

Mental illness isn't an illness in the traditional sense. More than an illness like diabetes or heart disease it reflects our culture, our way of being, our attitude toward life.

Instances of schizophrenia are higher in urban populations than in rural populations. People with schizophrenia in Scandinavian countries tend to do better than people with schizophrenia in the US. With an illness like diabetes they can perform a blood test and be 99.9% sure that you do, in fact, have diabetes. The treatment for diabetes is straightforward, with little variation between different patients with the same illness.

Mental illness is the complete opposite. There's no blood test they can perform to confirm the diagnosis; diagnosing someone is largely subjective and depends upon the patient reporting what they experience and how they experience it and the doctor then interpreting those reports. In the DSM V, the standard textbook of mental illness, there are five diagnostic criteria for schizophrenia and a person only needs to meet two of them to be diagnosed. So two different people, experiencing completely different symptoms, can have the same diagnosis of schizophrenia. You'd never get that with diabetes.

Treatment for mental illness varies from patient to patient because each presentation of the illness is unique - what works for me won't necessarily work for your loved one and so each person with a mental illness must embark on their own unique journey toward recovery. You can speak in generalities - that it's important to have a good support system, that it's important to follow your treatment regimen, that it's important to have a *purpose* in your life, and that it's important to have a good attitude. But it's oftentimes hard to speak in specifics. It's up to the patient and their support system to find the rest of the way to recovery.

Mental illness is poorly understood - the answers we find in one study are often contradicted in later studies. We understand very little about the brain and even less about how it malfunctions. We understand very little about the severe mental illnesses - schizophrenia could be environmental, it could be genetic, it could be the result of congenital defects in the brain, it's likely a combination of many variables - it's a dauntingly complex illness.

But I don't find this a hopeless proposition, I don't think I, or people like me, are without hope. I think this is just an indication of something more significant, more empowering: the mentally ill are not at the mercy of doctors and science and medicine like people with diabetes or cancer are. No, we have this power, this innate ability inside of us to help ourselves, something within us which allows us to come to terms with our illnesses and live with them in relative peace.

I'm not suggesting a system of telling me and people like me to "man up" or "pull themselves together". That's the opposite of helpful. I'm not suggesting mental illness can be cured with will power alone. I still rely on medication and therapy to help me with my illness, but my treatment goes far beyond simply taking medication and expecting to feel better. Medication doesn't *fix* me, it just allows me to do everything else which keeps me so healthy - it's a leg up, an able assistant.

What I *am* suggesting is that successfully living with a mental illness requires so much more than passively taking pills. Someone who's diabetic has it easy - avoid certain foods and either take medicine or inject themselves with insulin at certain times of the day, and they may not be cured, but they can lead a normal life. A person like me has to dedicate their lives to their illness - twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, three-hundred-sixty-five days a year. No weekends, no vacations, no cutting off work early - it's exhausting. But it's the most important job I'll ever have.

What I *am* suggesting is that pills will get you that first, crucial twenty percent. But you have to provide the rest - with discipline and tenacity; with vigilance, and also with bravado. You have to face your problems, your demons head on; you have to be willing to fight tooth and nail to survive some days. You have to be brave.

---

I have two birthdays. The first is my actual birthday, my traditional birthday. My second birthday marks the day, about six years ago now, when my life started over again. May 3rd,

2010 - the last time I had ECT.

Electroconvulsive therapy was a necessary step in my life, but it was a painful step. It saw the complete dissolution of my life. I lost nearly everything: my home, my job, my ability to paint and draw and read and write, my memories, my fiancée, my chance at an education, and even my beloved cat, Baxter. I had to move from my favorite neighborhood in Denver back to the suburbs of Aurora where I would dedicate my life to getting my brain shocked with enough electricity that it would give me a seizure, three times a week, for six months. 72 times. It erased my memory almost completely, it lowered my IQ, it isolated me from my friends and made many of them forget about me, it made my fiancée resent me and ultimately leave me, it made me forget the things I loved and how to do them. It was as close to being reborn as one is like to get.

