

I'm sitting in a very comfortable chair in my psychiatrist's office. Dr. Carlson, the only psychiatrist I've ever had, is explaining to me why I'm more miserable being part a of Western Civilization than if I'd been born as an Australian Aborigine. Aborigine's, he explains would consider me a holy man, a shaman - I would be consulted on important matters, respected, even revered.

Dr. Carlson's point was that we're a highly individualistic culture, not community focused. In our culture, I'm a failure - no job, no family of my own, no college degree, still very much dependent on my parents despite my age, I even failed to get the IB diploma I worked so hard for in high school. I have all the makings of a nobody, a loser, someone to forget.

Worst of all - I have a mental illness.

Despite all these markings of failure, I still consider myself successful, I've made my family proud. And, for the first time since being diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder, 8 long years ago, I feel proud of myself.

I've been fortunate enough to be blessed with smart doctors and an incredible support system who've made all the difference in treating my illness.

It's a matter of perspective, it's a matter of modifying expectations. We're not proud of most adults for being able to walk, but if a particular person has had to re-learn how to walk after an accident, we're right proud of them.

That's me - re-learning how to walk.

Mental illness, at one point, took everything away from me - my home, my job, my independence, my fiancé, and my sanity. It crippled me. And then, with a lot of help, I struggled to my feet and started walking again.

Nearest we can tell, schizoaffective disorder started to affect me around the time I got to high school. From kindergarten through 8th grade, I went to the same private Lutheran school with a student population between 50 and 60. So, when it came time to go to high school, and I chose to go to a school with nearly 2,500 kids, it was a culture shock. I wanted to do the International Baccalaureate program. IB was a tough program - hours of homework, college level work, but if I got my diploma I could enter college as a sophomore or junior.

It was stressful, and many symptoms of schizoaffective disorder are reactions to stress. As the years went on, I found myself unable to remember what I'd read. My dad has memories of the two of us sitting at the kitchen table doing my chemistry homework - we'd read a section, I'd do the problems correctly but, when it came time to recall that section a little while later I had no

memory of having learned it. It got worse and worse; to the point that, by senior year, I'd almost completely given up on reading the assigned material. I didn't really notice, I didn't give my problem much thought. In the classic behavior of the mentally ill I ignored the problem, I didn't even recognize it as a problem. I spent my time going to shows and hanging out with friends. I decided to go to art school despite having almost zero experience making art. I figured I wouldn't have to read as many books.

My grades slipped and I skipped more and more school. My parents were confused but we never talked about it - my dad later told me he figured he'd have an answer eventually as to why I was behaving so oddly. It's never been my mentality to slack off or skip school or not try my best. The IB counselors blamed it on test anxiety, though I never felt nervous during tests. I was pretty nonchalant about my condition - denial can be a powerful thing.

The end of senior year came and I took my 4 hour IB tests in every subject. I scored pretty well in my SAT's. I got into my first choice of schools - The School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Summer came and I decided to take a year off to work. SAIC was \$40k a year and we couldn't afford that. The results of my IB tests came back and the feeling of disappointment from not getting my diploma was momentary because I didn't really care about the piece of paper so much. My experience in high school taught me to value what I'd learned from class more than the grade I got. And IB had taught me so much I was just thankful to have done it, the diploma didn't matter. Given the choice, I would do IB all over again.

I entered SAIC having not saved a dime. My mania, perhaps amped up by the Zoloft I'd been prescribed, had started expressing itself by encouraging me to spend my entire paycheck on anything that seemed even vaguely interesting.

SAIC lasted about a month. Some versions of why I left include the rampant drug usage of my peers, or the fact that my Painting 1 professor didn't know how to stretch a canvas. Mostly it was a gut feeling and my gut led me to Bethany Lutheran College in rural Minnesota - the same college where my parents met.

My first semester of painting at Bethany was wonderful - I started dating Malia, a wonderful, caring woman. And the academic rigor required of students was minimal compared to IB - which meant more time painting. The painting professor let me have a senior studio in the basement of one of the dorms and I made friends with everyone down there, we called ourselves the Gullies and Malia painted our portraits. But the semester had to end. And, with the arrival of summer, came more signs of impending mental illness.

During the summer, I finished one, tortuous painting. My mind kept skipping, I spent more and more time locked up in my room. I was angry much of the time - short tempered with the people who love me the most. I became suspicious of the woman on the other end of the phone who called me every night - she couldn't possibly be Malia. She was trying to get

something from me. I didn't know what she wanted, but it wasn't good. And so, in one of my first bouts of paranoia I broke up with her by ignoring her text messages.

I didn't reach out to anyone, I didn't ask for help - I kept pretending everything was okay; probably because everything was okay, from my perspective. My problems were everyone else's problems. Not my problems at all.

My parents wanted me to stay in Colorado. Something was wrong, something wasn't right. But I'd come to my senses about Malia and I wanted to make things right with her and that meant doing one more semester in Minnesota. So we agreed I'd go back for one last semester so I could apologize.

I got back to Minnesota and managed to convince Malia to go to a school play with me. Per an agreement made with my parents I'd been seeing a local therapist - and I'd been telling her about increasingly weird things happening to me. I'd been losing a lot of time, dissociating for hours at a time and sometimes coming to in the middle of a class, having no recollection of how I got there or how I'd managed to do my homework.

At the play, a huge monster - half-dragon half-boar, centipede like and ferocious - came slithering out of the stage to get me. It got half way to the back of the theatre before I'd gotten up and run out of the theatre. Malia caught up with me just outside of the theatre where I was in a state of panic. Oblivious to what had just happened to me, she calmed me down and I agreed to go back to her place so she could cook me some food.

