

When I think of mental illness, I picture the premise of the book "How It Is" by Samuel Beckett. The book is about a man dragging a bag full of junk through an endless field of mud. On and on it talks about the mud and the man and his useless cargo. It's repetitive and maddening to read. But, so too is mental illness repetitive and maddening for everyone involved.

I've spent a lot of time dragging myself through a proverbial field of mud. Mental illness has left me unable to gain a solid foothold on the ground, it's left me feeling filthy because of the horrible intrusive thoughts, the voices in my head, and the difficulty I experience trying to keep up on my hygiene. A field of mud consumes you - nothing exists but the mud. Day, night - it doesn't matter - you're always dragging yourself through endless filth.

Treating mental illness requires a holistic approach - it's not any one thing that has made me healthy enough to speak in front of you tonight. Pills are important - without pills I wouldn't be able to do any of the other things that help me so much. But, if I just take the pills and do nothing else, I'm in a similar situation. What's required is discipline, tenacity, and routine. What's crucial is a good support system - people who love me and help me when I need it, people I can depend on to get me through the mud, and people who are there for me every day for any bit of support I might need.

It's been hard won battle after hard won battle - the battle to take my pills, the battle to get motivated to do what's healthy for me, the battle to be humble enough to ask for help. Battle after battle, day in and day out. There's never a day off, never a vacation, never a time when I can let my guard down. It's been a long 8 years since I was diagnosed; fraught with trauma, set backs, substantial loss, but also substantial victories.

I knew vaguely what schizophrenia and bipolar disorder were when I was diagnosed. That it meant I heard voices, saw things that weren't there, and was generally and forevermore "crazy" but I didn't know what the essence of it was. I knew bipolar disorder meant I was prone to wild mood swings - it meant I was unstable and, once again, that I was generally and forevermore "crazy".

Schizoaffective disorder would eventually make me lose everything - my job, my home, my fiancée, my friends, and my love for painting, reading, and fixing computers. Schizoaffective disorder nearly made me lose my life, nearly made me lose my faith. Schizoaffective disorder would haunt me wherever I went - it would isolate me, alienate me, hospitalize and destroy me. But, with a lot of help from my family and friends, I've managed to stand up in that field of mud and end up with the best possible life for myself - a life of relative independence, a life of fulfillment, and a life of meaning.

---

I was diagnosed while going to school in Minnesota, it made for a terrible semester. I was all alone, I had few friends. The boys' soccer team would bang on my door in the middle of the night and threaten to kill me. When I took the issue to the Dean of Students he told me, "boys will be boys." There's little mercy in this world for the mentally ill.

I stayed in my dorm room and drew picture after picture on newsprint. I thought they were brilliant. I was deluded into thinking that having a mental illness meant I was going to be one of the great artists of the 21st century. It was inevitable because I was mentally ill and everyone knows mental illness leads to brilliant art.

That, of course, is rubbish. While my mental illness certainly influences my art and while I even spent about half of my painting career depicting my hallucinations, I've learned that, if anything, mental illness gets in the way of me being able to do my work. I remember telling my psychiatrist that I didn't want to be medicated too much. "Just enough to take the edge off," I told Dr. Carlson - I thought my creativity would disappear if the pills were to take away my hallucinations and psychotic episodes. I've since learned that being healthy is what's needed for my art - if I'm unstable, if I'm hallucinating, if I'm getting psychotic or paranoid or delusional I can't make art. Everything goes on the back burner when my illness expresses itself - it leaves me crippled and unmotivated, it sucks the life out of me and I can't get anything done.

After getting diagnosed, I decided that I needed to tell everyone in Denver about my illness. I was quite popular back then. I had plenty of friends. I wasn't particularly close to all of them, but we would hang out when I got back into town. There was rarely a night I wasn't going out to a show or hanging out with someone. People liked me, people wanted to be my friend. And so I thought that telling everyone I had a mental illness would mean this sudden surge in support. Maybe I wouldn't feel so alone anymore, maybe it was just the boost I needed to keep myself going in my perpetually demoralizing life.

And so I told people. And, the more people I told, the fewer friends I had. It was ridiculous. I'd tell them I had schizoaffective disorder, and, after explaining what it was and what I was going through they stopped replying to my messages or they flat out told me they wanted nothing to do with me. Despite how the soccer team treated me in the middle of the night, I had no idea there was such a fear of the mentally ill. I didn't know how we're abandoned, how we get blamed for mass shootings and other violent crime, how we oftentimes become homeless because we can't support ourselves and because of how alienated, even feared we are. As the number of people I could call "friends" dwindled, I started to lose my tenuous grip on reality.