But it was an important step.

Three years earlier, I'd been diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder, a combination of schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. At the time, I acknowledged the fact I had a mental illness, I readily admitted it to my ex-fiancée when she and I first started dating - but I didn't really do anything about it. I didn't realize the *weight*, the seriousness of the diagnosis. None of us did. We thought I'd just take a pill and be better, that I'd resume a normal life - go to school, get a job, get married, have kids. It doesn't work that way.

I *hated* taking the pills. I remember trying Zyprexa for the first time. My psychiatrist had warned me it might make me sleepy, so I took it an hour earlier than usual. I ended up sleeping until 4pm the next day. I'd missed work, I'd missed school, and I was still tired enough I could go back to sleep. That's not even the worst side effect, just the most common. I've taken pills that have paralyzed me when I woke up in the morning, that give me seizures, that have made me see double while I was riding my bike in Cherry Creek State Park with my dad; I've taken pills that have made me drool uncontrollably, I've taken pills that make my hands shake uncontrollably; I take pills that make me essentially cold blooded, unable to regulate my body

temperature like a normal person - poikilothermic it's called. I take pills that have made me gain an enormous amount of weight, and I also take pills that make me stupid, that lower my IQ. I remember being in the kitchen making myself a sandwich, right after taking my morning medication, and just collapsing all of a sudden. No warning, my legs just gave out and I went crashing to the floor. It was a side effect of one of the medications I was on.

Given all this, prior to ECT, I didn't really take my pills consistently or even all that frequently. And that was a dumb mistake. I took them sometimes, when the spirit moved me, or when someone was watching me get ready for bed. When my psychiatrist prescribed me new ones I'd try them for a couple-three days and then stop taking them because I didn't like how they made me feel. All drugged out, foggy, and incoherent.

I was also going to parties. Large crowds bothered me, but I went anyways. Probably because my ex-fiancée wanted me to go and I didn't want to disappoint her. We'd stay up until all hours of the night, listening to music and talking with friends. What I really needed was to be back at home, tucked into bed, getting the rest necessary for combatting my illness. What I really needed was to be avoiding those exact places - they destabilize me, they stress me out. And stress is the mind killer for someone with a mental illness. I try to eliminate as many stresses as I can these days.

Prior to ECT, I was all about trying to act as normal as possible. And, in fact, I *did* appear normal, nobody suspected I had a severe mental illness. Save for those times when my ex-fiancée and her best friend were over and I would dissolve into a puddle of tears and soon slip into psychosis. But when those dissolutions started happening more and more frequently, I just ignored it.

I think we all did.

My parents weren't really in on the picture. We hadn't established the rapport and trust that has proved so essential in treating my illness yet. I didn't see them very often - just for dinner occasionally. I didn't talk to anyone except for my therapist and psychiatrist about my illness. I

took the burden on alone when I really should have been trying to rely on the people who love me to help me through the rough times.

Then my ex-fiancée and I decided to get married and that was the straw that broke my back. The planning, the stress of thinking about living the rest of my life with her, working more hours at my job at the computer repair shop so we could afford the wedding.

It was too much.

I ended up in the hospital after telling my therapist I had a plan to kill myself.

The hospital was alright. Certainly a dreary place. But a place is bound to be dreary when you can't do anything but sit around and watch TV or play the board games with the pieces missing or, do like me, and spend the time drawing and writing.

It was at the hospital that my uncanny insight into my illness was first recognized. I could tell the psychiatrist in charge of my case exactly what I was seeing, I was even drawing pictures of my hallucinations. I could tell him things about my illness that most other patients aren't able to communicate. It's this insight into my illness that's perhaps been my greatest ally, both in helping myself get better as well as in advocating for people like me.

No sooner had I gotten out of the hospital than I was back in the hospital again. We'd had to postpone the wedding and my mom remembers my second date of admission to Porter Adventist as being the original date my ex-fiancée and I had chosen to get married.

It was 2009, the Year of My Unravelling. By Thanksgiving I'd be getting ECT.