No sooner had she started cooking then voices in my head started telling me she was going to poison me. Not knowing any better, being fully convinced by the strange power voices have over those who hear them, I got up and accused her of poisoning me. I got angry and shouted at her, then I grabbed my bag and stormed out of her apartment. That was the last time I remember seeing her - I tried my hardest to avoid her for the rest of the semester.

I told this to my new therapist and, shortly after that, she diagnosed me schizoaffective disorder. I had no idea what she meant by it being a combination of schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. I don't think I really recognized there was anything wrong with me. But I didn't connect the loss of time, the hallucinations, or the wild mood swings with being sick, they were just strange things happening to me. My therapist spent the rest of our sessions trying to convince me I should see a psychiatrist and start taking medication. I didn't like that idea - I wanted to be treated by a naturopath, I didn't want to take pharmaceuticals.

An hour after getting diagnosed, I was walking from my therapist's office back to my dorm. I pulled out my phone and called my mom. I told her I had schizoaffective disorder and, when she told me she was going to fly out and take me home, I explained it wasn't a big deal; I could handle it by myself, I would see her when the semester was over.

People with mental illness are difficult to treat because they often don't recognize that there's anything wrong with them. I couldn't be convinced of the seriousness of my illness because I hadn't hit rock bottom yet. Rock bottom, a term used almost unanimously by people talking about their experience with mental illness. Nearly everyone who experiences a mental illness like me has to hit rock bottom before they realize something is wrong with them, before they do something to help themselves. And that was certainly the case with me.

I spent the rest of the semester ignoring my worsening state, being increasingly tortured by my illness and feeling increasingly isolated from the few friends I had at school. I used to go to my friend Maggie's apartment, call her, hang up when she answered, and then wait for her to come down to get me. When she arrived I would enter the building, go up to her apartment and, without saying a word, take a place on the couch and sit there. Just sit there. I wouldn't talk, make eye contact, or even acknowledge her presence as she put on my favorite movies, played my favorite music, and cooked food for me. I'd sit there, completely oblivious to everything around me and then get up, just as suddenly as I'd arrived, and leave without saying a word.

I'm thankful she took care of me, even though I didn't accept any of her help. I didn't know I was there and I didn't know I'd done that until she told me years later. I was dissociating, checking out of reality because of the stress of being so isolated. I don't know if Maggie connected my behavior with mental illness. But, in those instances of dissociation I'm glad she was there for me. Even if I wasn't aware of it, I know she offered a great comfort to me.

Maggie was one of the few comforts I had during my time in Minnesota. Some of the boys in my dorm found out there was something wrong with me, I'm sure the rumor mills of the 500 members of the student body were saying all kinds of things about me and my strange behavior. Their reaction was to bang on my door in the early hours of the morning and threaten to kill me. When I took the issue to the Dean of Students, he dismissed their actions as "boys will be boys".

My last semester in Minnesota wasn't a complete failure, I managed to make some new friends and had a wonderful 21st birthday where some kids I barely knew threw a party for me - we made huge burritos and watched bizarre Japanese movies in the living room of their unheated house. But good memories like that are few and far between, mostly I remember being locked up in my dorm making drawings on newsprint and writing poems I was convinced were absolutely brilliant.

In December, I finally came home. Mom and dad and I celebrated my birthday and the relief of being home saw an improvement in my health. A good, supportive environment is essential for people with mental illnesses - going from the mostly hostile and isolated environment of Minnesota to the home I'd grown up in, to my mom and dad who love me unconditionally lifted my spirits and improved my health. We didn't talk a whole lot about my illness - it was maybe a

bit taboo to bring it up. I didn't want to talk about it and mom and dad didn't want to provoke me. I'd proven to them I was short tempered. I spent a lot of time alone in my room.

I found a psychiatrist shortly after coming home. I made an appointment with him and mom drove me there. He asked me the same questions the therapist in Minnesota had and I expressed my desire to be treated naturally. Lithium, it turned out, was a natural substance - a salt which they'd discovered by accident helped with mood. I agreed to start taking it and Dr. Carlson and I scheduled another appointment for the following month.

In the mean time, I started school at CU-Denver. Not remembering my difficulty with retaining what I'd read, I decided to become a philosophy major. It was in my Logic and Language class that I met Brit, who would eventually become my fiancé and, ultimately, my ex-fiancé.

The beginning of the semester was hard for me. Auraria campus is a very crowded campus. I started dissociating again. The first time Brit and her friend Setta introduced themselves to me I was drawing - I must have been dissociating because I didn't even acknowledge their presence. Setta introduced herself and I just kept right on drawing, oblivious to the world around me. According to Setta, the professor would sometimes call on me and I'd just sit there, staring at nothing in particular, until he eventually gave up on me and asked someone else to answer the question.

Brit was wonderful for me, she introduced me to Scum of the Earth Church where I went for a number of years, made a lot of friends, and discovered a close knit community. Having friends, much less a community of people dramatically improved my health. I felt loved and, though hardly anyone knew about my mental illness, accepted. I got into radical politics and grew in my passion for art. Brit and I started dating, I told her about my illness with the qualification that I didn't know what it would mean. It was scary to tell her, my experience with telling friends about my mental illness had taught me that people didn't care too much for people suffering from them. Most of the people I'd told about my illness had stopped talking to me - not calling me back, not returning text messages, or being too busy to hang out with me until I finally got the hint that they didn't want to be friends anymore.

But Brit accepted me, she told me she would support me and she told me she loved me. I couldn't have been more thankful or more in love with her.

During this time, I was still seeing Dr. Carlson. At first, monthly and then bi-weekly and, finally weekly as my illness worsened. The addition of new friends and community only improved my health for so long. I'd meet with Dr. Carlson and he'd prescribe pills, I'd take them for a few days before giving up on them. Then, I'd see him again, tell him I wasn't taking the pills anymore, and he'd prescribe different ones - trying to find that magical combination of meds all psychiatrists struggle to find with each of their patients.

