

As you can see, I have spruced up the website a bit to reflect the change of season as well as a lift in attitude. Over the course of the past nine months you have read and listened to the realities of mental illness. You have read about the difficult roads and the painful avenues that mental illness has taken my family and me down. It is my guess that many of you relate to one or more of these experiences in some way and it is my hope that you do not relate to most, but instead are at the beginning of your journey, so that maybe you have a better grasp of how to approach mental illness.

Mental Illness is very difficult. It blurs the lines between the illness and behavior, helping yourself, and hurting yourself and frustration and love. It is important to understand all of these elements and also understand that you as a loved one and you as a consumer have the right to feel these emotions and even express them. Mental Illness, like so many tribulations in life, has the ability to either draw a family closer or completely tear it apart. There is some choice involved for both the consumer and loved ones. The best way for me to make that choice has been getting to know myself. For years I was undiagnosed, therefore so much that I dealt with and lived, was defined as me – when the reality was, a great deal wasn't me, it was the illness. It took years to sort out what was me and what was the illness. Some things within myself, I could not blame on the illness whether I didn't like it about myself or not. While, other things, after much thought and prayer, I realized were not me at all – just the illness gone wild with my mind and actions. As a consumer, it is imperative that you give yourself the time and education to understand who you are. This is one of the best defenses against the illness.

For loved ones, I recommend the same. Define your foundation, your limits and know who your loved one is and who he is not. Arm yourself with the tools necessary to fight the illness, not the person. Love, compassion, education and awareness are tools that can and do stop the progression of the illnesses in their tracks.

Prior to my parents coming back into my life, I was in a strange place. That place was not bitter, not resentful, and not angry – it was reflective, actually. There was no doubt in my mind that I was not going to live through it this time and that was what I wanted, I was even somewhat excited about the idea that I was going to pass from this earth. There were no suicide plans, I just knew in my heart that I was going to pass. What had become important to me was to let those that I had loved know who I really was. I was convinced that all they saw was the illness and for the most part, I was right. I wrote countless essays and letters that were not from a place of self-pity, but a place of appreciation and gratitude. I had lived a life that most could only dream of and a life that most would only have nightmares about. It had been quite a life and the only thing that bothered me about it was the fact that those that I loved didn't know that I was a good person. Did they know that I went to many third world countries to show my compassion and heart to those so desperately in need? Did they know that I have helped many friends throughout the years reach their goals in life? Did they know that I was often the person a troubled friend would come to in their time of need, day or night – that I was always there for them? Did they know that when I lived well, I wished I could have shared it with them – but never felt I could because of guilt and judgment? Did they know that as soon as I turned eighteen, I wanted to leave all that was, because I firmly believed, subconsciously, I knew I was self-destructive? Did they know that I loved them, feared for them, and prayed for them? Did they

know that I was actually intelligent, wise and intuitive? Did they know that I wasn't conceited, but so determined to fight an illness that I fought everything around me because I didn't know which was which? Did they know that in my times of prison, homelessness, hospitals and homeless shelters that I gave of myself constantly for the good of others – daily trying to provide hope to their lives? That people in all those facets of my life migrated to me for lessons in life and compassion?

As I wrote throughout the months, making peace with myself and God, I was in a state of mourning, not my life, but what my family might not know about me. Dying did not scare me at all, it seemed like a relief. What scared me was the idea that in the funeral home, people would look upon me as a life wasted. “He was so much fun, full of life, good looking and smart... what a shame.” That bothered me because – no, my life had not been anything near a shame. I didn't watch life, I lived it. To extremes, yes, but I lived it. I didn't want that to be the memory left behind, “his life was a shame.” I have lived more than any 80 year old I know.

Then something changed. It was without any doubt in my mind that it was God reading my essays, not my family and it was he who said, “Then give it all back!” I had evolved to a place that I realized myself but that could not be confirmed until my parents and some family, came to me and helped me confirm it. It wasn't time to go, just yet. I had been given an education on this earth that could not be bought. Thirty-two countries and cultures, nearly every economic environment known to man had past my way – but then my foundation came, my family. They had armed themselves with all the tools necessary; love, compassion,

education and awareness – everything that we needed to not only defend but to defeat the elements of my illness.

Is this easy? No, it is not easy. But I ask you what the alternative is? With my foundation in place, I had a gage – a gage to weigh the symptoms of my illness against. People to talk with, instead of talking to myself and having the illness answer the questions. I am here to tell you, that for a mentally ill person - silence is the absolutely worst thing you can do for a mentally ill person - because they will (I always do) answer the questions themselves and more times than not, the answers are not good - because the illness is the one doing the answering and it feeds on all the elements of despair.

So my question today is a simple question, but a difficult process. Who are you going to be: 'The illness or you? I sure do hope you make the choice to be you – because I tell you, I have met a lot of people in my life and I have never met such a wonderfully colorful, talented and intriguing group, as the mentally ill community. You are fascinating and you have so much to share with the world. Are you challenged because you are not "normal"? What is normal and when you define it - is it really something you aspire to? I don't. Peace is good, but normal appears to be quite boring to me and a realm of life that I don't think I would be at peace in. I admire people that have what appears to be normal, content lives - but that isn't me and chances are, if you are mentally ill - it isn't you either. Find peace in who YOU are, celebrate it, embrace it - those that cannot accept you or judge you don't have capacity to love you for all that you are, there are many people that do. Look around, they may be closer than you think! And for those who seem to want people to live in regret, shame and guilt... you seriously need take a look at your own life, because if those

emotions play a part in your life about someone else, you are not a peace yourself and that will stifle your ability to celebrate life and those around you.