---

I don't remember much of 2009 through 2010, ECT has wiped that out almost completely. I used to not remember hardly anything about my life - not college, not high school, not grade school or when I was a little kid. There's still a lot of stuff I don't remember, but I'm pretty solid on my childhood. My short term memory is very poor, my working memory (my ability to hold small tidbits of information, like doing math in my head) is basically non-functioning, but my long

term memory is largely fine. I like to joke that if you ask me something I can't remember now, ask me again in a few months and I'll remember then. I do remember, with great clarity, exactly what it's like to get ECT - the exact process is the prologue of the novel I've written.

I woke up from the anesthesia on May 3rd, 2010 a new man. I had no home, no job, I was estranged from my friends; I couldn't remember how to do any of the things I loved doing; and I didn't have a clue as to what to do with myself. I was despondent. I think most people would think that having a completely fresh start on life would be the most wonderful, freeing, refreshing thing in the world. And maybe it is if you do it by means other than getting your brain fried 72 times. But, for me, it was terrifying. I sank into a deep depression. I took a twisted sort of solace in the fact that, though I was still so depressed I would burst into tears when my dad came home for lunch, I wasn't so depressed I wanted to kill myself, I wasn't so depressed I couldn't feel anything. Sometimes, getting better from depression hurts more than just staying depressed - because you go from not feeling anything at all back to actually feeling feelings and those feelings aren't necessary happy ones. No, they're usually depressing feelings.

I would wake up as late as possible, get out of bed, put on my sweatpants, and go downstairs to the living room. There, I'd turn on the TV and switch it to one of the movie channels. The movie channel was playing the same movie it was playing yesterday, the same movie it was playing the day before yesterday, the same movie it would play tomorrow and the next day; the same movie, in fact, it would play all over again after it finished. I didn't mind. I didn't even watch the movie. I just laid on the couch and stared at the wall, willing time to go by faster. Dad would come home for lunch at some point and that's what my whole day revolved around. Sometimes he'd find me on the back porch and I'd burst into tears as soon as he said hello, other times I'd appear fine - but his act of coming home for lunch was one of the fixations of the day. Because then I wasn't alone. Because then I had someone to talk to. Though I never knew what to do talk about - my mind was a blank slate, a *tabula rasa*.

My days were about survival. They were about just trying to make it to the next day because

maybe tomorrow would be better. It was a bleak, pointless existence. But it was necessary to my recovery. You can't just bounce back from six months of ECT and head right back into normal life, not after every structure you'd built in your life has come crashing down. I had to take my time, I had to gather up energy, I had to be patient.

I don't know how long it went on like that. But I do remember my therapist telling me at some point that the only person who could improve my situation was me. My mom, my dad - though they encouraged me as best they could, weren't going to come up with a magic answer for what I was going to do with my life. I had to resume my normal life. I had to start getting out, I had to start stretching my wings.

And so I did.

---

On a trip to my favorite coffee shop to meet up with one of my friends, the barista asked me if I wouldn't mind looking at his girlfriend's computer. He had no idea what I'd just been though, had no idea I'd forgotten everything there is to know about fixing computers, that I couldn't remember what I'd had for breakfast that morning or even how to get home from where I was. He just knew that I'd saved his computer, where he kept every song he'd ever written, from certain death on a number of occasions and that maybe I could repeat the same feat for his girlfriend.

I'm not the kind of guy to turn down a request for help. I've been helping people with their computer problems for what seems like my entire life. So, despite knowing that I didn't know anything about computers I agreed to fix her laptop.

The problem was that it wouldn't turn on. You'd press the power button and nothing would happen. It was, of course, finals time and she had her final project on the laptop and it was due in a few days. So I needed to fix it quickly.

I got it home and brought it to my makeshift studio/work area. I pressed the button and, sure

enough, nothing happened. Then I sort of went into automatic mode, a part of me took over that I hadn't realized was there. I found myself reaching for my screwdrivers and opening up the laptop, I found myself plugging in my soldering iron and re-soldering a loose pad near the AC/DC converter. And, when I pressed the power button, the laptop turned on. In the space of maybe ten minutes I'd not only fixed a completely dead laptop but I'd also resurrected a good bit of knowledge on how to fix them.

