

This year marks ten years since I was diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder, a combination of schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. It's been ten years of suffering, ten years of learning, ten years of hardship, and ten years of blessings. I think, if I've come away with any lessons about mental illness in those ten years it's that mental illness can strip you bare. But also that mental illness can be a twisted sort of blessing.

I don't remember the precise date of my diagnosis. But I remember the day clearly. It was in the fall and the leaves crunched pleasingly under my shoes as I made my way down the hill from my college campus into downtown Mankato, Minnesota to meet with my therapist.

The summer before, I'd broken up with my girlfriend in Minnesota in a terrible way. It had been a hard summer, I'd only completed one painful, arduous painting instead of the three or four I'd planned on. My girlfriend had called me almost every night, but as the summer progressed I slowly realized that I had no idea who she was. Who was this woman who called me all the time? Who texted me every night to tell me they loved me and to wish me sweet dreams? I was suspicious of her. And so I started ignoring her. Eventually, after ignoring her for too long, she sent an ultimatum: either respond to this text message or our relationship was over. I didn't respond.

A while later; days, weeks, I have no idea, I came to my senses and knew I had to make amends with her. The only way I could think to do that was to go back to Minnesota and apologize. Perhaps explain the situation to her.

My parents weren't comfortable with the idea. It was obvious I'd changed. It was obvious I was suffering. All summer, I'd locked myself in my room and didn't come out save dinner, when I was quiet as a church mouse and not at all my usual loquacious self. I had been seeing a therapist for a while, ever since I'd developed some stomach issues that turned out to be severe food allergies, and they thought if I saw a therapist in Mankato then at least I'd have someone looking out for me.

I don't remember much about that therapist in Mankato. I remember she'd recently graduated from school, that it was her first year actually practicing therapy. She eventually told me she

thought I had schizoaffective disorder, explained briefly what it was, and I thought “okay, that’s what I have. At least now there’s a name for it.” I also remember being somewhat relieved it wasn’t full-blown schizophrenia, that somehow schizoaffective disorder wasn’t as bad, that it was like Diet Schizophrenia and therefore I didn’t have to take it as seriously. My first mistake among many.

I pulled my phone out of my pocket upon leaving my therapist’s office and called my mom. Making my way back up the hill to my school, eventually ending up in the art center where I took my painting classes. I told my mom what my therapist had said and then launched into excuses about how it wasn’t really *that* bad, how she didn’t need to fly out to Minnesota to come get me, that I was going to stick out the semester and then come home to receive treatment. I was hoping for some kind of naturopathic cure for my illness like had happened with my food allergies. I assumed it was a simple matter of taking my pills and everything being fixed. My next mistakes among many.

That semester was a tough semester. I remember being in my dorm room one second working on my homework and the next, with a mere blink of my eyes, I’d be in class. Hours had passed without me even realizing it and I had no idea what I’d done in the intervening time. I remember the soccer team banging on my door in the middle of the night, threatening to kill me. I’d sometimes show up at my friend’s dorm, call her, immediately hang up when she answered, and when she came outside to see if anything was wrong, I’d just silently walk inside. I wouldn’t talk to her, wouldn’t make eye contact with her, wouldn’t even acknowledge her. She put on my favorite movies, my favorite music, she made me food - nothing brought me out of my dissociative state. I’d just sit on her couch and not do anything until I finally decided to get up and walk out, not even saying goodbye.

I had no idea about those particular dissociative episodes until she came to visit me in Colorado years later. It explained at least some of what happened in the time between doing my homework one second and being in class the next.

It was a scary time. I was a troubled man. But it would get a lot worse before it started to get

better.

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When I got back to Denver, I met with my Naturopath. He wasn't aware of any natural treatment for schizoaffective disorder. There were these things called Pig Vitamins that were supposed to help with mood, but mood wasn't and still isn't my worst problem - I tend toward the schizophrenic side of schizoaffective disorder. The mood swings are still there in all their deadly reverie, I just suffer more from psychosis, delusions, paranoia, and hallucinations than I do from mania or depression. My Naturopath did more research, our hour long appointment turned into a three hour long appointment and I came out of it defeated; I'd have to go see a psychiatrist.

