

What if there is no tomorrow? There wasn't one today...

- Bill Murray, Groundhog Day

I'll frequently be sitting in my chair, being peaceful; with my dog, Kerrin, and it disappears. **Everything** disappears. I have no past, I have no family or relationships, I have no future – there is no tomorrow and there's never been a tomorrow. One moment it was there, the hope that tomorrow I would be doing something new – continuing a painting or hanging out with a friend – and in the next moment it's gone...that thought never seems to have existed. The past never happened and any thought of the future is a monumental, if not impossible, feat.

Sometimes I just sit there; absorbed in the ether of nothingness and sometimes I remember that I have a telephone and I can call someone for help.

People have this huge misconception of what schizophrenia is – they picture mad men bent on chaos and obsessed with destroying society. They picture artists, who can only paint the maddest of things...who exist on the edge of destruction; they picture homeless folks...addicted to drugs and wandering the streets, mumbling to themselves. They rarely picture someone like me...they rarely picture someone who is in many respects just like them. They don't picture a person with hopes and dreams, desires, fears, insecurities and strengths, talents and will. There are many reasons why they don't picture so called 'crazy' people like that. But that's beyond the scope of this talk.

I have a hard time when I hear people describe the personality of folks with schizophrenia. The word I most often hear associated with them is 'jerk'. I want to defend the person with schizophrenia at once, explain to people that you're going to be described as such when your perception of reality is constantly being questioned – being questioned by yourself. I want to explain to the people describing them as jerks that life works differently for people with schizophrenia or any mental illness. But, at the same time, I don't want to deny these jerks their right to be jerks...their right to a personality...their right to be human. Because that's what we are – human. And humans are jerks.

I also get upset at the person being described as a jerk – people with schizophrenia have a bad reputation. We're referred to as consumers in our own community. And I understand the frustration that comes with having a mental illness. I understand the loneliness, the social isolation and disconnect, I understand feeling worthless, I understand that it can be so overwhelming that getting out of bed is a major

accomplishment and that doing normal things is hard. Most of all I understand that people don't understand what it's like. I can explain what it's like on paper, in person, in front of my easel all I want, all I can, and people still won't understand. But that pain, fear, and loneliness is not an excuse to treat people poorly. Just like I expect people to treat me as a human, I expect myself to treat other people likewise.

I've seen terrible things, I hear terrible things on a daily basis and I think it's made worse by the fact that it all comes from me – that it's my head that comes up with those hallucinations and those voices. The human mind is capable of producing some truly horrendous things. But the human mind is equally capable of producing some truly beautiful things. And that's been my objective since I realized how serious my illness is – to make something beautiful out of it.

The day I was diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder, I remember talking on the phone with my mom – I don't remember the specifics of the conversation; but I do remember that she wanted to fly out to my school and take me home right away. I remember saying no – I remember telling her that it wasn't a big deal; that I would be fine. It was only through the Grace of God that I made it through that semester relatively unscathed. I did a lot of drawing during that period of time – which was, in many ways, the only way I had to cope with what I was experiencing. As time went on, my diagnosis became a bigger and bigger deal – I was losing large tracts of time, there was a voice in my head, calling herself Myra, who was commenting on everything I did, on everything people were telling me...she was saying such terrible and frightening things; I was seeing things that no one else was seeing. Years later, my good friend, Maggie, told me that I would frequently come over to her apartment, call her, hang up when she answered, and when she came outside I would go up to her apartment and sit on the couch without saying a word. She would make me food, put on movies, play my favorite music and I wouldn't say a thing – I would just sit there.

I finally agreed that I should come home and stay with my parents and attend CU-Denver. I also agreed that I would see a psychiatrist and take medicine to help me. I saw Dr. Carlson in January of 2007 and started low doses of a mood stabilizer and an anti-psychotic. I was only seeing him on a monthly or bi-weekly basis and for a while, by the time I came to see him, I had stopped taking the medication. I'm thankful he was so patient with me – it took a long time for me to start taking pills regularly, and respecting the fact that they're a necessary part of my treatment.

