

WHAT YOU CAN, WHEN YOU CAN, HOW YOU CAN

This is my story of being diagnosed 11 years ago and learning to cope with an illness that not only takes away life but quality of life. This is my story of learning to have hope and persevere with an illness that confounds me. My story is unique, but I know I am not alone. This is the story of a young woman who has been through the worst parts of the storm and now dedicates every day to finding the rainbows. This is the story of learning to do what you can, when you can, how you can.

There are some sounds that I have gotten used to. The sound of feet shuffling in those sticky hospital socks. The sound of the door opening every 15 minutes and a nurse saying "...checks!" The sound of the judge shows that tend to play continuously in psychiatric unit free rooms and the scratchy sound of thin sheets against thin plasticized mattresses. I've gotten used to those sounds, but my favorite sound of all is the sound of a pay phone ringing and someone yelling, "Simone! Simone! Someone is on the phone for you." Whenever I get sick, it is those calls that get me through. That one sound makes home not feel so far away and reminds me that I'm just having an episode and than soon enough everything will be ok and the channel, so to speak, will change. I had my first memorable episode at the age of 13. I didn't know what was happening. I was hanging out at the youth coffeehouse that I went to every Friday night. I was a freshman in high school and going through teenage angst was no fun, but my angst was different. I was depressed. I was suicidal. I was manic and I was very confused. I was at the coffeehouse, dancing as if I had had 13 espressos, talking to my friends so quickly they couldn't understand me; I felt out of control. My heart was racing and my mind simply couldn't slow down. I remember thinking I had to calm down, so I sat to play video games and the next thing I remember I was crying and dry heaving in a corner, so despondent my mother had to come back early. That's when therapy started and that's how old I was when my mom told me that I had bipolar disorder.

I can say now, that it was an early diagnosis of bipolar disorder that saved my life. In total I have had, probably what feels like, hundreds of episodes, but maybe 20 major episodes and nearly 13 hospitalizations. I have had many different treatments and I have been on many different medications. I have experienced some really challenging side effects. I have gone to work drooling. I have been unable to wake up before 12noon or stay up past 6pm. I have gained 60 pounds in four months. I have lost friends to this illness. I have spent many wakeless nights cursing the gods for this disease, but in 2006 something changed. It was my worst suicide attempt to date. The doctors were surprised I survived and I made a promise to myself that I would not only never do that again, but that I would work every day to find joy in my life. So, I started small. I learned Dialectical Behavior Therapy. I started doing daily morning affirmations by telling myself that I was beautiful, loveable and had nothing to be ashamed of. I learned that I had to take care of myself with monk-like discipline. I stopped drinking, smoking cigarettes, eating sugar and, instead, began drinking water, practicing meditation, eating foods I could pronounce, dancing, and celebrating each moment of my existence with exuberance and joy. If I think about living my whole life with bipolar it's overwhelming. Not knowing how my moods may shift. Not knowing who my bipolar will try to convince me to push away. Not knowing if my darkest days will settle upon me once again. So instead I live with one idea in my head. I take my life one day at a time and I do what I can, when I can, how I can. It has been 11 years since I was diagnosed. Some days are easier than others. My episodes are different now. For a long time the serious episodes were separated by weeks and not months. For a long time my parents weren't sure if I was going to make it. But no one gave up on me and because of that I never gave up on myself. Eleven years later here I

am. I am happy. I am in a beautiful and loving relationship. I'm working on my first book. My family and I get along well. I have great health professionals supporting me and, best of all, I have hope. And I know that bipolar will not be the end of my story.