

I remember sitting in a high school philosophy class and learning what schizophrenia is. The definition, as seems typical in so many places, was wrong – my teacher got it basically right but confused certain aspects with multiple personality disorder. I remember sitting there, hearing that lecture, and thinking to myself that it sounded so cool. It sounded so romantic to see things that weren't there, to have a running commentary in my head...voices that would tell me things. I remember almost wishing that I would get to experience schizophrenia; just for a little bit, because it all seemed so interesting.

The reality is that as I sat there in class I was developing a form of schizophrenia; something called schizoaffective disorder. During high school I found myself unable to learn. I would read books and nothing would stick. I may as well have not read anything in the first place and eventually I stopped reading altogether. I would sit down at the kitchen table with my dad and try to do homework with him. I'd understand one section of the text book, do the problems correctly...but with the next section I'd forgotten everything I'd learned in the previous section, it was like I hadn't even read the previous section. It was devastating for me – I wasn't a great athlete, I wasn't a skilled musician, I wasn't a skilled artist yet, and I wasn't particularly good looking. All I had going for me was that I am incredibly intelligent, my IQ was 163 and I couldn't learn anything, I felt stupid. I think that I was perceived as a lazy genius by my teachers. I tried to keep the ruse up, I tried to learn, I tried so hard until it finally came to an end my last semester of high school, I failed most of my classes that final semester and I was lucky that I could have graduated as a Junior because otherwise I wouldn't have my high school diploma.

College seemed to go just fine at first; I had been seeing a therapist for unrelated things for about a year before I took off for Chicago to attend a prestigious art school I had no right to be in. I only lasted about a month and a half before I felt as though I needed to go somewhere else. I ended up at Bethany Lutheran College...the same college where my parents met and probably the most conservative college I could have gone to. I flourished as an artist there – I challenged the status quo and really came into my own. I suppose I do better at places where I feel forced to be rebellious instead of places where I'm accepted.

Coming home for the summer was like someone flipping a light switch. It was like I couldn't fake it anymore. My skin didn't feel right...I couldn't paint; I broke up with my girlfriend, Malia, because I didn't believe she was real. She was a good partner – she'd come to visit me in the hospital when I'd had an appendicitis at Bethany, barely weeks into the semester; she made me food I could eat – she took care of me and loved me and I'd just dropped off the face of the planet, I'd abandoned her.

I don't think that my parents wanted me to go back for my second (and final) semester at Bethany. I think they knew something was up...but I was determined to

make things right with Malia. And I almost did – we went to a play that the college was putting on...but it was at that play that I had what I remember as being my first psychotic episode.

There were voices in my head, I kept telling people in the audience around me to be quiet...no one was speaking. The voices were muttering terribly negative things. Most voices start out fairly innocuous – they say hi over and over again, they'll tell me their names and ask me what my name is and then laugh because *of course* they know my name. Then it starts to shift...they start speaking nonsense. I remember one voice saying a couple of weeks ago "Well of course we'll be vacationing on the flats of Egypt, where else would we get the necessary parts?" The nonsense starts getting more and more frightening. Suddenly they're talking about all the terrible diseases that they're going to give me – that they're going to fill my brain with fluid while I sleep, that I'll never wake up from that sleep. More voices join in and they tell me in semi-unison that I'm worthless, that I'll never amount to anything, that I make terrible mistakes all the time and I'm just going to keep making them until someone finally puts me out of my misery. This is pittance compared to what Myra says. Myra is who I fear most. When I hear her calm, slithery voice tell me that she's there inside my head, checking out what kind of rewiring she can do, I get chills down my spine. Myra likes to tell me that she's going to make me watch as she eviscerates and dissects my mom, my sister, and sometimes my best friend Addie in front of me. That she's going to cut out my eyelids so that I can't close my eyes. She's going to make me watch every cut, every removed organ...she's going to make me listen to every scream. And it's all my fault, that I'm the reason she has to do such terrible things. She doesn't want to...but she has to because of me. It tends to get worse at night, I'm told because that's when my brain's defenses start to relax. One thing that I've found that makes the experience of symptoms lessen is to always keep my brain active...to never let the illness get a word in; to essentially suffocate it with active thinking and active doing. But when I go to sleep, I can't keep my brain active – by definition I'm relaxing my mind and allowing it to go to sleep. More often than not that's when my illness starts to take advantage of me – the whispers in my head start getting louder and louder, more of what they say starts to get discernible. A full volume assault of the most negative, most horrible phrases and words that I've ever heard. It then turns into a battle to try to both deny the voices their power and to relax enough that I can get to sleep. Even if I do manage to get to sleep I will oftentimes find myself waking in the middle of the night in terror.

Being that I'm also bi-polar, I'm presented with an entirely new set of difficulties, particularly during the night. Everyone experiences a second wind if they stay up past when they get tired – that's how most college students are able to get so much work done. But when I get past the point where I'm tired I give the meaning of "second wind" an entirely new definition. After getting my second wind I usually have to medicate

myself to get to sleep. I've had nights where I haven't slept at all. I remember one night I stayed up past when I normally need to go to bed working on a computer problem – I stayed up until about 8am working on the problem because I just didn't get tired. This, of course, ruined my entire day and I spent a good few nights trying to flip my sleep schedule back to normal. But it's not just the epic bi-polar second wind...and it's not just the misery of bi-polar depression. There's another side to bi-polar disorder that rears its head from time to time; and that's mania. The media depicts folks with bi-polar disorder as being manic most of the time...bouncing off the walls, bubbly, and generally pretty annoying. The reality is that if you have bi-polar disorder you're going to spend most of your time seriously depressed and only a fraction of your time manic. Sometimes that mania can be such a pleasant break from the depression – I'll feel on top of the world, I'll feel like I can do anything, I'm extremely excitable and tend to talk a mile a minute. I might even dare to call myself happy during that period of mania. But that kind of elated mania doesn't happen too often for me. I have extremely subtle mania. I don't know if it's just my naturally calm disposition or if it's the fact that the schizophrenic side of schizoaffective disorder gives me flat affect and the mania and the flat affect battle each other for dominance. Either way – my mania is largely internalized.

