

INTERVIEWEE: LAUREL ANN BOGEN
INTERVIEWER: Diane DeMartino
DATE: May 18, 2011

Tell me a little bit about the circumstances that brought you to Edelman?

I came to Edelman about 10 years ago. I had been seeing the same psychiatrist for 27 years, and he lost his license. He was a very good person to me. I started seeing him when he was still a resident at UCLA, and I sometimes said I taught him everything he knew. [Although] I was his patient for 27 years, I never really knew exactly what happened. I know that one of his patients committed suicide, and that [the patient's] mother sued him for malpractice and won.

I needed to be able to get my medication. I'd been in group therapy with a therapist in Santa Monica, and had been in and out of psychiatric care since 1971, in and out of hospitals. The [psychologist] who ran the group therapy told me to come here. So I did and that's how I started coming here, to manage my medication. For the first couple of years, that's all I did here. I was trying to work, and I lost my job, and started coming to groups. That's how I kind of got more into the program than just coming to see the psychiatrist and picking up my meds. Because I ended up needing more than just once a month, or once every three months, coming in and touching base.

Do you feel comfortable telling me about your diagnosis?

It's been so long. Originally I was diagnosed with schizophrenia, when I was young, and it's been changed to schizoaffective. I was first diagnosed when I was 21. I'm 61 now. I can't believe I'm that old; last time I looked, I was 30 (small smile). I was diagnosed right after I graduated from USC. Funny thing though, I went back to graduate school at USC and I graduated 30 years later in 2001, with a Master's degree. I'm a poet by profession. I got my Master's in poetry and I've been teaching for the last 20 years at UCLA Extension, in the Writer's Program.

So I tell people, "Well, I'm a poet, it's an occupational hazard." I laugh sometimes and tell people, "Poets are all kind of crazy." But it wasn't really fun being ill, and it used to feel like an elephant was sitting on my head. When I first got sick, they didn't have that type of medication they have now. I started out taking Thorazine and Stelazine and Mellaril [Thorazine (chlorpromazine), Stelazine (trifluoperazine), and Mellaril (thioridazine) are all phenothiazines, traditional antipsychotic drugs which can calm behavior, but have long-term serious side effects]. At one point I was taking 1000 milligrams of Mellaril a day for eight years, and the side effects were so awful. You could not imagine. Eventually, slowly, things got better. The medication got better. I'm on a medication now that I really feel has saved my life. I'm on Clozaril (clozapine, an atypical antipsychotic with proven high effectiveness, although not without possible side effects), and that has really helped me a lot, I think.

Your first break occurred in your twenties?

No, I had been sick my whole life, really. But no one diagnosed it really before then. I came from a family that was very abusive and my mother was way too invested in me. Well, I had issues with my mother. After I graduated from college, she faked a heart attack and I had to move home with my parents, and I lived with my parents till I was 42. I would probably still be living with them except my mother was diagnosed with Alzheimer's, and my father had Parkinson's disease.

I was born in LA and I've lived here my entire life. My mother herself lived with her mother, even after she married my father – they lived with my grandmother for five years – she belonged to the old school where daughters lived with their parents. She tried to break up every boyfriend relationship I had. [But at the same time,] I wasn't really meeting that many great guys because I [kept going] in and out of psych hospitals all the time. So, for a long time, that dynamic was really pathologically sick, and that was a lot of what was fueling the problems, was my relationships with my parents.

I never really believed I was going to outlive them. I thought for sure I was going to die, and I never believed that they would go before me. I really thought I was going to die before they did, because I could not imagine living longer than they would, because they were so awful.

I had a sister who died. When I was a child, one of my earliest memories [was of] my mother smashing her face with a skillet full of pork chops. Just horrible things growing up and I was terrified all the time. And I was the favorite, which in some respects was worse, because they would terrorize me with [remarks] like, "You better be careful or you're going to end up just like your sister."

I always thought, "Well, if you're smart, maybe that will help," so I [worked very hard to be] a really smart girl. I skipped the sixth grade. I went to Cambridge University in England as an exchange student. I've won many awards and things, but it brought me no comfort, no satisfaction with myself. I was always terrified that I had to keep going and keep performing and keep achieving things, or something bad was going to happen. To that extent, I still feel that a lot, even though my parents are dead. I still feel compelled to keep producing and I'm never, ever, ever satisfied and I'm always frightened all the time (laughs). That's the big overriding emotion in my entire life, is fear. Anyway.

