

THE WILDERNESS DIARY



JESSICA FARRELL

INTRODUCTION

I was always captivated by the people who shared powerful stories of recovery. One of those stories belonged to my Aunt Barbara. Several years ago, she sent me the diary she kept during her struggle with Bipolar Disorder in the 1960s and 1970s. She hoped her mental health recovery journey could help others.

Barbara was the cool aunt, an animal lover, that let my sisters and me stay up late listening to Herb Alpert records. Nothing prepared me for what I read—poems, coded messages, and frantic letters from the edge of a tormented dreamworld. Along with the diary, my aunt sent photographs of herself as a young girl. The images did not reveal the mental unrest that would hold her captive on and off for years. The writings exposed an alternate narrative that haunted my imagination. This was the jumping off point for my work.

The Wilderness Diary features portraits of people who have all experienced a mental health struggle. Despite living with a greatly misunderstood condition, they advocate for people struggling today. Many are peer recovery specialists I've worked with in my community. Their words shatter negative stereotypes and authentically tell the real experience of recovery.

During adolescence our physical transformation is paralleled by subtle changes hidden deep within our biological landscape. I wanted to explore this window in time. The mercurial skies and enigmatic landscape of my home in the Catskills became the backdrop for my paintings—mirroring the emotional and physical isolation my subjects described. Old school photos and candid snapshots served as my guide. I decided to pair each person with an animal companion as part allegorical indicator, foreshadowing mental states to come, and as part protector.

The Wilderness Diary is not only a meditation on the people I painted, but also a reflection on the significant, on-going mental health crisis that plagues this nation. One in five adults live with a mental health condition. Misconceptions and stigmas make it challenging to address. Lack of funding for mental health services has had a profound effect on communities everywhere. Delaware County, NY, where I live, has one of the highest suicide rates in the state. Eighty percent of the inmates in our jail have some form of mental illness.

My paintings became a refuge from the harsh reality, the injustices and inhumanity people must endure in overwhelmed systems of support.

My aunt and all the friends I painted experienced great adversity, yet they were able to move forward. Their perseverance is nothing less than heroic. Mental illness is a facet of the human condition. Creativity itself is an irrational voyage. I hope this collection of stories helps others understand that they are not alone. There is hope!

—Jessica Farrell



KATE

The moment I took my first breath was the moment the woman holding me held hers. My mother welcomed me into the world on August 15, 1977 in Rockville Centre, NY. I lived four years in Lynbrook NY, then moved upstate to New Lisbon.

As a child I had my own language that only I could understand and a best friend that only I could see and hear. I couldn't understand why no one else struggled with the voices in their mind. I struggled alone in dark silence until adulthood.

The psychiatrist asked me a few brief, simple questions then said, "Your life is over kid." He told me I would "never live in society under normative expectations." I felt angry, naked, and stripped of my identity. I refused treatment after my vision became so bad from the side effects of the psychiatric medications. I had ballooned to up to 300 pounds and slept 18 hours a day. I sat silent in therapy. I was labeled non-compliant, restrained, secluded in the hospital and told that Electroconvulsive Therapy was my only option.

The future would mean a life of poverty, getting groceries at food pantries, eating dinner at soup kitchens, housing discrimination, not being able to find a job that could accommodate my limited ability to work and not having any friends... I questioned my existence. Living with the shame and stigma associated with paranoid schizophrenia—I cried! I wanted a change! I was done being a patient! I wanted to be a participant in my own life and in the world! I was going to prove that psychiatrist wrong!

I began to exercise my right to be uniquely myself, the right to be heard, the right to be treated with dignity and respect and the right to fail. Transformation happened in my community. I joined a painting class and watched kids in a daycare. I talked to nursing home residents. I joined a 12-step group, a church and a meditation group. I started a mutual aid group and began feeling that I was a part of something.

I strongly believe that we need to work together and build relationships within our community, so we can make our city, our county, our state, our nation, our world stronger and better educated. We must continue to fight stigma and lift the shame associated with mental health challenges!