And that was the spark I'd needed.

Forget about the movie and spending all day on the couch waiting for dad to come home. I spent my days in the basement, fiddling around on my computers, catching up on the advancements I'd missed out on while my life was falling apart. I put *pants* on, actual, real *pants*.

I found myself going out more, the friends I was estranged from invited me back into the fold.. I started attending a weekly vegan community dinner and was soon a fixture in the kitchen, helping to cook every meal and those skills were quickly coming back to me.

Soon, I got it in my head that I'd attend school, with the idea of getting a PhD in Computer Science. It was the first long term plan I had after my second birth, and it became what sustained me - to have a hope for the future was a real blessing.

I had to take a remedial math course the summer before the fall semester started. I recognized that stress was something I couldn't handle, so in an effort to make school as stress free as possible I was going to take it one class at a time. I aced the math class, scoring the highest grade of anyone in the class. But more important than that, I met Helios.

Helios was drawing at my favorite coffee shop on my first day of class. I'd made an arrangement with my mom whereby I'd bike to my math class and then she'd pick me up after she was done with work. I had a few hours to kill between the class being done and her getting off of work so I decided I would wait at Pablo's and work on relearning how to draw. My old friend Joe happened to be at Pablo's that day and asked me what I was doing there, I told him I

was there to draw and he pointed at Helios and told me: “draw with that guy.” So I sat down by Helios and made my introduction. Helios noticed my hand was shaking right away and asked me if I was on Lithium. I wasn’t at the time, but I had been at one point and soon I found myself telling him my entire life story and how I’d come to Pablo’s to reteach myself how to draw.

Helios and I spent the rest of the summer getting together after my class and drawing, him offering me critiques of my drawings as well as telling me interesting stories from all the places he’d travelled to. At the end of the summer, his house sitting situation was over and so he had to move on. But his company, and his nonjudgmental attitude toward my illness helped me open up to other people, it taught me the value of being vulnerable.

Opening up to other people about your illness can be a scary thing. It can even be dangerous. The stigma against the mentally ill is that significant. I remember being away at college in Minnesota and having kids bang on my door in the middle of the night, threatening to kill me. You have to be intelligent about who you open up to but, most especially, you have to be intelligent about *when* you open up to them. Everyone is different. Some people, like Helios, you can tell right away. Other people, I find it’s best to build a rapport with them, to build an initial trust so they don’t just see you as more than just a person with a mental illness.

School didn’t agree with me. The same difficulties I’ve been facing since high school appeared once again.

My dad recalls trying to help me with my high school chemistry homework. I was failing the class and it just didn’t make sense - normally I’d been a decent student. But somehow College Prep Chemistry was eluding me. So my dad decided he would help me with my homework. We went through the first chapter together and I completed the problems just fine, but by the time we’d moved onto the second chapter’s questions I couldn’t recall the first chapters concepts at all; it was like I hadn’t even read the text book. The same problem plagued me throughout the rest of my school career. I’d read the assigned text and forget everything as soon as I set the book down.

The problem is caused by stress, as my cognitive and behavioral therapist was able to narrow down. When I'm stressed my memory is especially poor and so I have to reduce stress as much as possible in order to retain the things I read. It's a tall order in a college level computer science class, taught by a professor who takes pride in the fact that 9 out of 10 students who take her class don't pass.

I found that I wasn't retaining what I'd read, no matter how many times I read it, no matter how carefully I took notes, and despite the fact the Office of Disability had given me an audiobook version of my text book. The programs that I wrote didn't work. The whole class didn't make a lick of sense to me. I was starting to get more symptomatic, and so my psychiatrist and my therapist urged me to drop out.

It was a major setback. Not even 6 months into my brand new life I'd been met with failure. I was back to square one.

