

Can I do it?

One of the greatest discoveries a man makes, one of his great surprises, is to find he can do what he was afraid he couldn't do. – Henry Ford

Isn't that the truth? I like the first part – “one of the greatest discoveries a man makes”. You see Mason, after years of struggling and fighting myself and my illness and discovering the world and all that I could possibly take in right and wrong, I was then ready to discover myself a little more. But, Mason – I was scared to death to discover who I was. The image or images that I had created over the years to mask all that was going on in the inside always ‘looked’ pretty good. I never considered myself a shallow person or narrow minded – in fact I was a pretty deep thinker – but that is not what I showed people therefore that is not what they saw or knew of me. So I thought, “now what?”

Now let's look at the second part of this quote by Henry Ford, “one of his great surprises”. I was surprised yet a bit overwhelmed. I was surprised to see that through all of those years that I had absorbed a lot more than I realized. Another thing that surprised me was the fact that I had absorbed a lot more of my instilled belief system that I was raised with – than I thought I had. I had spent a lot of years wanting to be on the edge, living on the edge and hanging on the cliff just to push myself and see just how far I might be able to go. This was in part Mania and personality. My personality would take me to the edge – Mania would shove me off! By the age of 38, Thinking of my own life and writing about my own life was like going to the library! My perception of myself changed from, “you are a loser that never got it right” to “who is this man and what a life!” This was quite the paradigm shift for me. Could it actually be that I was interesting enough to have something to say? Could it be that while writing about my life, I could help someone like me – take a path that could be both interesting, but safe? I never wanted to encourage the mentally ill to hibernate and isolate – however, like a mother with a child – I wanted them safe. With the same train of thought – their gifts amazed me, their voice that was silenced – was something that needed to be heard. The surprise to me was the fact that while I owned my story and my life, I wanted to translate others – I wanted to speak for them when they could not speak.

This brings me to the final part of Mr. Ford's quote, "is to find he can do what he was afraid he couldn't do". Could I? Could I speak on behalf of my "lost" – could I communicate my story in a way that anyone could understand? Could I translate the lives of so many people I had interviewed over the years in a way that both gave them credit for who they are and still show the severity of mental illness? Could I do what I was most afraid of – could I go back into my own memories, analyze them objectively and then present them in a way that can prove that our current system is not working? Memories that I have tried SO hard to run from – memories that have haunted me for years upon years. Memories that have taken me to suicide attempts and fetal position tears. Could I face the most difficult times in my life? Could I then write about them? Could I then shed every image that I had built around me and expose the real me and the real experiences and still be able to hold my head up and look at the people I love? No act that I had ever done was more shameful than the acts that were done to me – however, a lot of shame comes with being assaulted especially sexually. Could I face these fears and memories?

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Yes, I can. Not easily – not quickly, but yes, I can. Nearly twenty thousand people are in Ohio's prisons right now, at this very minute with a severe mental illness with crimes that do not involve violence. An estimated 80% of them are going to be assaulted in one way or another by inmates or by correctional staff. 90% are going to be called "psycho" and "crazy" – when they go to get their medication they will be told they have to go get their "skittles". Twenty thousand lives are currently being embedded with memories like mine that will haunt them the rest of their life because they are sleeping beside murderers and rapists rather than in a hospital environment where they belong.

My discovery was that I can do this. My surprise was that I had the courage to do so and as far as doing what I am afraid to do? Well, I said, "am going to do it" – I may be a 100 years old by time I see it – but I am going to do it. If

society was so bound and determined to hold me so accountable for my mistakes and lack of complying with rules and laws – you damn well better believe I would set about making sure that the systems in place in this country were going to do the same. And so another mountain and another climb began, but this time it would be done my way – and this time I would not allow my illness to push me off the cliff.