

The Examined Life by Tom Wernigg

A man walks into a psychologist's office and says, "Doctor, you gotta' help me. I keep thinking I'm a set of curtains." The doctor says, "Pull yourself together man..."

Actually, I walked into **my** therapist's office a couple days ago. I told her I was nervous about speaking here today.

She said, "Relax, stay focused. What is it you hope to accomplish?" I decided there are two things. I accomplished the first by signing up to speak. By *coming out* as someone with a mood disorder, I am realizing the broader commitment of being *out* in all aspects of who I am, to stop hiding behind masks. The second reason is more in line with being a teacher. I am telling my story to put a face on a diagnosis. My struggles will resonate with many of you, because you know someone or have a family member who also struggles with mental illness. Maybe my story will help you better understand them—or even yourself.

According to Wikipedia, **mental illness** is a *substantial disorder of thought or mood which significantly impairs judgment, behavior, capacity to recognize reality or cope with the ordinary demands of life and is manifested by substantial pain or disability.* Reading further, I discovered that **mental disorders** have been found to be common, with over a third of people in most countries reporting sufficient criteria at some point in their life.

I have been diagnosed Bipolar Type II, which is a mood disorder. I am constrained to point out that this is less severe than Bipolar Type I or other more pronounced mental disorders, like schizophrenia. (Perhaps it is the stigma of *mental illness* that makes me emphasize this point.) The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (or DSM) describes mental illness in terms of neurotransmitters and their effects on thoughts and feelings. In other words, the brain malfunctions because of a chemical imbalance. Mental illness is generally believed to be at least partially inherited. In my case, this inheritance most surely comes down from my father's side of the family. My dad came from Hungary, for some time the suicide capital of the world. He himself was to die from suicide in May 1986. My brother would follow him a year and a half later. But before either of them, back in 1982—a year after graduating from high school—I tried to kill myself. I took pills I found at my father's house while he and my new stepmother were on their honeymoon.

I should point out that I had been determined to kill myself at least since middle school; and hardly a day of high school went by that I didn't fantasize about ways to do it. But I

somehow made it through that notoriously painful stage of life without finding the will or the means, and I left high school with some vague hope that the adult world would be different for me—or at the very least I might get a girlfriend.

I did get a girlfriend, and predictably she broke my heart. The pills appeared magically when I was at my lowest. I didn't recognize the name on the labels, but they looked dangerous enough. So I emptied three bottles, and I waited. Within a few minutes, my vision became blurry; my breath became short; and my pulse started racing. That's when the enormity of what I had just done sank in. Feeling consciousness fading, I grabbed the telephone and called—well, my girlfriend—and she raced over to take me to the hospital.

After pouring charcoal down a tube into my stomach to neutralize the poison, they stuck me in intensive care. At one point I watched my heartbeat flatten out on the screen above me—while feeling consciousness slipping away—and I willed my heart to beat. I found my instinct for survival; or fear of death. Maybe I only **thought** that I caused my heart to beat. But the fact remains I chose life, and it's a choice I've had to live with—thankfully—for these 27 years.

Before they would let me out of the hospital, I had to make an appointment with a therapist, and thus began my long history with the mental health establishment, which continues to this day. In fact, I've been in therapy almost constantly since then. And yet, it wasn't until a couple years ago that I got a diagnosis that has truly helped me.

Bipolar Disorder is the new name for what they used to call Manic-Depression, a disorder that is characterized by moods that swing wildly between depression and mania. Mania is, according to a book by Demitri and Janice Papolos, a state where *“...the person experiences an increased rate of thinking, has surges of energy, and describes him or herself as feeling more active, creative, intelligent, and sexual than he or she ever thought possible.”* Type 2's like me get less dramatic highs. But I do have periods when I am convinced that I will never be depressed again. Even against a long record to the contrary.

The other side of the bipolar coin, of course, is depression, and this is where my moods tend to linger: mind-numbing, bone-crunching depression.

Let me try to describe what depression is like, for the uninitiated. When I am depressed, it feels eternal, like I have always been depressed and will always be so. I long for love and comfort, but feel unlovable and beyond comfort. I long for solitude;

yet, when I find it, I am overcome with an intense loneliness, condemned to face the abyss alone.

When I am depressed, I feel hopelessly inadequate. I can't concentrate; my memory fails me; the continuity between one moment and the next is interrupted. A "job" becomes intolerable under these circumstances; obligation wipes out the hope of escape; responsibility feels like a terrible burden. When "on the job" I am defenseless, with no sanctuary to retreat to. I get overloaded with sensory data, and my instinct is to freeze, like an animal waiting for some danger to pass. I've gone through about 60 jobs in my life—escaping from one nightmare to another.

