

TO: The MHA Awards Committee

FROM: Joanne Doan, Publisher, *esperanza* magazine

It is my pleasure to nominate Michael Rafferty of Chestnut Hill, MA, for the 2017 Clifford W. Beers Award. Michael is the only Viewpoints columnist who has contributed to every single issue since our debut in Spring 2008. For the past 10 years, Michael has exemplified Beers’ conviction that he “must fight in the open” by telling his own story about his bouts of depression in print, on the Internet, and in person.

I knew from the earliest stages of planning *esperanza* that I wanted the magazine to include first-person accounts of living with depression and anxiety. I also knew that it was a lot to ask someone to “go public” with such painful and intimate experiences.

In fact, Michael wanted to tell his story. He wanted to tell people who thought they knew him that they didn’t know *this.* And he wanted to tell people who never met him that they were not alone.

Michael’s particular talent is to write about difficult topics with a touch of humor. Even when the subject is personally hurtful, he finds ways to, as one reader wrote, “always make me smile and sometimes laugh out loud—not something that you expect when the subject matter is depression.”

Michael’s columns always describe his own experiences, but each column has included handholds that might help his readers climb out of their own depressions. In one column, he described the therapeutic benefit of doing “good deeds” for other people. In another, he wrote about “occasional epiphanies of self-awareness about regrets, forgiveness and happiness.”

When we were getting ready to launch the *esperanza* website in 2012, we wanted to feature blog postings. We asked Michael to contribute, and he willingly ventured into addressing a wider online audience. He even took the opportunity of a freer editorial hand to get a little edgier—for example, comparing finding a new therapist to blind dating.

He has shared his story through presentations as well. When Screening for Mental Health asked him to help promote awareness of National Depression Screening Day, he was ready to help in any way he could. Michael agreed to submit a letter to Annie’s Mailbox, a syndicated advice column following in the tradition of Ann Landers.

That letter, included as part of this nomination, encouraged readers to take advantage of free screening if they suspected they had any of the symptoms of depression. The column ran in more than 800 newspapers across the country over his signature rather than “anonymous” as most advice column letters are run.

Michael also has spoken and written for the outreach organization Families for Depression Awareness on several occasions. Because workplace stress was such a predictable trigger to his own episodes of depression, Michael has been especially eager to speak to employee groups.

I mentioned earlier in this letter that we have featured Michael’s Viewpoint column in every issue of our magazine. I must also say that when a colleague recommended Michael for this role, I didn’t know that he was fresh off the experience of having lost a job as a direct result of a depressive episode. True to his style, he later described the experience as having lived through his greatest fears and discovered that it “wasn’t so bad.”

Looking back on that moment now, I realize that he was in a classic fight-or-flight situation. He chose to fight – as Clifford Beers instructed – “in the open.”

PS Samples of Michael’s columns are included with this nomination package.

All of Michael’s *esperanza* columns can be found [here](http://www.hopetocope.com/author/michael-rafferty/).

Additional Materials

Column Samples

Viewpoint: Survival Instinct 

By Michael Rafferty

In one of the first pieces I wrote for esperanza, I made the point that I don’t want to be described as “suffering from depression.” It is much better, I argued, to describe me as “struggling with depression.” It’s all about the active versus the passive verb.

Okay, I take words seriously. (Too seriously, some would say.) I love words and all their nuances.

I have recently been focused on the word “survivor.” As in “depression survivor.” I have struggled with [depression](http://www.hopetocope.com/depression-what-breed-is-your-black-dog/) for more than half my adult life. I resist, however, saying that I have survived depression. If I am referred to that way, my impulse is to go into full-sarcasm mode and reply, “Whoa, there! I’m not a survivor yet.

To me, survival implies arrival at the far end of an ordeal. It’s the sort of claim that you’d see on a T-shirt: “I survived the winter of 2016,” or, “I survived the holidays with my in-laws.” But lately, I have been reconsidering the notion.

I have been reading a book titled The Theater of War, by Bryan Doerries. In its preface, Mr. Doerries describes himself as a philologist—a lover of words —so I was a fan right from the get-go.

The book draws on Doerries’ experiences in staging ancient Greek tragedies for audiences of combat hardened Marines and prison inmates with life sentences. He wants his audiences to see that the private struggles that torture Ajax or Prometheus— guilt, abandonment, despair—are shared human experiences.

Ajax was a soldier who (spoiler alert!) lost his best friend, Achilles, in the Trojan War. Consequently, Ajax had an Olympian-level case of survivor’s guilt. In the Prometheus myth, Zeus chains the defiant Titan to a rock on a mountainside. His only visitor is an eagle sent to torture him every day. Being immortal, he seems destined for a future of eternal misery.

(SPOILER ALERT! Prometheus eventually gets rescued by Hercules.)

I am generally loathe to use military metaphors to describe illness. No patient ever volunteered to be sick, and certainly none ever trained for it. For many facing depression, there is no band of brothers (or sisters) to go through the ordeal together.

The idea of drama as [therapy](http://www.hopetocope.com/blog/therapy-of-a-different-kind/), on the other hand, is very helpful to me. I only wish that I’d learned that sooner.

My childhood was not exactly enriched by exposure to cultural activities. I first learned about Achilles from Captain Marvel’s magic word, SHAZAM!, which is an acronym of classical heroes’ names. (Achilles is the second “A.”) Greek tragedies were way off in the future. So, too, were stage performances of anything else.