Psychiatrists are MD's, they prescribe medication to treat your problems much like your regular doctor would prescribe an oral glycemic medication for diabetes.

But while the medication your regular doctor prescribes is usually incredibly effective and leaves you feeling right as rain a week or two after treatment, psychiatric medicine is a whole different animal. The following is a list of stuff everyone should know about taking psych meds.

1. The side effects are awful. Everything from weight gain to intention tremor to cognitive impairment to paralysis to drooling uncontrollably. I can no longer climb ladders or ride a bike because one of my medications effects my balance so much. One of my medications makes me prone to being essentially cold-blooded, poikilothermic it's called. So I'm at risk of getting heat stroke in the sun and hypothermia in the shade when it's at its worst, with the baseline being that I can never quite regulate my own body temperature. I was diagnosed with type II diabetes late last year because of all the weight I'd gained on my meds - because about an hour after I take my pills I get hungrier than hungry can explain. It's like I haven't eaten for weeks and in the past I was known to clean out my entire refrigerator in a single evening. Then there's the sleepiness. I remember taking Zyprexa for the first time. I took it an hour earlier than

my then-usual 10pm pill time because my psychiatrist had warned me it was pretty sedating. I didn't wake up until 4pm the next day. I'd missed school, I'd missed work, and I remember feeling like I *still* needed a good night's sleep. Even today, I feel like I could take a good long nap at just about any time, and, in fact, I often do require an hour or so in the afternoon after I've eat lunch.

2. You might have to take a lot of them. I take about 50 pills every day right now. That's 350 pills every week, 1,400 pills every month, or 72,800 pills every year. It's a lot of pills. And it's tough to take that many pills, both physically and emotionally. Experience and familiarity make it easier; I've been taking 50 pills for about four years, and before that it was about 40-some pills for three years. I've come up with a system to be able to take them all at once, and it impresses people occasionally that I can swallow all 35 of my evening pills at once with just a swig of water. They're not all prescription medications...a lot of them are various supplements. But I can remember thinking years ago, that I was only 25, I shouldn't be taking this many pills. No one else takes this many pills.
3. It's probably going to take a long time to find the right balance of medication. Every person is different, every mental illness is different, therefore every treatment is different. It took about five or six years for my psychiatrist and I to finally stop tweaking my medication regimen and call it good. When you decide to take medication to help with your illness, it's probably going to take a long time to find that proper balance, and it's going to be hard until you do find that proper balance. The side effects will be at their worse, and you'll constantly be discovering new side effects - it's a rough time for everyone involved.
4. You'll get used to them. I still experience a lot of the side effects of my medication but they're not as bad as when I first started taking them. I haven't had a med knock me out for 19 hours in a long time, I haven't experienced paralysis in a long time. The pills eventually attenuate, though it's a frustrating experience before that happens.

But I suppose I could have known those things and still would've had a miserable time with the pills. It's one thing to know and quite another to experience it. I was really good at ignoring my illness at first - at not taking my pills, at not listening to the needs and demands of my brain.

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Life got better as soon as I moved back to Colorado. Probably because I was back in a familiar environment, probably because I was back in a place where I knew I was supported. A good number of my friends had abandoned me when I told them about my illness, but I didn't focus on it. I chose instead to focus on classes at my new school where I was going to be a philosophy major instead of a painting major. Painting had become too difficult and I didn't like the idea of having to haul close to 40 pounds worth of paint and supplies on my back to class every day on my bike. Philosophy books, while thick, aren't nearly as heavy as all those little tubes of paint.

It was in one of my philosophy classes that I met my future ex-fiancée. She and I were destined to be friends. It was still winter and we both rode our bikes. So when we got to class we were the only ones still standing up peeling off layer upon layer of clothing before sitting down, we had the exact same cycling caps, we even had the same brand of messenger bag. It was fate. She was super shy and probably would never have talked to me, but her best friend (who's still one of my very good friends) had no qualms about talking to me.