I had no idea how to take care of myself. I wasn't taking any medication, I wasn't asking the right people for support. My parents were right there, a plane ride away, and I thought I could handle it by myself. Mental illness is not something I can handle on my own. I need a community of people to help and support me - I need my parents, I need my friends, I need my sister. I need a loving and supportive environment to be successful. I cannot stress enough how important you are in your loved ones' lives and I'm proud of you for taking this important first step in advocating for them and supporting them.

It's difficult, I've been known to become verbally abusive towards the people I love. At one point I was so full of irrational hatred for my mom that she wasn't allowed to speak to me - she had to speak to me through my dad. I told her she had to walk several feet behind me if I was ever forced to go out in public with her. She embarrassed me, she was pathetic. And she's done absolutely nothing but love me from the moment I was born. Mental illness can be such a cruel thing.

I wasn't completely devoid of resources while in Minnesota, though. I had my good friend, Maggie. I've always been able to rely on her when things get hard, but I had no idea I had relied on her until a few summers ago when she came to visit me and told me about my visits during my final semester at Bethany.

On especially bad nights, I would walk over to Maggie's apartment and call her; she would answer and I'd immediately hang up on her. She'd come downstairs and find me standing outside, holding my phone. She'd ask me how I was doing and if anything was wrong, but I didn't reply. I just walked inside and headed toward her apartment. Once inside, I'd take a seat on the couch and not say or do anything. I wouldn't make eye contact, I had no expression on my face, I wouldn't respond when she put on a movie or my favorite music, and I wouldn't eat the food she'd cook for me. Nothing. Just. Nothing. And then, without warning and without saying goodbye, I'd get up and walk out of her apartment; hopefully back to my dorm.

I was dissociating - there in body but not in mind. I had no idea I was there, it was the same thing that happened when I found myself in my room one minute and suddenly in class the next. It's a stress response - checking out of reality because something traumatic is happening. Rape victims often dissociate, people with PTSD often dissociate. But, while rape victims and people with PTSD have a direct event that triggers dissociation, I don't always seem to have a particular reason for dissociating. A lot of the trauma I experience is so abstract, so detached from my consciousness that I don't know it's happening. It takes me out of the moment and into a safe place, a place where I don't have to directly experience them, a place where I'm removed from the trauma.

---

Upon returning to Colorado, my health improved somewhat. Positive and loving environments have a profound effect on me. If I'm someplace where I feel safe I can weather most storms.

I had my first appointment with my psychiatrist, the same psychiatrist I've been seeing ever since. Dr. Carlson is an incredibly intelligent and understanding man and, perhaps most importantly, humble. He listened to my desire to be treated naturally and decided to prescribe Lithium, a naturally occurring salt that helps with bipolar symptoms. I left his office with the prescription and thought that I'd just take the pill and everything would be okay. If I just took my medicine I could lead a normal life.

That's not how it works.

Lithium was awful to take - it made my hands shake uncontrollably, it made me very sleepy, and it made me incredibly thirsty.

Psych meds are dreadful. I've never taken one without horrible side effects: weight gain, the occasional seizure, sleepiness that makes me incapable of getting up at a decent time most days. One of the drugs leaves me unable to control my body temperature at times, meaning I'm somewhat cold blooded. In the sun I cook and can overheat very easily, and in the shade I become unbearably cold. The same pill will

paralyze me on occasion, I'll wake up in the morning and be unable to move for 20 minutes or so. The first time it happened I ended up reasoning with myself that I could dedicate my life to chess, you don't need to be able to move in order to play chess. I've taken meds that make me drool uncontrollably, that have made me see double while riding my bike, one of the drugs I'm currently taking makes me unable to ride a bike or climb a ladder because of how it affects my balance. Another drug affects my joints, making them ratchety - if I sit for too long my knees will pop when I stand up and the pain is excruciating. Side effect after side effect, pill after pill. 50 pills total, ingested each day.

It was a long road to take them all at the prescribed times, I went through many pill rebellions. Dr. Carlson tried drug after drug, a complex cocktail of medication that changed every week I met with him. I'd take the pills for a few days and then give up on them because of the side effects, hardly ever giving one enough of a chance to start working effectively.

Pills aren't the only solution, but they're the backbone of what I've come to define as my version of effective treatment. Everyone has a different solution, a different cocktail of medication that works for them. Some people don't need to take medication - they've found a way of living that means they can survive without it. Each person's brain is unique and so each treatment is unique.

---

I started school at CU-Denver, attending my first philosophy class in college and it was there there I met Brit, who would become my fiancée and, ultimately, my ex-fiancée.

Brit and I were two of a kind, both ardent bike kids - it was winter when classes started and so Brit and I would get to class and start peeling off layer after layer of clothing - we had the same messenger bags and the same cycling caps. It was fate. Her best friend, Setta was the one who tried to introduce herself to me, Brit was very shy and reserved. The first time Setta came up to me, I didn't even look up. I kept right on drawing. I was dissociating again. Auraria Campus has three colleges, thousands of people are there during the school year, and crowds traumatize me. So, I'd get to class and bust out my sketchbook and start drawing - not aware of anything going on around me. According to Setta, the professor would call on me sometimes and I'd just sit there and stare off in to space, like no one had said a thing until he eventually called on someone else.

