

Story from a Church Member

As a child, I gravitated to the music of Beethoven, which spoke to me. The artwork of Van Gogh fascinated me and I stared many evenings into his *Starry Night*. As a teen struggling to connect with my peers, I found the books of Anne Rice and became captivated by her protagonist, Lestat. A character at times so full of energy and creativity that his peers grew weary of him, yet at other times so full of melancholy that he retreated into dark corners to sleep for decades at a time. He felt... familiar.

Before I knew there was such a mental state as bipolar, I recognized it. My child brain was picking out and collecting the works of like-minded people – those who are ‘emotionally action packed’!

How completely soul crushing it was for me, that moment when I acknowledged my bipolar diagnosis.

I struggled with reconciling myself under these new terms. I sought to understand it and subsequently discovered that many of my favourite artists experienced bipolar. But, to own this term meant that I am mentally ill. It meant considering that my inspirational people, the ones who I believed were beautiful and genius, are the mentally ill people according to modern science.

In the early months after my diagnosis I experienced moments of denial.

“The bipolar mind is a gift! It’s not sick, or a disability! Look at the creativity it’s capable of because it can tap into *all* spectrums of human emotion, without inhibition! How can these beautiful moments stem from a place of illness? You’re telling me I need to medicate this gift away because I’m sick?”

Take your mood stabilizers and you will see how impaired you’ve become, said my doctor.

So I did... and I saw.

Yet, a part of me still rebels from the thought that what I experience is an impairment (which is a very symptom of the illness). For a time, I felt that I was being forced to medicate away a part of my true self only because it was unhealthy for society. What would society offer me in return? Stigma.

I've since learned more about how my illness works, and completed therapy to learn how to recognize when I'm being dominated by it. Only recently have I finally, truly, understood having bipolar.

When I can achieve inner balance, I am my true self. Often, I can only do this by taking mood-stabilizing medication for long terms. Like a diabetic, I am under a life-long regime of carefully watching my habits, diet and exercise, and monitoring my medication intake and responses. In addition, I monitor my inner thoughts and emotional reactions. I know that if I don't do this, I risk letting my condition get out of control, which could have fatal consequences. Unlike a diabetic, I am faced with shame for my condition.

Society pushes the mentally ill to the periphery because they make us uncomfortable. They're unhealthy, unpredictable, unsafe. As a disability, the *defaults*, not the *strengths* of the person tend to be recognized. How others judge the mentally ill is one of the greatest barriers we face to enjoying a complete and satisfying life.

Most of us suffering are too scared to talk about it because we fear ridicule. We fear being misunderstood. I fear being locked up in an institution, or how other's knowledge of my mental illness could create barriers to my life enjoyment. I've spent a big chunk of my life avoiding social contact and avoiding seeking the help I needed, because I feared the stigma.

Facing the stigma of mental illness every day is being bullied by an entire society. Perpetuating stigma is a form of bullying. Misuse of medical terms to belittle a group of people is bullying. Bullying isn't just an issue for schoolyards, it is happening every day in society and the mentally ill are paying for it with their lives.

I dream of a society that uses terms like *Differently Abled* to replace disabled. I dream of a society that listens to each other. I dream of a society where mental illness is treated in an inclusive, not exclusive manner. I dream of a future where if my son or daughter suffers from mental illness, they won't wait until it has nearly destroyed their life before accepting treatment, because they will feel it's safe to *seek* treatment.

[Note from Christine Guth, Anabaptist Disabilities Network:

Stories have power. Stories from people in your congregation can be the most powerful of all. Creating safe spaces for the telling of stories sometimes requires a courageous person to take the first step of breaking the silence surrounding mental illness. If you don't have someone in your congregation ready to share a personal story of living with mental illness, inviting a reader to dramatize a prepared story in monologue form may be a step toward inviting stories to emerge from within a congregation. Thanks to a member from Valleyview Mennonite Church, London, Ontario, for sharing the story above.]

Anabaptist Disabilities Network
www.adnetonline.org

Member Story – Mental Health Month, May 2014
Valleyview Mennonite Church, London, Ontario