Most drugs aren't fun to take by I think that anti-psychotics belong in a class all by themselves. They're sub-humanizing, they take away your capacity to think clearly, and they make you *very* tired among other things. In those days, and even up until

recently, I was trying new drugs all the time. After the first time I was hospitalized in April of 2009 I began to take my illness more seriously. At that point I was doing what comes naturally to pretty much everyone in their early 20s. I was staying out until 2 or 3am. I was drinking more often than I probably should have been, and I wasn't taking my medicine consistently or at the same time every day. I was compelled toward a life of constantly being around people, staying up late, and ignoring what my body and mind really needed. I was also revolted by my medicine – it was awful to take, even the very act of taking it made me feel sick. So even after I was hospitalized and I'd told myself that I would take my pills I was still prone to pill rebellions. One such rebellion led to another hospitalization a few months later.

I don't remember that hospitalization and wasn't aware it had even happened until my dad and I were reviewing my medical history when I was applying for disability last year. This hospitalization meant that I would have to attend Intensive Outpatient Therapy at Porter Hospital. Things were getting serious. During this time I was put on Zyprexa and Haldol. Zyprexa is a close cousin of Clozapine and it's very sedating. Dr. Carlson had warned me of this; and so the first time I took it I took it two hours earlier than I normally take my other pills. I went to bed at about 10PM and didn't wake up until about 4PM the next day – I'd missed work without calling in.

Haldol was a different experience. Haldol is very effective at taking away the positive symptoms of schizophrenia – the hallucinations, voices, paranoia, and delusions. But it mimics the negative symptoms – apathy, flat affect (which is a lack of expression or feeling), depression, lethargy, etc. it didn't feel like treatment at all – it felt like being sub-human, it felt like being dead. I didn't know how to act around other people, I didn't laugh at jokes, I didn't make my own jokes up, I wasn't interested in the things that I was normally interested in...I had no joy. Schizophrenia does this to a person under normal conditions, under Haldol – it was worse.

My health deteriorated rapidly despite being on close to a dozen different medications. There were a few more suicide attempts and the constant threat, because of depression, delusions, and voices in my head, that it might happen again and there would be no one to stop me from doing it. It was finally suggested, after the threat of suicide became too great, after I tried killing myself a couple more times, that I do electro-convulsive therapy (ECT).

It's funny to think back on that period of my life...the fragments that I remember...and try to guess if I would do it again. It's one of the worst things that's ever happened to me – it erased years of my memory...there are sometimes just these tiny specks of consciousness floating around in the blurry ether of a particular period of my

life. I've forgotten entire classes that I took during college, I've forgotten most of the books that I've read (and I'm a voracious reader), I forgot how to paint and draw, I forgot a good deal of my friends and ended up re-introducing myself to them, my fiancé left me and I have no memory of how, why, or when it happened. I lost my job and had to move back in with my parents – my life had crumbled from beneath me. During ECT I couldn't do anything...I would go out occasionally, but for the most part I sat on the couch and watched movies. I just watched whatever was on – I didn't have the presence of mind to realize that I could choose one of the hundreds of DVDs that my parents own...or to even change the channel. So many things were gone and I was alone. But at the same time – ECT saved my life, I don't think that I would be here today if I hadn't gone through with it...and that makes it worthwhile.

I've learned, both through therapy sessions with a Cognitive and Behavioral Therapist as well as my own experience, that the best thing to do when you're not feeling well is to be proactive about it – that sitting on the couch and watching movies makes things worse. Sitting in your own pool of misery and wallowing in your pain only serves to perpetuate the problem. You have to identify things that make you feel better and do them; sometimes you have to take pills to deal with it. It's a long journey, but once you have those tools you can be fearless.

I think that having a mental illness is like having the reset button on your life pushed. You're not disabled, you're not worthless, you're not simply a consumer – you just need to figure out a new way to live. Sometimes that takes something as drastic as thousands of volts of electricity shooting through your head and your life literally falling apart – especially if you're as stubborn and pig-headed as I am.

I tried to go to school for a good three years, dropping out nearly every semester – only completing one class during that time – before I was led to the conclusion that school can't be done right now. I've learned to be sensitive to the cues my body gives me before I get sick and I've also learned what to do about it when those cues present themselves. I've learned that walks, every day for at least 30-45 minutes are crucial to my mental health, I've learned that getting sunshine on my face every day is wonderful for me. I've learned that eating well is as important to my mental health as taking my medicine. Most importantly – I've learned that I need to ask for help when I can't get the things I need to be healthy.