Somehow, Brit and Setta looked past my odd behavior and we became friends - going to a local coffee shop after we were done with classes to hang out and do homework together. Those are probably some of the happiest times of my life - an early crush developing and getting to know new friends meant my life was exciting and full of possibilities.

Brit introduced me to Scum of the Earth church, which I attended for several years, a community of like-minded people who welcomed me with open arms. With so many people around to distract me from my problems, my health seemed to improve. My life was a far cry from the lonely nights I'd spent in Minnesota, drawing picture after picture trying to get rid of my demons. Brit got me a job cleaning out

the store room of a computer repair shop, which lead to a job fixing computers, which meant I could afford to move out of my parents' house and into my own apartment.

I remember largely ignoring my illness, not giving it much thought. Appointments with Dr. Carlson continued and I still saw my therapist, Amy. But I was much too busy to give much thought to my struggles with mental illness, I was having too much fun to think about taking my medication. I remember the psychotic episodes were growing more intense, more frequent - but denial can be a powerful thing. Brit was the only person who could touch me while I was psychotic and I took this to have great significance. Eventually, we decided to get married. But that would never happen, I would spiral out of control before the date arrived.

---

The Fall of 2008 proved to be my last full semester of college. I've finished three semesters worth of school and haven't been able to go back since. I've tried many times, but each time I have to drop out because I get sick. I will probably never go back to finish my degree. I'm disabled because of my illness, unable to get a job or go to school - the every day pressures that people face in their lives are too much for me. I need a lot of downtime and I need the flexibility to do whatever I need to do in order to take care of myself. The schedule of a job or going to classes would mean that I couldn't sit and read with Kerrin on my lap when I need to, I couldn't go outside and take a walk when I need to. But, above all, the stress of having to get work done in a timely manner, the stress of tests and papers due, and all of the other countless things people face in their every day lives, cripples me.

It's not to say that I'm a wimp - I deal with demonic creatures haunting me in the night - sometimes ripping out my spine, or raping me with a broom handle, I deal with voices in my head that tell me terrible things, I deal with psychosis and dissociation that can come at any time. My life is fundamentally different than other people's lives. I don't answer to a boss at work or a professor at school, I answer to the demands of my brain and it's much more than a full time job: it's a 24 hour a day, 7 days a week, day in, day out struggle to maintain my sanity. I oftentimes called myself a "professional sick person" and that's very much accurate - it takes a great deal of tenacity and discipline to manage my illness. It's what I'm good at, I'm good at having a mental illness.

---

In early 2009, barely weeks into the semester, I was hospitalized. I was sitting in Amy's office, telling her about how I was planning on killing myself when I left her office. She called my dad, who drove the 40 minutes to Amy's office and took me to Porter Hospital. It was my first trip to the psych ward.

My trip to Porter and the week or so I stayed there should have been a wake up call that I couldn't ignore my symptoms anymore, it should have told me that I needed to be disciplined and proactive about caring for myself, but all it was for me was a mini vacation. It meant that Brit and I had to postpone our wedding, it meant I had to drop out of school. But all that really meant to me was that I was able to work more hours at the computer repair shop. I know that I was in the hospital twice in that year. A few weeks

after I was released, on the day Brit and I were supposed to be married, my parents took me to the hospital again because my psychosis was uncontrollable. I have no memory of my second hospital visit, I didn't find out about the second one until I was sending in the paperwork to apply for disability.

That, too, should have been a wake up call. But it wasn't. I was stubborn and I was sick. I fully acknowledged that I had schizoaffective disorder, but there was a disconnect somewhere. I could say that I had it, but I didn't believe I had it. I've been troubled with the delusion that I'm just making it up ever since. I'll start getting sick and call my parents and my internal dialogue will tell me that I can just snap out of it.

"Just stop being sick," I'll tell myself. "You're not really sick, you're just faking it, just stop, stop now. You don't need to be on the phone with them, they don't need to come and pick you up - you're not sick, you just want some attention."

It deteriorates from there, I get nasty with myself, I call myself names. It doesn't matter how much evidence has piled up to demonstrate to my delusional self that I really am sick, that I truly do have schizoaffective disorder. It doesn't matter that I wouldn't be able to trick so many doctors for so many years, it doesn't matter that I would have much different reactions to the anti-psychotics if I weren't sick, none of the mountain of evidence that proves I have a mental illness is sufficient to convince this delusional part of my brain that I do, in fact, have schizoaffective disorder, and a nasty case of it at that.