Mania usually starts with sensory overload – things seem brighter than usual and sounds seem to come out of the woodwork. It's the sounds that bother me the most; because if I hear a repetitive sound I can't get it out of my head. It's a phenomenon among people with schizophrenia that we have an underdeveloped part of the brain – the part that allows the brain to shut off repetitive noise. When y'all hear a sprinkler you register that it's happening, you listen to it, and eventually it goes away. With me I hear a sprinkler, I register that it's happening...and I can't get it out of my head. It happens for any repetitive noise – the sound of a computer running, the sound of running water, vacuum cleaners, clocks, even the blinkers in cars, I've even been kept up at night by the sound of my heart beating. It's maddening and has driven me to either psychosis or dissociation on too many occasions to count. The sounds of my computers running, the sounds of running water or vacuum cleaners or clocks are pretty easy to manage – I can either turn them off or go to another room; but my heart beat – that's something else. I can't stop my heart from beating, I can't run away from it – there's nothing I can do about it; it just has to stay that way and I end up psychotic or dissociated every time. When I'm manic this phenomenon gets much worse. I'll be lying there in bed...and I can hear my watch ticking 15 feet across the room; and I can't get it out of my head...all I hear is the tick tock, tick tock, tick tock, of the watch over and over again. I've found that I have to put my watch on my hat to deaden the noise. Oftentimes I have to eliminate all light sources in my room...because otherwise the room is bright as day, even from something as simple as an LED from some of the computer equipment in my room. So I have to draw the blackout blinds, and I have to get towels or t-shirts to cover up the LEDs – I have to eliminate every source of light in my room...sometimes I have to put

towels or t-shirts along the bottom of my door to keep the light from sneaking in from the living room. Sometimes even that doesn't work – I was recently put on a supplement to try to help with cognition and memory that made me manic; even in a completely dark room I would shut my eyes and the swirling colors were so bright and vivid that it was actually darker for me to keep my eyes open than to close them and try to go to sleep. After the sensory overload comes the racing thoughts; I imagine you've all experienced a time in your life when your thoughts are racing and you can't stop thinking about something. I imagine that those racing thoughts were at least directed at something – maybe you were thinking about getting married the next day or maybe you'd just put an offer in on a house – it was difficult to fall asleep. Racing thoughts due to mania are a little bit like that – only they race much faster and they're not usually directed at one thing, and it oftentimes doesn't stop for days. When that happens I'll be lying in bed and thinking about a conversation I had a week ago with one of my friends for a few seconds and then I'll be thinking about something that I've read in a book recently and then I'll be thinking about what I'm going to be doing tomorrow and then I'll be thinking about what I'm going to be doing to my painting. On and on and on...thinking about everything at once and not being able to still my mind long enough to actually give my thoughts the time of day. Add those racing thoughts to the voices in my head and the whirring of my computers in the next room and the sound of my watch tick tock-ing on my workbench and you've got one loud, messy night of assaults on my senses. And this will go on for days – days when I can't do much of anything. I can't read, I can't write, I have a hard time following conversations with other people, I can't paint, I can't work on computers...I can't do anything that requires attention on my part. Luckily I have a huge collection of video games and all the free time you could imagine; so I fire up a video game and play it through until I'm able to concentrate on something again. If I'm working on a painting I'll make all kinds of mistakes being in a state like that. But a video game has no real-world ramifications; so I can fire one up and blow stuff up to my heart's content and not have to worry about screwing anything up. If video games don't work, I usually find myself sitting in my chair or lying down on my bed, listening to album after album on my stereo – it's a good way to turn the noise down.

Recently the voices did something completely new...they woke me in the middle of the night saying completely random things. They weren't even words...they were saying things like "MK four two one", it was alarming. At the same time there were figures...these creatures that I frequently see sitting in the waiting rooms at doctors' offices or following me on walks with my dog...these figures were holding up what looked like crumpled up pieces of paper and dropping them at the foot of my bed. One by one they lined up at my bed, the line went out the door and wrapped to my front door and out past the window in my room that overlooks the yard, and one by one they presented me with a crumpled up piece of paper and dropped it at the foot of my bed and then turned and walked out the room.

Back in the theatre, I'm unable to concentrate on the play; I don't know what's going on. I ask Malia if she hears what I hear. She doesn't.

Then, what I can only describe as an enormous dragon-like monster, the kind you'd expect to see in Norse mythology— the most terrifying thing I'd ever seen at that point – comes out of the side of the stage and stares directly at me. It starts slithering toward me. I run out of the theatre and start to panic when Malia comes out of the theatre calm as can be. There were no terrified screams coming out of the theatre like I was expecting. She calms me down and we agree to go and make some food. We head over to the grocery store and start picking things out to eat and by the time we get back to her place I'm feeling a lot better. She insists that I just sit down and relax while she makes dinner. But there comes the voice again – “Hi Chris, it's Myra...she's trying to poison you, she's going to kill you.” So I start yelling at Malia, I hardly ever yell at anyone, but she was bent on killing me, on murdering me. So I pack my bag and leave the room with Malia protesting that she's not trying to do anything other than help me. That was the last time I remember speaking to Malia.