I have trouble cooking for myself. I can't explain why (though there are theories) – it's just hard and I found myself not doing it after a while of living on my own. So, on Sunday afternoons, my mom and I get together and cook food for the week. It not only affords me the opportunity to cook (which is something that I love doing) but, more

importantly, it gives me time with my family. I also get paranoid about walking by myself – so to help mitigate that my parents got me a dog. Kerrin is such a blessing in my life, not just helping me go on walks but also giving me a constant companion who loves me unconditionally...I think she's a big reason why I was able to move out on my own. At one point I wasn't able to walk even with Kerrin so my dad agreed to go on a walk with me during his lunch break – he works several blocks away from where I live and being able to take that opportunity to walk with him is a good way to connect with him – we continue to walk just because the time together is so valuable.

I was elated when I was able to tell my therapist that my parents were doing the family-to-family class through NAMI. Just like they can only imagine my daily struggles, I can only imagine what it's like for them to see their son psychotic, what it's like when I have to tell them that I can't give them a hug, or what it's like for them to visit me in the hospital. All of the literature that I've read on dealing with mental health issues has said that a good support system is crucial to having positive results. And all of that literature is absolutely correct. I've been blessed with good doctors, but they only see me for an hour a week. Outside of an hour with a psychiatrist and an hour with a psychologist there's a lot more support that needs to happen. And knowing that I can call my parents anytime, knowing that they will come and get me if I really need them to is incredibly comforting to me. I think we live in a society that is actively trying to reject community and family. I think there's something wrong when people living in community houses – bound together by a common goal – are labeled as radical. If schizophrenia or schizoaffective disorder or whatever you want to call it has taught me anything, it's the value of family and community. Because family and community don't only offer their support to me, they also afford me the opportunity to give my support to others. I feel better knowing that when people are going through hard times, which is just a part of everyone's life, they'll feel comfortable confiding in me. Because I've been in those tough, narrow, spaces. And I've survived those tough, narrow, spaces. And, because I've been there and because I've survived, I can tell others how to do the same. A mental illness is like hitting the reset button on your life. At times you'll look at all the repercussions of that reset button and see nothing but what you've lost – skills, abilities, friends, loved ones – but if you choose to take the opportunity to take advantage of the fact that there's a lot of stuff you need to re-learn then I think you'll end up in a better place than most.

I had a friend in art school – he was obsessed with the so-called 'crazy' artist, he wanted so much to be just like Salvador Dali and pointed to his painting, "The Persistence of Memory," as the ultimate example of insanity in painting. Most people know the painting if they know of Salvador Dali – it's the painting of the melted clocks. That painting enters my mind when I think about time. And time is very important to me.

I've lost a lot of time in my life – from being in my dorm room one moment and then being in class the next moment – with just the blink of an eye. From not remembering what I got for Christmas or my birthday, losing nearly a year of my life – not remembering a good chunk of my friends and re-introducing myself to them, not remembering my fiancé breaking up with me; even calling her a while after it happened without remembering she didn't want me in her life anymore. And, finally, to frequently sitting down in my chair for a few minutes and becoming conscious a few hours later – having no idea where that time went. Time is important. I want the time I spend with people who are important to me to be a persistent state because my memory isn't persistent.

I'll get home from a day spent with someone and feel all that time – the whole relationship – vanish in front of me. And I'll try to hold on to it – I'll try to remember that 20 minutes ago I was giving my goodbye hugs and planning another time to hang out. But it just fades away and I'm left with an empty feeling – almost as though it had never happened. I feel as though Salvador Dali got something right in that painting – but I don't think that he was mad, not like my friend wanted him to be – because memories don't persist, not for me...if they did I think I would be able to hold on to the joy I experience when I'm with people I care about. If it were persistent I think that I would be able to feel it 20 minutes after getting home – that it wouldn't all disappear on me.

Cognitive and behavioral therapy teaches you to live in the moment – to be as present as possible. I recognize that I was encouraged to do that because my past, my recent past, is full of trauma. But I think it's important to know about the past – to recognize the impact that it has on the present, and to know that there's still good things about the past. My memory is very poor for most things – I have to write most everything down to get a firmer grasp on reality – to know what conversations I've had, to know what I've done, what I've read. Even then the passing of time remains an enigma – something that I know is constantly happening but that I experience in spurts, and sometimes hardly at all.