And with square one came daily psychosis, sometimes multiple times a day. With it came more suffering, more despondence, and me actively wondering if there was any hope for someone like me at all.

But I'm tenacious. I don't give up easily. Push me down, I get back up. Push me down again, I get back up again. I am the human version of those clownish bowling-pin shaped punching bags some of my friends had as kids - the kind where you hit them and they just come right back up for another round.

So, out of options I applied for Social Security Disability Income. My doctors said if I couldn't go to school then I couldn't get a job - the stress of either means I get so sick I can't function. The very definition of disabled.

Getting on SSDI was surprisingly easy, I didn't get rejected first thing like everyone said was going to happen. It doesn't work like that. If they think you should get it they give it to you, if they don't, they don't give it to you.

It took almost a year to get on SSDI. A torturous wait. But, with the wait came some huge

improvements to my life. The first was that my dad was laid off.

——

It certainly sucked for him. Not knowing how he was going to provide for his family. Especially when his son had some very expensive medication he depended on for daily survival. Especially when his son had had a very expensive procedure done recently that needed to be paid for. And especially when his son needed to see his either his psychiatrist or his therapist every week. Not to mention the mortgage and the electric bill and everything else that demands our money.

But dad getting laid off was a Godsend for me. I was back to being at home and, as I said, despondent. I didn't know what to do with myself. I had failed at what I'd set out to do and I hadn't gotten back up to fight just yet.

My dad and I are incredibly close. He's my best friend, he was going to be the best man at my wedding. He and I can complete each other's sentences and are prone to saying the exact same thing at the exact same time. Suddenly having him at home was wonderful. I had someone to talk to, someone to spend time with, someone to go on walks with.

And we walked a lot.

I'd discovered walking, getting a little bit of exercise and fresh air is crucial to my mental health. We continue going on walks to this day. Not so much when it's 95 degrees outside as my aforementioned semi-cold-bloodedness can make me overheat far too easily. But every afternoon he comes over to my apartment and we walk for about an hour and then he goes back to work and I go back home.

At the time, I wasn't able to go on walks by myself. My mom had encouraged me at one point to walk to the park about two blocks away from my parents' house. I'd made it to the entrance of the park and then panicked. The world was completely, utterly, totally overwhelming and I was about to have a panic attack. I had to call her to have her come pick me up.

It had been especially frustrating to know how much a walk would help me but not be able to go on one because I knew I'd have a panic attack, or because I knew I'd get so paranoid I couldn't take another step. Having dad home meant we could go for a walk right after lunch, or before lunch, or whenever we wanted. And so we made it a daily habit that continues to this day.

---

My cognitive and behavioral therapist was a real breakthrough for me. I saw her in the first months after finishing ECT, when I was trying to read on my own instead of having my dad read to me every night before bed like I was a little kid. She taught me all kinds of tricks for managing my illness and ever since then I've been on the hunt for more tricks. I figure the more tools I have at my disposal the better off I am - whether it's a breathing technique, a mindfulness exercise, or something else, I'm always on the lookout for a new technique to help me feel better when I start feeling anxious or depressed or manic or psychotic or dissociative.

Along my path of research I'd come across numerous articles talking about how helpful dogs are for people with mental illness. I talked about it with my CBT, my regular therapist, and my psychiatrist and they all thought a dog would be a wonderful addition to my life. A dog would give me someone to care for, someone who would love me unconditionally. I'd probably be able to go for walks by myself and just having another presence in my life - especially with how loyal and loving dogs are, how they just want to do whatever it is they can to please you - would have a positive effect. A dog would give me someone to train, someone to raise and be responsible for. I think so often we take responsibilities away from the mentally ill when really we should be looking to give them *more* responsibilities - easily managed responsibilities, especially if they're responsibilities they're actively interested in taking on.