One of the benefits of having a severe mental illness like schizoaffective disorder is that you quickly find out who your real friends are. Jacko, Will, Anna, Katie, Noelle, and Lauren among others all found their own ways to exit my life when I told them about my diagnosis. They were supposed to be among my closest friends and I haven't heard from them in years. I'm not sad anymore for losing them – I'm thankful for their honesty, and I'm thankful that they decided they don't want to share my journey with me. I don't want, nor can I afford, to have people who don't want to support me in my struggles. Because a good support system is absolutely critical to my survival. Beyond the pills and the therapy there's so much more that has to happen, there's so much more that I need to keep me as healthy as possible. If I didn't have parents who are so involved in my life, whom I can call up anytime, day or night, I know I wouldn't be able to live as independently as I do right now. But things had to get really terrible; I had to spend a good few years miserable, absolutely miserable, before I finally started to take my illness seriously. I think there's such a thing as going through the motions when it comes to treatment – going to therapy, going to psychiatrist appointments but nothing else. And there's such a thing as growing up and actually taking charge of your life and doing everything you can do, every day, to fight it. There's such a thing as growing up and realizing your limitations and also realizing your strengths. I don't stand before you as a fixed and healthy person. I still have psychotic episodes, I still get suicidal, I'm still sick, I can't go to school and I can't hold down a job – those are some of my limitations. But I do stand before you as a person who accepts the reality of my situation and I stand before you as a person who fights and lives with this nightmare every day. I stand before you as a person who doesn't give up...and who doesn't intend to give up. I'm tenacious as can be – those are some of my strengths.

I finished my last semester at Bethany. During that time I was diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder by the therapist I was seeing there. I didn't take it seriously; I refused to get treatment from a psychiatrist. I think I didn't take it seriously because it wasn't schizophrenia – something I thought I was much more familiar with. I thought schizoaffective disorder was like diet-schizophrenia. I thought my naturopath in Denver would be able to give me some supplements and the whole thing would go away. Nothing could be further from the truth – schizoaffective disorder is just as deadly serious as schizophrenia, or depression, or bipolar disorder or anything else; it's just not as well known or as well understood. There are really no naturopathic treatments for it, though there are certain supplements that can help make western medicine more effective and can handle some of the side effects of western medication.

I came back home, stricken with delusions and very much in denial. I started attending CU-Denver to work towards a philosophy degree. That was the last semester of full classes that I was able to complete – the spring of 2008. I met a woman there who introduced me to members of the radical Christian community; a community I'm still a part of. The woman, Brit, was the first woman I dated after being diagnosed (mere months after I was diagnosed) and she helped me through a lot of troubled times. I got a job at a computer repair shop and toward the end of my time there my boss gave me my own store to manage and run in Cap Hill in Denver. I moved out of my parents' house and into my first apartment. I'd started seeing a psychiatrist, one of the kindest and most understanding men I've ever met.

I thought the nightmare was behind me. I wasn't taking my pills every night but they didn't seem to be working anyways and in all honesty my illness wasn't that bad at that point. I felt as though I could hack it. I'd just met a community of friends who thought a lot like I do and I was feeling more and more accepted and loved by them every week. But it's not a matter of being able to hack it, not completely, not as much as I thought it was. I needed help, a lot of help. I needed to be doing things that were healthy for me; I was just going through the motions. Things seemed as though they were going well. After one semester as a philosophy student I decided I missed painting too much and I transferred to CU-Denver's fine arts program. I was in love with Brit and she was in love with me and we eventually started talking about marriage. But through all of this positive stuff – painting every day, working at a good job, and a woman who was in love with me – I was still incredibly depressed. My psychiatrist says there's no depression quite as low as bipolar depression. Getting motivated was hard for me, painting just wasn't doing it for me anymore, I had no energy, and my love for Brit didn't seem as beautiful or as lovely as I felt it should have been. I couldn't cry, I was hallucinating more and the voices were getting worse. My sub-conscious had disconnected me from my brain...I was a walking zombie. I was miserable, I was dispondent, I was inconsolable.

I get fuzzy on the details but at one point I tried to take my own life, there seemed to be no end to my suffering, there seemed to be no other way out, there was no hope and all I saw was a big empty nothingness in front of me. Luckily, Brit found me before I did any real damage. I was eventually hospitalized for my depression, for the constant need I felt to kill myself. During my stay in what I like to call the “psych ward prison complex” (which I’ll explain in a bit) I was put on Haldol – the worst drug ever made. I wasn’t miserable anymore...I guess...I was less psychotic. But I also didn’t feel anything. Haldol numbed me to the world and turned me into some kind of less-than-human automaton. I somehow felt worse on Haldol than I did unmedicated and that was the precipitant for my first pill rebellion and my next hospitalization, which I don’t really remember at all.

I think a lot of people have this misconception of the psych ward being some sort of resort. The reality is that it’s more prison-like – you can’t go outside, they take all of your personal items away - including your shoes - you can’t have a pen or a pencil, you can’t have paper, they control what books you can read, what TV programs you can watch, there are short visiting hours and you have to play by their rules in order to get discharged. It’s a safe place, the people are there to help you and they’re committed to helping you and sometimes there’s no better place to be than a psych ward; but it’s also terrifying. My sister says that visiting me in the psych ward during one of my hospitalizations was the scariest place she’s even been in. One of my goals in life is to avoid the psych ward.