The only problem was that I was dissociating again. Auraria Campus, where I was going to school, is incredibly crowded. It has to be with three schools crammed onto one campus. Crowds are one of the things that trigger me, so I spent a lot of time dissociating. My future ex-fiancée's best friend started talking to me, but I just kept drawing in my notebook, not even paying attention to her. She later told me the professor would sometimes call on me in class and I would just sit there staring back at him, not saying anything or communicating anything with my dead pan stare. I imagine I probably creeped him out, just staring back like I hadn't even

heard him.

My future ex-fiancée and I started hanging out and she really encouraged me to be independent. She helped me get a job at the computer repair shop where she worked, she helped me move out of my parents' house and into her old apartment once her lease was up. It was both good for me and bad for me.

Good for me in the sense that it was some of the last normalcy I ever knew in my early adulthood. Before too long everything would come spiraling out of control.

We did homework together, we worked together, she took me to a weekly vegan community dinner which I loved because I could usually eat the food there and they later put gluten-free options on the menu so I could eat every week. It was a lovely time, just riding bikes and hanging out with friends.

And with the improvements to my life came improvements to my mental health. Most of the time, I didn't even think about having a mental illness. And because my mental illness didn't seem to be bothering me, I didn't take my pills regularly. Sure, there were those occasional times when I'd find myself breaking down, crying and shaking uncontrollably from psychosis while my future ex-fiancée held my head in her lap. But I just didn't connect the two together. The pills were awful to take, they made my head fuzzy, they made me feel less than human, they made me so dang *tired*. I've always had this mentality of muscling through any pain I have and that's exactly what I did with my psychotic anguish.

But come 2009 everything fell apart. By that time we were going to get married. I'd also been asked by my boss at the computer repair shop if I wanted to enter into a sort of partnership with him and take ownership of the second location he'd opened up in Cap Hill. It would mean a lot more money, probably enough to support a family, a tempting offer I was seriously considering.

As my future looked brighter, my mental health looked grimmer. I hadn't been able to complete a single semester of school since returning from Minnesota. I'd get so far into the semester and then something bad would happen and my psychiatrist would suggest I drop out.

I was getting psychotic more frequently, I was suffering more. As the wedding loomed I finally

broke down and admitted to my therapist that I had a plan to kill myself. She called my dad to have him pick me up and take me to the psych ward at Porter Adventist Hospital.

2009 was the year of my unraveling, after which I could no longer safely ignore my illness or the demands of my brain. By the end of the year my psychiatrist considered me treatment resistant, he'd sent me to get a second opinion from another psychiatrist, my suicidal tendencies were making me head toward a dangerous precipice. Therapy wasn't working, the medication wasn't working, it was time to try something more drastic: Electroconvulsive Therapy.

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I have really mixed emotions surrounding ECT. On the one hand it saved my life. My ECT doctor, one of the best in the country, said that cases of depression like mine ended in death in 80% of cases when left untreated. On the other hand, I lost nearly everything I held dear to me. I lost my home, my job, my fiancée left me, I again lost a good deal of my friends, I lost my abilities to read and paint and draw and fix computers, I lost a good deal of my memories; I even lost my beloved cat, Baxter. But was that the ECT or my willful ignorance of my illness?

Three times a week for six months, one of my parents drove me to Louisville where they put me under anesthesia and delivered enough electricity to my brain that it gave me a seizure. I try to imagine what it was like for my mom or my dad, to say goodbye to a fully conscious and alert Chris going into the clinic where they performed the procedure and then seeing me brought out in a wheelchair, dazed, confused, and barely coherent; doing nothing but being the most polite and thankful person ever as the nurse wheeled me out to the car.

I have two birthdays now. The first is the anniversary of the day my mom gave birth to me, and the second is the anniversary of the day I had my last round of ECT. May 3rd, 2010.

I consider myself a very mature and articulate seven year-old.

