

This week has been busy with preparing a speech for the Candle Light Vigil to kick off Mental Health Awareness week, which begins on Sunday, October 4th.

Today marks the 9th month that I have been home and I can't help but to evaluate where I have been, where I am and where I am going. I remember a year ago sitting in a prison cell working on Harrison's Story and wondering if I would ever be able to share it. Daily, as I wrote about myself projected 40 years from then, I would sit and wonder if anyone would ever read the pages that I had been working on for so many months and the story that I had been living for so many years.

At that time I was deeply concerned about what my mental state would be like upon my release. I made sure that I had telephone numbers of hospitals and doctors in my little address book, because I thought certain that I was not going to be able to go directly home and be stable. It was impossible for me to even imagine what life was going to be like. How people would receive me and how I would receive them. Undoubtedly, I thought of the times that I didn't have this opportunity and I also thought of so many that would never have such an opportunity. In ways that seems like a year ago yet in so many other ways – it seems to be current to me, just as many things are.

I think the first couple of months were simply “what do I do?” – I walked on my tip toes and isolated myself as much as possible. Those that I did come in contact with seemed to relate to me as if nothing had ever happen. For the sake of socializing, I appreciated that... but there has also been the continuance of flashbacks and the closeness in which I have with my past that

burns in me at times when others act as if nothing has ever happened, because all too much *has* happened. This is simply an internal process and journey that I must continue on, until I am able to make some sort of closure with my own experiences.

Within these 9 months, we have launched a website with over 12 thousand viewers, we are speaking at various events and presenting at other events. A book is in editing and will one day be published. I have interacted with many with Mental Illness and have done more research than my bookshelves allow. My therapist says that he is impressed as does my doctor... I, on the other hand would much prefer to see more results. I am happy with what has been done, don't get me wrong, but what has become so apparent to me is my ability. I would love to blame it on age, but I am only 38 years old. I simply cannot do what I once was able to do so easily.

Now I am not writing this for sympathy. All too often I believe that my writings are taken in that context. I do not feel sorry for myself. I am blessed beyond anything I know or can imagine. I have had an extraordinary life, throughout the world and throughout the cultures provided to us. To know what it feels like to board a private jet AND to walk with the homeless as a homeless, hungry person is a gift to me, it was a gift to my life and my perception of humanity and one I hold closely to my heart. The reason I am writing this is because it is imperative that people understand that I or anyone are not "cured" from their Mental Illnesses. Mental Illness is something that progresses and continues with a daily, if not hourly maintenance check. It is a tight rope of sorts that we, with Mental Illness walk. This is a challenge that I accept, knowing full well the

consequences of what happens if I fall. At this point in my illness, it is not a matter of “screwing up” or “not maintaining” it would be a question of life or death. My Psychiatrist explained to my father once, “You have a responsibility of making sure that Cory takes his medication and has treatment... it is no longer a question of him spending too much money – if he does not maintain this illness, it will kill him – it is black and white – he will die.”

I will say this; the past nine months have been easier than I thought they ever could be. It is amazing what God and love can do. I prayed for years, “just keep me safe, and let me feel safe all I want is to be is safe.” I have been given that and much more. I would rather give up food than to feel unsafe and I have experienced both so I speak with confidence. Every day since I have been home has been a challenge. Not because of my environment, but because of my mind. Every glance and word from someone can easily be distorted in the paranoia that exits in my head. I have a few people that are close enough to me to realize these challenges without me even saying anything and I think at times I have lashed out, in words to people that I have expected to understand me – but don’t. There have been moments in the past nine months that I have grabbed a hold of my hair (what is left of it – medication takes it) and pulled, fell onto my bed and just cringed in rage. I have been shocked awake in the middle of the night in complete sweat and fear from flashbacks. I have had anger run through my veins. Ten years of wanting to voice what I was going through pumping through my heart with nowhere to go, because too much has happened and passed to even bother.

When I came home, I came home to a group of people that understood Mental Illness and the severity of mine. They took into great consideration what I had been through and with compassion and concern, have been there for me. I am certain there are many who don't understand and don't much care what happened, but even they, I believe are comforted that I am home with my family. My battle continues within myself, the fight for my sanity and the struggle to make some resolution with my past. I have a few close friends in which I can share how I am feeling without harsh judgment or throwing my past in my face and I have my parents with whom have only my best interest at heart and have never judged me for my actions, but are fiercely protective of me from my illness.

So what happens if you don't have a family to come home to? What happens if your environment is not conducive to maintaining your illness? What happens if you have no money to go to a doctor or a bed to rest your head? What happens if you don't understand your illness or the severity of it? What happens when you have offended everyone in your life because you lashed out at them from your emotions? What happens when we don't care? When we close off those that don't behave as we feel they should? When we are not *aware* of their illnesses.

I am writing this a few days prior to Mental Health Awareness Week because I feel that awareness is vital to the situation at hand. The Mentally Ill in this country and the world are very sick and they are being punished at alarming rates by the criminal justice system, their own families and the judgments placed on them by society. I know the stigmas attached to the

illnesses, believe me – I have been called them and been defined by them for years! This ignorance kills – it leaves people with no ability to maintain their illness and with a sense of simply giving up. It leads to one person every 14 minutes dying by their own hand because they cannot do it alone. Mental Illness was no more of a choice to me than my blue eyes. There isn't a darn thing I can do about it. I can maintain it to the best of my ability, but I will never get rid of it. I have seen Cancer in loved ones, I have watched them die with compassion and love surrounding them from an illness they had no control over. I have been watching the Mentally Ill die for years, including myself at times, with no compassion and no love and instead of healthcare – punishment.

A report was recently released that stated the fact... a Bipolar male has a life expectancy of 42 years of age. I don't think that is such a futile statistic, something we should not be aware of. Mental Illness has no boundaries; it affects the rich as it does the poor, the educated as it does the uneducated. Be aware, pay attention and have the compassion necessary for those that are simply trying to survive... and maybe one day – they will thrive! Understand that those suffering with Mental Illness, I assure you, want it less than you! This is not fun, there is nothing fun about it at all. It is one thing to be sick and it is quite another to be misunderstood and judged because you are sick. To wake up in the morning and feel that you are less of a human being than others because of an illness you never asked for or contracted, but were just given, is in itself a daily battle.

This is what Mental Health Awareness means to me. I don't mind if you don't have the time or the care to educate yourself

on all the information available about Mental Illnesses. What I do care about is the fact that people are AWARE that these illnesses are as real as anything on this earth. I am not sure what we are going to do with the fact that the prison population in Ohio has grown 43% while the Mentally Ill prison growth has grown 285% (and no that is not a typo – TWO HUNDRED AND EIGHTY FIVE PERCENT!) There is no money in public funding for Mental Health Care – Mental Health Hospitals are being closed and people are committing suicide at alarming rates. The ONLY thing that I can hold onto is hope and the fact that AWARENESS has to be the key. We must CARE; we MUST stop the punishment and start the treatment. This all comes from AWARENESS. Be aware of what your local governments are doing. Be aware of what your prosecutors and judges are doing. Be aware of the needs that community based organizations have that you may be able to give. Shame should not be a symptom of Mental Illness, but far too often, it is. It is a symptom because of public perception and because of ignorance and stigma. These walls must be broken so that people do not have to be shameful of getting the help they so desperately need. AWARENESS can do this; AWARENESS can break down those walls and provide an outlet for people who are experiencing difficulties that currently they are embarrassed to even discuss.

All I ask is that you are AWARE of the people around you – you never know just how much better you might have it than the person next to you and that goes for everything in life, not just Mental Illness.

Cory