Do you think mental illness ran in your family?

It did, actually. My grandfather committed suicide. Apparently, from what I've heard, it was on both sides of my family, my mother's side and my father's side. I didn't really know my grandparents, except for my one grandmother, very well at all. But I can tell you, my one aunt, except for the fact that she was quite wealthy, was loopy as could be. When she ended up dying, she owned lots of stuff and they had to raze all her houses, because she would buy [so many] things.

My aunt owned the land the Beverly Center [a major shopping center] sits on in Los Angeles. She was very wealthy, and when you're wealthy, they don't call it insane, they call it eccentric. She would do things like buy ocelots [a breed of wild cat] and put them in the house and not give them enough food, so they would kill all the other animals she had. She was a chronic hoarder; she was just outrageously insane. But she was very charismatic as well, so she got away with it. And she was very generous with me. She liked me, I guess.

But my mother was insane and — the whole three sisters, my mother and my two aunts — were decidedly loopy. My dad was in World War II, and that generation never talked about anything. I didn't even know my dad liked me until I was 21, and I'd tried to kill myself and he cried. I didn't even know he liked me, until that happened. It was very strange.

So when did you come to an understanding of what your illness was and what you needed to do to treat it?

Well, I had a hard time accepting it. It's pretty recently that I've even dealt with it straight on. For a long time, I would fight taking my meds and wouldn't want to take my meds. But I've not taken my meds enough times and ended up in the hospital to realize, "Hmmm, maybe I better take those pills." I think coming here has helped me a lot too, because I used to also be afraid of my doctors, that they were going to do something bad to me, and that they were going to lock me up.

Coming here has helped me, because I realize that the doctors are just people too. They just have an advanced degree. They can tell a joke, and they've become much more humanized in my eyes. Instead of being someone who's out to get me or out to do something bad to me, I realize that they're just people and, they're kind of nice, some of them. Some of them are not so nice; but, on the whole, they're OK. I don't have to really worry about them being out to hurt me in some way. That's probably not what they had in mind. Some of them can be stupid. I've had my share of dumb psychiatrists, that I consider myself more intelligent than, but they're not evil people, for the most part. I mean, I used to think that they were evil incarnate and that they were going to do something terrible to me, unless I was very careful.

Do you think that idea was a result of your illness or of your family experiences?

Probably a little bit of both.

Did you ever reconcile with your parents in any way?

No. Well, I know this sounds strange. I never really told my parents what I ever really felt about them. When they died, I kind of felt good that I never gave them the satisfaction of knowing what I felt about them. I played the good girl, the good daughter to the end, and they died thinking they were great parents. And I know that sounds strange, to never let them know how much I hated them (shakes head, thinking). Sometimes now I think maybe that was not the best thing to do, but then on the other hand, that's what I did.

Do you have any other brothers or sisters?

I have one brother. My sister died 10 years ago. My brother is two years younger than I am and he left as soon as he could. He lives in Arizona, with a wife and three kids, and he's a pretty cool guy. I was the one that stayed home (laughs).

Do you have a relationship with him now?

I do; I love my brother very much. My dad taught at Hamilton High School here in LA for 30 years. He was a PE teacher, and my brother is also a coach like my dad was, in a high school in Arizona. He's a really good guy. He's the only one in the family that came out kind of normal, I think.

Did your brother have a sense of what you were going through at all?

I don't really know. I think he might have. Now I think he does. His eldest daughter went through a terrible bout of anorexia, and she still struggles with it. She's 30, and a lovely young woman, but takes things way too hard, to heart. And so I think he has had to deal with it himself.

Tell me about what you do here at Edelman.

Well, I did learn how to make jewelry here at Edelman. I started by coming to the Art

Group because I'm a poet, as I mentioned. I'd written nine books at that time that had been published, and I was in a terrible slump. I could not write because – how do I explain this? I started writing about the same time that I started losing my mind. And [once] I'd started to feel better, my writing – I could not write. I could not get the words out. I was afraid that because I was feeling better, that I would lose my ability to write poetry. I was terribly stuck and I was also very depressed.