Now, I live in my own apartment, work full time, drive a car. I'm in a long-term relationship. I'm off government benefits and psychiatric medications. I am an advocate, public speaker, community organizer, an activist. I am a visionary leader who brings about change and fights injustice and oppression!

When the beautiful woman who created me lay dying, she held my hand and said, "Katie, I know you will change the world one person at a time. Live life with honor and without regret." That was the moment my life truly began.



Jessica Farrell

JASON

I'm writing this in a world isolated by a pandemic. Isolation is something I'm comfortable with—perhaps even comforted by. After all, it reminds me of most of my earlier life. Social comfort is actually a relatively new thing for me. Social awkwardness and self-imposed withdrawal tended to be my norm as a child trying to escape fears I had around school. That's when many of my issues began, in childhood, as it happens for many, I guess. As a child social phobia and depression kept me chronically anxious and afraid of situations that others deemed normal, everyday activities. For example, a classroom full of excited kids was as overwhelming and scary to me as a modern-day horror movie.

It was the sheer loneliness in that fear, believing I was the only one who seemed to feel it, that compounded my inner pain—perhaps even fermenting, crystallizing and even altering the very expression of my DNA. I say this because the fear, anxiety and worry that haunted my every minute during school and college seemed to have left biological, neurological and psychological damage. In my twenties, all of these feelings morphed into a very real diagnosis of schizoaffective disorder which included an entirely new set of major mental illness features like delusions, paranoia and hallucinations.

Honestly, I can't presume to know what caused it all. I have no way of knowing the truth. The cause isn't really that important to me. What is far more important is knowing that what I went through has without a

doubt shaped the man I am today. I'm a creative person who wants nothing more than to help others overcome the challenges of emotional strife as I have, thankfully, in my own life.

Today, I am a people-loving creator of many things—inventions and uplifting educational concepts like multimedia animations and entertainment. I am a motivational presenter, casting the light of recovery on all who will take a moment to listen, watch and see.

Sitting here today in happy solitude, I look at my childhood with fondness. I'm thankful for the powerful foundation it built under me. Now, I recall how in the past I often retreated alone just like this, by myself, away from the world of people. However, it was for a very different reason. Years ago, it was for psychological safety. Today, the world retreats from a potentially deadly virus. So, in compliance, as the socially competent, capable and people-loving man that I am now, I do too. This time by choice to further help my community during a global health crisis.

I smile realizing it took a national, governmental decree to actually keep me "away" from the people that I love. I love people that much. I have healed that much! My smile beams. I'm alone, but not lonely. In reflection, I admire the boy I used to be for his surviving strength. Forever grateful, I realize my life today has been built on that strength. I'll never be alone again. And that makes this already smiling man... smile that much more.



Jessica Farrell

ARIANNA

AS THE QUESTION ANSWERS ITSELF

I feel overcome by emotions
but not overwhelmed
These are wonderful feelings
I suppose this is what it's like to be alive.
There is light in my life that I
let in for the first time
What if the darkness does not equal
"Who am I"?
Where did I go, this *Sweet Girl*
you call "mine"?
I was curled up in the corner
Door shut tight, locked up
Frozen in time
When the other side became safe
I stayed trapped in this cage called
my own abusive mind
I lift my head and turn the knob,
my god, how long it's been since I let
the sun and moon light shine
Outside, there you were, my hope
I just opened up my eyes
All along, waiting there outside
You never left my sky
I break free from this cage
Leave these shattered pieces behind
to move beyond the brokenness
I am no longer *Damaged Goods*
I am stronger, more, ENOUGH,
That's "Who am I".



Jessica Farrell

DENNIS

I was introduced to this world on July 8 th, 1958. It was a time when African Americans were still trying to find themselves. In New York, there was a sense of freedom compared to the horrors of the South. Buffalo was an industrial mecca of growth, prosperity and opportunity. But, was it really that way for all people?