Everyone was on board. I mean everyone. Except my dad. And my dad had final say. He'd had dogs when he was little, he'd had all of the responsibility of taking care of dogs with none of

the joys of having them. He'd had to clean up their messes but didn't get to cuddle or play with them and so his view of dogs was skewed. It didn't matter how emphatic I was that I'd clean up accidents and messes, that I'd take on *all* of the responsibilities of having a dog. He wouldn't hear it. He'd stepped on a pile of dog poop in his bare feet one night when he was little and it was surely going to happen again if I got a dog. And that was that. Nothing my mom, or my sister, or my therapist, or my CBT, or my psychiatrist, or any of the dozens of articles I must have emailed him could sway him.

And then Milton happened.

Milton was a neighborhood cat we'd befriended on our walks through my parents' neighborhood. Like most friendships with cats, he'd just come sauntering over to us one day, meowing up a storm and told us we were his friends now. We started purposefully going by his house to see if he was home so we could play with him, we bought him cat treats and I always looked forward to seeing him. He even tried to follow us home one time, something my mom wouldn't have appreciated since she's very much allergic to cats.

I had a tendency to get psychotic on walks, especially walks after dark. One such night, my dad and I were out on a walk and I got silent all of a sudden. A sign that I was about to get psychotic. I didn't carry pills with me at all times at that point and we didn't think to just call my mom to have her pick me up, so I was forced to muscle my way through it and walk home as quickly as possible in a race against the impending psychosis. I was passing by Milton's house, my dad just a dozen or so paces behind me when who else but good ol' Milton starts meowing up a storm and sauntering over to greet me.

It was like someone flipped off the psychosis switch.

I was instantly better. I greeted Milton with a friendly 'hello', got out the cat treats, and started petting him as he rubbed up against my legs and then rubbed up against my dad's legs. You wouldn't have thought that thirty seconds before I was on the verge of totally losing it.

My dad had seen the power a beloved animal has to make things better and he was

convinced. I don't know if he decided he wouldn't mind stepping on dog poop in the middle of the night if it meant his son would feel better or if he just totally forgot about that unpleasant thought. Either way, the next day he told me he would get me a dog as soon as he got a job.

I was ecstatic. Though now I would have a new torturous wait. Waiting until my dad got a job. And the job market wasn't all that great in 2011. But I could be patient.

Fortunately I didn't have to be *that* patient. As soon as my sister found out about the deal, she said that she'd buy a dog for me. Hearing the story about my total one-eighty when Milton showed up, she must have foreseen the power Kerrin would have too.

I find it hard to describe exactly what Kerrin means to me. "Everything" just doesn't seem to do it justice. I know that without her I wouldn't be able to do most of the things I can now do. I can walk by myself, I can live on my own, I can conquer most psychosis - she's done so much for me and all she wants is a bit of cheese every so often, some belly rubs, and to play fetch when we get to grandma and grandpa's house. I could blab about her all day. But who wouldn't talk incessantly about someone who's enabled you to do so much? who can end a psychotic episode, surely one of the scariest things a person can face, by just hopping on my lap and giving me kisses?

My dad's reaction is perhaps most endearing. The staunchest opponent to me getting a dog is now most often photographed with my dog laying on a pillow on his lap, both of them sleeping contentedly. My dad is probably Kerrin's second biggest fan, he's gone from anti-dog to the most pro-dog person you could possibly imagine.

---

Life is full of transitions. You go to school, graduate, get a job, get married, have kids and your life is pretty much set. That's the line that most people follow with only slight variation. There's tragedy and comedy and there's bliss and there's misery in everyone's lives but it sometimes seems to me that the suffering in my life has been a little unbalanced. At least that's

what people tell me.

When you look at life do you see the good times or the bad times? do you see the positive in people or do you see the negative? are you an optimist or a pessimist?

Not really crucial points of view for most people but absolutely essential if you have a mental illness. Schizoaffective disorder has given me every reason to be bitter, to be cynical, to be mad at the world and everyone in it. I've lost countless friends, been cheated over and over again. I've been judged unfairly, I've been treated with suspicion, I've even been beaten up because of my illness. I've been doomed to a life of relative poverty, always at the mercy of other people instead of at the helm of my own financial life. I'll probably never get a college degree, I'll never drive a car again, I'll probably never own a house. I'm scared of having kids because I worry that with me being emotionally and psychologically unstable I wouldn't be able to provide my kids with what my parents so readily and essentially provided me: stability. So many things in my life have gone wrong. But I'm okay with it. I'd hazard to say I'm actually pleased with how things have turned out, that I'm even *thankful* for my mental illness in a way.