So I started coming to the Art Group, because at one time in my life, I wanted to be a painter. I went to Marlborough School for Girls [a private preparatory school in Hancock Park] for high school. When I started to go to college, I originally wanted to go to be an art major. But my parents wouldn't let me be an art major because there was no money in it. So I became a poet, where the real money was. That's a little joke I say sometimes (smiles).

I started going to the Art Group and Eileen Saltzman, who led the Group, was very kind to me, and took me under her wing and started showing me how to make jewelry. It really helped me change my mind around things, and it became an outlet for me. I started out learning how to make jewelry, necklaces and bracelets, and it kind of eased me back into writing, because I started naming the bracelets and necklaces that I made. I started making metaphors out of the kind of pieces that I make. If something looks like something [that] you would see in Africa, I'd call it the Lion Queen, or something like that.

And then I got to be proficient enough that I could sell it. I even got a business license for a while. I ended up leaving [the business], because it took too much energy [and put] too much stress on me to keep doing it. But I still make the jewelry and sell it to friends of mine who may want a gift or something.

Then I'd gotten ill again about five years ago and had to go through another series of ECT [electrotherapy] treatments. I had to take a leave of absence for about a year from my job at UCLA, where I teach creative writing poetry in the Writers' Program. And slowly I've gotten back to my writing again. I had a book come out in 2004 from Redhen Press [a nonprofit literary press in Pasadena, CA].

But lately, after the treatments, I started to slowly come back to myself. I felt like I wanted to get back to the world that had managed to keep me alive. What really changed it, I guess, was that I didn't understand about people liking me. I was in a Writing Group here that was led by Paul Alperin. It was a really great group. I've never really been able to understand what people felt about me. I mean I like people, I like to help people, but I didn't understand it when they said they liked me. There were two fellows were in that group, and they both really, really liked me. And in the course of three years, they both died.

It devastated me. I didn't understand what that felt like. I didn't understand that if you like somebody, and they die, it hurts you. I started thinking about all the times that I had hurt my friends, and I'd never understood that before.

I was a chronic suicide patient. I mean, really, it's embarrassing when I think about it. The first part of my life, all I wanted to do was stick my head in an oven and turn on the gas. That was it. That was all I wanted to do. I would think about it, and do it, and think about it, and cut myself up, and eat razor blades. All I fixated on was how can I leave this world. And I never understood the impact it had on others. And then I felt so bad when these two men died. Separately, but [they were both in my group.] For the first time in my life, I felt such incredible pain over somebody else that I understood how my friends must feel. I could really feel that horrible despair. (deep sigh) So I tried to think of that.

In my own world, my poetry world, I've seen how poetry can change people's lives. Over the years, I've seen it change some of my students' lives. Some of them come to my UCLA classes, thinking they're going to take it for an easy grade; and then something happens and they've found a calling. They found something they didn't know they had within themselves. And it changes something.

So I thought, "Well, hmm, maybe I can help out here." So I started teaching a poetry workshop here on Friday afternoons, and we have a small but enthusiastic group that comes once a week usually, at 3:00. I don't know if it's changed anybody's lives, but a little drop in the bucket in the long run may help someone.

So being part of the community here at Edelman has changed you as a person.

It has. I was very, very isolated before I came here. I felt like I was encased in cotton batting all around me. Nothing could get through to me. When people said they liked me, I didn't understand what that felt like. I didn't understand what that meant. They would say, "Oh, you're so cool," and I would [think], "What does that mean? I have no idea." But I understand now like what friendship is about. I do feel like I have good friends here, and I do think that people have my best interests at heart.

I think things have changed because of my ability to come here, and that I have a sense of worth that I didn't have. I know that sounds very odd, because you would think that I would have valued my life more than I have. But there are so many things on the minus side, that they seemed to overwhelm the plus side of my life. So I'm really glad that I came here. I would not have done it on my own. But I thank my group therapist who said "You must come," so I said "All right, OK." (chuckles, smiles).

What is the purpose of your jewelry making?

Well, several things. It's something I can do to teach people. I use it to teach other clients often, as something they can do to help them make money, because everybody here is always looking to make money, as am I. I'm always trying to make extra money because I'm still on disability. I can't work full-time. I can work part-time if I have enough support behind me. I manage to pull it together and teach one class a quarter at UCLA Extension. I wish I could work full-time, but if I try, I just (gestures spiraling down).