As the eldest son in a single parent home, I was thrust into the role of “man of the house” at the age of seven years old. I was responsible for my younger sibling. My ancestors suffered a long, violent history and my parents’ generation experienced their own horror and heartache. Segregation still existed. Life was dominated by the war in Vietnam, terrifying assassinations and divisions that still stand today. As the rhyme goes, “If you’re white, you’re all right; if you’re yellow, you’re mellow; if you’re brown, stick around; if you’re black, stay back.” What was a child trying to understand the world around him supposed to think?

By the time I was ready to start school and become a responsible young man, I saw the illusions. The families on TV did not reflect the brokenness I had to endure around me. I loved school; education was my deepest love. However, I was haunted by the dysfunction within my family. I questioned everything. I knew in my heart I was good enough if not better, despite the color of my skin. I wandered through life asking, “Why not me?”

I went to an historically “black” college in the deep South, Louisiana. A sickness almost took my life. I didn’t finish school. I became depressed—the result of twenty-five years of inner dysfunction.

I never talked about my feelings, the deep hurt inside. Was it a matter of getting myself together, or was it expected that a Black man suffer failure? I learned that finding love and being a family man was a desire, but would not be a reality for me. My employment status and the inner wounds and insecurities reflected in my outer existence, made life hard. I was unable to be a father to my daughter and son due to deep depression.

At one point, I became homeless. I ate at community kitchens. I worked hard to try and accept myself by being in the presence of others that were stable. I lost beloved family members and friends. I wondered who did I have or why should I get close to anyone anymore?

Finally, I went back to my roots. I turned away from living life based solely on an earthy existence—materially based and substance influenced illusions. A power greater than myself directed me to save my own life. Through it all, here I stand today. My calling is to help those who cannot help themselves.



Jessica Farrell

MARTHA

I am one of 14 children. At an early age, I helped care for my younger siblings. I was proud of the responsibility, but it meant I didn't have much of a childhood. My father was a pastor and my mother a teacher. We were expected to always do what was right. I belonged to a big family. I was surrounded by our church family too.

My father was an extremely sensitive and moody person. One day my sister and I found some old ledgers saying he'd been hospitalized. The church had given him a leave of absence during this time. At 14 years old, I found out my father was what was then called Manic Depressive. Our mother said we were never to mention it. At sixteen, I began having periods of depression myself. For a few weeks I'd have trouble concentrating, loss of appetite and sleep. It would pass and I'd be my happy self again.

I went to college and fell in love. I dropped out of college, got married and had two children. After the birth of my second child, I developed postpartum depression. I went to the doctor and told him something was very wrong. My husband was in the military at the time. The doctor said, "You're an army wife. You just have to buck up and do your duty." I felt ashamed and worked twice as hard to pull myself together. Eventually, I developed a psychosis and became suicidal. One day I tried to take my life. I was rushed to the hospital. This was the beginning of a long, slow recovery.

Knowing my father had a mental illness, I called him. He said, "I cannot talk about it. Just don't let them label you." I found out later he'd had many shock treatments and was terrified of hospitals. The hospital terrified me too. Initially, I did not improve. I didn't trust anyone. I tried to check myself out and ended up being committed. How ironic! First, I couldn't get help and then I was locked up. I decided if I wanted to get out, I would have to

act like I was okay, but I wasn't. I was able to get a hold of a ceramic cup, break it in the hospital bathroom and cut my wrist.

My medication was adjusted. A combination was found that started to work. I was able to sleep and engage in therapeutic activities. I didn't see my children, but my husband visited when he could. The doctor told me I should be thankful because it wasn't uncommon for a spouse to divorce a partner with mental illness. I felt if I'd been a man, he wouldn't have said that.

Slowly I improved. Visits home were allowed, but they were hard and sad. I was determined to be able to take care of my children. I wouldn't be released until they were certain I could do that. My oldest son was sad and angry. He told me not to come home unless I could stay. My husband learned about mental illness and promised to help, so we could be a family again.