My particular biotype of schizophrenia most commonly presents with poor memory, poor learning skills, but a high IQ score. It's such a frustrating type to be – I have the capacity to learn whatever I want to learn but that capacity is corroded. I like to imagine a great, big strainer – something so capacious it could hold an Olympic sized swimming pool. But it's got holes in it – so I can fill it all I want but it just drains out the bottom. I imagine the strainer when I'm depressed, when I'm thinking about the past and how everything fell apart and that I had no awareness of it. And when I get like that I seem to conveniently forget how much I know – how much information I've sponged up. So I try to be more realistic about my strainer of a head; I try to put a giant sponge in

the strainer – and when I do there's still water that flows out the bottom of the strainer but there's also an amount that stays in the sponge, a surprising amount.

It goes back to that reset button again; I just have to re-learn how to capture time and memory. So many people like me suffer from this illness without any insight into it; so many seem to suffer and not know what's happening to them, they don't always understand what's going on. And I get like that too, but God has granted me a certain insight into my illness – enabled me to know how to ask for help when I need it and enabled me to effectively communicate what kind of help I need.

I love playing chess – and while there are many reasons for me to play chess, many reasons that it's helpful to me, two facts about chess stick out in my head that are applicable to life. And not just to a person suffering from mental illness, but to everyone. The first is that every move has an advantage and a disadvantage. If I go out with friends to a house show the obvious advantage is that I'll connect with people, I'll hear good music, and I'll enjoy myself and my community. The disadvantage is that I'll most likely start to feel sick and, if I leave that sick feeling unattended, I'll get psychotic – and all the positive things about going to a house show will vanish in the pain. The second fact is that you always have to make a move – in chess you can have a positional advantage for a set of moves and lose it in the next; because you always have to move a piece – you can't just sit still. And I don't mean this in the sense that you can't put on an album and listen to it for an hour with a dog cuddling in your lap, but in the sense that I have to be proactive about my illness. Psychosis is always trying to get me and if I'm not trying to proactively prevent it, then I'm going to get psychotic – I'm going to lose. I oftentimes lose, but that's just a fact of life – I'm not perfect and I'm still learning.

Of course the chess analogy fails shortly thereafter. I don't look at psychosis or schizoaffective disorder as an opponent. I'm an advocate of non-violence, I believe in peace and consensus, and I'm a pacifist. My attitude is not to look at my mind as an opponent or as something to be defeated. Violently fighting my head isn't going to solve anything. Integrating what my brain needs to be healthy will. Knowing that, if I'm going to a house show, there's a possibility of getting sick doesn't mean stubbornly going and fighting through the sensations and it also doesn't mean not going either. It means that I take a sketchbook with me, it means that I don't drink a bunch while I'm there, it means taking the appropriate amount of medicine with me so I can mitigate psychotic sensations. And, above all, it means respecting what my brain needs.

I suppose there's one more chess analogy. And you're likely to come across this type of lesson in almost any book on tactics and strategy, be it chess, warfare, or the various martial arts. And that is to make moves that minimize your weaknesses and

take advantage of your strengths. There is a significant disadvantage to going to a house show. I've ended up locked in a stranger's bathroom, completely psychotic and unresponsive. And that's terrifying. But people need people and being in a house with all of your friends, enjoying music and each other's company is a truly uplifting experience – especially when you're blessed with the kind of friends that I have. So I minimize the disadvantage – when I enter the house I know, and reassure myself, that I'm with a bunch of people who love me, that I can always sit down and draw a picture, that I can go out to the porch and smoke to my heart's content, and that if things get bad I can leave – that I can even call my parents and they'll come and pick me up. I also take a little bit more Geodon about an hour before I get there if I know it's going to be especially loud or if I know I'm feeling especially sensitive and on edge. I'll take a bit of Xanax or, more likely, some Melatonin. And I'll have extras of all three and some more potent anti-psychotics along with my nightly dose of medicine. I'm a walking pharmacy – but I need to be.

Having a mental illness has been such a blessing in my life. I don't mean to say that I prefer it or necessarily enjoy it. I just mean to say that I choose to embrace a positive outlook on it. It's shown me truly amazing and supportive friends, it fascinates me to no end, it's strengthened my relationship with my family, it's responsible for reconnecting me with my faith in God, and it's made me very aware. I'm very in-tune with the needs of my brain and mind; and, because I've been able to sponge up information on it and talk to experts in the field of psychology and psychiatry in an intelligent and enlightening fashion, I've been able to do things like have meaningful relationships, live on my own, and work to develop a business– I feel like I've been able to flourish in an unconventional way. I don't have a degree, I don't have a job...but I try hard not to define myself by those things.