Last year, I decided to throw a celebration, with all my friends, of my last day of ECT, something I'm going to do again this year. Something I plan to do every year from here on out.

It's important to remember the things that bring us to where we are today, and I wouldn't be where I am today if it weren't for ECT.

But I didn't feel like celebrating back then. Being reborn, getting a second birthday, isn't nearly the joyous experience one might believe it to be. I re-entered life with a fried brain, I couldn't remember hardly anything about my life - not when I was a little kid, not when I was in high school, not my early adulthood, not the two years of my relationship with my ex-fiancée. My ECT doctor told me my memory would return to normal within six months, but here it is seven years later and my memory is still very poor. I can remember my childhood pretty well, I remember a little bit from high school, more than I did even a couple of years ago, I don't remember hardly anything about the two years surrounding ECT, pretty much my only memory is of exactly what it's like to get ECT. My short term memory is garbage, my working memory (the type of memory we use to store information like when doing math in our head, for example) is largely useless. I'm thankful we live in an era of smartphones. I can just program my phone to do my remembering for me - if it's not on my phone I don't do it, so I have a somewhat complex system of reminders and calendar events and notes to remind me of what I'm supposed to be doing.

What was worse was the depression I sank into. I had this idea in my head that I'd just bounce back into normal life and everything would be okay. That I'd get my job at the computer repair shop back and that I'd move back out of my parents' house in Aurora, that life would become normal again.

It didn't.

I'd just had my brain fried. I needed to rest. And getting rest wasn't something I was very good at back then. My brain needed to recover from the trauma, it needed to put itself back together again. I just wanted to resume a life I wasn't going to have. And the resulting conflict and confusion sank me into a deep depression.

And so I found myself sleeping in as late as I possibly could, then going down to the living room and turning on the TV to the same movie which was playing on cable day after day after

day. I didn't even watch the movie, I just stared at the wall; waiting for my dad to come home for lunch.

My days orbited around my dad coming home for lunch and then my mom coming home from work. I wasn't home alone for more than three or four hours at a time, but it always felt like an eternity. I felt like I was living in some kind of personal hell. I pictured myself at the bottom of this fathomless pit, it was dark and wet and dripping and my task was to climb out of it and join the rest of society. It seemed too much to climb.

I couldn't even read. Reading had been a major passion of mine for a number of years, but I just couldn't make sense of the complicated arguments the authors were trying to make. I knew what the words meant individually, I could have defined any one of them for you. But I couldn't have told you what they meant when they were combined. So my dad read to me every night before bed like I was a little kid, I was 24 years old. I remember him oftentimes falling asleep in the middle of a sentence. My dad has always been loyal, always been ready to do anything to help me out. I couldn't ask for more supportive parents.

The days dragged on and I suppose it wasn't really all that long a period of time. I soon got restless of just staring at the wall and graduated to sitting in the chair with my laptop, browsing Facebook, ready to pounce on anyone who logged on. I was desperate for any kind of human contact. No one came to visit me during my time getting ECT or my initial time recovering from ECT, it was just me and my parents against the world. And my parents had the luxury of going to work where they would inevitably interact with their co-workers.

But that restlessness was good. It was motivation to start climbing out of the deep, fathomless pit. I started contacting people I trusted - I remember hanging out with one of the pastors at the church I used to go to. And it was during a meeting with her that I got my big break.

I've been going to Pablo's for years. And because I've been going there for so long, so consistently, I tend to get friendly with the baristas there. There was one particular barista who was also a musician. I'd saved his laptop, which held his only copy of every song he'd ever

written, from certain doom on a number of occasions, so when his girlfriend's laptop broke down shortly before she had a final due, he asked me if I could take a look at it.

I've always been motivated by helping people. But I was worried that I didn't remember anything about fixing computers, I'd forgotten how to read after all. But I said 'yes' because I figured if worse came to worse, my dad, who'd taught me everything I know, would be able to help. I also didn't know how to explain to him that I'd forgotten everything there was to know about computers. So, I took the laptop home and got to work.