Even after two trips to the hospital and a round of intensive outpatient therapy in the span of a few months, I still didn’t get it. I still had pill rebellions. I was missing work, I had to withdraw from classes; my life was starting to fall apart all round me. I’d moved into a different apartment where hopefully I’d get more sunlight than in my basement apartment – but with the idea and threat of actualizing suicide a constant presence my therapist and psychiatrist decided it was time to try more drastic measures.

I was to get ECT, electroconvulsive therapy. They put you under anesthesia and shoot enough electricity through your brain that it gives you a seizure. I had that done three times a week for six months and then once a week for a month before I called it quits. All told I had 76 sessions, I’ve had anesthesia 78 times if you include my appendectomy and my tonsillectomy. Getting so much electricity shot through my head so many times was enough to wipe out my memory almost completely for all of 2009, half of 2010, and a substantial portion of my childhood through high school.

ECT literally tore my life apart – no more job, no more school, no more apartment, no more Brit. The job, school and apartment made sense – I couldn’t earn any money so I couldn’t have an apartment and with such a rigorous ECT schedule there was no way I could do school or work, let alone both. My parents live in Aurora –

all of my friends live in Denver and hardly anyone had a car at that point. So I very rarely hung out with anyone. Brit, from what I've been told, became more distant – she came to my first ECT appointment, but not for the 75 other times I got it. She didn't call or text, she made it over to dinner once...but never again after that. She did, however, expect me to come over to her house – which I did because I wanted to see her. I was a shell of my former self and this made Brit uncomfortable – she eventually told me she didn't want me touching her anymore – no kisses, no hugs, no holding hands, not even a handshake...nothing. And then one day we met for coffee and she told me it wasn't working between us anymore. She broke up with me, she left me. I don't remember feeling anything; I just asked her if she wanted to go get lunch with me. My life was ruined and I didn't have the presence of mind to realize it until months later.

I stopped ECT a few months after Brit left me and entered one of the deepest depressions I've ever been through – I feel as though I ceased being a human. I slept in as late as I could because I didn't want to deal with another day of nothingness; I watched whatever movies were replaying on cable because I didn't even have the presence of mind to select a movie from my parents' vast DVD collection. I sat there with my laptop desperate for someone to talk to – doing nothing but hoping the misery would end. ECT had taken everything from me – I'd forgotten how to fix computers, I'd forgotten how to paint and draw, I'd forgotten the past year and a half of my life and large chunks of my childhood, my fiancé had left me and I had no idea why. There was nothing left. I kept going to weekly dinners with my friends – but I couldn't connect with any of them. I felt so un-human. I felt like I'd made the biggest mistake of my life. I had lost all hope of ever being normal and independent and happy again.

It's funny how God works though, when you reach your lowest point it seems like something always happens to lift you out of your pit and restore your confidence. Something always gives you a way to pull yourself up by your bootstraps. It was the spring of 2010 and I was making a rare visit to my favorite coffee shops, Pablo's. The baristas there know me pretty well as I've been going there for years – one of them, a guy named Hunter, knew I was good at fixing computers as I'd saved his computer from certain doom on several occasions. His girlfriend, Brynn, was in a terrible bind. She'd been working on her final project for a class in culinary school when her computer had shut down and refused to turn on again. She didn't have any money for replacement parts so it seemed like a pretty hopeless situation. Hunter asked me if I could take a look at it and possibly repair it and I agreed, though I told him that the chances of me being successful were pretty slim without spending any money on parts. I got the laptop and, to make a long story short, after hours of meticulously cleaning it and soldering some connections, I got the thing working. It's probably the most impressive fix I've ever had. So maybe I hadn't forgotten about computers after all. I was so proud of myself, I was elated to be able to call her and tell her I'd fixed it. I was back. I started tinkering

around with computers again. The hours I'd spent sitting in front of my parents' TV were replaced with hours spent catching up on all the developments in the computer world that I'd missed because of ECT and my terrible depression.

A few weeks later, I had enough motivation to try school again. I decided to major in Computer Science because I'd never programmed computers before, I've always been a hardware person – I wanted to round out my computer education. I had to take a math class during the summer as a prerequisite to Computer Science 1. It was wonderful because it got me back on my bike for the hour or so ride to campus. Biking has been one of my joys since I was forced to use a bike as my primary means of transportation after a series of car accidents made insuring me too expensive for me or my parents to afford. I loved biking and just being able to get back on my bike again and ride for an hour or an hour and a half helped to ease my depression. It also helped me start losing the weight that I'd been gaining as a result of all the medication I was on and from sitting around the house doing nothing all day. The class also got me out of the house twice a week and into Denver, the city I love. It was an easy class...the material was much simpler than what I'd taken in high school and I was relearning a lot of stuff that I'd forgotten and it was coming back pretty easily. Everything seemed as though it was going to be okay. I ended up with an A in the class and it was the first time I'd gotten an A in a non-art class in a very long time. More importantly, I would ride my bike to Pablo's after class to wait for my mom to pick me up after she got off work. It was there that I met Helios. Helios is an interesting character to say the least... he was a traveler, hitch-hiking across the country wherever he pleased, he told me he had ADHD and was un-medicated – his attention span was short and he was excited by darn near everything. But Helios loved drawing, he said it was the only thing that he could concentrate on for long periods of time...well, shoot, I loved drawing too and the whole reason I'd come to Pablo's in the first place was to reteach myself how to draw. He and I drew together all summer long and his encouragement, critiques, and sheer energy from his love for drawing helped me get back into art. The challenge of re-learning how to draw and paint had seemed insurmountable...but with his help, it became fun and I took the opportunity to learn how to draw the right way and to get rid of the bad habits I'd developed from years of drawing incorrectly.

