

Letter from Auckland

By Anne Ho

Toi Ora is a Maori term, meaning well-being through art. Toi Ora is the place where I found myself and stood up again, a place where I started my journey to recovery.

I close my eyes. I can see a dark, narrow staircase. I walk up the staircase and arrive on the first level of an old factory building. I find a large room with meagre furnishings – tables and chairs. The room is not very bright. Little sunshine comes in from windows at the top of some of the walls. The place is so “enclosed.” Some people are painting, some just sit there to relax. The manager comes to greet me. This is how I came to Toi Ora, roughly 12 years ago, to begin my journey to recovery.

I was diagnosed as schizophrenic, and later bipolar disorder almost destroyed my life. I had four breakdowns and thought they would not come back each time after I became “normal” again. But I failed. They came back to me no matter what – after a short time, like a year, or a long time like 10 years. The last time it happened in Auckland, but I am sure I have recovered. At long last I can control my illness. I no longer let stress conquer me. I am no longer lonely. No longer depressed, or rather, I know how to handle depression. It is all because I can help myself this time. Most important, I have found the meaning of life and its worthiness through goals and dreams.

During my fourth and last breakdown, I suffered most. It was even more severe than the time in Hong Kong when I tried to kill myself, and it took much longer to be “normal” again. Yet it was all worth it. At the beginning of this breakdown I was mad as mad could be. I ran away from home three times. My family was stricken with worry, running around looking for me. I was ripped off by a cunning jeweller when I sold her my diamond to get money to run away to Wellington.

Once I ended up in jail for trespassing. Do you think my family still had patience with me? Certainly not. For a long while, my relationship with my family was in tatters. I lost the love and respect of my husband and daughter, or so I thought. This was the time I was at my lowest, when I did not know what to do. Then I came to know Toi Ora – a place where the mentally ill can go to do free courses on writing, painting, drama, music and art. I did the creative writing, the drama and painting courses. They have worked miracles for me. Through writing I poured out my love, my sorrow, my joy, my pain, my hatred . . . I wrote about my disgust

所有的清醒都是一種瘋狂，所有的瘋狂都是一種清醒。說到底，誰也沒有看不起誰的權利與理直氣壯

for war; I wrote about my love for my family; I wrote about my sorrow when I fought with my husband; I wrote about the pain inside me when I was hurt; I wrote also about simple pleasures like how I enjoyed a wonderful concert.

Through drama I acted out my long hidden secrets which I considered shameful; I acted out my emotions; I acted out my scary experiences. I released so much and felt so much happier after the drama course. Although our tutor said the things we did were not meant to be therapeutic, I regained my confidence, my self-esteem and integrity – the best results of any therapy. I found that I was ready to move on to another stage of my recovery plan.

I began to embark on a struggle which would take me almost 10 years – to study at the University of Auckland for a Bachelor of Art degree. I finally

received my degree at the age of 57.

Recently I came across the present manager of Toi Ora and he invited me to visit the new Toi Ora. Today, I made that trip. I was amazed at the transformation. The area is now much larger and is filled with lots of sunshine, giving it a sense of openness. There are two levels with a deck so those inside Toi Ora are more connected to the outside community. There are even more courses to take. I know I won't be able to resist coming back to use the facilities again.

I also saw an old friend – Andrew Blythe. He was also at the old Toi Ora some 12 years ago, painting and writing poetry so complex that I could not understand it. He hardly spoke, even when I tried talking to him. He looked like a typical “outsider” artist with long hair and an untidy beard. But today his paintings are exhibited in New York and Paris. It is easier for me to understand and appreciate his works now. He even talked to me and let me take photos with him and his paintings.

We have both been empowered – him with his painting and poetry, I with my degree. I am just as proud as he is of what I have achieved. Graduating with a degree is a dream come true, is an important milestone in my life and is an assurance that nothing is impossible if we try to achieve it.

Thank you Toi Ora for giving me the start! ☐

Anne Ho loves writing. Letters were the sole outlet for her writing until her breakdown. After that she started to write with fervour and studied English at university. She loves music with equal enthusiasm and has also written songs which she hopes will one day be sung by music lovers.