The problem was that it wouldn't turn on. You'd press the button and nothing would happen. A stupefying problem. Especially considering the charging indicator on the AC adapter was green. But as I sat there at my workbench, in my makeshift studio, a sort of instinct took over. I found myself taking the laptop apart, finding the cause of the problem, soldering a part back together again, and Voilà the thing turned on.

It was one of the most impressive fixes I've ever had.

But more important than the objective fixing-of-the-laptop was the further motivation it gave me. If it was *that* easy to regain the knowledge I'd lost, then why didn't I try to regain more knowledge?

I was back.

No more sitting in front of the TV waiting to pounce on anyone who logged into Facebook. I went to the basement, dusted off my computers, and set about the task of relearning everything I'd forgotten about computers. I started developing a plan to go back to school to get a degree in computer science, with the eventual plan of getting a PhD.

To have goals, to have an objective in the face of having nothing is one of the most beautiful things in the world. My psychiatrist has long suggested that I have short-term goals, medium-term goals, and long-term goals. It's something I still try to have to this day. To have hope that something is going to happen in the future, to have something to look forward to, is powerful. And it's all the more powerful if you've come up with those goals yourself.

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But plans don't always work out the way you want them to. No sooner had I enrolled in computer science 1, than the pressures of school started to get to me. I would read my text book and forget all of it as soon as I closed the book, an old problem that'd plagued me since high school. I would write programs that didn't work, I would sometimes even write programs backwards. I started getting psychotic more frequently and, recognizing this as possibly another unraveling of my life, my therapist and my psychiatrist suggested that I drop out of school for good and apply for Social Security Disability Income (SSDI).

The thought of disability, of SSDI, didn't appeal to me. But I saw their point. My therapist had actually been trying to get me to apply for SSDI for a while and this latest failure, this latest setback seemed to finally make the suggestion seem valid. I'm not cut out for school, I'm not cut out for a job. So I sank back into my depression, sliding down a ways in the deep, fathomless pit. I got psychotic more frequently.

I put my hope in getting on disability and then moving out of my parents' house. I'm not the kind of person you can knock down for very long - I told myself that, when I got on disability, I would move out and dedicate my life to painting. I would do what I've always wanted to do with my life.

But I was still trapped at my parents' house. Trapped in the confines of the rooms - it'd become like a prison to me.

I wasn't even able to go for walks by myself. I would become racked with paranoia and delusions: what if the police stop me? what if someone is following me? what if I get hit by a car? on and on the questions came and at the time it led me to some dark places. I remember my mom suggesting one time I walk to the park about 3 blocks away from my parents' house. I got just about to the entrance of the park before I became so paranoid that I was psychotic. I barely managed to call her to have her come pick me up.

So, trapped at my parents' house meant *trapped*. I couldn't even get out of the house by

myself. My daily walk is important to me, it's part of what keeps me sane. I've been walking just about every day for the past 6 or 7 years. At the time, I needed my dad with me to go on our daily walks, which meant I'd have to wait until he came home from work. In February, when it was dark by 5pm, it was rough. I don't do well walking after dark - I become especially paranoid, my eyes play tricks on me.

I'd just about resigned myself to only being able to walk on the weekends during the winter when the most wonderful thing happened. On Valentine's Day, my dad was laid off from his job. I still feel like a bit of a schmuck for calling it "the most wonderful thing", but it was a good thing for me. I wasn't doing well all by myself in my parents' house all day. Sure, my dad came home for lunch, but he was only home for about 20 minutes before he had to go back to work. Not enough time for that ever-crucial walk.

So God solved the problem by taking away my dad's job and now we could walk all day long if we wanted to.

My dad is my best friend, we've been virtually inseparable since I was born. He tells stories about my mom telling him when I was a baby that he'd better put me down or else I'd never learn how to walk. My childhood is stocked full of memories of playing with him, building models with him, fixing computers with him, doing housework, on and on - dad and I are a team and a good team at that. Even today, he comes over to my place every day for his lunch break and we chat for about an hour before he heads back to work.