An interesting thing happened to me because of ECT. Pre-ECT artwork was colorful and even whimsical...it made people happy, it was easy to get shows in coffee shops with it. I think a lot of people assumed that I was a happy person because of the artwork I had been making. Maybe the bright, colorful, happy artwork I'd been making served as a sort of projection of what I really wanted to be like. Post-ECT art work is the exact opposite. It's dark and foreboding; it's been accurately described as creepy by many people. The colors are muted and the subject matter can be difficult to absorb. The major shift in my artwork has a lot to do with a gestalt I had concerning what I was

going to paint. I've been hallucinating these masked figures for a few years now – the same figures that I mentioned giving me crumpled up pieces of paper earlier. They're masked and naked with grotesque bodies; I'll see them walking down the street in front of me or following me home as I walk down the street – they frightened me terribly. And then one day I drew one of them to show my therapist and, in doing so, I realized that drawing them made them less scary. So now these grotesquely deformed figures are my muses. I paint my hallucinations and my psychotic episodes and I find it very cathartic. My current project is a three panel painting that will end up being 6 feet high by 12 feet long – it stems from a psychotic episode that I was having nightmares about until I turned it into an art project. During the episode I was lying in my bed, trying to sleep, and something was next to me pushing me off the bed. Every time I got to the point when I was about to fall I would reappear in the middle of my bed. This happened over and over and over again, dozens of times and eventually I looked over to my right. Sitting in three chairs a few feet away were three of the masked figures. They were gesticulating like they were speaking to one another though I couldn't hear anything being said between them. I would get pushed over to the side of the bed and I'd look over across my room and there would be these three figures and I'd reappear in the middle of the bed again. I would start getting shoved over and I'd look over again and there they were, still speaking. I'd never been more afraid of a psychotic episode than I've been at that one and it was crippling me. I didn't want to go to sleep, so I had to drug myself to get to sleep. In the middle of sleeping I would have a nightmare about the psychotic episode so I would wake up drenched in sweat. But because I'd drugged myself I was too tired to get up and wash myself off...all I could do was sit there in my own pool of sweat and try to sleepily remind myself that it wasn't real and that I could go back to sleep without fearing that anything bad would happen to me. After getting really frustrated with messing up my sleep schedule and the fear that came to me when it got close to bed time I finally broke out my sketch book and started sketching what I'd seen and I eventually ended up with a massive artistic expression of such a horrible experience. I found that the more work I've done on this project – the more I've sketched and drawn my plans for the painting and the more I've worked on the actual painting itself the less traumatizing the whole event became for me. I can now think back on it and not feel any anxiety about it at all...and I'm not even done painting the first panel. I'm a firm believer that facing your fears and trying to understand them as objectively as possible is a healthy way to deal with what you fear. Or maybe I should say that me trying to be objective and trying to understand my fears is a healthy way for *me* to deal with it. I don't draw or paint every psychotic episode – I usually save those for the really scary ones – a painting of the psychotic episode with the crumpled up pieces of paper is in the works and I'm also working on making a graphic novel about what it's like to experience a psychotic episode.

The summer ended and Helios started travelling again – leaving my life just as suddenly as he'd entered it. I started Computer Science 1 in the fall of 2010 and I was excited for the future for the first time in a long time. I was actually talking about my future, and in positive terms, things were looking good. I was also better prepared this time. The Office of Disability Services at Metro State is fantastic – I had a meeting with a counselor there and she set me up with some good tools to help me do better. I got extra time to take my exams and they scanned my text book so I could have my computer read it to me as I followed along. I was only taking one class in an effort to take away some of the stress of school, as we'd learned that stress is a very bad thing for someone like me.

It didn't last long. I was doing so well at first but then I started forgetting what I'd read in my textbook, again. I started writing my programs backwards and I started getting psychotic more frequently. The stress of my previous failures capitulating once more was taking its toll on me and I was forced to drop out again. That was my last semester at school, I haven't been back since. It was devastating to me and I spent nearly every night in the throes of psychosis...once again tormented by the demons that had left me for such a precious little amount of time.

It was time for me to face some harsh realities about my life. My therapist and psychiatrist sat me down and told me I'd tried hard but it was time for me to realize that I was disabled – I can't work, I can't go to school...I just can't handle the everyday stresses that normal people can. A standard bad day at work, or a standard final assignment at school doesn't do much to a normal person beside make their day a little unpleasant. But for someone like me, that bad day, the pressure of that final assignment can be debilitating...it can make me have psychotic episodes for days or even weeks. High stress environments just aren't any good for me – people yelling, people fighting, and tension in the room, uncomfortable disagreements between me and someone else have a hugely negative effect on me. I was, I am, disabled.

It was hard to take, it was hard to say. I didn't take the news well. I got more psychotic, I got more depressed. I had a severe psychotic episode nearly every day and I was beginning to worry that more ECT was in my future. That Christmas, my first Christmas after ECT, I was supposed to go to Minnesota to have Christmas with my Mom's side of the family. It was something that I'd been going to my whole life...but the thought of flying let alone the thought of being in my Grandma's two bedroom house with ~30 people was too much for me to handle and so I had to stay behind in Colorado with my Dad taking care of me. ECT – I never want to have it again...it saved my life, and for that I'm thankful. But I've become committed to making sure that I'm healthy enough to never have to get it again. I finally gave in to my therapist's suggestion to apply for disability. She'd been suggesting that I apply for disability while I was getting ECT...but I'd always seen disability like it was giving up, like it was admitting I'd failed.