---

2009 was a rough year. Two hospital visits at the beginning of the year and horrible depression from spring through summer and into fall. I was suicidal, closer to death than ever before. Nothing could console me. I was a failure. I was crippled. I wasn't crawling through the mud, one of those disgusting creatures I hallucinate was dragging me through it. I was resigned, I didn't want to do it anymore. I withdrew socially, I isolated myself, I didn't laugh or joke like I'm wont to do. There was very little joy in my life.

It all came to a head around Thanksgiving, when I'd deteriorated to the point Dr. Carlson suggested I try electroconvulsive therapy as a last ditch effort to save my life. It turned out that one of the best ECT doctors in the country, a man who'd performed more ECT than everyone else in the state combined, worked from Louisville. I made an appointment with him and started my treatment shortly after that.

The events leading up to ECT and ECT itself took everything away from me. I was going to be incapacitated during my treatment. Someone was going to have to keep an eye on me on the days I received treatment, to make sure I was safe, to make sure I came out of the anesthesia okay. It meant I couldn't live in my own apartment anymore, it meant I would lose my job. I was to move back in with mom and dad, away from my friends and everything I loved. Into the suburbs for the sake of my health.

ECT meant no more job, no more apartment, no more school, no more hanging out - it was dedicating my life to getting enough electricity shot through my head so as to give me a seizure. Three days a week

for what ended up lasting 6 months. ECT took my memory with it, I have little recollection of 2009 through 2010 beyond what it's like to get ECT, I've lost most of my childhood memories, and my short term memory is now greatly impaired. If something isn't written down for me, if I don't put an appointment in the calendar on my phone it doesn't get done, it's forgotten. ECT would also take away my ability to draw and paint, it took away my ability to fix computers. It demoralized me and reduced me to a husk of who I'd been prior to ECT.

But ECT was important. Before getting diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder I was addicted to pain killers - I self medicated my increasingly troubled mind with Vicodin and Percocet. It numbed me from my anxiousness, from feeling like I was on the brink of losing control. I'm thankful that my ex-girlfriend in Minnesota, Malia asked me to stop taking them. I've always been motivated by helping others, so I flushed my substantial collection of pills down the toilet for her and went through awful withdrawals and haven't taken another one since. Before getting diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder, I was losing my faith in God. I was drifting away from the comfort and love He provides because I thought I knew better, because I thought I was wise and because I was angry with Him. Schizoaffective disorder and ECT humbled me, and I've come out of that fire with a stronger faith and a deeper resolve.

I'm often bitter about ECT, I was traumatized by ECT. I suspect that the electrical feeling I get shortly before I become psychotic is subconscious residue from my experience with it. But I know it was important, if getting diagnosed with a mental illness was like a reset button, ECT was a way for me to reconfigure and upgrade myself. I was rolled out of the ECT operating room for the last time, 6 months after starting treatment, a blank slate. It wasn't the kind of blank slate I would have desired, it was a blank slate of utter desolation. It seemed as though I didn't have anything left after I was done, it seemed as though there would never be another moment of happiness again. But, I have friends and family who love me, who support me unconditionally. And, with their help, I struggled to my feet once more to continue my journey through the endless field of mud.

---

I sometimes find myself in a loop of despair. Immediately after ECT, I wasn't capable of doing very much. I'd lost everything, I was demoralized. When I tried to draw, my hand wouldn't make the lines I wanted it to. I made mistake after mistake, never making any appreciable progress toward a finished work of art. It made the act of drawing and painting even more frustrating.

Art sessions were few and far between, but my identity was wrapped up in being an artist, in being a painter. Without art, I thought I was nothing and it created this reciprocating loop of feeling like a failure. And, in feeling like a failure, I'd created a self-fulfilling prophesy of failing every time I attempted to do it.

About all I was capable of doing in the months after ECT was watching the same movie on cable day after day after day: a comedy with Jack Black and the kid from Arrested Development set in Biblical times. I sat in front of the TV with my laptop opened to my Facebook page, anxiously waiting to pounce on anyone who happened to log on. I was desperate for social contact, I was isolated from my friends

living in the suburbs and that isolation, that loneliness led to one of the worst depressions I can remember.

My day revolved around dad coming home for lunch. If I could just survive until dad got home, everything would be okay. Because then I could survive until mom came home from work. Every day was survival, every day saw me wrestling with my damaged brain.

Dad would frequently find me sitting on the back porch. He'd open the sliding glass door, say "hi", and I'd burst into uncontrollable sobs. He'd stay home with me whenever that happened, we'd talk, or, more accurately, I'd rant. It wasn't fair that no one came to visit me, it wasn't fair that Brit had left me.

But, my mom's words echoed in my ears: Life isn't fair.

And, indeed it isn't.

People get dealt losing hands. But, even with a losing hand, it's possible to carve out a meaningful life. It's just a matter of finding the tools to do so. I couldn't have done it without the support of my family. I couldn't have done it without God's grace and mercy.