Psychiatric medication is awful to take. Some of it was the stigma of taking so much medication despite being a physically healthy man in his early-twenties who rode his bike 20–30 miles a day. Most of my pill rebellions were because of the awful side effects. The medication made me incredibly tired, to the point that it was difficult to get up in time for classes which started mid-morning. Other side effects have included a terrible hand tremor which made it difficult to draw and paint, drooling uncontrollably, joint pain (which is severe enough now that I can't sit in a chair for very long and prefer to either stand or sit on a stool when working at my desk), double vision, an insatiable appetite which ultimately made me gain about 100 pounds. One of the meds paralyzes me from time to time, usually in the morning, for about 20 minutes or so, some of the medications mimicked the negative symptoms of my illness - making me disconnected from other people and giving me the sensation of being "sub-human".

It was a long road to get to the point where I would take all of my medication at the prescribed times. But we're not at that point of the story quite yet. It's still a few years before I'd make that promise to myself and my family.

My wedding was looming and I was getting increasingly stressed. After a terrible semester trying to be a philosophy major, and marking the final semester of school I'd ever finish, I decided to be a painting major again. There were invitations to make, RSVPs to catalog, venues to call and make arrangements with, marital counseling to attend, and we had to figure out where to get a bunch of bikes as we were going to have a bike parade back to the place where the reception would take place.

So much to do and I was dragging my feet.

Doing things, "things" in the sense of day-to-day responsibilities we accumulate as we get older, was becoming increasingly hard for me. I was assigned the simple task of mailing out the invitations. A week passed, two weeks passed, and the invitations were still sitting on my coffee table. I had every intention of mailing them...but getting out of my apartment and to the mail box a few blocks away seemed like such an insurmountable obstacle. I stopped bathing as frequently, I stopped grooming myself, I forgot to eat meals, I didn't do my homework, it was difficult to get up and go school or work, and socializing with my friends became increasingly difficult. There was a barrier between me and everyone else, an impenetrable force field that made relating to people difficult. Life got hard. Life got hard for no particular reason - no one could understand it because there's really no understanding it other than to say life is hard for people with mental illness. The simple things normal people do every day without thinking become so difficult for a person with a mental illness that they often don't get done.

Finally, it all caught up with me - the parties I'd been going to, the medication I hadn't been taking, the challenges with mental illness I'd been having, the stress from planning the wedding, the pressure I felt at school, everything - caught up with me. And so, I found myself in my therapist's office telling her that when I left her office I had every intention of killing

myself. So Amy told me to stay put while she called my dad, so he could take me to the hospital.

I went to Porter Adventist Hospital and was checked into their Psych Ward. It was surreal, but it seemed like the perfect fit for me. Mom, dad, Brit, and Setta came to visit me every day and I felt loved and cared for. I felt hope that everything would be okay from then on...that this was just what I needed to get my life back on track. Setta gave me a book of poetry she thought would be good for me to read. I can't read that book without remembering the Psych Ward at Porter - I read it from cover to cover several times during my week or so being committed.

Psych wards aren't much like they're depicted in the movies. I felt like the nurses genuinely wanted to help me, the doctors weren't abusive, they were maybe over-worked but I know they cared for me. There weren't the stereotypical people often depicted in the movies. No out of control manic person, no out-of-their-mind old guy who eats the checker pieces, and no mastermind who coordinates a rebellion against the uncaring staff and ultimately escapes the confines of what might as well be a prison. No. The patients mostly kept to themselves. A lot of them spent their time watching TV in the common room, or putting together puzzles. Some of them, like me, spent their days in their rooms - mostly sleeping or, in my case, drawing and writing obsessively.

I felt inspired in the psych ward. The art I made was brilliant and I wrote a poem I considered to be the finest poem ever written. Delusions of grandeur to be sure - but going from wanting to kill myself to being the greatest artist ever was a marked improvement for just a week of staying there. The hospitalization was a wake up call for all of us - it got me talking about it with my parents. I was more willing to be open about my illness, I started to trust the people who so desperately wanted to help me.

The doctor who saw me there, was very interested in me - talking to me about my illness and my art, he realized I have an amazing insight into my illness. He told my parents I was a genius given my understanding of my illness, something that went straight to my head. He ended up putting me on Haldol, the worst drug I've ever taken.

Of course, some people see improvement on Haldol...everyone reacts differently to different drugs. I reacted positively to Haldol at first and it was probably the first drug I took seriously, the first drug I remembered to take more often than not. But, eventually, Haldol revealed its true nature. Haldol turned me into a sub-human zombie...it made me cease feeling emotions.

Dead to the world, I returned to normal society. I'd missed too much school to be able to go back so I was forced to drop out and decided to work more hours at my job fixing computers. In the meantime, Brit and I postponed our wedding and we were able to relax a bit and the stress levels decreased.

But it still affected me emotionally because, when the now-cancelled day of the wedding arrived, mom and dad came had to take me to the hospital because my psychosis was uncontrollable. It was mere weeks after my first hospitalization and going into Porter's psych ward for a second time felt like failure. It seemed to me as though I couldn't handle even the simplest of stresses, that I couldn't handle any kind of disappointment.

Brit didn't come to visit me every day like she had with the first hospitalization. Maybe she was busy with school, maybe she was sick of me getting sick - we think she had the attitude that, after I got out of the hospital, I would be all better and things would return to normal. Nothing could be further from the truth - insurance companies are largely to blame for the state of mental health care with regards to hospitalizations. It takes a lot of money to hospitalize a patient in the psych ward for the amount of time they need to get better. Decades ago, patients would stay in the psych ward until they were properly equipped to deal with their illness and real life, oftentimes as long as 3 months. Now, they'll keep you for a week if you're really bad...but normally it's just a few days or the infamous 72-hour-hold. Enough to get you stable and then send you home.