So dad and I walked every day, exploring our neighborhood and meeting and naming all of the neighborhood dogs: there was Sweater Dog who always came out of his house barking while wearing a cheesy sweater, Insecure Dog who kept looking back at his house as if to ask "is it okay that I'm barking at them?", there was Emphysema Dog who sounded like he'd smoked four packs a day for the past thirty years, and Puberty Dog who sounded the opposite, just to name a few.

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I'd been reading for a while about how well people with mental illnesses do with animals. An animal gives someone like me something to take care, something to train. An animal gives someone like me companionship and unconditional love. There are whole articles and studies which list the benefits of animals for people with mental illness. My mom is very much allergic to cats, plus it's hard to take cats for walks, so I decided I ought to get a dog.

I asked my dad on numerous occasions, quoting him the latest research, telling him how my therapist thought it was a good idea, telling him that I'd take full responsibility for the dog - clean up every mess and that he wouldn't have to do a single thing to take care of the dog.

But he said no. Every. Single. Time.

One time he told me the reason was because once, when he was little, he'd stepped in dog poop in bare feet going down the stairs and to my dad, if it happens once it'll definitely happen again.

I think the real reason was his warped perspective on dogs. Growing up, he'd had all of the responsibility of taking care of dogs with none of the joys. None of the playing with them, none of the kisses, none of the cuddling, or the unconditional love. At the time, to him, dogs were a source of messes and noise and perpetual work.

My dad had final say in the manner, so my only hope was to get on SSDI soon and get my dog once I moved out.

Luckily it didn't have to come to that.

On our walks through the neighborhood, we'd befriended a local cat whom I'd named Milton. Milton was about the friendliest cat around. If we were walking by, he'd come up to us, meowing up a storm, and rub up against our legs, to receive scratches from us. He tried to follow us home one time and we even went to Petsmart to buy him treats which my dad kept in the pocket of his cargo shorts.

I had a tendency to get psychotic on our walks and on one such walk I started to get silent all

of a sudden, the first sign of impending psychosis. Knowing that I didn't want to get psychotic in the middle of suburbia, I kicked it into high gear and sped off for home, leaving my dad behind.

As I neared Milton's house, who else did I hear but my little buddy meowing up a storm and sauntering over to receive his scratches and possibly a treat. It was like there was some kind of switch in my brain that was suddenly flipped from psychotic to normal, because I immediately returned to my normal self and stooped down to pet Milton.

When my dad caught up with me, he saw a completely different person. Instead of a Chris who was about to get psychotic, he saw a Chris who was enamored with his favorite neighborhood cat. Milton said goodbye to us after a while and we headed back home, no psychosis in sight.

My dad may be thick headed when it comes to reason and rationale and all of world's smartest scientists saying something. But when he sees the power a cat has over his son, to take me from one of the scariest and most painful things I experience back to completely normal, he notices. The next day he told me that when he got a job, I'd be getting my dog. It was wonderful news, but the job market wasn't so good in 2011, so I might be waiting a while.

Luckily my sister got wind of the plan and decided *she* would just buy me my dog instead. You can read the full story of how Kerrin came into my life on the website my dad has built dedicated to her (kerrinpuppy.com).

What my dad's website doesn't mention is just how much Kerrin enables me to do. Without her I wouldn't be able to live on my own, without her I wouldn't have someone in my life who, when I become psychotic, can jump on my lap and with a few kisses of her tongue can make the psychosis go away or else dramatically reduce its hold on me. I don't have hard data, but I know the number of psychotic episodes I suffer from has been substantially reduced since she came into my life. I used to get psychotic at least once a day, sometimes multiple times a day, now that number is a fraction of what it used to be. I can walk on my own now, without experiencing nearly as much paranoia as I navigate the streets of Cap Hill. And Kerrin is an intuitive enough dog that she can sense when I've started dissociating and will lead me safely

home.