But that's just part of the reset button – you relearn how to live and you relearn how to define yourself, what your worth is. I think y'all are taking an enormously good step in the right direction. It doesn't matter if you or your loved one is suffering from depression, schizophrenia, bi-polar disorder, anorexia or any other mental illness – it's important to become educated about it. Talk to your doctors and therapists, talk to other people with mental illnesses, buy books – read books, research things on the Internet. And involve everyone- your whole family. I only know one other person with schizophrenia but I know a lot of people who suffer from other mental illnesses, and when I talk with them about their experiences and share mine there's a kind of unity between us, this bond over something that's mutually understood yet unspoken. I don't even know what to call it. There's just something that we get about each other. That community is important, that solidarity is crucial. It makes the world a less lonely place; it makes me feel like someone understands the visceral sensations of it.

The more you know about how to take care of yourself when your mentally ill the better off you'll be. You'll certainly get it through experience and the trial and error of finding out what works and what doesn't work but it goes deeper than that. I feel more in control of myself the more I know about my illness. For instance, I have Celiac, a gluten allergy, and according to a new book I'm reading about schizophrenia, 75% of people with schizophrenia have a gluten intolerance or allergy. That knowledge doesn't necessarily help in giving me anything to change about myself – I know I have schizoaffective disorder and I know I have Celiac...and I'm still doing the same things about them. But just having that little fact makes me feel as though I have a more complete picture. 50% of all hospital beds were occupied by folks with schizophrenia before Thorazine was invented – knowing that makes me realize the importance of my medicine in being independent and an active member of my community. It's a reason for me to take my pills every morning and every night.

Depression is one of those things I frequently discount; frankly, because it's such a common feeling in my life that it's become normal for me to feel like trash. My mom even had to mention to me when she read the rough draft of this that I hardly touched on the issue of depression. Depression is such a crippling thing – you can be out with friends and become alienated from them because you're not laughing at jokes; you're socially awkward because you have nothing to say – and feel that nothing you could possibly say would contribute positively to the conversation. People assume that you're mad at them and don't really accept the idea that you're consuming the idea that there is nothing, that not a single thing has worth.

My worst period of depression actually occurred while I was recovering from intensive ECT and going through maintenance ECT. I took extra medicine just so I could sleep more and avoid having to deal with the daunting emptiness and feeling of worthlessness. The highlights of my day – the things that happened that I tried to convince myself would make life worth living felt shallow and meaningless – never as satisfying as I hoped that they would be...not even close to satisfying. Surely a lot of this was situational. People are uneasy coming to visit people who are mentally ill. On the one hand I can understand – but it makes the world so empty, so lonely. No one came to visit me, no one called me. I don't know why; I've never asked anyone because I don't want to put them in the position of having to answer. It especially hurt when one of my friends got her wisdom teeth removed. Her Facebook status was complaining about the discomfort and people were replying with nothing but well wishes. I went over to visit her and bring her some curry I'd made and, when I got there, there were at least five people visiting with her – hanging out and watching movies with her...bringing her ice cream. She did nothing wrong; her friends – many of whom were my friends – really didn't do anything wrong. Getting your wisdom teeth removed is a normal part of

growing up and people can understand and relate to that kind of surgery. Something as invasive and scary as electro convulsive therapy is on a whole other level – people can't seem to comprehend what it is.

But that almost put me over the edge; it was so demoralizing to see that people were ignoring me when I needed them the most. I couldn't paint (I'd forgotten how), I couldn't cook, computers didn't seem to interest me...the things I loved to do were inaccessible. All of these things that I'd known how to do were just gone and had been replaced by nothing. I was empty inside – everything was in vain. And I was alone.

I'm not unique in this, but it's important for me to feel loved and supported. I've stopped myself from going through with suicide because of that love. But people don't know how to handle ECT. I don't think I was myself – I was hallow and I wasn't growing.

Depression is like that for nearly everyone – it's not necessarily that you feel terrible, it's that you feel nothing and that makes you feel like you should feel terrible. I couldn't cry...I remember that I tried so hard to cry, just to feel something, just to know that I was alive and I couldn't manage anything. I was almost elated when I was able to cry about how I felt – that was progress... that was a step –a huge step – in the right direction. Most people identify the state of being depressed as a feeling of overall badness. They say "I feel like crap, I must be depressed." That's not depressed, that's feeling like crap. True depression is just an overwhelming lack of everything – you're depressed when you can't cry, if you're crying you're still healthy. I'll occasionally get sensitive about people using the word 'depressed'...because I think it's another word, like 'crazy', that's been co-opted by our society to express a sensation that's totally normal and then robs it of its actual definition, of its weight. During the time I was recovering from ECT I don't think I'd ever been more depressed than I was...I couldn't do anything, I couldn't feel anything, and there was this overwhelming knowledge of a daunting and oblique nothingness in my future.