I was twenty-something when I first saw a performance of Eugene O’Neill’s Long Day’s Journey Into Night. Even thirty-something years later, I remember the awakening I experienced in that small theater: “This O’Neill guy knows something about me!”

I won’t go into the details about the Tyrone family’s, um, issues because a) this is a family magazine, and b) my family will read this. Let’s just say that shame, resentment and fear figure into the plot. It took me years—decades actually— before I understood that I was on my own [journey](http://www.hopetocope.com/blog/patience-in-our-journeys-to-recovery-can-enable-us-to-fly/) into night. It took me a little longer to understand that dawn did not always promise a better day.

As a case in point, I have a distinct recollection of a crisp autumn day in 2006. I could feel the bear hug of a depression coming on when I got out of bed that morning, but it wasn’t until mid-afternoon that I felt it crushing my chest. I was walking my dog at the time, trying to keep one foot in front of the other, hoping I could cover the two blocks back home without breaking into sobs. I can still remember thinking, “I can’t go through this again. I can’t. I just can’t.”

Here’s the weird part: Even as my depression was lifting—crying can be very therapeutic—I was already anticipating the next one. And there was a next one. And another after that, and another, and—well, you get the idea.

Thinking back on those episodes now, I am starting to appreciate my own [resilience](http://www.hopetocope.com/soundoff-resilience-you/). That just might be what surviving is all about.

That’s kind of Promethean, don’t you think?

*Printed as “Viewpoint: Survival Instinct”,*[*Winter 2016*](http://www.hopetocope.com/winter-2016/)

Viewpoint: Owner of a Lonely Heart

By Michael Rafferty

I am lonely. And I am depressed. Am I depressed because I’m lonely or the other way around? Or am I a loser and that’s why I am lonely and depressed?

Well, you can see right away why I don’t get invited to a lot of parties.

I don’t think that [loneliness](http://www.hopetocope.com/soundoff-connections-3/) is an integral part of depression. From what I’ve read about well-known people who struggle with depression—Buzz Aldrin, Kitty Dukakis, Dorothy Hamill—they don’t talk about being lonely. They tell of pulling back from their families and friends during episodes of depression, but they come across as quite sociable the rest of the time.

So maybe it is [isolation](http://www.hopetocope.com/life-lessons-anti-isolation-policies/) that has the common bond to depression. That makes sense. Anyone who participates in cognitive therapy will likely recognize a major category of “distorted thinking” at work in that pulling back—the one where Everyone Else is Normal. You say “toe-mah-toe” and they all say “cu-cum-ber.” No wonder you want to withdraw.

But isolation—being alone—is different from [loneliness](http://www.hopetocope.com/blog/were-not-alone/). We can all use some degree of isolation, some time to ourselves. It’s healthy, maybe even necessary, to retreat from the world’s demands now and then. Even Superman has his Fortress of Solitude.

Loneliness, on the other hand, has nothing to do with being alone. For me, loneliness can have its most painful sting when I’m in a room full of people. At the risk of crossing the threshold into self-pity, I will admit to feeling that no one in that room wants anything to do with me. Would anybody notice if I wasn’t here?

Before I go further, I should point out that I am not a hermit. I have a wife, a son, three siblings, a dog and a cat, all of whom love me (well, maybe not the cat). And I love them (even the cat). But they don’t really count because—Distorted Thinking Alert!—they have to love me.

When I am in a depressed frame of mind, I will start to withdraw and close in on myself. That’s the [isolation](http://www.hopetocope.com/viewpoint-island-of-isolation/) reflex: I don’t want anyone to see me like this.

Fortunately, my episodes of depression always run their course (well, so far). The precipitating factors either get resolved or stop seeming important. [Resilience](http://www.hopetocope.com/blog/resilience/) kicks in and I stop feeling fragile. My sense of humor returns. I emerge from my cave of isolation.

But the loneliness does not go away. Over decades, I have accumulated a deep reservoir of low self-regard. It has resulted in a default starting point in almost every social interaction I undertake. They won’t like me. I am going to be judged and found wanting.

A “fight or flight” instinct wells up. There are physical manifestations—increased heart rate, tension, rapid breathing, tightness in my chest—and they are hard to ignore. Only rarely can I consider the possibility that I am not actually under attack. Oddly enough, “fight or flight” is my comfort zone.

Shifting metaphors, I think of neurological pathways as roads. With the roads that I travel all the time, the ones that I take without conscious thought, I cruise along, arriving at predictable places. I am trying to pave some new roads and choosing very consciously to take them.

As part of this road-building, I force myself to be aggressively social, to reach out to people whom I don’t know and keep track of the people I do know. After all, contact is the first step to connection, and I am occasionally rewarded with reassurance from these folks that I am not a pariah.

The Internet and the new “[social media](http://www.hopetocope.com/viewpoint-connect-outside-of-social-media/)” help quite a lot, but this is still hard work for me. I keep at it because living with depression has already cost me a great deal. When I think about the friendships that I have let slip away or the people with whom I never built friendships, I feel something akin to grief. It’s time, I tell myself, to put a stop to this.

Because I really can be fun at parties.

*Printed as “Viewpoint: Owner of a Lonely Heart “,*[*Spring 2010*](http://www.hopetocope.com/spring-2010-2/)