Eventually I stopped crying as much - not because things were better, but because I'd sunk past the depression that sees you crying and into the depression that leaves you numb and indifferent to the world. That's the worst kind of depression. At the time, I thought it was nice not to cry so easily. But now, it'd be the best thing in the world to cry. I've cried, truly cried, once since then, once in about five years. I've gotten close several times, but full tears have only happened once. Tears are a symbol of our connection to the world, tears are cleansing - our own personal form of a spring rain that nourishes us. I'd give up just about anything to be able to cry again.

Life presents opportunities and it's just a matter of taking advantage of those opportunities. One of the pastors at Scum was a tremendous help. When it seemed like everyone else had forgotten about me, Lianne would invite me out for coffee. She talked to me as a friend and not as an intimidating mental case. On one such coffee date, one of the baristas asked me if I wouldn't mind taking a look at his girlfriend's laptop. I'd saved his laptop, along with every song he'd ever written, a couple of years prior and he was hoping I could perform a similar miracle for Brynn.

How could I fix a computer when I'd lost everything? How could I fix a computer when I wasn't capable of doing much of anything but watching TV and bothering people on Facebook? I had my doubts, but I agreed to take a look at it because I've always been motivated by helping people. I also can't turn down a puzzle, especially one as alluring as a laptop that doesn't do anything when you press the power button.

I picked up the laptop and, sure enough, when you hit the power button nothing happened. The power adapter wouldn't even indicate it was providing power. I opened it up and noticed the AC/DC converter had come out of its solder joints. I broke out my soldering iron and a few minutes later, I pressed the power button and heard the familiar ding of a Macintosh powering on.



Maybe I wasn't so worthless after all, maybe I still had something to contribute to the world. Maybe I still had value.

---

Mental illness strips you of your self worth. The voices in my head, when they're at their worst, will tell me over and over again how much of a pissant I am, how nobody loves me, how I'd be better off dead, how I ought to just kill myself because that would be so much better for everyone. Listen to that kind of sadistic serenade long enough and you'll start believing it. Besides, I start thinking, it's not like I'm capable of doing anything - I'm on disability, I can't get a job, I don't have a degree, I'm a 28 year-old man and still depend on my parents for so much. The voices are especially convincing in those times, evidence upon evidence mounts up about my worthlessness and it seems as though there's nothing I can do to quell the storm inside my head.

But then, a broken computer comes along. And I fix it. I fix it in an impressive manner - it's rare that you can fix a problem like that in 15 minutes with nothing but a collection of screw drivers and a soldering iron. It was invigorating. I felt important, I felt useful. I spent less time in front of the TV. I dusted off my computer and absorbed myself in researching what I'd missed out on because of ECT. Suddenly, I had a goal - I had a purpose, I had a reason to get up in the morning. I got the idea that I would start a business fixing computers.

For the past three years, mental illness had done nothing but kick my teeth in. I'd lost everything because of how I'd been living. I'd been ignoring my illness - not taking my pills, not being mindful of the restrictions inherent in living with my illness. I'd been cruising along, ignoring good advice, ignoring the warnings of my own brain, and I'd paid for it dearly. It was time for me to pick myself up and start doing proactive things to help me feel better. I needed a lot of help doing that. And, thankfully, I have all the help I need. Dr. Carlson has often told me that one of the reasons I do so well with my illness is because I have the unconditional love and support of my family.

---

My parents are always there for me - if I'm at their place, a simple text message will see them drop whatever they're doing to come help me. Mom will make me coffee and dad will start talking to me and get Kerrin on my lap. I can call anytime, day or night, and they'll come and pick me up. We've worked out a system of communication with each other. Mom texts me every morning around the time I take my pills to check up on me, dad walks with me and Kerrin every day so I can have some social time and get some exercise. Mental illness has brought me closer to my entire family. But such progress wouldn't have been made without some key tools in my life. Chief among them, the pills I hate taking so much.

It's not easy swallowing 50 pills a day, every day. The pills have terrible side effects but they're also symbolic. They remind me of how sick I am, of how much of a failure I am at being a conventional

human. I've managed to have a positive attitude about my illness for a while now, but every so often I can't help but think about how much easier my life would be if I didn't have to take the pills. I wonder if I would have married Brit if I weren't sick, I wonder if I would be a father. But wondering is pointless. So I shake my head to clear the thoughts from my head, tip the cupful of pills into my mouth, and wash them down my throat with a drink of water. It was a long road to get to the point where I would take my pills, and it all started with my little cousin Maren.