So the best I can do to contribute to the world is to do it in my own weird way. And I try to be an asset to the community, in whatever way I can. I teach some of the clients here how to make jewelry, and they seem to enjoy it. Sometimes I have them come to my apartment, and I put out all the extra beads I have and I show them how to wire wrap and stuff. It makes me happy to see them that excited about things. And it's kind of fun. "Ooh, what fabulous earrings!" "Thank you, thank you!" (laughs).

Do you still write?

Yes, I do. I do write, and do lots of poetry readings and things. I've gone through a slump, but suddenly it's coming back up again. I read at the *LA Times* Festival of Books a month ago. My new book has been accepted for publication. But it won't be out for another three or four years, because poetry's not a big seller and they've got books ahead of mine before it comes out.

But I do write. It's not easy. It's really hard to write. It used to be – I used to call it a vomitation. I would start writing and I could write anything, any time. It's very hard for me to pull the things out of myself now. It's a different type of poetry that I write, and it's also more difficult to write.

I'm also afraid to write, because some of my students are better than I am. So I am embarrassed and afraid to write, because I'm afraid that if they find out how much better they are than I am, they won't want to study with me anymore. That really scares me, because some of them are getting published in better magazines than I can get in to, and some of them are winning more awards. So I'm afraid to even confront that, or let them know that "Maybe you should join your own group or start [your own group]," because it's kind of embarrassing sometimes.

It's just the new people coming in; it doesn't mean that you're not valuable.

I know. [Movie actress] Bette Davis said, "Growing old ain't for sissies." And I've had a hard time accepting the age [factor] – last year, when I turned 60, was very difficult. A friend of mine said, "Well, you've got to do something for your birthday." So I went up to San Francisco. I hate traveling and I never go anywhere unless I absolutely have to. But I have a friend in San Francisco who said, "You must do something, so why don't you come for a visit?"

So of course I had to make my pilgrimage to City Lights Bookstore, which besides being a bookstore, is a publisher. They published the famous poem, "Howl" by Allen Ginsberg [in 1956. This poem of the "Beat Generation" was criticized for its strong language and images, but is today considered a classic]. I bought the ["Howl"] cap. Since today was a hair-don't day as opposed to a hair-do day, my hair was not being very cooperative with the rest of my body. So I had to put a hat on to not embarrass myself when I came to the clinic today.

You have lived a very accomplished life, especially for someone who's been trying to manage a mental illness all their life. What would you say to other people about mental illness and their preconceptions?

If you have a mental illness, do not give up. Don't give up. If [your life is] not working now, it can in the future.

I wanted to give up so many times, [and I] tried to give up. But somehow, if you just persist, just keep going forward, it *can* get better. It can get better and things can change. Always remember, it's just an emotion, and emotions will not kill you. It's just an emotion. That's one thing I had to learn, that an emotion is not a thing. An emotion is just an emotion. That was a big deal.

So you have students and teach classes. Would it bother you if they saw this interview?

Doesn't bother me. It really doesn't. Actually most of my students already know; they all know. I've been very open about this in my life, and I write a lot about it in my books. Before I had the doctor who lost his license and I was spending most of my time in and out of hospitals, there'd be times where I was scheduled to give a poetry reading and I'd be in the hospital. He would send me out with a keeper to give my poetry reading. So the whole poetry community in Los Angeles pretty much knows my life story because I was living it in public when I was in my 20s and my 30s and my 40s, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera. And they've been very kind to me. They were the family that I really wished I'd had more of. The poets of LA have been my family, and I'm so grateful to them. They're part of the reason that I keep on.

Have you made any good friends here at Edelman?

Yes, I have. I have indeed. And I'm very grateful for them too.

Why did you want to do this interview today?

Well, I think I wanted people to know not to give up, and that things can get better. I think that was it.

Would you characterize yourself as hopeful?

Most of the time, yes. If I look back and see where I was, and I look at myself now, I would definitely say things have improved. I don't know what the future holds, but right now, things are OK.

Thank you so much.

You're welcome.

It was really a pleasure. I hope it wasn't too uncomfortable for you.

No, it was fine (smiles). Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW