself in the Public Library borrowing books by Freud, Jung and Adler; I read them from cover to cover and found I could understand a lot of what was written. I favoured the idea mentioned in some of the books of deep psychotherapy and talked this over with my doctor as I felt convinced this would help me. He was rather non-committal and said that the treatment was hard to get. I felt he thought I was hobbling along alright with my huge quantities of barbiturates but I also felt he was

beginning to think he was making no headway with me and didn't know what to do next. Christmas came round again and I, with Bruce's help, managed to make the occasion a happy time for everyone.

In 1961 we moved to a larger house and I helped Bruce with many of the jobs which needed doing both inside and outside in the fairly large garden. We decided to take an early holiday and went to north Devon where we rented a small chalet, and the sunshine that greeted us remained throughout the entire holiday. Bruce and I were both sun worshippers and we all returned home looking like Indians. I felt very much better after this holiday although, I am sorry to say, I was not able to reduce my intake of barbiturates.

Towards the end of 1961 my state of health really took a turn for the worse. I could not take any solid food. To exist I used to consume eggs beaten up with milk, Complian, etc. In December my intake of these foods was diminishing. Convinced as I was that there was now something seriously physically wrong with me, my doctor sent me to hospital for a stomach juices test and many others. Unfortunately, all the tests proved negative. Christmas this year found me in bed and my mother and sister were asked to help with the festive occasion for the sake of the children. Bruce was now very worried about my condition and he had a private consultation with the doctor. He came to see me and continued with the same treatment. I would liked to have gone to a psychiatric hospital in London with a request for some psychotherapy but I had been given to understand that only emergency cases could go to a hospital outside their own area. If my case wasn't an emergency it was certainly becoming one.

With the advent of 1962, I was now taking the following drugs: sodium amylal, drinamyl, tryptizol, seconal, ethobral, nembutal, one tablespoon of syrup of chloral, and one injection of omnopon-scopolamine. I clutched these drugs as a child would clutch a teddy bear - they were my only salvation. My doctor would come to the house any time during the evenings to give me my injection, I had to fit in with his commitments and sometimes I would have the injection as early as 7.30 p.m. On May 7th I took my prescribed dosage of all the drugs mentioned at about 9.30 p.m. My doctor arrived at 10.00 p.m. to give me the injection. That night we had a few 'words' about my condition which did not entirely meet with his approval. Being so terribly sensitive to criticism, when the doctor had left the house something came over me and I went to my bedside cabinet where all the barbiturates stood in bottles in their various colours and strengths. I unscrewed the tops of all of them and proceeded to swallow drug after drug saying whilst I did so: 'one and a half, three, four and a half, five and a quarter, six, seven and a half' . . . until I had taken a total of 57 grains. I rushed downstairs and hysterically told Bruce I had taken a massive overdose. Then I flew upstairs and apparently threw myself over Louise's bed. I remember taking this action as a means of drawing attention to my terrible distress rather than a desire to seek the ultimate tragic solution. My doctor couldn't be located and another doctor in the partnership was called and he found me with virtually no pulse. I remember waking up in Addenbrooke's hospital under a saline drip. To attempt to describe how I

felt would be impossible; it was some hours before I could keep my eyes open: when they were I could see coloured spots on the ceiling and I found it difficult to talk. I knew I had never been so close to death. Suddenly Bruce appeared at my curtained-off bedside, and he weepily said: 'don't do it again will you, we'll sort things out'. He said he would see our doctor in the evening and talk about 'what happens now'.

I left Addenbrooke's for home two days later, not able to walk unaided. I had to stay in bed and I caught a glimpse of those horrible coloured bottles by my bedside. My doctor called to see me daily but there was *still* no change of treatment. After a week I was on my feet again and struggling in the same old manner. How many more grains of barbiturates was one to take before being considered for a change of treatment? I was not going to tip the bottles up again; it was too painful for all concerned. If I could have packed my bags, boarded a train to London and walked into a psychiatric hospital myself I would have done so, but the rules have it that one has to be sent via their doctor.

In June my doctor suggested we all took another holiday in Devon, he remembered how much better I was after last year's holiday there. We said we would go but this time it was not at all enjoyable as I was still clutching all the aforementioned drugs and my doctor had arranged for me to have an omnopon-scopolamine injection every night whilst I was away. A district Nurse came and administered same. The sun did not benefit me at all, I knew what treatment I wanted to try but the thing was, *how* to get it. On returning home my doctor greeted me with the syringe! Oh God, what good was all this doing me for it never solved anything, it never gave me a good night's sleep.

