

From:

**OC 87 Recovery Diaries'
Women Write on the Ocean Retreat
Opening Remarks**

by Lisa Grunberger

“Illness is the night-side of life, a more onerous citizenship. Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick. Although we all prefer to use the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place.” So wrote Susan Sontag in her defining essay “Illness as Metaphor.”

I fully assumed my “citizenship” in “that other place” mainly through protracted ordeals of grief and loss, when, in an interval of 6 years, I lost both my parents, my grandmother, my great aunt and uncle, and our beloved dog. And though, profoundly changed, I eventually returned to “the kingdom of the well,” I continue to be an immigrant in “that other place.” Because, as you well know, “the night-side of life” is not elsewhere or otherwise than in the midst of our everyday life.

My writing life—comprised of my being an artist, an orphan, a poet, a teacher and mother, has taught me how to live with, and within, a radical, even subversive uncertainty, and thereby has enlarged my capacity to live in ambiguity and to, as the poet Zbigniew Herbert expressed it, “be true to uncertain clarity.” Those of us who have lived, or continue to live, with a condition so unbounded and without borders as mental illness, and who creatively write about it, must as writers be equally unbounded and without borders. It is how, as Rilke said, “one catches the glance of an empty page, where everything new is yet to be.” For the writer, aware of her illusive, undefinable, mostly unknown ‘self,’ waiting for memory to speak through her imagination, what is more uncertain and ambiguous than an empty page?

In a letter to his brothers George and Tom, written in December 1818, the poet John Keats tells how in the midst of conversation with a colleague he was struck by the quality that forms or informs a person of achievement in Literature: “I mean,” he wrote, “Negative Capability, when [one] is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason.”

Similarly, the children’s psychoanalyst and essayist Adam Phillips speaks of what he calls “the need not to know yourself.” “Symptoms,” he asserts, “are forms of self-knowledge.” They are what we assume to be “facts” about our situation, about who we

are; they are the allegedly stable, reliable referents of our 'identity.' "Not to know yourself," Phillips states, can, so to speak, act as a "cure" for this self-knowledge, that is, for "the wish to know yourself in that coherent, narrative way." This too, or so I maintain, is the work of the literary artist and the effect of her writing.

For the writer, what Keats named "negative capability," what Phillips named "the need not to know yourself," what Herbert called "uncertain clarity" are the same. As wrote the poet Hayden Carruth—who contended throughout his life with suicidal depression and several phobias: "I changed the appearance of myself to myself" until "losing and finding were the same." The writing life is one of constant metamorphosis, of 'going from self to self'. The poet Rimbaud said it best and most succinctly: "I is an 'other'." The writer when she is writing—whether it is a short story, a novel, or memoir, is both, 'I' and 'other.' What the writer desires is not the unexamined "coherent, narrative way" her symptoms seem to establish for her, but rather a new commingling of herself—"I" and 'other,' in which she is newly possessed of a previously inactive dimension of herself.

Those who live with mental illness, who are harrowed by its ordeals, must constantly navigate those liminal, wandering borders wherein even what is or is not 'sanity' may persist as an unanswered question. If they also are creative writers, then they are possessed by the odd gift of being more able to adequately interpret and express, for themselves and their readers, the meanings of an inner life, of a bodily and mental suffering, that otherwise would be lost to the sensibilities, the imaginations and empathy of people who, though they may live in the presence of such ordeals and feel something of their pain and debility, do not understand and fear them.

The work of the literary artist, Chekov reminds writers and readers alike, consists not in solving problems but in rightly articulating problems; it is also to question and scrutinize like the best of literary fiction does, and it is to artfully utilize imagination, along with different modes and registers of language, in ways that the professionals—the clinicians, 'experts' and 'authorities,' do not or cannot.

Consistent with the purpose of her essay "Illness as Metaphor," Sontag declares she does not intend to describe "what it is really like to emigrate to the kingdom of the ill and live there," but to describe "the punitive or sentimental fantasies concocted about that situation." We writers, I trust, are not beholden to or governed by such distinctions; without ideology, position, or agenda, with no pre-conceived itinerary and conclusion, we go—or are taken, to wherever the story discovers us. Ours are stories about both "what it is really like to emigrate to the kingdom of the ill and live there" and "the punitive or sentimental fantasies concocted about that situation."

For in our experience they often are indivisible. Literary needs and imperatives prevail over any given clinical, 'logical' or 'rational' distinctions. The writer has a third citizenship; she is also a free citizen, endowed with the inalienable rights of her literary language, in the country of imagination and memory.