First Person Account:  
Third Side of the Coin

by Dorothy Minor

The article that begins below is the fourth in a series of personal accounts to be published in the Schizophrenia Bulletin. We hope that mental health professionals—who are the Bulletin's primary audience—will take this opportunity to learn about the issues and difficulties confronted by consumers of mental health care. In addition, we hope that these accounts will give patients and families a better sense of not being alone in confronting the problems that can be anticipated by persons with serious emotional difficulties. Although there are a number of books and articles describing the personal experiences of patients and families with mental disorder, we believe there is a continuing need for experiences to be shared among mental health professionals, families, and current and former patients.

We welcome other contributions from patients, ex-patients, or family members. Our major editorial requirement is that such contributions be clearly written and organized and that a novel or unique aspect of schizophrenia be described, with special emphasis on points that will be important for professionals. Clinicians who see articulate patients, with experiences they believe should be shared, might encourage these patients to submit their articles to the Bulletin's new section, First Person Accounts.—The Editors

A coin has two sides, heads or tails, as the world sometimes seems to be divided between the sane and the insane. I fit somewhere in between. These last 5½ years I have been a mental patient. I have been in and out of the hospital three times and on and off a variety of medications. In short, I walk the thin edge of the coin. I have learned much, and I am proud of my accomplishments. I can point to a padded cell and am proud to say, "I was there."

I live in a small town in Central Florida. The town is too large to know everyone personally but small enough to know "the truth" about people. No one is perfect. I have friends who accept me wholeheartedly. Once I spoke with one of the ministers of my church. I began gently by telling him that I was seeing a psychiatrist, and I spared him many details hitting only the main points. He had nothing to say. Possibly my illness was too great a burden for him. There are those who see mental illness as a demonic possession. My own Sunday school teacher has confessed that he believes this true in some cases, and he is a good person. Happily, I deal with all these people successfully.

My third psychotic episode, like my first, happened while I was a graduate student. I was in my third quarter at the School of Library Science at Florida State University. I was off all medication at the time. When a neighbor's stereo began speaking to me, I knew my illness had returned. I went to see the Dean of the Library School. He was very concerned and wanted to help. I was hospitalized for a second time at Florida Hospital North in Altamonte Springs.

Hospitals are no fun. Because of my illness, I was terrified. Perhaps my hospital experiences were different from those of others because Florida Hospital North is Seventh Day Adventist. Every morning on the breakfast tray there was a printed message from the Chaplain
of the hospital. They gave me something to read and a quotation on which to try to focus my thoughts. And I have kept several of them. The staff members were encouraged to carry on light conversation with the patients. A simple question, "Do you live with your mother?" seemed too hard to answer. Unsuccessfully, I tried to explain about school, a part-time job, and my life in Tallahassee. Many people have written of the friendships they made in the hospital. I did not make any friends. Possibly I was too withdrawn, or maybe I was released from the hospital too soon.

I went back to Florida State University, finished, and received my Master's Degree in Library Science. It frightens me now to think that I drove Tennessee Street in downtown Tallahassee during rush hour, my vision blurred from medication.

Now almost 2½ years have passed. I am still on medication. But changes have taken place in the way I see the world and my place in it. Out of the five psychiatrists I have had, counting the one I have now, only two have helped me. One of these, Dr. Miles of Tallahassee, helped me to see that sometimes it is better to stop and take opportunities to do things which might never be repeated. And I have done this. My world has grown, my interests increased, and I am developing a greater understanding for others and their problems.

My greatest step toward mental health was the acceptance of my illness. The first few years I tried to pretend it was not there. I did not want to believe I was really sick, falling victim to the false logic of medication. Instead of thinking, "I am sick; therefore I need medicine," I thought, "I am taking medicine; therefore I am sick; and if I stop taking medicine, I will be well." I feel that some psychiatrists play on this false logic.

When I graduated from Library School, I applied for a few professional positions. I was refused. I do not believe I was discriminated against. There are simply too many qualified librarians for the number of jobs. I volunteered at a local hospital for a year. And it was this volunteer work that helped me get a part-time paying position at the Florida Regional Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped. At present I am also a part-time reference librarian at a liberal arts college in Central Florida. I am accepted at both libraries, and I love my work.

I do not deny that discrimination exists. It does. So do ignorance, disease, poverty, and war. But it is important to keep one's perspective in this matter, and to believe that for every person prejudiced against the mentally ill there are others free of that prejudice. Mental patients should not accept vegetative illness. When a person is ill from any cause, he is unable to work as well as he could if he were healthy. The world is full of simple, nontaxing, emotionally fulfilling work that needs doing. A job such as one of these may lead to positions of higher responsibility and financial rewards. Some will say that I am overly optimistic. But this is the path I walk. It is on the third side of the coin.