I don't remember how long my second hospital stay was, I didn't even know I had gone to the hospital a second time until my dad and I were going through my medical history while applying for SSDI years later. I do remember that I had the opportunity to get out early if I agreed to do Intensive Outpatient Therapy.

I don't remember too much from IOP either - I have a note from someone I made friends with while there. She wrote about how much she appreciated my art - I had a show up at one of my favorite coffee shops at the time and I'd invited her to go and take a look at them. I still have the note and take it out from time to time to read her encouraging words.

Dad had to drive me every day to be at the hospital by 9:00a and then mom picked me up after I was done in the afternoon. My parents have always been extremely supportive - willing to do whatever it takes to help me feel better, and their tenacity and willingness to sacrifice has made all the difference.

IOP lasted maybe three weeks and I remember feeling as though I didn't learn anything because they were talking about developing life skills I still had at that point. I've always been able to relate my experiences with clarity and precision. I've usually "passed" during my time with schizoaffective disorder. By "passed" I mean that I don't usually look like I'm sick, it's not usually obvious that I have a serious mental illness. Most people with a mental illness like schizoaffective disorder have this look in their face that betrays their illness, the thousand yard stare, and I usually lack that.

IOP ended and I went back to my normal life. Summer came and I spent the time working, spending time with Brit, riding my bike, and going to parties and get-togethers with my friends

from Scum. I was off the Haldol by that time - it had been too much for me and I was back to my pill rebellions. I call them "pill rebellions", the point at which I stopped taking pills because they were too much for me. They overwhelmed me, the side effects are awful, and they didn't seem to help that much.

But I don't think I ever gave any particular antipsychotic a chance to fully kick in. Psych meds take anywhere from 3 to 6 weeks to start working effectively and I certainly wasn't giving any of them 6 weeks worth of consistently taking them to see if they worked out. Most of them failed because of side effects. In their effort to help my brain, the pills messed with every other system in my body, often to miserable effect.

Come the fall of 2009, I thought I was ready for school again. But I have no recollection of that time. I don't know what I tried to major in, I don't know what classes I took, I don't remember much of anything from 2009 or 2010 because from November 2009 to May 2010 I was getting electroconvulsive therapy. I've had anesthesia over 60 times and the toll it took on my body has been substantial. Even almost 5 years later I'm still recovering from it. My therapist Amy and I have been working on ways to deal with my experience with ECT as I have very conflicting ideas as to my opinion about it.

It's agreed upon, in my family, that ECT saved my life. In the months leading up to ECT I tried to kill myself multiple times and I was tortured by a crippling depression that largely immobilized me. I wasn't able to feed myself, I wasn't able to walk the 3 blocks to work in the morning. But, like I said - I have no direct memory of what led up to me getting ECT, I just know what people have told me about my life. I think that this lack of memory is what really sours me to the idea of ECT. They told me I'd get my memory back within six months of stopping the intensive phase. It's been 5 years and my memory is still pretty horrible.

My post ECT world was a nightmare. During the process I'd lost my home, my job, Brit had left me, I'd had to drop out of school yet again. And, worst of all - my love for painting, drawing, writing, computers, and my ability to read were all gone. My dad had to read to me every night before I went to bed just like he had when I was a little kid. I was literate, I was capable of reading - it's just that the meaning of those words, their organization into more complex ideas had no impact on me.

And so, immediately after ECT, I entered what I remember being the worst depression of my life:

I tried to sleep in as late as I could, not being able to bear the idea of taking on another day. When I finally dragged myself out of bed I left it unmade, something I've always been so anal about doing my entire life. I went downstairs and sat in front of the TV to watch the same movies they'd been showing on cable the day before, and the day before that, and the day before that. The same movies they'd be playing everyday for the next few weeks. I'd sit in front

of the TV with my laptop open to my Facebook page, scrolling through my feed and waiting to pounce on anyone who came online so I could talk to them. I was desperate for social interaction, any kind of social interaction. I hadn't seen my friends for months - no one had come to visit me during my time getting ECT.

And I suppose I don't really blame them, though it still hurts. What do you say to someone who's having so much electricity shot through their head that it gives them a seizure? How do you interact with someone who's so dead inside? who's just a hollowed out shell of their former self? Days turned into weeks and I was increasingly isolated - mom and dad both worked so they couldn't be with me all day and I'm sure I wouldn't have appreciated it if they were there. I was angry and bitter, I wasn't my usual kind and thoughtful self.

My days were structured around dad's hour long lunch break from work, when he came home. I told myself that if I could just survive until dad came home from lunch then everything would be okay. Because then I could survive until mom came home from work a few hours later. Every day was survival, everything was crawling through the mud of psychosis and depression.

Severe depression is crippling. It sucks out all of your energy, it makes you largely incapable of doing anything for yourself. During those times, I needed someone to help me, I needed someone to take care of me. Mom and dad did their best in that regard - conflicted between wanting to be there for me all the time and knowing they needed to keep working.

Dad would come home for lunch and frequently find me on the back porch, he'd say hi to me and I'd burst into tears, into uncontrollable sobs. They were the sobs of inconsolable grief - I couldn't paint, I couldn't read, I couldn't fix computers, I couldn't write - anything I'd previously been interested in doing no longer felt like something I could do. I was a worthless husk, an infant trapped in an adult's body.

I'm normally a very curious person - I'm the kind of computer nerd who reads white papers, the detailed manuals on new hardware, I'm the kind of painter who loves to read about different techniques, who loves to experiment with my palette, who gets into the technical aspects of painting and absorbs it all in. Both of these things were no longer available to me. My memory had been wiped out, my cognition was sub par, and I'd lost all will to regain what I'd lost.

It seemed like such an insurmountable task to teach myself how to get into these things again. I'd spent years getting to the point I was at before ECT, and the prospect of spending more years just to get to the same point seemed impossible to me, seemed too intimidating.