That's a really stupid and immature way to look at it. In reality, disability was and is my only shot at living as independently as I can. I was committed (and still am) to being as healthy as possible. No more pill rebellions, no more unhealthy TV watching; no more loud parties or shows – I have since dedicated my life to being as healthy as I possibly can.

Pill rebellions can seem confusing to an outsider – I think a lot of folks are under the impression that you take your pills and then you're cured, I know that my parents and I were under that impression. Just take your happy pills and you'll be fixed. It's not like that. The truth of the matter is that medication is not as effective as one might think. The pills don't magically cure you and they're so side-effect laden that it makes functioning very difficult. That's the reason behind the pill rebellions – the impression that they're going to fix you but then the realization that they're so miserable to take. I'm on 8 different prescription medications – 3 antipsychotics, 2 mood stabilizers, 1 anti-depressant, and 2 other prescriptions for managing side effects among a few other supplements. The pills will make you gain weight (I've gained about 60 pounds since I started taking medication), they'll take away your capacity for deep thought and contemplation; sometimes (like as is the case with Haldol) they take away your ability for higher function almost completely, and they'll make you so tired that the word 'tired' seems to be a futile way of putting it. I take a medication that gives me seizures every so often. That same medication has left me paralyzed in bed for an hour on several occasions. They also make you feel sub-human – it's hard to relate to other people, it's hard to feel empathetic – it's hard to feel human on many of the medications. My psychiatrist recently told me that I probably wouldn't score another 163 on an IQ test if I were to take one again...schizoaffective disorder as well as the treatment for it takes away my capacity for abstract thought, for understanding difficult things. That was very difficult to hear, it was difficult to accept because I value my intelligence so greatly. The pills are miserable to take...on days when I'm tired I can't even get out of bed. And if I do, I'll be taking a walk with my dad and we'll get a block down the street and I'll have to tell him that I'm too tired to go on and that we have to go back to my house. On those days, I'm so tired that I can't walk straight and I slur my speech as if I'm drunk. To counter this tiredness my psychiatrist put me on Dexedrine, a stimulant, and even with 50mg of that (a high dose) I'm not able to get out of bed at a reasonable time. It's a great morning if I'm able to get up at 10:30am. Pills can seem debilitating, how can I expect to go to work if they make me so tired I'm lucky to get out of bed at 10:30am? How can I do well at a job if they take away my ability to think clearly? Pills aren't a magic fix...they're terribly miserable to take and I wouldn't wish such medication on anyone. But they do help me. They allow me to do things that are healthy for me; they allow me to go through the day without being completely psychotic – they give me that extra push that I need to resume my daily life the best that I can. They allow me to get out of the house and do the things that make me feel better – I can hang out with my

friends, I can paint, I can go for walks thanks to the pills. I think that it comes down to attitude – with the medication, and with the illness itself – you can't just sit idly by and wait for things to get better. You have to accept the reality of your situation, maybe you can't get out of bed until 3pm – that's the reality of your situation. Maybe you can't go to a loud party because too much stimulation is bad for you – that's the reality of your situation. Pills give me enough of a boost to enable me to do the things that I've found *really* helps me; and it started with such simple things.

It started with walks, at least once a day – preferably in the sunshine. I can't begin to stress enough how important getting fresh air and sunshine is when you have a mental illness. It even helps those people without a mental illness. Getting sunshine is proven to help with mood and tree bathing, an old Japanese practice used to treat depression, helps significantly. Tree bathing is an interesting trick that I learned from a newsletter that my naturopath emails every couple of weeks or so. There was a study done recently on the correlation between depression and being around trees. The doctors who did the study noticed that those people who spent about 15-20 minutes sitting in the presence of a group of trees reported being less depressed than those who were in the city constantly. The Japanese name for it is *Shinrin-yoku*; it's been used for hundreds of years in Japan as a relaxation technique as well as to treat depression. I've found that it actually works – on my daily walk with my Dad and on my Saturday walk with just Kerrin and me the middle of the walk always involves sitting on a bench in the midst of a grouping of trees. Sitting there and observing nature and just being in the presence of nature is very calming and helps me center myself. It's not all about the pills; it's not all about seeing trained professionals. The reason I described seeing a therapist and psychiatrist as the bare minimum amount of work someone can do with a mental illness is because I didn't see much improvement until I started doing things like taking walks every day. It also started with setting up a system to make sure I took my pills twice a day at a consistent time. It started with making as much art as possible and it started with exercising my brain as much as possible.

In the summer of 2011 I took a break from my regular therapist and saw a Cognitive and Behavioral Therapist. My CBT, Chris, helped me identify the sensations I experience when I'm about to get psychotic – and we developed a kind of early warning system to help me make psychotic episodes as palatable as a psychotic episode can be. She gave me some techniques for dealing with dissociation and anxiety. She was a tremendous help in giving me tools outside of just pills to manage my illness. It takes a lot of work. I sometimes joke, in all seriousness, that I'm a professional sick person. But it's really quite true – my whole day is spent trying to be as healthy as possible. But all these tricks are mere pittance compared to what happened to me on July 27th, 2011.

