

Witness to the Dark: My Daughter's Troubled Times: A Comedy of Emotions

Bob Larsted

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Bob Larsted isn't the type of person who works out his problems in public. He had always made a point of "avoiding speaking in public—or to anyone for that matter." And yet, the introverted engineer has written a moving memoir about his quest to find answers for his daughter as she struggled with serious mental illness. *Witness to the Dark* tells the very human story of a father who is just trying to do the right thing, even when he has no idea what that thing might be.

Larsted's self-effacing humor sets the tone for a book that easily could have become drowned in drama. The situation is undeniably dire. Larsted's daughter Patricia has attempted suicide several times. She hears voices and has friends nobody else can see. Patricia spends her teen years cycling through hospitals and treatment programs, none of which offers a permanent cure. And yet, Larsted never resorts to a "woe is me" lament. Instead, he opts for an engineer's problem-solving orientation: "Here's what I did. Here's how it went. And here's how I screwed it up time after time and how I kept trying anyway." Not surprisingly, sometimes it worked for him.

Larsted points fingers not just at his own frequent follies but also at the American mental health system that failed to provide consistent, competent treatment. Each chapter is headed with a simple illustration of Patricia's ever-changing medication regimen—cut the round one in half, take two of the diamonds, and add one of the oblong—that calls vivid attention to the fact that her doctors are scrambling for a solution rather than planning a considered course of treatment.

In all of this, Larsted is pretty much on his own. His wife, Kate, is recovering from a stroke, and his younger daughter, Beth, is busy being a normal teenager. Whatever role they played in Patricia's treatment is minimized; Larsted chooses to leave them out of the narrative to honor their privacy, a move that may have been unnecessary given that "Bob Larsted" is itself a pen name, and all of the family names are invented as well.

Poems and e-mails from Patricia, notes to and from doctors, and some spot-on analogies about handling emergencies round out Larsted's tendency to make a lot of lists. There are lists of Patricia's dreams, lists of medications, lists of the dreaded phone calls to therapists (and the inevitable failure of the therapists to call back). Larsted acknowledges his own compulsive tendencies, though, with self-deprecating comments and gentle humor.

Parents will identify with Larsted's tenacity in getting treatment for his troubled daughter, as well as the missteps he makes along the way. While he honestly recounts the enormous struggles he has faced, his story also offers hope that even the most ordinary parents can rise to the challenge and find help for their child.

SHEILA M. TRASK (March 7, 2013)

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