But, as long as you keep limping along, progress is inevitable, even a slow drag through the mud of mental illness was going to get me somewhere.

Slowly, I got out into the real world. I started going to the weekly Vegan Community Dinner my friends hosted. I started relearning how to cook and I enjoyed it - I discovered it wasn't a matter of relearning from square one, it was just refreshing my memory and I relearned quickly. I started meeting my friends at my favorite coffee shops and it was there that one of the baristas asked me if I wouldn't mind taking a look at his girlfriend's laptop. I'd saved his own laptop, with all the music he'd ever written, from certain doom a couple years before and he was hoping I could perform the same kind of miracle on her laptop. I was hesitant, but I agreed. I've always been driven to help people in any way I can, and so I took on the responsibility of fixing Brynn's laptop.

I picked up the laptop and took it home with me. I plugged it in and pressed the power button and, like Hunter had told me, nothing happened. My problem fixing brain slowly started churning again, it got into gear and pretty soon I found myself taking the laptop apart - the skills were coming back to me quickly. Within minutes I'd identified the problem - a contact had come off its pad near the AC/DC converter. I broke out my soldering iron, figuring I had nothing to lose from trying, soldered it back into place, plugged the laptop in, pressed the power button and the familiar ding of a healthy Macintosh playing when I powered it on let me know I'd fixed it.

I'd done it! I'd brought her computer back to life - It was one of my most impressive fixes and I'd done it despite all the brain damage from ECT. I eagerly texted Brynn, telling her her computer was fixed, that I could drop it off tomorrow at the coffee shop. She was thrilled and couldn't thank me enough. She had a final paper due in a few days and the paper was on her laptop, which was her only computer.

This was a breakthrough. Not only was cooking coming back to me, not only was I seeing my friends more often, but I'd proved to myself that I could still fix computers like the expert I am. For the first time in months, I had hope. For the first time in months, I'd accomplished something - I'd helped someone, I'd done a good deed. I had a purpose and I craved more.

The next day, I found myself in the basement where all of the computers were kept. I dusted off my computer and set about to work. I found myself researching hardware again, reacquainting myself with nearly two years' worth of information about computers that I'd missed because of ECT. I soaked it all up. Dad wasn't finding me sitting on the back porch bursting into tears nearly as often as he had. I had a purpose, I had something to do.

What's better, the confidence boost I'd received from fixing Brynn's laptop led me to start painting and drawing again. There was a marked difference in style though. I'd been painting bright, colorful and happy paintings before - whimsical I suppose you might call them. These new paintings were dark and creepy. Being starved for material, having no images in my head but the horrifying monsters who were appearing everywhere - I started drawing my hallucinations. Masked creatures, grotesque and nude. They were my muse for a good number

of years as my paintings took on a character very much opposed to my personality. But they were important - depicting my hallucinations enabled me to start dealing with them head on. And that's the kind of attitude I needed for dealing with my mental illness - attacking it head on.

I was still very much ill, but things were getting better. Not only does a loving support system help with mental illness, but having a purpose in life is key too.

Dad and I started taking nightly walks. The walks helped tremendously. It's something we still do to this day. He walks over from work to my apartment at 12:30p and we walk for an hour with Kerrin. It's one of the most crucial parts of treating my illness, those daily walks, and I intend to keep walking for the rest of my life.

Those walks solidified a bond my dad and I have always had. I was able to express my frustrations and feelings in a non clinical setting. But, most of all, we were sharing the joy of the relationship we have with each other. We both enjoy a very dry sense of humor and love the absurd. We're both the quirky type of people who make a game out of kicking stones along the sidewalk, trying to see who can kick them the furthest or get them into the storm drain. Our bond has been crucial in my treatment, knowing that I can trust him with anything.

But I'm still not taking my pills frequently. At this point - I'm beginning to realize how important the pills are but I'm forgetting to take them mostly because I don't have a reason to take my pills, I don't know why I ought to take them. My four-year-old cousin Maren, however, had the answer for me.

I haven't been able to go celebrate Christmas at my grandma's house in a number of years. Crowded places really stress me out and having 30+ people over for Christmas in my grandma's two bedroom house makes for a crowded environment. I would be immobilized in such a place, completely disconnected, completely psychotic. So, while mom and my sister, Rachel go to join my grandma and the rest of the family for Christmas, which they celebrate on New Year's Day, dad and I stay home and eat the chili mom has left for us.

On New Year's Day of 2011, Rachel was fortunate enough to find an open wi-fi network for her laptop to connect to. My grandma doesn't own a computer and Glenville, MN is small enough that it doesn't have good cell phone coverage for my mom's phone. So it was an amazing blessing that Rachel found that open wi-fi network.

Dad and I were able to Skype with the whole family - taking a few minutes to talk with everyone and tell them we loved them and hoped to see them soon. My four-year-old cousin, Maren, who probably doesn't remember what I look like given she was a baby the last time I saw her, got on the line and asked me how I was feeling. I told her I was feeling much better. She told me about how she was praying for me every night and that she hoped I would feel better soon.

And then a lightbulb appeared on the top of my head and turned on - my illness doesn't just affect me, it affects everyone else. If my little cousin, who probably doesn't even remember me, is praying for me and wanting me to heal then why don't I put in the effort to help myself feel better? Why am I being so selfish so by refusing to take my pills. Pills certainly don't "fix" the problem. But they're still essential, without pills I wouldn't be able to do everything else to make my life better.

One of the misconceptions we had after I was first diagnosed was that I would take a pill and be all better. That's simply not the case - pills are important, but pills alone aren't going to make your problems go away. You have to fight, you have to be disciplined, tenacious, you have to find every tool you can and use those every day.