Maren was about 4 or 5 at the time, the last time I'd seen her she was a baby so she probably doesn't remember me at all. My mom and sister were at my grandma's house, celebrating Christmas, and my dad and I had been left at home with a pot full of chili. Christmas at grandma's house was too stressful for me - too many people, too much stimulation - ripe conditions for psychosis. On this particular Christmas, the Christmas after ECT, my sister managed to find a neighbor's open WiFi network, a rare thing to find in rural Minnesota. So we decided to do a video chat. My grandma and aunts and uncles and cousins took turns in front of the computer wishing my dad and I Merry Christmas and chatting with each other for a few minutes.

When Maren's turn came she asked me how I was doing, I lied and told her I was doing much better. And then she told me she was praying for me every night and that she wished I would get better. Imagine that, someone barely out of diapers praying for me every night to get better. I realized in that moment that my illness doesn't just affect me, it affects everyone around me: my mom and dad, my sister, my grandma, my aunts and uncles, my cousins, my friends, and my doctors. All these people are rooting for me. I was being selfish by not taking care of myself, I was hurting them by ignoring the demands of my brain. And, being motivated by helping others, I thought about what I could do to be as healthy as possible.

---

I didn't start taking my pills for myself, I started taking them because of my little cousin who loves me, who prays for me every night, who is concerned about me. After we disconnected, I made a vow, a promise - I was going to take my pills every morning and every evening from then on. And I've kept that promise, I haven't had a single pill rebellion since.

I started researching my medication, I started educating myself about my mental illness. I learned that medication takes 4-6 weeks to be fully effective, I learned that most people have to experiment with dozens of different combinations of drugs for sometimes years before they find the right combination. So I took my pills, every morning and every evening and I started improving. I took my pills and Dr. Carlson tweaked and adjusted them and I started to get better. It was like crawling my way through a marathon, but at least I was making progress.

Inspired by my improvement I wanted to know if there was anything else I could do to make myself better. I wasn't addicted to pain killers anymore, I was addicted to making myself feel better. I learned that walking really helps, that 30 minutes of exercise three times a week will improve mental health. So my dad and I started taking walks every evening. My dad and I have always been close, but those walks

have been beneficial in making us even closer. We talk about serious things, we talk about computers, we come up with ridiculous business schemes and impractical inventions. I inherited my dad's calm and reasonable manner, but walking with him every day has encouraged me to be even calmer and more reasonable.

Prevention is as necessary as treatment, being able to stop psychosis from happening in the first place makes all the difference. Through the years, and with the help of my Cognitive and Behavioral Therapist (CBT), I've been able to identify what it feels like before I get psychotic. Because of that, I can head it off with medication or my vast collection of other tools. And it makes all the difference in my quality of life.

My walks with my dad are such good prevention. Walking was the first thing I discovered that I could actively do to prevent my mental health from crumbling. I'd been a victim of psychosis, dissociation, voices, hallucinations, paranoia, and delusions for such a long time that it was tremendously empowering to be able to do something to help myself. I wasn't just passively swallowing a bunch of pills and hoping for the best (as pills work well sometimes and other times they don't), I was putting one foot in front of the other and literally walking my way toward better health.

It's not perfect, walking doesn't cure me, just like pills don't cure me. Nothing will "cure" me, schizoaffective disorder is poorly understood and the treatment for it is still rudimentary, especially compared to treatment for broken bones or high blood pressure. But walking helps enough that I keep doing it - it gets me out of the house and it gives me quality time with my dad.

---

I got it in my head that a dog would really help me. I'd read about service dogs helping veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan suffering from PTSD. I've always thought schizoaffective disorder is similar to PTSD in some ways. Especially in how certain environments can trigger symptoms and how that triggering can have devastating effects. So I asked my dad for a dog.

I'd had to give up Baxter, my One-Eyed Wonder Kitty, when I'd moved out of my apartment to get ECT because my mom is allergic to cats. Baxter had always been such a great help to me - greeting me at the door when I came home, cuddling with me when I wasn't feeling well, and keeping me company throughout the day. I figured a dog would be even better, especially since my mom isn't allergic to dogs. Dogs exist to make you happy, they just want to love you and do whatever they can to please you. Plus, I figured I'd be able to go on walks by myself as a dog would give me a sense of security. I depended on my dad to go with me on walks. Without someone accompanying me I would break down from the weight of psychosis and it sounded nice to be able to go on a walk whenever I wanted to without having to make sure my dad was free.

But dad always said no. He'd had dogs growing up and it wasn't very fun. He'd had all of the responsibility of owning a dog with none of the joys. He'd also stepped in dog poop barefoot one night and if, I got a dog, obviously it would happen again. But that's my dad, for you: if it happens once it'll

happen again. I can't blame him too much because I'm very much the same way. We get into this rigid way of thinking and it takes something substantial for us to change our minds.

Luckily, on one walk shortly after I'd asked him, yet again, for a dog, my dad would change his mind.