My key to wellness has been to stay on my medication and work with a therapist. Initially, I saw my therapist weekly. Gradually, I began to care for myself. My husband encouraged me to finish my degree. He took care of the children on Saturdays so I could take an art class. Painting became an outlet for my irritability and anger. Eventually, I graduated, got a job that I was proud of and raised my children.

My oldest son has Bipolar Disorder too. Thankfully, we were aware and were able to get him the help he needed. He lives a productive life. I cannot emphasize how important it is to get the proper treatment and stick to it. In therapy I learned to recognize my triggers. Ten years after my hospitalization, I finally felt whole again. I've had to go back to the hospital a couple of times. Now, I know it's a safe space to get myself back on track. I lead a normal life within my own parameters.



DON

I remember the year I was told I was different. It was 1978. I was a kid with a lot of dreams and a LOT of energy. I didn't feel different, yet apparently others thought so. I questioned whether my life was worth living because the things I dreamed of doing were never "real jobs." I was discouraged from daring to dream. Of course, my mind never stops, so I'm sure it was exhausting for those around me, especially my parents. I was grounded all the time for something stupid I'd done.

Soon I was resentful and filled with rage, loneliness, isolation. The absence of someone to explain what I was going through began to take its toll. My parents didn't like the effect of the medicines I was prescribed and took me off them. They never told the school, so it was determined that my ADHD was being treated and my disconnectedness and lack of focus must be behavioral.

As a compensatory strategy, I developed a comedic, rebel personality to cover my true feelings. I decided I would no longer be looked at as a "special" kid, but rather as a class clown that clearly didn't give a shit about outcomes. Soon, I became the image I'd created. Fighting, drugs and alcohol became my new best friends. I walked hand and hand with them starting at 14 years old. This led to six arrests and eleven charges in twelve months. From 14 to 16 years old, I lived in foster homes, however I continually ran away. Families in the county would no longer take me. From 16 to 20 years old, I was incarcerated. My final arrest landed me in Elmira State Prison.

After deciding my life was not worth living, I tried to hang myself in my cell. I was placed in "the Hole" and eventually put on a Mental Observation Unit. It was there that I met the

counselor that would ask the question no one had ever asked. In a nutshell he said, "If you could take away all of your perceived limitations and had no one to answer to but yourself, what passion would you embrace for the rest of your life?" After weeks of coming back to him saying, "I think I'd like to be a welder or a truck driver." He said "No, you're giving me jobs. I want to know what you would do for YOU if you didn't owe ANYONE anything. What is it that would make you happy every day?" I finally came up with, "I don't know, man. Music and helping people?" He said, "PERFECT! Now, all you have to do is put that passion in the forefront of your mind and begin to practice those things everyday—even here in jail."

My mood suddenly shifted, I understood what he meant. I needed to find my purpose through my passions. I lived by that for the next 30 years. I now stand on my own two feet confident with who I am. I still struggle sometimes, but I've learned that my passions keep me connected to my own purpose. My life is to be enjoyed while helping others to do the same.

Today, I just wish I could remember the counselor's name at that cold, grimy prison office. I'd thank him for taking the time to know ME, not just my sentence and background. The question that changed my life is now how I begin my motivational speaking engagements. After 11 years of speaking about my experience, I feel I now have the power to help others! So onward, I will...



Jessica Farrell

BETHEL

Everyone has the right to exist and to take up space in the world. The idea was something I had no problem applying to other people, but I have had to work hard to accept that it applies to me as well. Despite my imperfections and mistakes, I have a right to live and breathe just as much as anyone else. This idea once felt so forbidden that I barely left the house or spoke to anyone. I struggled with an eating disorder, insomnia, hearing voices, depression and anxiety, and a pervasive lack of hope about my future. Medications and the ever-changing list of diagnoses didn't do much except validate my struggle.