The Skype session ended and I had a lot to think about - the wise words of a four-year-old, undistorted by social convention or the wearying of age. Just an honest wish that someone she's related to, and therefore loves, gets better. So I made a promise to myself that I would take my pills every day. I promised myself I would figure out a way to remember to take my pills. And I promised myself I would try to find ways to be better connected with reality. I was going to work to make myself feel better. Not just for me, but because I love my family.

And the journey began with Kerrin:

I'd been wanting a dog for a while. I'd stumbled across research that said dogs are excellent companions for people with mental illness. A dog would mean I wouldn't be home by myself all day, I could potentially go for walks on my own, a dog meant unconditional love and unfaltering loyalty to me above everyone else. Dogs exist to love and serve their owner, they just want to please you and that's exactly what I need.

But dad always said no. I'd been bringing it up every few months or so and dad's answer was always the same. He'd had dogs growing up. They weren't his dogs but he'd had to clean up after their messes. He had all of the responsibility of having a dog with none of the joys. My psychiatrist was on board, my therapist was on board, mom was on board - but dad, the final authority in the matter still said no.

My therapist and I were trying to come up with a plan to convince my dad to get me a dog. She thought it was pretty absurd dad didn't want me to get a dog because he feared a repeat of stepping in dog poop with bare feet in the middle of the night. But, understanding my dad as I do, if it happens once it'll happen again and the best thing to do is to avoid the situation altogether.

But it turned out Amy and I didn't need a grand plan. My dad just had to see for himself.

I was psychotic frequently in those days and there was always the risk of that happening when we were on a walk. It was one of the reasons I didn't go for walks by myself. My dad and I had befriended a neighborhood cat on our walks - we'd named him Milton and brought him cat treats. He would meow at us as he sauntered over to rub against our legs and get love from us. He even tried to follow us home one time.

On one particular walk, I stopped talking - the telltale sign I was about to get psychotic. My objective became to get home as quickly as possible and try to stave off the psychosis until I got there. I was rounding a bend, getting near Milton's house and there he was. He sauntered over to me and we started our usual routine of Milton rubbing against my legs and me petting him and my psychosis was gone. Almost instantly, I was better.

There's something magical about animals and the way they can sense when something is wrong, the way they know how to love you at just the right time. How your aloof cat can snuggle with you after you've gone through a terrible breakup. How a dog can put its head in your lap after you've had a bad day. Milton worked his magic and dad's eyes were opened.

If a cat we'd befriended on the street could wipe away impending psychosis, imagine what my own dog could do for me.

Dad talked it over with mom and told me the next day I was going to get a dog. Unfortunately, dad had lost his job a few months prior so it wasn't possible to take on the extra expense of getting a dog until he had a steady income. It was disappointing, but I understood - I certainly didn't have the money to adopt a dog.

But Rachel, who's always loved me from afar (having spent high school, college, and now her teaching career in the Midwest) told my mom that she would pay for the adoption fee. A few days later a blank check signed by my sister arrived in the mail. I couldn't even begin to express how thankful I was, words failed me. The search was on for a dog and I emailed a vet who goes to my church asking him what kind of breed I should look for. He suggested a Westie, told me he rescued them and that he would put me on the waiting list.

Days turned into weeks and soon it was the beginning of summer and I still didn't have my dog.

I got increasingly anxious until my mom recommended I email the vet to ask him for an update. Dr. Bob responded and told me that he didn't have any Westies at the moment, that I was pretty far down the list. But a lady named Alex, who rescues dogs had a cute, playful Italian Greyhound/Dachshund mix who would probably be perfect for me. He gave me her email address and I sent her a message immediately. She responded and we set up a time for me to go over to her house to meet this dog named after Karen Carpenter the very next day.

I could hardly sleep. Maybe Karen would be my dog, my dog. We got over to Alex's house the next day, I nervously rang the doorbell and, when Alex opened the door, I was stampeded by 4 or 5 dogs. Leading the pack was my Kerrin, who immediately crawled onto my lap and started giving me kisses. Her initial affection was lost on me, but I soon grew to appreciate how she immediately loved me because she's usually pretty wary around strangers, especially men. Alex and I talked for a while, while my soon to be Kerrinpuppy was running around the house and then asking to jump into Alex's lap to cuddle. After a quick half-block walk with Kerrin I knew she was my dog. Kerrin and dad and I returned to Alex's house and we finalized the paper work.

The effect Kerrin has had on me is not really quantifiable - but I know I wouldn't be able to live on my own without her, I know I wouldn't be able to go on walks by myself without her, and I know she's essential in helping to either prevent psychosis or at least make it more tolerable. All she has to do is jump on my lap and start giving me kisses and I usually respond right away - the psychotic episode that would have otherwise crushed me vanishing with each lap of her tongue. She's even smart enough to be able to take me home if I start dissociating or getting psychotic while we're out walking.

It's more than just that, though. Having to be responsible for someone, having to take her outside to go to the bathroom, to make sure she gets plenty of exercise, having to be responsible for giving her her heart worm medication every month, taking her to the vet when she's sick, having to do all of the things that come with taking care of a dog is good for me. Purpose is a driving force behind success, without a purpose we just lapse into a world of depressing compliance - we become resigned to be discontent while doing things like watching the same movies on cable day after day, we don't have a reason to get out of bed in the morning.

Kerrin was my first taste of purpose and my first taste of success. But there's more to come.

By August of 2011, dad had a job working near downtown Denver. It was a relief for all of us as it cheered my dad up - he too, had a purpose now. He was able to provide for his family. Shortly after that, I received my first SSDI check and decided to move in with a friend I'd been playing chess with every Friday since the beginning of the year.

Moving out on my own was incredibly stressful - a new environment, a new routine, the sudden responsibility of having to feed myself, and many other "life things" made the first few months of living back in Cap Hill in Denver difficult for me. But it was worth it - I finally had the independence I'd been longing for. I still needed mom and dad's support, I still ended up having to go back to their place on weekends to do my laundry and have help with preparing meals for the week ahead. But being able to hang out with my friends whenever I wanted to - without having to worry about a stressful 40 minute ride from mom or dad to get me there, was a real blessing.