---

On our patrols through the neighborhood, we'd befriended a neighborhood cat. I named him Milton and we brought cat treats for him. He had this routine of meowing as he walked over to us and switched off between my dad and I, rubbing against our legs as we gave him scratches. He even tried to follow us home one time. Milton meant a lot to me, he reminded me of Baxter and he was a source of comfort. He was a friendly face to encounter on our walks through the suburbs and I looked forward to seeing him.

On one particular walk I got silent all of a sudden: impending psychosis, a bad sign. I quickened my pace to try to get home before it took over. The static feeling occupying my head, the electrical pulses surging through my body were getting worse and worse. The static quickly fading away to make room for voices. I was passing Milton's house, with dad half a block behind, when I heard the familiar meowing of my good friend, Milton. He sauntered over and started rubbing against my legs and I bent down to pet him. Almost immediately - the static, the electrical pulses were gone. It was like Milton had found an off switch. I petted him and got the treats out and he continued his meowing and strutting and, when we left a few minutes later, it was like I hadn't been getting sick at all.

My dad may be stubborn, but his love for his children trumps even his most implacable stubbornness. He came to me the next day and told me he would get me a dog. The only problem was my dad had been laid off earlier that year and we couldn't afford the expenses of getting a dog just then. But, he promised that as soon as he had a job, he would get me a dog. My sister, who lives in Wisconsin, got wind of this plan and decided that she would buy the dog for me. If Milton could have such a powerful affect on me, imagine what my own dog could do for me. A few days later, a blank check arrived in the mail and the search for a dog was on.

Kerrin is my best friend, my constant companion, and an inexhaustible source of joy. She's always there for me to lend a few licks on my face to cheer me right up, to go on walks, or cuddle and listen to music. Kerrin is a fundamental part of my treatment, without her I doubt I'd be able to live on my own, I wouldn't be able to take care of myself by going for walks every day. If we're on a walk together and I start to get sick, she'll lead me home. If we're at home and I start to get sick, she'll hop up on my lap and start giving me kisses and that usually takes me right out of it - just like Milton managed to do all those years ago.

She's actually a service dog - an Emotional Support Animal. I can rent any apartment I want, regardless of whether or not it allows dogs. I take her to my doctors' appointments and she's a great help when I'm trying to relate something especially traumatizing to Dr. Carlson or Amy.

Kerrin completes my tool set, she's my trump card - she can defeat psychosis with a few flicks of her tongue; I have no idea how much psychosis she's prevented, but it's significant. It's not to say that

everything is completely better now. I still get sick, I still get psychotic, I still dissociate. But I can't imagine life without her.

---

The quest to find the perfect combination of pills continued long after I moved out of my parents' house. The changes to my medications used to happen on a weekly basis - try a new antipsychotic, this mood stabilizer needs to have its dose increased, stop taking that other antidepressant and let's retry this other one. Change after change after change. I made a spreadsheet just to keep track of them and it's interesting to see the history of my life with medication. The pill changes finally came to a halt about a year and a half ago.

It took years to find that combination and I hope it continues to work for me for years to come. Sometimes, medication stops working. Sometimes, I get worse for no apparent reason. Dr. Carlson and I sit in his office and try to figure out what life event could have possibly caused a regression. There isn't always a clear answer - mental illness is a murky, muddy thing and it's oftentimes impossible to sort the cause of what's ailing you. It's important to keep looking, but it's also important to be willing to admit that it's just part of the ebbing and flowing of mental illness.

I have good days and bad days.

So It Goes.

---

I didn't paint my way through life, like I thought I would. I tried, but the paint didn't flow. More often, I spent my time in front of the computer playing video games or browsing the computer section of Craigslist. I was purposeless. I was wandering. I didn't know what to do with myself. And so my health deteriorated to the point that I wondered if I hadn't made some kind of terrible mistake in moving out. Calls to mom and dad were frequent, they had to get up in the middle of the night to come and get me. I couldn't go to the grocery store by myself, I couldn't cook food for myself. I hadn't thought that my disability might go beyond merely being unable to work or go to school. My disability is all encompassing, affecting every aspect of my life. But it was only by moving out on my own that I discovered the true extent of it.

And so I found myself browsing a website connected to the Occupy Wall Street Movement one night at 2 o'clock in the morning. The website showed pictures of people my age holding up signs that talked about how much debt they were in - tens of thousands of dollars worth of student loan debt and they couldn't find a job in their field. They lived at home with their parents and worked two or three minimum wage jobs just to keep ahead of their bills. I don't have to worry about debt. My parents pay my medical

bills and they paid my student loan bills until that debt was finally forgiven because of my disability status. So I wrote them a thank you email.

Dad thought it was well written and wanted to share it with their Family-to-Family class. I gave him permission and so he read it to everyone. The facilitator was impressed enough with my writing that she wanted to meet me. So we met and hit it off and a few weeks later she asked me if I wouldn't mind giving a talk to her next Family-to-Family class. I agreed and thus started my career as a writer.