Kerrin gives me someone to care for, someone to train, someone to be responsible for. I think people all too often take responsibilities away from the mentally ill. When, really, they ought to be *giving* us responsibilities. Reasonable, easily managed responsibilities. Especially responsibilities we're actively interested in taking on. She helps me be more social - I've met and befriended many people because of her lovable personality. When we're out on the stoop it's not unusual for someone to come up and ask to pet her and it makes me feel less lonely, less isolated from the rest of planet earth.

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I got my first disability check a couple months after getting Kerrin and my dad also got a job downtown. I had a friend who needed a roommate so it made sense to move out - to fulfill my dream of moving out of my parents house and living on my own. It was a huge step, but a necessary one. It's important for my mental health to have a place I can call my own, to have the freedom to be able to go and grab a cup of coffee when I want, to be able to see my friends easily without having to schedule it around my parents' ability to drive me the necessary 40 minutes it required when I lived in Aurora.

But life was hard when I first moved out.

When you're on disability you don't have to actually *do* anything to earn your living and so I found myself with hardly anything to do. I spent day after purposeless day customizing my computer, endlessly tweaking the Linux installation on it - breaking it and then spending all day fixing it. It's no way to spend your life. I had no short-term plans, I had no medium-term plans, I had no long-term plans. I just had this vague notion that I ought to be painting more, but I couldn't bring myself to paint.

Then came an opportunity to speak in front of my first NAMI Family-to-Family class. I'd been asked after my dad shared an email I'd sent him late at night when I'd been feeling particularly

thankful for my lot in life. Thankful because I didn't have tens of thousands of dollars of debts from college - that my parents were paying that off, thankful because I didn't have to work three jobs and still live at my parents' house to make ends meet. Just thankful in general that I had a good life. I had my favorite puppy in the universe to go on walks with every day, my health was much improved, and I was putting an ever increasing amount of distance between me and the events that led up to me getting ECT in 2009.

When my dad shared that email with his Family-to-Family class the facilitator thought it was well written and that I might make a good speaker for her next class. She contacted me and I agreed to speak in front of her class like I'm speaking in front of y'all tonight.

Writing that talk was my first taste of purpose, I had something to do, something *important* to do. I would have the opportunity to share my journey with mental illness and how I got to where I am today.

Purpose is everything with mental illness, without a *reason* to get up in the morning, one doesn't have much of anything to live for. One speech turned into two, my mom suggested I start a blog and I politely ignored her, people told me I ought to write a book and I thought it sounded like a good idea but the time wasn't right. The Family-to-Family talks were good for me, but they always left me feeling a little empty afterwards. Because in the weeks leading up to the night I'd give the talk, I'd have much to do - I would be editing and practicing and thinking about what I wanted to say. And then I'd give the talk, and the next day there'd be nothing to do.

Eventually I listened to my mom's advice and started a blog. We have cards here tonight with the address of the blog if you're interested in reading it. The text of this talk should be up on the site in the next few days.

The blog gave me something to work on consistently and it gave me a place to write about my insight and opinions on mental illness.

Slowly, the painting stuff disappeared from my apartment and writing stuff became more prominent - I got rid of the six by four foot painting in my studio apartment and folded my easel up next to the fridge. Weeks later, I took my easel and taboret back to my parents' house.

I'm a writer not a painter. I see that clearly now. I'm just stubborn like my dad was stubborn about getting me a dog - I had to see how much writing makes me feel alive, how much joy it gives me, and how much I dreaded painting, how much it zapped the energy right out of me.

I remember sitting on my stoop one morning and getting the first line of my novel in my head. I pulled out one of the little black notebooks I've been carrying in my back pocket for years and started writing. Then I went inside and transcribed the writing onto my computer and continued writing some more. Before I knew it I had the beginnings of what I knew was the book everyone had been telling me I really ought to write.

It's not a very conventional book, I don't think people had a novel in mind when they suggested I ought to write a book. But I had to fictionalize my life somewhat - make things happen to made-up characters instead of to real people - in order to write it truthfully.