My social life bloomed and I found my health steadily increasing the more I hung out with the people I hadn't seen in two years and the more I adjusted to living on my own.

But life was slowly becoming purposeless again. The excitement of relearning how to fix computers and relearning how to paint had worn off.

I found myself browsing Craigslist for entire afternoons, I would pause only to take Kerrin out for our noon-thirty walk with dad and my mandatory bi-hourly smoke break. While some aspects of my life were improving, I found myself depending on those social interactions to make myself feel better - I needed to work on something important, something larger than myself.

And it was sitting in my room one night at 2 o'clock in the morning that I composed an email which would bring purpose back into my life.

Mom and dad were taking a Family-to-Family class at the time, beginning their passage into advocating for the rights of the mentally ill. On that particular night, I was looking at a website associated with the Occupy Wall Street movement. The website featured pictures of folks my age talking about how much student debt they were in and how they had to work two or more minimum wage jobs to keep up with their student loan payments because they couldn't find a decent paying job in their field. I looked through hundreds of these pictures, losing track of the time.

I've never had to worry about money. When I lost my job and my student loans came due my parents started paying them for me, they continued to pay them for me until the debt was finally forgiven a few weeks ago. When my medical debt started mounting, my dad made the policy that he and mom would pay for any medical expense I have. They pay for my pills, my art supplies (since art is so crucial to helping me deal with my illness), my tobacco (as it's good for calming me down when I'm stressed), and my hospitalizations and doctors' visits. So, overwhelmed by thanks that I didn't have anything to contribute to the website I wrote my parents an email thanking them for all of their support.

Apparently it was quite the email.

With my permission, dad shared the email with his Family-to-Family class the next night and the facilitator of the class was so impressed or moved or what have you that she said she wanted to meet me. I met her and we ended up talking for 3 hours, having a wonderful discussion with each other. A few months later, she asked me if I would like to give a speech to the next Family-to-Family class she was teaching. I agreed and I found myself with another purpose in life - teaching people about mental illness. I consider myself privileged to be able to speak in front of you tonight. And, having a purpose in addition to taking care of Kerrin has been an empowering experience.

Back at home, however my friend was emotionally and psychologically abusive. He took advantage of my illness to try to control me. He tried to manipulate every confrontation we had in an almost sadistic manner.

This friend, who was the one on the lease, told me one day I had a month to pack up and move out. Someone else was moving in. He could make more money off of them and he wanted me out. So I began searching for another place to live; half furious at him for forcing me through the impending trauma of adjusting to a new place and half thankful I would finally be free of him.

I found a small apartment a few blocks away. Right next door to my favorite coffee shop. I was moving into a place roughly the size of the bedroom I had in my old place, only with a kitchen and bathroom eating up some of the square-footage. I was apprehensive about the sudden change in available space, but it's ended up being wonderful for me. In my old house, I used to wander around our half of the house, looking for intruders because my paranoia factory and the voices in my head were telling me someone was in the house, trying to kill me and Kerrin. The paranoia factory and voices haven't spun that tale in my new studio apartment - it's small enough that I don't have to worry about it.

Sure, I've had to keep a lot of my possessions at my parents' house, where they wait for the day when I'll move into a larger space. But dad works 11 minutes away from my place if I get into trouble, my favorite coffee shop is right next door, and I've arranged my apartment in such a way that it's cozy and welcoming - a much better environment than living in my old house where my housemates were known to leave piles of junk in the middle of the room for weeks on end. I'm very particular about the arrangement of my possessions, and I'm particular about keeping my place neat. Living alone means I don't have to live with other people's messes.

It was hard adjusting to my studio apartment, just like it was hard to adjust to living on my own the first time around. Before, I had the ability to find my roommates to have someone to hang out with. At this new place, it's just me and Kerrin. We took the transition slowly - spreading the moving process over several days. Each morning I would wake up and mom and I would pack up the car with some of my possessions and she'd drive me to my new apartment. I'd unload the car and spend the day organizing my apartment - putting everything away and sorting things into a pile for what I needed to keep at my new place and a pile for what could either be given to GoodWill, thrown away, or stored at mom and dad's house. Then, at 5 o'clock my dad would pick me up and we'd go home to have dinner.

The slow transition was helpful. If we hadn't done it, I would have felt as though I needed to get everything done in one day. Like I said, I'm very particular about my environment and need everything to be in it's place. Sleeping in Aurora, I didn't have to worry about that. Out of sight, out of mind.

Speeches turned into more speeches, eventually culminating in speaking in front of Aurora Community College about my experience with mental illness. The speeches were wonderful to do, but they came with a significant downside. Given that I didn't have much to do with my life, having no job and few obligations - I depended on those speeches to give me purpose. I worked feverishly on them, revising them again and again until they were as perfect as they were going to get. I had something to do, something important to do. But, then the night of the speech would come and I'd give it and, come the next day, I had no more purpose again.

July of 2013 was my last speech. I was left with trying to figure out what to do next. I kept getting computers to fix on the side, I worked on paintings a little bit, I continued to hang out with my friends, but purposelessness was slipping back into my life. What did I do for a living? I've always said I'm a professional sick person, but there's only so much pride you can take in doing healthy things for yourself. I'd been to Cognitive and Behavioral Therapy where I'd learned many tricks for helping myself out of panic attacks and how to identify a psychotic episode before it was too late. I'd been taking my pills regularly for quite a while at that point - it was routine, I'd put the times I needed to take pills into the calendar on my phone so it would beep whenever I needed to take them. I was in status quo mode. ECT was behind me - I was painting better than I ever had been, I was adept at fixing computers, I was reading (and understanding!) a very difficult novel. Things were getting back into place. But the fundamental piece missing was a purpose.