Social interaction has always been difficult for me for the same reasons. I feel trapped when I can't escape to the seclusion of my own room. Even as an adult—even when I am with family or friends who know I have a problem with depression—this can be painful. I tell people to never mind me, to go on and have a good time. Yet it feels cruel, even absurd, that others should be frivolous while I suffer. It's been the story of my life. "Lighten up," people have always told me. They don't understand why I can't just "snap out of it", or "make the best of things".

I've tried the "fake it 'til you make it" approach all my life. I desperately wanted to be normal—to be different from my brother and my father—so I've tried to see my depression as within the normal range of emotion. But it simply isn't. One reason I know this is that my depressions come on more or less randomly—though they are more likely to appear when I am not taking good care of myself. But there isn't always a discernable trigger. Everything can be going my way, and then: BOOM. I've looked for the cause in vain. I've been tested for food and chemical allergies; I've submitted myself to every therapy from primal scream to hypnosis; I've had my astrological chart done; I've tried rebirthing and meditation; I've scoured the libraries for self-help books on depression.

But, until very recently, I've refused any suggestion of medication. My brother and father had medicine cabinets full of pills, and look what happened to them! Mostly, I've simply tried to live with depression. And it hasn't always been easy.

High School, for instance: when **everybody** feels like they're going crazy. My brother went crazy in high school, literally. He was hospitalized, and diagnosed schizophrenic. When I went to visit him, he wouldn't recognize me, and claimed he was Jesus. At about the same time my parents split up. Neither of them explained to me what was going on with Dennis. My mother was an emotional wreck. She moved us from Virginia to Wisconsin in my senior year to be near *her* mother. The first thing I remember was

going raccoon hunting with my cousin, and trying to hold a hockey stick on ice. (Which I wasn't very good at)

Mostly what I remember about that time was the shame. I did not feel worthy of attention—or love (neither of which, incidentally, was I getting). To counter this, I led a Walter Mitty-like existence, imagining that I was an extraordinary person—a genius like my brother—and that others were unworthy of *my* attention. I admired writers like Hemingway, Capote and J.D. Salinger, for they at least had the courage to withdraw from a society that was unworthy of their genius—through isolation or drugs or suicide. I liked Dostoyevski perhaps best of all. He had faced a firing squad and been reprieved at the last moment, an experience he likened to clinging to a windowsill over a bottomless pit. He said he would have chosen the windowsill a thousand times over the abyss—which is how I fought laying in that hospital bed. From his portrait of Raskalnikov in *Crime and Punishment*, I could see that he understood shame.

Ultimately, I was ashamed to even be alive—let alone be in love. High school was a living hell: awash with shame, longing for love—or for any kind of relief from the daily grind of despair—confused, powerless: I skulked along the hallways, hid in the shadows, avoiding the crush of the herd.

One bright spot in high school (and the reason I chose to be a teacher) was Mr. Taylor, an ex-minor league baseball player, who chain-smoked in his office, and would giggle in class over lines in Shakespeare. He inspired me to read. And I found many examples in books of people like me: over-sensitive, misunderstood, and tormented...In books their struggles took on meaning. So, I had two dreams: I would become a writer, and find meaning in my suffering and express that through my art; or I would one day emerge from my nightmare—adulthood would break the spell—and I would find power and redemption in the post high-school world. In a way, both are happening now. I have become a writer, of sorts. And gradually I'm finding redemption.

I actually thought I found it in college. After four years eking out a miserable existence as a dishwasher, I enrolled at George Mason University, in Virginia. I founded an underground newspaper with some friends I made at the Rats Keller, and miraculously I found a sort of celebrity. I was shaken in 1986 when my father jumped out his 8th story window at the Watergate Condominiums. But when my brother was found dead in his car, with a hose duct-taped to the tailpipe, the world seemed to fall in on me. I remember walking the streets at night, screaming in empty parking lots, kneeling at locked churches, searching my psyche for a sign that I was different—that I was normal.

I moved back to Wisconsin to be with what was left of my family, thinking these twin tragedies might bring us closer together. They didn't. I drifted out to Santa Cruz, where for a time I lived in the rafters of the Café Cameleon. Other refugees there included: the singer for a band called the Vicious Midgets; a cartoonist who was to later earn notoriety as a cross-dressing ATM bandit; and a punk named Zay Heron Mohead, who had a totem pole tattooed on...well, it was a colorful group of folks. Then I lived with a masseuse for 3 years, who ended up leaving me for her dealer.

I fled to Guatemala, and then El Salvador, where the first election with a legalized FMLN was taking place. I was to meet someone who never showed up. Nothing amplifies solitude more than a language barrier. I wandered streets of rubble and felt my sanity slipping away. I saw children living in cardboard boxes in landfills, and I wondered why that wasn't me. I deserved no better.