Time slowly passed and I visited my doctor at his surgery about twice a week. At my visit on Friday, 3rd August, I angled to get some psychotherapy *anywhere*, anywhere in the country but my request was cast aside. After this unsuccessful visit I returned home and took just 9 grains of sodium amyral, enough to relax me maybe. I picked up the telephone, dialled my doctor, and simply told him I would not be seeing him again and replaced the receiver. In a matter of minutes he was at my house and made me vomit by giving me some highly concentrated salt water. 'I'll see you tonight', he said. I got my own way at last for when he came he said he had decided to send me to London and that he had been successful in getting me an emergency bed at University College Hospital and I would be taken there by car on Thursday, 9th August; just six days to wait.

I packed one small case as I felt confident I would only be having a very short stay there. What did occupy a considerable amount of space was a box containing *all* my drugs. It took every one of them including the omnopon-scopolamine ampoules as I was determined to declare everything and be completely open and truthful to the staff who were to look after me at UCH. Of course, I hated leaving the family again but I was optimistic about the outcome of whatever treatment I was prescribed. Thursday, 9th August 1962, at 6 p.m. I handed the Sister (who greeted me) a letter from my

doctor and was then given a cup of tea. After this I was given a routine physical examination and was told that the doctor who would be treating me would be coming to see me in a few moments. It was a lady psychiatrist, she was very tall and self-assured. She stood by my bedside and her first words were - 'you must have had an awful lot of anxiety', to which I remember replying - 'more than my share I guess; are you going to be able to help me'? 'That will be entirely up to you', she said. At this point I opened the drawer of my bedside cabinet and handed her the box of drugs. 'These are the drugs I have been taking for months and months', I exclaimed, and told her the exact dosage for both day and night. After she had examined the contents of the box it was with the utmost difficulty that she was able to conceal her astonishment. She put the lid on the box and tucked it under her arm saying, 'you won't be getting *any* of these here, I will be giving you intensive psychotherapy every day and treatment will begin tomorrow'. She told me that I must have got the constitution of an ox to have survived for so long eating barbiturates like sweets. As she left my bedside I realised I had handed over my entire security, however was I going to exist without the drugs, surely she could have gradually weaned me off them? But no, that was not the way she went about it.

Night time came and I wondered what I would be given to help me sleep. A nurse brought me on little sodium amytal (gr. $\frac{3}{4}$) with a glass of water. Well, I was always one to keep my sense of humour and this really did make me chuckle to myself - how was I to get a wink of sleep on such a drastic cut, and no injection either! I did not sleep and lay in bed as rigid as a board.

Morning came and I washed and dressed and was directed to the dining room which was also the common room. I did not want a bite to eat but the Sister said: 'you must eat; you are grossly underweight and you don't want to be spoonfed do you'? No, I did not want to be spoonfed and would not be spoonfed under any circumstances; so I pecked around with my breakfast. I had not had my morning barbiturates. *No* drugs were prescribed for me during the day.

I was fast beginning to develop withdrawal symptoms but I kept a stiff upper lip and sat with my arms clenched tightly together. I could not speak to anyone yet. At 11 a.m., after we had had a cup of cocoa, I was asked to go downstairs for my first treatment. I entered a tiny little room where my therapist sat very composed without a white coat and without any case notes. There was another chair which was for me. 'Sit down', she said. I wasted precious moments by commenting on my withdrawal symptoms which were developing rapidly. She pointed out that I would have dreadful withdrawal symptoms but that I was safe here in hospital and the symptoms would disappear as treatment progressed provided I co-operated one hundred per cent. We then sat staring at each other until she broke the silence by saying, 'why have you let the rest of the world get you into this state'? I said: 'I am ill; what has this to do with the rest of the world', to which she briefly replied: 'think about it'. Silence followed, then the therapist said: 'why did you become depressed after the birth of your third child'? I sat looking at the floor thinking hard but could not answer this question to her satisfaction - she knew the answer but I didn't, not yet, anyway. Peculiar short questions were quietly asked at my first session which terminated by the therapist

saying: 'we will finish here; think about what I have said and I'll see you again tomorrow'. I went upstairs to the common room and sat and pondered over my first session of psychotherapy. Lunch was served at 12.30 and as usual I had no appetite but knew I had to eat just a wee piece of everything on the plate. I felt tatty and dirty and in the afternoon I literally *dragged* myself into the bathroom and had a quick bath and tidy up. I knew that if I neglected myself I would be bathed by one of the staff and I had my pride and was determined this was not going to happen to me.