In the safety of my room I devoured recovery stories in books, movies and podcasts. As I heard people describe experiences and symptoms similar to mine, I linked the extreme negativity of the voices to the treatment of some family members, challenged negative beliefs and made changes in my life to move towards recovery.

Today I try to be kind to myself and surround myself with accepting people. I know that our stories of recovery are powerful and our realizations can help someone else piece together the jigsaw puzzle of their life. I continue to receive services in the mental health system which make a positive difference in my life now that I am in a safe place. I am glad to have the opportunity to be able to empower others struggling with their own recovery. I am here to listen and support because I believe you have a right to exist and take up space in the world.



Jessica Farrell

GARRETT

RETROSPECT

I am the seed born into a broken home
I am ignorant to what's about to come
I am the baby loved by a caring mother
I am the boy ignored by an absent father
I am the kid who stood out from any other
I am the teen in a stage of rebellious evolution
I am treated different for the way I think, act, and look
I am stuck between the pages of a blank book
I am questioning traditions, conditions, and religions
I am searching for meaning, trying to find what's missing
I am the young man wanting to just get high, giving up on conforming to society
I am trying to escape reality
I am creating illusions to feel safe with being me
I am crashing and burning, hitting rock bottom
I am humbled by my experiences and the things I've done
I am growing in knowledge; learning life is a continuous lesson
I am blossoming with wisdom
I am a man understanding to live and love with honesty
I am you. I am me.
I am a soul on a never-ending journey towards my eternal destiny.



Jessica Farrell

BARBARA

Excerpt from her diary, 1966

A short hissing sound and it's all over, my first shock treatment that is. I am wheeled back to my room by the aide and put into my bed. When breakfast arrives, I am awakened. Groggy and disoriented, I get up and go into the dining room and get my tray. I sit and try to recall who I am, where I am, why I am. My memory seems quite blank and I feel removed from what's happening around me. I pick up my fork and toy at the pancakes and butter. Someone asks me how I feel? Do I know that face? What name goes with that face? She acts like she knows me, but I can't place her face.

This was to be the first of fourteen shock treatments. After having more of them my memory seemed to get worse, although with time it did improve. To this day I cannot recall some things that happened around the time I received those treatments. I attribute my poor memory today to this. I might be mistaken, but I have no way to prove it is different.

What is it like to spend a day, a week, a month in the psychiatric wing of a hospital? It all ends up being rather a bore. You arise in the morning around seven or seven thirty. There's fresh brewed coffee to drink while you wait for breakfast to arrive. If you've had a treatment, due to the anesthetic, you

have to be awakened by an aide or an orderly. Your name is called and you go get your breakfast tray. Breakfast time is also pill time. Usually this calls for patients to comment on the kind of, the name of, the strength of whatever medication is being given out.

Then it's the big wait. Time to wait and see your doctor. The doctors saw new patients from 9 - 11:30 a.m. They each had their own little office. Outside were chairs lined up to sit and wait. The time you spent inside the office with the doctor varied anywhere from five to thirty minutes, with an average being about ten to fifteen minutes. Conversation in the doctor's office was almost impossible for me. Frequently, I took in drawings or writings. I spent a lot of time pacing and looking out the window.

I was not sure why I'd voluntarily committed myself, but at that very moment I was quite sane and free of any mental hang-ups whatsoever. I was a hummingbird! All I needed to do was to hover, hover, hover and recover. Somehow, my doctor did not exactly agree with me.

The first time I voluntarily entered the hospital I was given 14 shock treatments. I spent three months of my twenty-first year in the psychiatric wing of a hospital.

To hear Barbara's complete audio diary,
visit *The Wilderness Diary* at www.jessicafarrell.com

DEDICATION

I want to sincerely thank family and friends who allowed me to include them in this series. I will carry your stories with me forever. I hope my work reflects the dignity and wisdom you have graciously shared with me and others.

The *Wilderness Diary* is dedicated to the memory of Barbara Fox-Smith.



The Wilderness Diary at www.jessicafarrell.com