Attitude is everything when you have a mental illness. Reality is truly what you make it. Because, when I look at my life I see that I'm closer to my family and friends than most people are, that I've earned a kind of quiet wisdom about the world that it takes most people a lifetime to achieve. I see that I have the ideal life - I get to devote my day to writing, to making art, which is all I really wanted to do with my time when I graduated high school. When I look at my life I see that I have a firm foundation in God and that it gives me a confidence about life that many people my age seem to lack. I see that, while I might not have a ton of friends, the few friends I *do* have would do anything they could to help me - that I can always count on them. I rather enjoy my life. I don't mean to suggest that I don't suffer anymore, that times don't get rough. I don't mean to suggest that my life is easy. I know that I have it harder than most in some ways, but I also have it easier than most in other ways.

My point is that your attitude when it comes to mental illness has a profound effect on how

well you do. If you just focus on the negative, if you just focus on how unfairly life has treated you then life is going to suck. My mom drilled into my sister and I when we were younger that “life isn’t fair” and indeed it isn’t.

—

I have a tattoo on my knuckles that reads “So it goes”. It’s a quote pulled from the novel *Slaughterhouse Five* by Kurt Vonnegut. In the novel, every time a character dies he writes those words. So it goes.

*So it goes* sums up my view on life perfectly. We really have very little control over what happens to us, and the best thing to do is to accept the things that happen to us as openly as possible so that we can exercise what control we *do* have.

Life just happens. I didn’t have any control over developing schizoaffective disorder, I don’t have much control over when I’ll get psychotic next, or when I’ll get manic or depressed next. All I can say is “so it goes”, accept what’s happening to me and try to operate within the conditions that I’ve been given. I *do* have control over my attitude.

I *do* have control over how I treat myself when I’m psychotic, how well I can recognize the signs before I become psychotic, and I have control over putting mechanisms in place to ensure the psychosis is as mild as possible. I also have control over making sure I don’t do things that’ll cause my illness to express itself - I don’t go to parties anymore, I don’t watch TV or movies (save for the occasional football game and then only ever with it muted and music playing instead of the play-by-play commentary); I don’t drink, I don’t smoke weed. I lead a disciplined life because that’s what my illness demands of me, and it’s worth it. Because I get to live on my own in a wonderful apartment in my favorite neighborhood in Denver, because I get to spend all morning writing and all afternoon reading and listening to music and hanging out with friends. Because I get to do things like speak in front of you tonight and share my story and let you know that being diagnosed with a mental illness isn’t a death sentence.

Life moved pretty fast shortly after getting Kerrin. I'd had her about a month, maybe a month and a half and suddenly my dad found a job and I received my first Disability check. I made plans to move out almost immediately, into a house with the guy I'd been playing chess with every Friday night for the past year.

My new found freedom brought with it new responsibilities and also new hardships. My new roommate proved to be someone other than the nice, supporting person he'd been while we were playing chess. He was borderline abusive, he made unreasonable demands of me, he accused me of ridiculous things, he was hostile and combative and rude. It made living on my own difficult.

The most difficult part about living on my own wasn't my roommate, though. It was filling up my day. When you're on SSDI, you don't have to actually *do* anything to earn an income and so I found myself aimlessly wandering computer forums looking for ways to trick out the Linux installation on my computer - making the fonts render better, installing custom icons, customizing and tweaking the interface to my exact liking. It can make for a fun afternoon of computing, but when it's the only thing you do day-in and day-out it wears you down. I had no purpose in my life. No reason to get up in the morning. My only obligations were to walk Kerrin every day and take my pills. Beyond that, I could do whatever I wanted.