The next day arrived and I had my hour of psychotherapy. If ever there was a deft psychotherapist she was one. For the first two or three sessions I quickly put up barriers to some of her remarks. I resisted treatment; she could not help me while I did this - she was trying her utmost to get through to the 'real' me. In a very short time I was able to fathom it all out and I began to take the curtain down and confessed, confessed, confessed, and this gradual revelation of the 'real' me helped her enormously in her endeavour to cure me. During the taking down of my curtain I was staggered to find myself such a rotten person. I had never thought of myself in such a bad light. I found envy, hatred, aggression, greed, jealousy - all obnoxious things. I cannot explain how the therapist used her skill but she would quickly follow up an answer to one of her questions by giving me another question and the idea was that there should be no time for hesitation. The treatment was not to lose its continuity for even a few seconds, if it did, we would be stuck and have a job to get going again. Before I go any further I want to say that to take the veil off oneself is no easy task, but we all need to do it, ill or not, if we are to be successful as persons.

Recovery. My treatment continued daily and I would never have thought it possible that I was capable of doing so much long and hard deep thinking - I had to, simply *had* to. It was on Wednesday, 22nd August, just thirteen days after I had been admitted, that the therapist got right through to the kernel, and the change in me in this instance was more than phenomenal. I left the little treatment room, rushed upstairs to find lunch being served and for the first time since 1957 I desperately desired some food and consumed my lunch with utter relish. The sister exclaimed: 'Mrs. Read, you've cleared your plate, would you like a second helping?' 'Oh yes please', I said. It became a standing joke that when there was food left over, Mrs. Read would help out. I scribbled in my diary on the successful day of the 22nd August: 'The day I 'found' myself'. I was so radiant, had no desire for drugs, felt full to capacity with insight and felt quite ready to board a train for home. I saw my therapist the next morning and I told her I felt I could now begin living for the first time. She said: 'you appear a different person, but treatment usually takes a little longer than this'. She warned me that it was not going to be at all easy as I had been conditioned to thinking and reacting in the same way all my life and that I could easily find myself slipping back into my old thinking. She wished me luck for the future and I thanked her from the bottom of my heart. The treatment demonstrated to me how unpalatable *truth* is and that as people, how much better we should all be if we could live at the core and represent what we really are, not what our parents and society as a whole have turned us in to.

On Tuesday, 28th August 1962, I returned home to Bruce and the children. The note in my diary for that day reads: 'My children felt real to me for the first time and I

began living'. I devoted all my time to the home and family, I owed a great deal to them. It was a strange feeling being the same person yet with a new outlook. I had been given insight and this precious gift could never be taken away from me. It was useless trying to explain to anyone just what had happened at the hospital, it was all incomprehensible to them. So I plodded along with everyone looking at me rather warily. I felt sorry, not for myself now, but for the rest of the world.

The illness had clearly shown that I had never been 'myself' and that I had been playing the role of someone else. The distress and suffering brought about by the 'real' me wanting to break through to the surface, reduced me to a skeleton. Was I given ECT and drugged unnecessarily? Nobody could understand my attitude and behaviour after recovery, my changed outlook and way of thinking. I lost friends, but this was my gain. I had difficulties with Bruce and the children for some considerable time. Being at home, I did not have contact with many people. For thirteen years after recovery I found the going very tough and was well able to understand my therapist's last warning words about the 'monsters' outside eating me up again. She was dead right, particularly after the death of Bruce (six years after my recovery) when I was forced into full-time employment and had to face more and more people. Alas, at the end of 1975, I abandoned all hope of *ever* being in charge of myself and planned to take my own life with all the seriousness in the world because I could not remove suicidal thoughts which I had allowed to creep in. Had it not been for my Professor for whom I was working, and Brian Thorne, Director of Student Counselling at the University of East Anglia, where I was a secretary, I would not be alive today. He gave me the spur I needed and early in 1976 I was able to tell him convincingly that I was *not*, under *any* circumstances, going to allow myself to let others take charge of me - the pain and risk was too great. I had had enough, simply enough, and I was going to be in charge of myself *come hell or high water*. I feel a freedom which I shall never quit, but it took me thirteen years to find the courage necessary to experience this freedom: it was so near yet so far. Brian said thirteen years wasn't a long time to arrive at this state. It is in this state I intend to remain.