I'd been asking my Dad if I could get a dog for quite a while. He didn't think it was a good idea – maybe because he thought I wouldn't be able to properly care for a dog,

or maybe because he thought a dog wouldn't be very effective while still being quite expensive to care for. He told me one time that he'd stepped in dog poop with his bare feet in the middle of the night going down the stairs when he was little and that really turned him off from dogs. It was disappointing; but my therapist, Amy, and I were trying to come up with a way to convince him that a dog would be a great help for me. It turned out that Amy and I didn't need to be clever at all...my dad just had to see for himself.

On our walks through my parents' neighborhood my dad and I had befriended a cat whom I named Milton. Milton is a wonderful cat...we'd walk past his house and hear him meowing up a storm, see him sauntering over to us. We'd spend a few minutes scratching him and he'd switch off between rubbing up against my legs and rubbing up against my dad's legs. One time he even tried to follow us home. We brought him treats and started to look forward to seeing him on our walks. It didn't matter what side of the street we were walking on...if he was outside when we were passing by, Milton was going to say hi and get some love from us. On one particular walk I was starting to get sick. We were taking a route that took us past Milton's house toward the end of the walk and at some point before we got to Milton's house I'd stopped being verbal; a bad sign. My dad was trying to talk to me...but it just wasn't working. It seemed like I was in for a psychotic episode before we managed to get home. But I kept walking and we got to Milton's house. Milton was outside and came sauntering over to me, doing his meowing routine. I perked up almost immediately. I went from being completely non-verbal to talking to Milton in a matter of maybe 30 seconds. It was like Milton had cured me and prevented me from going psychotic. When my dad saw how much an animal I cared about could help me, a flash of realization went through his head – the next day he told me that when he got a job (he'd been laid off a few months before) we would get me a dog. The next night he told me my mom was talking to my sister on the phone and my sister told them that she would front the bill for a dog for me. The search was on for a dog and I was anxious to get one.

Kerrin is my dog. She's no ordinary dog – she's the most amazing dog I've ever met. She's a rock solid partner in my ongoing war against mental illness. When I first met her, the very second the door opened and we saw each other – I knew that she was my dog. I think she picked me, I had no choice in the matter – I was smitten from the very first moment I met her. When I first got her she was generally pretty wary of strangers but with me she wasn't wary at all – she was licking my hands and crawling into my lap to lick my face...her tail was wagging and it seemed as though she had been waiting for me all her life.

I sometimes think that Kerrin and I are so closely bonded because of how bad our early 2011's were. While I was in the throes of psychosis, Kerrin was in Mexico. She was homeless with her twin brother, Richard. They were eventually found by a rescue

organization but both of them had pneumonia. They were only puppies then, having been born in early January. Richard ended up dying from the pneumonia, but Kerrin survived. It breaks my heart to think of Richard dying, or Kerrin being a little puppy and living on the streets...but it also shows that she's one tough dog, just like I'm one tough person. Kerrin was nursed back to health and was running around playing with dogs two or three times her size, making friends with everyone. The rescue organization found a home for her in Canada and she was well enough to travel so they put her on a flight to Canada. In Canada, she was denied entry even though she had a family waiting for her because dogs under 3 months of age aren't allowed to travel alone. She spent several days in her crate...barely tended to; with no one to take her for walks or cuddle with her...before she was sent back to Mexico. So the rescue organization tried again. Again Kerrin spent several days in her crate, untended to, and again she was denied entry. Only this time the head vet that makes such decisions told them that they either had to get Kerrin out of Canada or she was going to be put down because Kerrin was a national health threat due to her pneumonia and a vaginal infection. The organization didn't have money to fly her back to Mexico and it was looking like Kerrin was going to die. She'd gotten very sick from exposure and neglect and her life was in serious danger...again. The rescue organization eventually figured that they didn't have to fly Kerrin back to Mexico...they just had to get her out of Canada. So they flew her to Colorado where a woman named Alex takes care of dogs as a part of the rescue organization. Alex just so happens to go to the same vet who attends my church. I had contacted the vet at my church to ask him about adopting a dog and had been waiting anxiously for a couple of months to get my dog. I finally emailed him one day to ask him how long of a wait he was expecting it to be and he told me about Kerrin. I called Alex about meeting Kerrin and the very next day I went to Alex's house to meet Kerrin and the rest is history. Kerrin and I seem to have been fated to go through terrible things until we met each other...maybe so that I could appreciate how precious she is because of how much life has improved for me, and maybe so Kerrin could have the most loving home ever.

She's always there for me – she has a preternatural awareness of how I'm feeling. She's an even better early warning detector for psychotic episodes than the cues that Chris taught me to look for are. When I sit down in my chair because I'm not feeling well, she always comes over to me and asks to sit in my lap. When I'm tired or not feeling well I lie down on my bed, she always comes over to snuggle with me. She can be occupied with a jar of peanut butter...licking out the remains of the jar...but if she hears me lying down on my bed she comes right over. There's no shortage of kisses on my face when she's around. She snuggles in my bed at night next to me so I can pet her and hold her when the voices come. She even protects me from danger – there have been a few times that I've been walking her by myself and I've started to dissociate. When that happens Kerrin takes charge of the walk and has always led me

safely home. She's always thinking about me, making sure that I'm okay, making sure that I'm feeling well – I've never experienced anything or anyone being as devoted to me as Kerrin is. Before I got her it would have been an exercise in futility to try to count how many bad psychotic episodes I was having. Since getting her, I can actually count the number of times I've had a really bad psychotic episode.

