

An Introduction

February 29, 2000. I was attending a luncheon honoring a colleague for his pending retirement. As he talked about his future plans, my mind wandered. Life was good. We had worked hard all of our lives, built our own home and paid for it, bought a farm and paid for it and my husband had recently retired. I just had taken on a new job after teaching fourth grade for seventeen years. This was a new challenge which seemed appropriate for this time in our lives. We had survived a lot.

We had been married just three months when my husband's number 6 draft number came up and he was gone. While he was gone, we became the proud parents of our son. We made it through that (at 19 years old, it seemed like an adventure!) and came home to pick up our lives where we left off. We again became parents of a daughter only to lose her three months later to [Cystic Fibrosis](#). We survived that as well and our life was good and fairly uneventful comparatively speaking.

Our son now was 29 years old and after being out on his own for eleven years, he had returned home and we were glad to have him there! He had started a travel business in our small town and things seemed to be going great! Yes, life was good and I felt a great sense of peace as my colleague spoke thinking that I soon would be attending my own retirement and thinking of all the things we would do.

Just then, the waitress alerted me that I had a phone call. I wondered who it could possibly be since I was working in a new town and most people would not know how to reach me. It was my niece and Goddaughter. My son had attempted [suicide](#). I needed to get home right away. The numbness began. How could that possibly be? He had just returned from taking a group on a trip and the trip was successful, wasn't it? I had just talked with him. Suicide? My legs were like jelly. My superintendent offered to drive me home, but of course, since I thought there was a major mistake, I said no.

On the 33 mile drive home, I began playing back in my mind any scenario that would have explained what this could possibly be about. I came up with nothing.

When I arrived home, my husband had put our son in the shower and was preparing to take him to the hospital. I then got a call from his travel business that a group of people were there who had a trip scheduled which had not

been booked. I ran up there and threw my credit cards on the table and told the staff to do what they had to do and I left to get to the hospital.

Upon arriving at the hospital, one of the people who had been on the trip with our son greeted me and proceeded to tell me what a great time she had and then asked me what I was doing there. In shock, I told her.

Through the process, our son ended up in a psychiatric ward in a hospital in a bigger town. I entered a world that I didn't know existed. Our son's diagnosis was Bipolar Disorder. What is that? You can fix it, right? It quickly became clear that was not so easily done. I had no idea where this road was going. How was this possible that our son, so full of life, creativity and personality could have anything "wrong"?

Meanwhile, the travel business was in shambles. I am not sure to this day exactly what all transpired there, but the bottom line is that when it was all over, my husband and I were \$300,000 in debt (how could we not pay back the people we had to live with?) and our son was facing charges of theft.

We were mortified. We sat in the house not speaking a word and in shock. In retrospect, the way that family handled this is quite interesting. One came and told me how hard this was on her and how difficult it was for her to face people. (She never visited us again nor had she ever even asked about our situation). Others came every night to sit with us in our guilt ridden, humiliated silence. No one knew what to say or to do. But the important thing that I know now is that they were there. Others just pitched in and helped with the travel business, taking that load from our shoulders while we tried to find a path to get down. We found none.

Our son was to be dismissed from the hospital. He could not come home, what would people think? He went to a homeless shelter. I could not believe that our son was in a homeless shelter. I felt guilty for having a nice house, for having a car, for having food and my son was in a homeless shelter. How can it be? Isn't there anyone who knows what we should do? There was no one. I met with the doctor and asked him to explain Bipolar Disorder. He explained that it is a mental illness where the body's chemical make-up causes one to experience manic highs and severe depressive lows. He explained that a rational person may go and buy a car on impulse and realize that he can't afford it and take it back or figure out a way to pay for his mistake and never do it again. The manic person would buy the car, feel great about it and think that it would all work out! Then in the depressive state realize that he couldn't pay for the car, get depressed over it and things soon get out of control. This is

a simplistic explanation, but one that I could understand. My intellectual self understands it, my heart does not.

We have been on this journey for 9 years. We have been in the black hole of despair and hopelessness. Right now we are seeing the light and for that we are thankful.

Our son has not been "cured", but we have educated ourselves, found support for ourselves and welcomed our son home again.

In this column, I will continue to take you on our journey. For now, there are a few things that I want you to know.

1. *My faith in God has lifted me through these times. My mantra is truly the [Footprints](#) verse. God has carried me many times. This is bigger than me, and without God's care, I would not have survived.*
2. *Your loved one with mental illness needs you to be there. I have been there at times and not been there at times. I do not beat myself up for the times when I have not. I have gone into survival mode during these times and there have been times that I wasn't there because I didn't think I needed to be. You always need to be there in one way or another.*
3. *Your family and friends are your best support system and those that have unconditional love will be. Those that do not, will not. I accept that. Everyone has a right to their opinion, but so do I.*
4. *When I thought that God had abandoned me, I looked around and had to recognize who he had put in my life to help me. Once I realized that God works in many different ways, I accepted that too, with great gratitude.*
5. *I have felt like giving up many times. However, I know that God would not create such a wonderful young man like our son and give up on his own work.*
6. *This is not an easy road and there are no silver bullets. With each day that is a good day, I thank the Lord. With each day that is not so great, I pray for strength.*
7. *You have to [educate yourself about mental illness](#). Once you understand it, you will be able to better deal with it.*

In the future, I hope to address family relationships, the relationship with our son, the journey our marriage has been on, the stigma of mental illness and its affect on family and consumer. Some day, I might just write about my day.

Stay tuned!

Harrison's Mom