I can't go to school, I can't get a job - my experience with trying those things was that they ended in disaster. Last time I'd tried, I'd ended up being hospitalized twice and getting ECT - I don't want a repeat of that. I struggled for the rest of the year with trying to find something to do.

I'd developed the habit, since before getting diagnosed, of carrying around a notebook in my back pocket to write down ideas, bit of prose, or snippets of things that come to my mind while I'm going about my life. There are over 16 of them now, my life's work. I wrote my speeches in those notebooks, I wrote what I wanted to talk about with my doctors' in them - anything I felt needed to be written down is contained in those notebooks. Frequently, the topic is mental illness. I process verbally, often through writing.

My mom, being the intelligent woman she is, told me I ought to start a blog. I thought it was a good idea, but I felt as though it might be too much pressure to put content out consistently. Too much stress and I crumble. But, too little stress and I find myself wandering Craigslist for hours and feeling awful for having wasted an entire morning and afternoon doing little more than looking for vintage computers on the Internet.

It took a few months of considering before I decided in March of last year to start my blog. It was an immediate success. Not necessarily from the standpoint of visitors coming to the site, though there are enough of them that it keeps my hopes up that I'm doing something

worthwhile. It was a success from the standpoint of giving me a purpose. From then until now, Every first Tuesday of the month, to coincide with the Family Support Group my parents facilitate, I post another blog. I'm able to help people, to talk to them about the experience of mental illness without the sudden loss of purpose that proceeded giving speeches. I post an article with the knowledge that, four weeks from now, I'll be posting another one.

Purpose and success are intertwined. I think of people who make their fortunes early in life and decide to retire. I think the life of luxury afforded by not having to do anything to earn your living can be frustrating. I may not be wealthy, but I don't have to worry about money. I'm in a similar situation to those millionaires who make their money early and retire to do whatever it is they want. It can be a miserable life - humans have this need to make an impact on the world they inhabit, humans have this need to make their presence known, to go down in history as having done something important.

My blog makes me feel as though I'm doing something important. It makes me feel like I'm helping people; but, mostly I think it helps me. Just like Kerrin gave me the responsibility of taking care of her, my blog gives me the responsibility of sharing my thoughts with the world once a month.

My experience with life, ever since losing my livelihood and independence with the start of ECT, had been one that lacked purpose and because of that I saw no success. My first taste of success came from finding my purpose in fixing computers. My next taste was taking responsibility for taking my pills. After that came Kerrin and the needs she has. Speeches baby stepped me up to being responsible for expressing my experiences with schizoaffective disorder to a group of people whose loved ones have mental illness. And the blog has given me even more success. Success from purpose, it's important to note - not financial success, or fame, or prestige. Success from simply having a purpose in life, something important to work on.

Breakthroughs in my medication have certainly helped - the addition of 200mg of Pepcid AC and the essential amino acid Lysine being chief among them. But, pills alone don't fix the problem. So much of having a mental illness is feeling like a victim, feeling helpless - feeling lonely and trapped and isolated. Having a reason to get up in the morning, having a purpose is just as important as taking all 50 of my pills each day.

Each time I've found more of a purpose, each time I've experienced a success, I've gotten healthier. Psychotic episodes have become less frequent, the voices have lessened their torturous presence. Each time I've discovered something else to do, to really do, with my life, I've become healthier. It's been baby steps and it's been rough going but I've been steadily and consistently improving since the last time I was wheeled out of the room where they perform ECT. Was it the ECT? Yes, though in an abstract sort of way. ECT was like a reset button. It was my rock bottom. It forced me to start from the beginning, to reshape my life. ECT

let me start fresh with my relationships - with God, with my family, with my friends, and with myself.

People have been telling me ever since I gave my first speech, that I ought to write a book, so it's always been in the back of my mind. I usually dismissed the idea because I figured I wasn't wise enough to be able to give anyone advice, because I don't have enough experience with mental illness to be able to truly share my story.

But one day, late last summer I sat down on the stoop in front of my apartment with Kerrin and I started writing. And I kept writing and writing, burning through cigarette after cigarette as Kerrin soaked up the sun. And, before too long, I had the beginnings of a novel. I typed it up the next day, I gave the file the title "novel_chap1" and pretty soon I was on chapter 2, then 3, 4, and on and on.

It's changed substantially since I first started it. The chapters have been rewritten almost entirely. But, writing that first draft of the first chapter of the novel let me connect with some baser level within me. I discovered how much I truly love writing, how much I've always loved writing.

Last summer, my mom found a notebook from when I was in 4th grade. It was the journal I had to keep for school. In it was a story I began writing for my teacher and several notecards where I'd been taking notes about a novel I'd wanted to write. I remembered winning my grade school's writing contest every year I was eligible to enter it, I remembered winning a coveted prize in high school, that wasn't given out every year, for my excellence in writing. Is writing what God put me on earth to do?

I met my friend, a fellow writer, for a cup of coffee a few weeks ago. He's aware of my illness and the fact I'm on disability, but we haven't talked about it too much. Near the end of our coffee date, he told me he was pretty jealous of me (in the best way possible). He doesn't get to write full time, he still has to do his regular job - he gets up at 3 in-the-morning to write and I have all day to write. He told me I was a full time writer, that I had his dream job. And, as I stared at this very professionally successful man, someone who's had more culturally-acceptable success than me, I realized it was true. A successful man was jealous of me, was jealous of my success.

Success isn't a matter of how much money you make, the car you drive, or where you go on vacation. Success isn't any of the things our culture tells us it is. Success is following a purpose set out for you. My successes haven't made my wallet fat, haven't made me rich in the traditional sense. My successes have made me rich with a family that loves me, friends who love me, a reason to get out of bed in the morning, and a purpose that keeps me going.