

Ian from Stone

The Rollercoaster of life; my story by Ian.

Where do I begin? I've spent a good deal of the last 20 years searching for answers. The problem was I didn't know what to ask.

I don't think you ever recover fully from loss of a parent in your early years. Especially if the loss is not helped by well-meaning lies. Lies meant to ease the pain that, instead, magnify that pain and cause a lifetime of low mental health issues. Not so severe that prolonged treatment is required but severe enough to cloud my judgement leading to faulty decision making and damaging relationships. I have managed to nearly complete so many grand projects over the years that I could not list them all. My failed marriage is but the latest in a long and inglorious list. However, for the purpose of this slice of my life I shall limit myself to more recent events.

I had a history of mysterious shooting pains in my right thigh which had been coming and going of a period of 10 years or so. No diagnosis was forthcoming and in the end I was prescribed powerful painkillers and the problem went away. Only it hadn't. I began to develop pain in my left knee to a point where a friend lent me a pair of crutches. Then a strange stiffness began hampering movement and I noticed difficulty with my speech. As my job relied totally on speech as a customer service advisor for a now defunct electrical retailer things got difficult and for the first time in my life I had time off sick. It didn't help but my sick pay ran out and I had to return to work. Things did not improve and an appointment was made with a neurologist. A few days prior to my consultation things reached a pitch at work where I became unable to speak while attending a customer. I had become aware of a collection of colleagues gathering round the desk concerning at my obvious distress but seemingly unable or unwilling to intervene until, one did and my wife was called to collect me from work, never to return, and take me to A&E. whilst there I recovered and their tests revealed nothing. I was sent home to await my visit to the neurology department the following week.

To cut a long story short had my judgement not been clouded and had I instead opted for North Staffs Hospital, gone to Stafford things may have worked out differently. My Parkinson's was missed and I spent a year in limbo before finally getting the diagnosis I needed. This led to my having entered the benefits system for the first time and the first of a number of, on-going, battles with various benefits agencies.

Enter Starfish and the road to recovery and acceptance. The necessity of diagnosis does not reduce the trauma of receiving it and I was sent into a tailspin. Referred to Starfish for assessment I was deemed well enough to not require treatment as such, relief all round, but was offered the chance to join The Social Hub. I accepted and was instructed to meet Debbie at the Sainsbury's café. I had visions of having to go from table to table in order to identify Debbie. I need not have worried.

If memory serves me correctly she wasn't there that day but her able lieutenants welcomed me and in what seemed like no time at all I felt like I had known them all my life. The one downside was nomadic existence of the Stafford group moving from one venue to another without finding a permanent base. I hope they have found somewhere, by now, to call home because they deserve it.

In a relatively short period of time I felt the need to move on. I found myself, with mentoring of our brilliant neighbours, selling my photographs on a stall at Stones Farmers Market and felt that I had gone as far as I could with the Stafford Group. That may seem trite and that I am writing the time I

spent there off very quickly. Nothing could be further from the truth. The impact that spending time with people who had come through such adversity, and yes, trauma and yet a largely positive outlook on life cannot be overstated. What I find even more admirable and this equally applicable to The Stone Coffee Mornings I have since joined, invited by Yvonne, is that those who organise the groups have been through the same experiences as those they help and support. Nothing is imposed from the "outside". There is sense of shared experience throughout the groups. We are encouraged to come up with solutions to issues, to have ideas about how to expand the activities the groups we are involved in. we have ownership. Many members have endured far more traumatic experiences than I and yet their outlook, almost with exception, is positive. I have seen others join the groups and sit quietly at first, wary of contact, of opening up of telling their story. It isn't long before they blossom and come out of themselves. Given the almost irrepressible optimism of some of those I have had the privilege to meet this is not hard to understand.

Before I end up submitting a novel id better sum up how I feel. Positive. In a word. As I write this I am going through a divorce that will see me on my own for the first time in my life. I hope I can continue to attend The Stone Coffee Mornings. I have met a second group of people who want to help not only themselves but also each other. We are accepted and understood, never judged or belittled because of our human frailties'. We are lifted up not pushed down. A cup of tea, a biscuit an hour or more spent with friends, I think I can say that, is time well spent. In my humble opinion.

As for the rollercoaster well we have to learn to enjoy the ups enough to able endure the downs. What goes down must always go up again!