I'd been reteaching myself how to paint, but it was slow going. It seemed to me that painting was the hardest thing in the world to do. Every brush stroke I made would inevitably have to be covered up because it was a mistake and every time I tried to draw, it'd be draw and erase, draw and erase. It wasn't fun anymore. Not like it'd been with Helios. I felt less and less enamored with drawing and painting - it was what I'd told everyone I was on the planet to do; and here I was with all the time in the world to paint and I hardly ever painted. I played video games and I customized my Linux machine and that was my purposeless life.

But then one night I found myself up at three in-the-morning, browsing an Occupy Wall Street

website. It was picture after picture of people holding up signs, talking about how much debt they were in from college, how many minimum wage jobs they were working to try to pay off the debt. Their lives seemed more grim than mine and so I wrote my parents an email before going to bed because I was so wrapped in gratitude at how ideal my life was. How they provided for me and how them paying back my student loans enabled me to live in Denver. My parents were going through a NAMI Family-to-Family class at the time and my dad asked me if he could share my email with the class. The facilitator of the class was so impressed with my email that she asked if I could come and speak to her next class like I'm speaking to y'all tonight. And that was my first taste of purpose.

---

I've always been motivated by helping people. I took on the repair for the barista's girlfriend because I wanted to help her. I've been fixing computers my whole life under the same premise. I've always enjoyed writing, but never thought it would help anyone. I gave my first speech and the reception was overwhelmingly warm, I'd helped people simply by telling them my story.

Giving NAMI speeches eventually led to me starting my blog. Having something to write every month, a commitment I wanted to stick with did wonders to improve my morale. I no longer found myself endlessly customizing my Linux machine, I didn't find myself aimlessly smoking cigarette after cigarette after cigarette all afternoon. There was *purpose*, there was *meaning* to my life. Then I started work on my novel about two years ago and that's been the biggest boost to morale I've experienced yet. I now have a reason to get up in the morning, I now have a legitimate job.

I was born an artist but I wasn't supposed to be a painter. Painting was just something I latched onto for ten years and it was fun for a while, but ultimately I just couldn't do it anymore. There proved to be some substantial roadblocks.

My semi-abusive roommate kicked me out of the house and so I had to move into a tiny

three-hundred-and-fifty square foot studio apartment. Having my painting stuff crammed in there made the place seem less like a home and more like a cluttered workshop. It took me forty-five minutes to prepare my palette every time I wanted to paint and, since my medication robs me of so much of my energy, oftentimes by the time I'd finished preparing my palette I just didn't have the oomph necessary to start painting. So gradually the painting stuff went off to the side. First the enormous six by four foot canvas I'd been working on for the past two years went back to my parents, then my easel was folded up and put next to my fridge. Then the easel and taboret went to my parents' house and finally my drafting table was replaced with a real desk I could write from. Writing is my new medium and it's a better fit for me. It doesn't take forty-five minutes just to prepare to begin writing, I can just take my notebook out of my back pocket and start writing. I can just log onto my computer, open my text editor and start typing.

Everyone needs a purpose in life, but mental illness is especially good at stripping us of our purpose. I think it goes back to mental illness being more of a social or cultural disease - society doesn't have anything for people like me to do. Society doesn't want people who can't work, who can't handle the stress of everyday life and so we're set aside, forgotten. We have no use and no one gives us a purpose. We have to make our own purpose, we have to find our own way.

---

My name is Chris Feld. I have schizoaffective disorder. While it's a major component of my life, it doesn't define me. Over the years, I've learned a few tricks - to be tenacious and disciplined, to be stubborn, to have a purpose in my life - something which motivates me to get up in the morning. Most of all, I've learned to have a good attitude.

While it's hard to be specific about treating mental illness, I don't believe any of these things are out of reach for your loved ones. They're hard lessons to learn, but invaluable. Being diagnosed with a mental illness is not a death sentence. It's totally possible to live a fulfilling,

meaningful life despite the severe hardships. It takes time and patience, but my outcome doesn't have to be unique, it can be everyone's story.

Thank you.