The novel is getting published later this year, I signed the book deal at the beginning of this year. I just sent off the final manuscript a little while ago and things are starting to take shape. In a few months I'll be a published author. It's kind of an intimidating thing to think about.

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What is mental illness? It's a question I've asked myself many times in the ten years since I was diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder. Is it genetic? I know I have two aunts with bipolar disorder and my grandmother most likely had it as well. But there's more to it than that.

An illness is something that's gone awry with the proper functioning of the body - the body does something it shouldn't do or doesn't do something it should do. Illnesses are universally bad - we always want to get rid of them. We always want to treat them, to cure them. But mental illness is different - it's not all bad, mine has even been beneficial to me.

Beneficial in the ways you can expect any chronic, debilitating illness to sometimes be - beneficial in giving me a better sense of what's important in life, bringing me closer to friends, family, and God; making me take stop to take stock in how wonderful life is when I get a

reprieve from the onslaught of symptoms. But my mental illness is also beneficial in literal ways - a voice delivering to me the exact right thing to say in a situation where I have no idea what to say, or else a similar voice saying something hilarious which I then share and everyone enjoys. I experience colors in a way people on hallucinogenic drugs think is exclusive to them. I've seen sunsets that make the best paintings of sunsets pale in comparison.

Is that really something I want to get rid of? is that something I really want to completely cut off?

No doubt my illness has made me suffer. No doubt I've been through the lowest of lows, the darkest of darks - I've faced death on my own doorstep and, through the grace of God, survived. No doubt I've seen terrible things - my own dear Little Baby Kerrin hanging by her entrails from my ceiling fan. I've experienced psychotic nightmares so vivid that the residual pain from the creatures tearing out my insides has stayed with me for weeks, leaving me unable to sit down comfortably.

I suppose mental illness could be considered a metaphor for life. That's certainly how I treat it. Life is subtle and often whisper quiet, mental illness is brash and thunderously loud. You can learn a lot about life through living with a mental illness - the importance of discipline, routine, tenacity. The importance of being kind, responsible, and self-controlled like my mom told my sister and me time and time again when we were growing up. You'll learn how crucial it is to have a good attitude, how simply having a good attitude can make the illness orders of magnitude easier to bear.

If you'd asked me what I wanted to do with my life when I'd graduated from high school I would have said something along the lines of: I want to paint all day, with no one telling me what to paint, and hang out with my friends in a cool coffee shop and have interesting discussions.

And that's exactly what I ended up getting with my mental illness. You just have to substitute "painting" with "writing" and "all day" with "all morning" because the reality of my mental illness means it's not such a good idea for me to work all day long - I can do about three or four hours in the morning, but after that I must rest my brain.

I was fully ready and willing to join the 9-to-5 workforce, I wasn't a lazy bum or a short-sighted idealist. Shortly before everything fell apart in 2009, I was seriously considering dropping out of school and taking my boss up on his offer to take me on as a partner in his business. It was something I enjoyed doing and I needed to think about providing for me and my soon-to-be wife. I was beginning to realize that in the economy of the time, neither a degree in philosophy or a Fine Arts Degree in painting was the wisest thing to be spending money on. But God has his own unique sense of humor, and so my life was stripped bare and after I finished putting the pieces of my life back together, just about two and a half years ago now - it turned out to be a completely different kind of life, and almost exactly the kind of life I'd naively wished for.

Mental illness can be a twisted sort of blessing.

My point in saying that is not to point out an objective truth. There are very few objective truths in life. My point in saying that is that attitude is everything. Taking medication is important, yes. But that's only one part of the journey and might not even be part of the journey for your loved one. Going to therapy is important, yes. But again, it's only one step and not even a necessary step. So many of the steps I've highlighted in my story aren't so much necessary as they are just the steps in my particular journey.

But I think having a good attitude is an objective truth.

Because if you maintain perspective, if you hold onto whatever truth keeps you going - then whatever trials and pains and tortures the journey brings to you along the way will be worth it.

Thank you.