I've given 7 speeches now. That first speech was my reintroduction to what it's like to have responsibility, to what it's like to have a purpose. I worked feverishly on it. Revision after revision. I was hooked. I wanted to do nothing but work on writing all day. But, of course, the day of the speech came, I gave it, and the next few days saw me sink into depression.

I didn't have anything to do anymore, my purpose was fulfilled.

I gave speech after speech and got depressed in the days following.

My mom had suggested that I start a blog after noticing how I was getting depressed, how I suddenly had to have her and dad come over to pick me up after giving a speech. She knew best, like all moms seem to know best, if I just had a purpose in my life I would be a lot better.

She gently reminded me every so often until I finally came up with the idea, all by myself, to start a blog.

I started the blog in April of last year - posting once a month so I don't get too stressed out. It's been such a wonderful thing for me to do. Not only do I get to write, something I'm passionate about, not only do I get to help people through my writing, but I also have a purpose. The blog focuses on my experience with mental illness, I try to show people what it's like to go through a psychotic episode, I talk about practical things like the mindset I get in when my illness expresses itself - what I've termed "Crazy People Logic", and I try to offer the insight into my illness that makes me unique among the mentally ill.

That blog has sustained me through some really terrible times. Having an outlet to express myself and share my struggles, I get to affect people in a positive way, and it gives me something to do.

---

It's funny, the directions life takes you. I never knew what I wanted to be when I grew up. When I was in high school I'd settled on becoming a painter because I knew I wouldn't have to read so many books. It turns out that what I'm really good at is having a mental illness, what I'm good at is writing. God gave me a direction in my life that's ended up being more fulfilling and more satisfying than what I'd imagined for myself before my diagnosis. I revel in being able to help people with mental illness, I enjoy advocating for them. I'm able to spend my good days, of which there are more and more as of late, writing for my blog, working on my novel, or working on any of the other writing projects I have going.

It's been so beneficial to have a purpose in life, to have a passion to pursue. Mental illness so often robs us of our purpose and of our passion. It wants to deaden our insides. But it's possible to fight that, it's possible to push back the dark curtains of mental illness and let in some light. I have a meaningful life, I have a purposeful life. It's a rare opportunity to be able to actually do what you're passionate about. Because of the things I don't have to worry about (money, a job, school, etc.) I'm able to do things that mean mental illness doesn't have the grip it used to have on me. Because of the support of my friends and especially my family I can live a life of meaning.

Life needs meaning. If we don't feel as though we're having an impact on the world, we slip into the Hardboiled Wonderland of despair and loneliness. That's how it works for me, at least.

---

There's no more powerful antipsychotic for me than feeling like I'm making a difference in people's lives. One of the most important self-discoveries I've made is to learn that I'm motivated by helping people. So much of my experience with mental illness has left me feeling as though I'm worthless. But, by helping people, I don't feel so worthless anymore.

It's important to keep sight of what motivates you and to ask yourself what motivates you. It's an essential question for anyone to ask: what motivates me? It's important to find your passion. And it's important to remember that there are good days and bad days. It's important to have patience. Mental illness is terrifying and often causes you to freeze. Without my parents' gentle encouragement, I know I wouldn't be here today. Life presents opportunities - it's just a matter of taking advantage of them.

Treating mental illness requires a holistic approach - medication is often crucial, but pills alone won't get you through it. It's not possible without a loving support system to provide gentle encouragement and a shoulder to cry on or a hand to hold.

I'm a strong person. Amy likes to call me "tough as nails". But I wouldn't be so tough without my support system, I wouldn't be anywhere without knowing my passions or my motivation to help other people. Having a life on disability means that I have all the free time in the world - I can get up whenever I want, go to sleep whenever I want, do anything I want to do whenever I want to do it. That kind of freedom is essential for me to take care of myself, but it's also dangerous sometimes. Knowing what it is I want to do with my life gives me direction in my otherwise directionless world - it gives me a goal to work toward and much needed structure for my day.

In the movie, *The Matrix*, the protagonist, Neo, visits the Oracle, the wise woman who will tell him if he's "The One." Above the doorway of her kitchen is a sign that reads "Temet Nosce" - Latin for "Know Thyself."

And I've been blessed with knowing myself - by writing incessantly, by processing my experiences with my doctors and especially my dad I've come to know myself. Through knowing myself, I've been able to help my doctors develop tools to help me combat this ugly illness of mine, through knowing myself I've

been able to identify the sensations I get before I become psychotic. Knowing yourself is an essential component of living any successful life, but it's especially important when you're saddled with such a terrible illness.

Nothing about your loved one's illness is easy or convenient or pretty. Mental illness is one of the ugliest, most terrifying things you're likely to encounter. But, with gently encouragement and love it's possible for them to live rich and fulfilling lives.

Thank you.