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Minnesota native's memoir describes battle with depression

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By: Mary Ann Grossman, Forum Communications, INFORUM

ST. PAUL — When Paul Gruchow died by suicide in 2004, he left seven eloquently written books that link humans with nature in an almost spiritual way.

Now this native Minnesotan's award-winning literary legacy is completed with publication of "Letters to a Young Madman," a new memoir about Gruchow's nearly lifelong struggle with depression.

"This is one possible definition of mental illness," he writes. "It is the sickness of unborn pain."

Gruchow was 56 when he took his life. He tells in the book of being treated like a child in mental hospitals, electroshock treatments, dealing with psychiatrists and therapists, the effects of drugs on the brain, inability to function on his worst days, the bravery of mentally ill men and women and what melancholia does to the soul, the St. Paul Pioneer Press reported.

"We no longer believe, as we did 250 years ago, that the mentally ill are animals, but we are not yet ready to grant that they are fully human either," he writes.

One of his goals was to destigmatize the mentally ill, according to Louis Martinelli, the author's friend and literary executor.

Martinelli, a poet and playwright who lives in Cincinnati, edited "Letters to a Young Madman" and wrote the foreword.

"There has been quite a bit written about writers' struggles with depression, including 'Darkness Visible,' William Styron's masterpiece," Martinelli said. "But I don't know of a single book that combines Paul's kind of soul-searching, Job-like eloquence with a critical analysis of the mental health system."

Martinelli, whose father died by suicide, believes Gruchow's book is important in several ways. "It can change the way people think of mental illness and treatment, and it pulls Paul's remarkable body of work along with it. As passionate as Paul could be about the environment, he sometimes held back emotions in those books. In this one, he let it all out there."

Gruchow, described as a contemporary Thoreau for his lyrical writing about lakes and prairies, grew up on a farm in Montevideo.

After editing the Minnesota Daily newspaper at the University of Minnesota, he served as a congressional aide to U.S. Rep. Don Fraser, then as news and public affairs director for Minnesota Public Radio.

Gruchow was working for the Daily Globe newspaper in Worthington when he wrote his first book, "Journal of a Prairie Year" (University of Minnesota Press, 1985).

His second book, "The Necessity of Empty Places" (St. Martin's Press, 1988), earned him a national reputation. He sold his interest in the Daily Globe, where he had been managing editor, and moved to Northfield where he taught English composition at St. Olaf College. He and his wife, Nancy, also ran a bookstore. (They later divorced.)

It was in Northfield that Gruchow met Martinelli, who attended St. Mary's College in Winona and had done long-term, writer-in-residence programs in Upper Midwest communities.

"I had such regard for Paul and his work," Martinelli recalls. "He introduced me to the prairie, and we shared an interest in community."

Martinelli says the catalyst for "Letters to a Young Madman" was his poems exploring the life and work of painter Vincent van Gogh.

"I sent two or three of these poems to Paul in the spring of '03, and he liked them," Martinelli said. "Within a week he had sent me the first pages of 'Letters.' ... Paul felt we were doing something almost collaborative, inspired by van Gogh to write about the human self and suffering and mental illness. Van Gogh lived that in his life, and he was still able to make art with high standards. Van Gogh inspired both of us, and Paul and I inspired each other."

Among Gruchow and Martinelli's Northfield friends were Jane Dickerson and Richard Levins, the married couple whose Minneapolis-based company published "Letters to a Young Madman."

Levins is a University of Minnesota professor emeritus in agricultural economics, so he and Gruchow had a lot to talk about. They also shared a sense of humor, according to Dickerson.

"We enjoyed Paul so much as our neighbor," she said, adding that she and her husband helped Paul pack his library when he moved to northern Minnesota in the 1990s.

"Paul was a gracious man and a great cook. He had a Bon Appetit magazine collection he would not part with," Dickerson recalled with a laugh.

"We kept in touch with Paul, and we were surprised and not surprised when he committed suicide. We knew his demons were in there."

Gruchow functioned well much of the time, and his thoughts on the ramifications of living with mental illness are some of the most interesting parts of his touching, sometimes humorous, sometimes wry book.

"My biggest mistake was in allowing myself to be called disabled," he writes. "When I did so, I became, in my own mind, disabled. And once that happened, I was disabled. I defined myself by what I couldn't do. But the number of things I could do was far greater."

Gruchow and Martinelli also stayed in touch after Gruchow moved north and Martinelli returned to Cincinnati from Minnesota.

"I felt Paul's worsening struggles with depression when we talked on the phone," Martinelli recalls. "I felt it more deeply beginning about 2001, the intense period of treatment when he was given large doses of drugs and subjected to electroconvulsive shock treatment that led to short-term memory loss."

By the summer of 2003, Gruchow was well enough to be working vigorously on "Letters..." In the book he writes of the efficacy of medications he may have been taking at the time:

"The popular belief persists that antidepressant medications make people happy. They don't. When they work, they make people not depressed. But there is as wide a gulf between being not-depressed and being happy as there is between being not-starving and well nourished, or not-mute and eloquent. One speaks to the condition of living and the other to its art. What we are is far more important than what we are not."

Martinelli says there were times Gruchow almost convinced his friends that this book would save him. "A Christmas visit to the small house he'd purchase in Duluth was encouraging. There was a sense of order and harmony. Paul was cooking again," Martinelli recalls.

Gruchow had completed his manuscript by January 2004, when his migraine headaches, depression and anxiety returned. He died of a drug overdose in February.

"To the healthy person, suicide seems not only unconscionable but unfathomable," Gruchow writes. "But to someone seized by deep depression, the thought of suicide, or more abstractly, of death, may appear logical and morally compelling. In dying, such a person thinks, I will relieve the world of my misery and also of the misery of those who are made miserable by my misery. Such thoughts may be life-saving."

After Gruchow's death, a friend sent his manuscript to Emilie Buchwald, retired Milkweed Editions founder-publisher and Gruchow's friend.

Buchwald edited Gruchow's Milkweed books, "Grass Roots: The Universe of Home" and "Boundary Waters: The Grace of the Wild." The literary press also reprinted "The Necessity of Empty Places" and "Journal of a Prairie Year."

"Paul's memoir deserves to be talked about," Buchwald said. "It's important because of the way it's written. The style is different from his other work."

"I think he wanted to reach an audience that would appreciate the simplicity and obvious sincerity of what he had to say. He wanted to make clear situations faced by people who had gone through a long process of great misery, of illness that the medical profession was not, and probably is still not well-equipped to cope with. And he conveys all this with dignity."

Buchwald said that when she worked with Gruchow in the 1990s, "he wasn't ebullient but he was not incapacitated the way he describes in the book, spending an entire afternoon looking at a letter and not being able to raise his hand to put a stamp on it. I found that passage so moving."

Depression is "paralytic," Gruchow writes: "It is as useless to ask a person immobilized by depression to summon the power of will as it is to beg a dance of a corpse."

Dickerson said she was surprised, when she read Gruchow's manuscript, by how devout a man he was. She especially delighted in the prayers he wrote for the book. The loveliest, simply titled "Prayer," concludes:

"Forgive me, Lord, for receiving your gifts with closed eyes and a hard heart. Open my eyes and soften my heart, O Lord. Grant me the vulnerability of grace to the end of my days."

Information from: St. Paul Pioneer Press, <http://www.twincities.com>

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