

Salvaged

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“Impaired functioning; combative towards nursing staff.”

Those were the words written next to my official bipolar diagnosis 13 years ago. I received my “label” while involuntarily hospitalized after a failed suicide attempt. I was discharged with a script for an anti-depressant and an accordion brochure outlining the dangers of living while under the debilitating influence of depression.

It took 8 more years for me to put the finishing touches on my masterpiece of destruction; by then every bridge was burned, every cord severed, I’d wrecked three marriages and lost custody of my four children. I was a drug-addicted alcoholic, seized by a disease that had no face or form. In 2004, I woke up three days after another botched suicide attempt, knowing I’d finally hit the legendary rock-bottom I’d heard so much about. I called my ex-husband, who had never stopped believing in me and we began the long and arduous journey back to sanity.

I think a lot of people with a mental illness of ANY kind...from depression to full blown psychosis, feel as if they were born with a defect. A permanent scar on the brain that morphs into a scab. Some of us pick at the scab, re-opening the wound; letting it ooze, making us sick; then letting it scab over until we’re ready to pick at it again. But I decided that, hey! I don’t like a nasty scab! Who wants an oozing scab on their brain? So I made the choice to put some medicine on my scabby scar. It won’t go away completely. It’ll itch from time to time. People might notice it. Other days you can even cover it up.

Occasionally there’s anger when I have to stop and take meds three times a day. A personality manufactured and designed by brightly colored pellets. I think the common misconception is that a pill is the knight in shining armor, expected to numb the pain of the past and smack a smile on our face. Sure, medicine plays a crucial role in managing our illness...but it’s just the gasoline and windshield wiper fluid. YOU still have to drive, follow directions and try to avoid hitting pedestrians and mail boxes. It took me close to five years to find my medicinal sweet spot. There were times when I just wanted to flush everything down the toilet, grab a bottle of wine and run off to the Land of Irresponsibility. What kept me focused was a combination of meds and cognitive behavioral therapy. One thing that people fail to realize is that, regardless of meds, bipolar still has a room upstairs. The cycles still come and go. Only now the lows aren’t life threatening and the highs aren’t obscenely grandiose.

One of the biggest adjustments I’ve had to make is realizing that it’s imperative to go the “speed limit”. But once again, the cognitive skills came to my rescue, teaching me how to discipline myself and work through any patches of confusion and despair. So I’ve taken my foot off the accelerator and started eating three meals a day. Going to bed and waking up at the same time. Incorporating yoga and relaxation techniques to keep stress levels down. Instead of alienating friends and family, I’ve drawn them closer. Having a support system is imperative. Even if it’s just two or three people! Most importantly, laugh. Even when people say bipolar and humor are an inappropriate combo...laugh!

Because I’ve overcome a past of repeated failures, I feel a profound sense to be of service. So five years ago I decided to swallow the lump in my throat and invite strangers into my skeleton closet to browse. Sure, it gets ugly from time to time. But most days you’ll see a successful mom, artist, writer and mental health advocate taking things five minutes at a time. My hope is that my transparency will play a part in educating and supporting mental health consumers AND their families and friends.

There are a myriad of lifestyle changes that have to be made to ensure a good quality of life for the person living with bipolar. Sometimes it takes a lot of trial and error. The most important thing to remember is that underneath of the diagnosis and its management, there is a truly beautiful soul with far more potential and strength than the average Joe.

It’s this core of our being that defines who we are. Not a disease. Not a diagnosis.