

On New Year's Day 2000, *The Boston Globe Sunday Magazine* published short pieces by five New England writers on the theme of "New Beginnings." This is mine. A few people wrote angry letters complaining that I was making fun of depression. I only meant to make fun of myself.

At The Threshold

On my 42nd birthday, I decided to do something positive, life-affirming, and ambitious. I decided it was finally time to do something for *me*. I decided to get on antidepressants.

It wasn't a matter of suddenly slipping into despair; I'd been mildly, contentedly depressed for years. Among other things, I found it a useful and inexpensive way to combat a tendency toward insomnia. Nor was it the onslaught of a midlife crisis. I hadn't yet had my inevitable midlife crisis, but I was eagerly awaiting it, figuring it would motivate me to improve my diet and possibly finish reading *The Man Without Qualities*.

What finally got me into line at the CVS pharmacy counter was the fear that I was realizing my full potential. I wasn't as focused, happy, or productive as I could be. Engines two and three were not functioning. With est out of fashion and high colonics out of the question, drug therapy seemed the most reliable way to start fresh, to take a new lease on life and become the person I just knew I had in me,

I'd seen it happen to people I knew. All of my medicated peers were more energetic, optimistic, self-confident, and cheerful than I was. They had goals, yoga teachers, and complicated appointment books. They spent Sunday mornings looking at real estate. They knew where to get the best haircuts and how to buy stock over the

Internet. All because they were on antidepressants. Their engines were finely tuned, well-oiled machines. They were the people sitting next to me on the airplane who'd paid \$900 less for their tickets than I'd paid. Somehow, it didn't seem fair. Even if I wanted to, I told myself, I couldn't afford to plod along at my usual pace.

Best of all, the medicated majority had shared interests. They talked passionately about their drugs; at dinner parties, at faculty meetings, in line at the movie theater, during the movie. I felt as if I were back in high school, friendless and isolated in the lunchroom. I couldn't participate in their conversations, and listening was as confusing and alienating as tuning in to a traffic report in a strange city: "The Wellbutrin is too edgy, so I'm taking a little Paxil along with it, although I've been thinking a lot about Elavil recently, as Prozac alternative." My feeble attempts at joining in—confessing that I occasionally stole Valium when I visited my mother—drew pitying glances.

So I got a prescription, which is about as difficult as getting a parking ticket, and sat back, waiting for the first day of the rest of my life.

The religion of the fresh start is so deeply embedded in the American consciousness that we take it for granted most of the time. After all, the promise of a new beginning is what brought many of our ancestors here in the first place. Our ongoing fascination with the mythic ability to endlessly reinvent ourselves helps explain our restlessness, our creativity, and important pieces of our history: westward expansion, the space program, and Paula Corbin Jones's nose job. Combine our need to renew with our belief in the essential infallibility of science, and it seems inevitable that drugs would become the preferred route to spiritual and psychological fulfillment, to becoming our very best selves.

I was prescribed one of a new family of antidepressants, a drug with a vague, cheerful name. All drugs have masterfully elusive names that suggest something without actually saying anything. Their names are as slippery as the profoundly meaningless titles of New Age music albums: *Deep Breakfast*, *Sky of a Thousand Rains*, *Desert Imaginings*.

The change was instant. By the time I'd figured out how to open the childproof cap on the pill bottle. I was a walking Physician's Desk Reference. I called up every antidepressed person I knew and began trading stories about milligrams and blurred vision. I was officially a member of the club.

But six months into the experience, I began to wonder what changes the drug had wrought, what this fresh start really amounted to. True, I was less anxious, less obsessive in my thinking, and more talkative at the movies. So far, so good. But I wasn't worried about reaching my full potential anymore, and that started to worry me. Did that mean I *had* reached my full potential, that at long last I *was* the best that I could be? If so, I really did have something to be depressed about.

When I finally stopped taking the pills, I felt I had learned a valuable lesson. But it wasn't about antidepressants, those chemical compounds that have worked wonders on hundreds of thousands buried under suffocating depression. The lesson I learned was about the vital importance of new beginnings; about how essential it is to keep your eyes on the door that leads to a fresh start, a new lease on life, a world where all your potential is realized.

Just don't open it.