But I was stubborn and I was tough. I called it quits to ECT in May 2010 and tried to put my life back together again. And the most important part of putting myself back together again was acknowledging that I had a future. When you're depressed the future doesn't really exist – you try to look out a few years into the future, even a few months into the future and its incomprehensible, emptiness stares right back at you.

I am not my brain, I am a human being, I have worth, I have skills, I'm full of love and I want to share myself with other people. Depression counters those facts, which are true of anyone, with such bleakness that you can't seem to argue with it and expect

to win. Depression is a bully. I realize that depression, in its truest sense, is a chemical imbalance in your brain – that there is a physiological basis to it...but there's you, and then there's your brain. And you are stronger than your brain. I don't mean to suggest that you can just turn depression off and I don't mean to suggest it's easy– but you have to keep in mind the power you have to overcome tremendous difficulty.

I think my life started to come back together again when someone asked me to fix their computer. I hadn't really touched a computer in months for more than surfing the Internet or playing video games. But I agreed to try to fix it. I wasn't too confident. The laptop wouldn't power on – you would press the power button and nothing would happen. To spare you the technical details, I took that laptop apart and made it turn on...I fixed it, I raised it from the dead. It was amazing – not because the fix itself was so amazing...but because it made me feel alive. For the first time in months I felt the nothingness get replaced with something else. Get replaced with something energizing and fulfilling and beautiful. Before too long I asked my dad if he wanted to start a computer repair business with me – he agreed. I enrolled in school as a computer science major and, when I looked out at the future, the incomprehensible emptiness had been replaced by substance. I started putting other pieces of my life back together again – I started going to hang out with my friends, I started going to my church again and perhaps most importantly – I set out to relearn how to draw and paint.

I'm not a computer science major anymore, I'm not even in college anymore, I don't have a degree and if there is a degree in my future it seems to be a distant entity. Shortly after starting up my second class in the program, an actual programming class, my memory started failing me. I would read and take notes, I even had a deal with the disability office at my school where they scanned my text book so that I could play the text book as an audio book through my computer and read along with it – I was being a diligent student, I was working hard – and all that I read, all that I took notes about during class, would vanish. I couldn't remember a single thing I'd read, when I got to class the lecture on the material that I'd just read seemed like brand new information to me, the programs that I turned in were written completely wrong despite the fact that I thought I had them working when I wrote them. It all fell apart...again. My psychiatrist told me that I'd been trying to go to college for years – that I'd had to drop out of every semester (save for one) for medical reasons. It was because of stress and it was time to eliminate that stress. The incomprehensible emptiness returned; I'd invested my worth in the idea of getting a PHD in computer science. I'd banked on success and fulfillment coming from an external source and I'd ended up twisting myself inside out.

Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God.

-Psalm 20:7.

That Bible passage was on this hokey piece of artwork that a friend of mine was getting rid of. I saw that and it hit me – it woke me up. You don't have to have faith to understand this – your worth doesn't come from external things. It doesn't come from a degree in computer science. It comes from something much simpler and much more powerful than that. It can be God, it can be something else. But I'm not here to preach to you, I'm not a pastor. I firmly believe that you shouldn't invest your sense of worth in shallow things. A PHD is a piece of paper – it doesn't prove that you're a better person, it doesn't prove that you have worth or have more worth than a person who doesn't have a PHD; it just proves that you know a lot about a particular subject...that you're a master of it. And that has value, but it doesn't prove you're a worthy person, it doesn't prove you.

I had to swallow my pride, accept the fact that I cannot, at this point in my life, go to college or hold down a job. And that was hard. It was depressing. It required a gestalt. I still have problems with it, I still have days where I look at my friends with degrees and jobs and I feel like I'm worthless because I'm on disability...because I'm just a statistic and a consumer. But I'm not. I have to be stubborn with myself and reject what the voices in my head and society says makes me a worthy person. I have a difficult time expressing exactly what that looks like. My sense of worth is this beautifully nebulous thing. The thing that cannot be named.