It's hard to put into words just how much the little girl means to me – but she's the most precious thing in the world to me. She's helped me so much, in so many ways, that I get overwhelmed trying to list them all. She understands me, she doesn't judge me, she gives me someone to take care of, she gives my day structure with getting a walk in every day and going outside for fresh air so she can have potty breaks...she gets me focusing on real things. Several months after I got her, in October, she officially became a service dog. Dogs are eligible to become an Emotional Support Animal if they're good at obeying basic commands, they aren't out of control, and the owner has a note from their doctor. An Emotional Support Animal has the same rights as any service animal so Kerrin can go into the grocery store with me, or to doctors' appointments with me...she can fly with me, she can go on public transportation with me...restaurants, coffee shops...anywhere, Kerrin can come in with me.

Dogs have this incredible capacity for unconditional love and this is my first time experiencing that amazing capacity. She's so precious to me, and I know there's no way I could have ever moved out of my parents' house and be as independent as I am without her. The funny thing is that Kerrin is so good for me that she allows me to go places without her. When she first became a service dog I took her everywhere...but now I find that I don't have to. I just love coming home to her – she's so happy to see me, her tail couldn't wag any faster, I bend down on my knees and she crawls up on my lap to give me kisses...sometimes she twirls around on the ground doing pirouettes because she's unable to contain herself with how happy she is to see me. I'll still take her to Pablo's when it's warm outside so that she can sit in the sun or shade with me as I drink coffee and read or draw...but somehow having her in my life makes me less dependent on her – I know that if I leave her alone that when I get home I'll be just as happy to see her as she is to see me.

How do you enumerate that? How do you explain how much someone means to you? How do you explain how much you mean to someone else? All I can say is that I'm *much* healthier with Kerrin in my life than I was before I had Kerrin in my life. I had a really bad night a few months ago – I hardly slept because the voices were just so oppressive and unrelenting. I was scared most of the night...but I can always take solace in the fact that Kerrin is very protective of me; so if she's sleeping peacefully next to me in bed then can be assured that nothing bad is actually happening. I can take solace in the fact that if I were in any real danger Kerrin would be barking - she would be protecting me. But that morning after the particularly bad night I was quite depressed

waking up. Little Kerrin woke up from underneath the covers at the foot of my bed and started making what I refer to as “Kerrin noises,” she crawled up on top of my legs and stretched as far as she could, she got all the way up to my chest, popping her head out of the covers and I swear she had a smile on her face. Her eyes were bright and she was making noises as if to say “don’t worry, the night is over...today is a brand new day” and then she started licking me in the face. Her seemingly insignificant kisses can really change how I feel...I went from being forlorn and depressed to being excited to take Kerrin out for a walk, to play fetch with her, and sit in my chair and drink coffee as she laid on my lap. Pills can’t do that...doctors can’t do that. My dog can do that though, she can turn an entire day around just by waking up and saying good morning to me.

Mental illness is a lot like a reset button. When you hit the reset button on a computer it turns the power off...it kills the computer. But it also brings the computer back to life...so you can log in and start getting work done. Mental illness has destroyed my life – it’s made me absolutely despondent, it’s taken people I love away from me, and it’s left me more lonely than I’ve ever imagined I could be. But each time my life has been seemingly destroyed I’ve always managed, with the help of God, friends, and family, to build something stronger, with an improved design of the support system that I have. I’ve had to face some ugly truths; I’ve had to accept some harsh realities. But each time I’ve come out stronger. If mental illness has taught me one thing it’s that I’m tough. Amy, my therapist, likes to call me “tough as nails”. Tough isn’t about winning the most arm wrestling contests, or driving the biggest truck, or shooting the largest buck...tough is about surviving and even flourishing under difficult circumstances. Mental illness has unique, difficult circumstances – it’s not recognized by most people as being something that requires you to be tough. Folks with mental illnesses are often times seen as weak because when I tell certain people that I’m depressed they think about a time that they’ve been sad. They imagine that I’m just sad and that I can will myself out of it any time I want to. It just doesn’t work like that. If you want to survive with a mental illness you have to be tough. And I figure if I can be tough...if I can be tough as nails...then anyone can. I never considered myself even remotely tough until quite a while after I was diagnosed. Mental illness presents people with terrible things – whether it is a crippling depression, voices in your head, thoughts racing so fast that there’s no way you can concentrate on anything, or the thought of suicide becoming so prominent that it seems like an existential imperative. It’s so hard to live with a mental illness; it puts you into too many difficult situations. More importantly, mental illness has taught me how much people love me...my illness spends a lot of time telling me, literally telling me, that I’m a worthless human being, that I don’t deserve anyone’s love. But when I look at the evidence, when I look at the people who have stuck with me through such hard times, I know that those voices in my head have no merit. I know that that empty pit in my heart and in my soul couldn’t be more wrong.

I don't come before you as a fixed individual. I struggle with this illness every day- sometimes I win and sometimes I lose. Sometimes I have to call my parents' in the middle of the night and have them pick me up to take me back to their house, sometimes my dad has to stay behind at my house past his lunch break to take care of me and make sure that I'm safe, sometimes I have to do difficult things like call someone when I can't get the thought of killing myself out of my head. It's a difficult war to fight...it demands a lot out of me, mental illness demands a lot out of anyone. Like I said, I'm a professional sick person...but it's not a Monday through Friday 9-5 type deal...it's a job that requires my attention 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, for the rest of my life. I just hope to impart upon you that there are beautiful things that can happen as a result of mental illness – unbreakable friendships can be formed, the weak can be made to feel strong, computers can get fixed in impressive ways, and beautiful paintings can be produced as a result.