Somehow I found my way back to Guatemala, which was still embroiled at that time in a civil war. I took buses all over the country, staying in two or three-dollar hotels, trying to stretch out what little money I had left. I found a volunteer position teaching in a small rural village. But six months later I was back in the states, brought down by depression and dysentery. I couldn't work for a year and a half, and no one could figure out what was wrong with me. I thought I had chronic fatigue syndrome. I was living with my mother and began to see myself as the *crazy man in the attic*. We barely communicated. Very gradually I came back to life, so to speak, and eventually I found myself back in California, where I met my wife Wendy. With her encouragement, I started taking Zoloft, which seemed to work for a while. I did experience an awakening of sorts. But with the stressful combination of marriage, career, children and middle age, the depressions returned. My therapist suspected bipolar disorder, and a painful period of experimentation followed. Eventually we found a combination of medications that have changed my life; and here I am.

A theme that has run through my life has been a quest for solitude, which is a little baffling, since in solitude I tend toward paranoia. But since childhood I've yearned for this perfect communion with myself—a place where I could find commiseration, and where I could rail against the world.

But gradually I came to realize that solitude was only marginally better than being embroiled in the world around me. Time itself was the enemy, it seemed. I have at different times used coffee, alcohol, cigarettes, recklessness, and promiscuity to create some illusion of control.

But things have shifted dramatically over these last few years. I have experienced not so much control, but peace, without using any of the above. Thanks to the medications, I've learned to see contentment as a reliable experience. Even when I am depressed—and this is something totally new—I can remind myself of this, and I am coming to trust that peace will return. Thus: no more chasing after the perfect experience, or perfect solitude, or perfect forgetfulness. I still gravitate toward solitude, but no longer do I crave and dread it simultaneously.

Perhaps it goes without saying, but I am glad I failed in my attempt to end my life. Like Dostoyevski, I chose the ledge over the chasm that hangs beneath it—without knowing that my life would improve. (Pause) I have to remember that the prognosis is that I will have bad depressions again—periodically, for the rest of my life. This gives me pause. But it's sort of like telling the man who has been hit by lightning 100 times that a thunderstorm is coming. "Oh, well".

I don't consider myself religious, but I am an optimist. I don't know where it comes from, but an optimistic outlook is what has kept me plugging away all these years, looking for "the cure." I refused to believe that misery was my destiny.

If there is a god, I don't know how I could ever forgive him for what happened to my brother and my father. But I've come to see there is a flow of energy between people—perhaps between all things—that gives life meaning. I grew up and spent the better part of my life separated from this energy; but now, like the addict who has first tasted his drug—I cannot imagine living without it. I have allowed myself to love, and be loved, and this is the main ingredient in my recipe for redemption.

And here is my faith: if I follow the compass of my love always, though I may wander down many a dead end, I believe that I will be expressing the eternal and the divine, and all else will be excusable. Life is better, to be sure. But I retain an awareness, as most of us do, of how cruel life *can* be.

So how do I remain positive? Well, there are different things. The courage of others...inspires me—especially when it involves self-sacrifice. This last election: it's hard not to feel a bit of optimism about that. Music, art, film, literature, cartoons. Science. The magic of childbirth. To paraphrase Utah Phillips, who inspired many of us with his optimism, "Too many good people are doing too many good things for me to afford the luxury of pessimism."

Here is what I have come to believe through my experiences:

- I know that my struggle to overcome depression—however futile it seemed at times—has made me stronger and wiser.
- I know that everything that happens ***happens*** for a reason. That reason may be as simple (and non-spiritual) as the law of cause and effect, but knowing this moves me toward acceptance.
- I believe that my ordeals, though not gifts in themselves, have given me gifts...for instance, I have come to appreciate simply feeling okay.
- I take great joy knowing that I am giving my children better attention than I got as a child. I tell them I love them everyday, and I stand committed to act on that love; to listen to them without judgment; to forgive their clumsiness and inexperience in the ways of the world; to treat them as equals; to set aside time to be their friends.
- Perhaps most importantly: I have learned not to be ashamed of who I am.

My path to recovery has been through the gate of therapy. In the hands of my therapist, Psychology is both a science and an art. In an environment of absolute trust, I have confided in her things that I've held onto for decades. And in this spirit of confession, with her gentle guidance—yes—I have found redemption. The examined life is worth living, as it turns out. If it becomes otherwise, I make a vow to come to one of you and ask you to help me find my way. I cannot do this alone. None of us can.

I hope. I doubt. I love. And I follow my passions. May it be so for each of you as well....

(Amen)

*Popolos, Dimitri and Janice: *The Bipolar Child*. 2002: Random House, New York. Page 5

**Wikipedia, "Mental disorder", at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mental_illness

Benediction:

As you go forth, remember that life, examined or otherwise, is worth living. You are part of a community that needs you. And you never know what gifts await you around the next corner...