Externally it looks a lot like me just painting pictures and fixing people's computers. I love that I can fix computers because I can serve my community by doing it. I'm endlessly fascinated with them and I understand them – I just suck up information about them. I love that I can paint whenever I feel like it – because I have a venue for all my experiences to be turned into something tangible and beautiful...into something I've created with my own hands and effort. So perhaps the thing that cannot be named, my sense of worth...comes from helping people. I'm a firm believer that I'm here on this planet to serve and love others. And whether that looks like that painting a picture for one of my friends, or fixing a computer, or being able to relate to some truly painful and difficult-to-understand problems in life and support and love the people that are experiencing them, it's important for me to do that kind of stuff; not only because it benefits my friends and my community but because it helps me deal with the difficulties in my life. It gives me ammunition against the voices in my head that tell me I'm worth

nothing, and it gives me something to fill the void that I feel in my chest when the day just seems so overwhelmingly difficult.

I think I'm also trying to say is that you have to have hope, as corny as that sounds. Hope connotes the future. I always try to have short term plans, plans for a few months from now - and long term plans. It's helpful because, on days when the incomprehensible nothingness rears its ugly head, I can deny it its power. Because I know that I'll be hanging out with my best friend every Wednesday. I know I'll be taking my dog for a walk with my dad every day, I know that Mother's Day is coming up and I'd better start working on a present for my mom. And I know that someday I'll have a family of my own - I know that I'll be a better artist, and I'll know even more programming languages...I know I'll be healthier. I know that the incomprehensible nothingness is just temporary and that it's a lie.

I sometimes joke that I'm a professional sick person. I get paid to be sick, to be disabled. And maybe that's a bit cynical of me - but I think I say that because I know that at this point in my life I'm learning how to take care of myself. It's the reset button again. There's a lot to learn, a lot to process...and I need help supporting myself while I master those skills. I'm not perfect, I don't always follow the ideas that I've shared with you tonight. I have voices in my head almost constantly - so I'm learning how to live with a crowded brain. I get paranoid about the dumbest things on a daily basis, so I'm learning to force myself to be rational and firm with my paranoid thoughts. I see truly frightening things more often than I'd like to - so I'm learning how to paint them and live at peace with them; to turn them into something less frightening, to make them my muse instead of my tormentor.

The journey is different for everyone. It has to be - we're all unique creations with specific needs. But I think that, when dealing with paranoia, hallucinations, delusions, voices, depression and mania, the thing to remember is to be proactive about it. It's easy to sit on the couch and watch movies all day and be miserable and alone and empty - I say easy because it can be a natural state of being for some people and that that's the automatic response to feeling like that. But the easy existence is painful and hopeless, so indescribably painful and hopeless. It doesn't have to be that way.

The first steps are hard, and it remains hard for a long time...it's still hard for me. Some days, getting out of bed is something to be celebrated. But there's so much beauty in the world...and if you can find what that beauty is for you then the incomprehensible nothingness gets more and more substance - something tangible and obtainable - something worth surviving all the pain and trauma for. The alarm on my phone displays the message "Wake up, there's so much to see," when it goes off

every morning. A lot of times the alarm just gets shut off without paying much attention to what it's saying...but I put it on there to remind me that it's important to be a part of life, to take an active role, to respect what my brain needs me to do in order to stay safe and healthy but also to respect that I need to push myself and challenge myself. That it's important to live for something higher than myself, that it's important for me to believe in something and try to hold myself up to a higher standard. Most of all, that it's important to try to live life as fully as possible.

I'd like to end with a quote from one of the most enlightening books I ever read during my brief attempt at college. I was, for a short time, a philosophy major and had managed as a Freshman to convince a professor to let me take a 3000-level class. That was a mistake, but the book that we read in that class is now very well worn and it has provided me a great deal of comfort. I had to drop the class before any real discussion about the contents of the book happened, but that's life...I think it's better that I have my own (most likely) twisted understanding of the text. The quote itself is from a French Phenomenologist named Merleau-Ponty and his book *Phenomenology of Perception* is absolute fodder for a schizophrenic...I could give an entire speech about his concepts of the nature of perception and the phenomenon of it but I'll have to settle for this quote:

"We must not, therefore, wonder whether we really perceive a world, we must instead say: the world is what we perceive."

I read that quote and imagine what my life would be like if that were the status quo instead of a radical idea.