DOLPHINS CHANGING MINDS

REFLECTIONS ON EXPERIENCES WITH MENTAL HEALTH FROM THE LE MOYNE COLLEGE COMMUNITY
A STORY OF RECOVERY
Bill Kirchoff
parent

On the bright Sunday morning before our son was to begin college, the ring of our doorbell heralded what was to be, thus far, our darkest odyssey into the world of mental health struggles. Two compassionate police officers informed us that our son had attempted suicide, but survived and called 911, claiming that he believed the world and he would be safer if he were not on earth. He suffered: a broken number six vertebra, two broken ribs, two lost teeth, a laceration to the liver (Grade 4), and a totally shattered left wrist (which was hailed by the medics as the unusual hero of his fall). His first words to us were, “I’m sorry Mom and Dad. Is your heart okay Mom?”

How had our precious son, who had successfully navigated Asperger’s, anxiety, and mild OCD all his life with little medication and still managed to achieve success as a cross-country runner and a “Top Ten” graduate in his class, arrived at this near-fatal initiative? How could a remarkably empathetic and gentle soul who firmly claimed he wanted to help the environment and discover a cure for Autism, suddenly believe that the world was better off without him? These questions haunted not only us but, also, CPEP and the hospital staff who treated him, as we began our year-long pilgrimage to find a treatment/cure for our son before his hope and faith gave out.

The first great challenge was to even be able to identify the specific nature of his mental illness and many doctors, in their narrow examination of his symptoms, were baffled. Given the dearth of support groups and few medical resources in Syracuse, we became his researchers and discovered Harm OCD, as well as an innovative treatment surrounding depression and OCD. Autism was his excluding factor in most of these studies, indicating that we had been overlooking the nature of his Asperger’s and needed to refocus our research. One researcher, in particular, took such an interest in our son that he reached out to several doctors, who offered suggestions on treatments, resources, and other experts around the country. This led to a prominent doctor in Texas offering us yet another pro bono phone consultation in which he said we should pursue Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation (TMS). We began the battle pursuing TMS with his psychiatrist and our insurance carrier. In late April, now 8 months from when the nightmare unfolded, we were finally approved for TMS, which began in May of 2017. For the first time in several months we had hope.

Our son’s recovery, however, was not obtained by passively waiting for the medical world to heal him. We learned very quickly that a road to recovery could only begin with some sort of “one day at a time” mantra. That survival would come from a symbolic net of physical, emotional, intellectual, AND spiritual support, even though he felt some days like he had little reason to get out of bed. With his father’s loving support and pushing him to walk and swim and begin the morning ritual of drinking coffee with us, our son began swimming EVERY morning and walking/running every day. This was balanced by mandating that he still pursue education, even though he was on his “Gap Year” from Le Moyne for help. This resulted in his enrolling in several online courses including science, psychology and history. Every day we were committed to his maintaining a strict structure of exercise, study, and meditation/relaxation, which came through his maintaining a portfolio of diary entries, artwork, and research. Physical therapy also was mandated, as we adopted a kitten. We also believed he needed to find solace and purpose in helping others in some manner to alleviate his sole focus on his own health. He chose to volunteer each week at Meisal on Wheels or a local pet daycare/shelter. Each day, even if only in baby steps, our son began returning to himself and us. While we had to be strong in setting up the structures and advocating for medical treatment, he is the one who found the courage and hope to also heal himself. Also, a cornerstone throughout all this journey has been a select number of individuals who we believe are his angels on Earth: family, friends, doctors, nurses, researchers, online support groups, and his adviser and administrators from Le Moyne. These people reassured us and our son that his illness was a struggle, not a definition of who he was, had become, or would be. They never wavered in believing in his intellect and compassion. After two rounds of TMS, with a third one on the horizon, fourteen months from that fateful day, our son has returned to a full credit load, a 4.0 mid-term average, and is again eagerly looking to the future and hoping to cure Autism.

Treating mental illness, especially in Syracuse, is extremely difficult but not impossible. It takes a village to heal, as well as raise, a child. If we continue to research psychology, to share our stories to end the stigma of mental illness, the entire world will be our healing village.
LIVING WITH PARENTS THAT WERE NEVER TRULY THERE
college student

Have you ever heard of Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID), formerly named Multiple Personality Disorder (MPD)? Whether you have or have not, chances are that you have never witnessed a real case. Why? The preva-
ience of this disorder is extremely low, it is overly rare and controversial. However, my mother was formally diagnosed around age forty, after recalling horrific and traumatically personal events from her childhood. I do not think that the things that I have seen and heard can be explained in any other way than by psychology. I do understand why there are many speculations surrounding this disorder because it is difficult to imagine it being real. Regardless, I am here to take you on a short journey through what my life has been like as the daughter of a severely mentally ill woman.

The day that I found out was a day that I will never forget. I came home from school one day to find my dad already there, which was odd because he should have been at work. When I walked inside, my dad greeted me immedi-
ately. He told me that he had some serious news about what had gone on upstairs: my mother had a cracked heart with a hole. His mother had already died, and my dad warned me about what had gone on upstairs: my mother had a hole in her heart with a hole in it. When I walked inside, my dad greeted me imme-

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There have been multiple occasions where I have seen and/or heard my mother’s other identities. The “child” has been the most prominent, but certainly not the only. She also exhibits a dark, negative, and terrifying identity: one that has made my father and I fear for our lives. This particular identity has tried to kill my father in his sleep and has also tried to end my mother’s life as well. I understand that there may be some questions. “Why do you separate your mother from her ‘identities’?” “Why did your mom try to kill your dad?” “What do you mean that the ‘identity’ tried to kill her?” Well, to answer these questions, those “identities” are not my mother. As I have understood it, they are unconscious beings within my mother’s psyche who have attached to certain events and feelings from her past. After my mother ‘switched’ (as I consider it), she can never recall what happened or what she has done. It is, perhaps, the scarri-
est thing I have ever encountered in my life thus far.

However, not only has my mother suffered from this illness for the past several years, but she and my father have struggled with drug addictions. This began shortly after I was born (nearly twenty years ago), when my older brother was around six or seven years old. I cannot discuss all of the details surrounding my entire life, but most people could never imagine what we have gone through as young children. My brother took care of me in more ways than he should have, especially as young as he was. He used to make me dinner, make sure I brushed my teeth and got to bed early, so he could wake me up and get me ready for school the next day. He had to become my parent because we spent many nights alone, where my parents were out (often for nights alone, where my parents were out (often for

days at a time), fulfilling their need to cloud their minds and ease their pain.

Regardless of the trauma that my brother and I have experienced, I have always said that I am thankful for my parents and what they have put us through, which some people think is crazy. However, I have always tried to look at the situation as positively as possible because my brother and I have made great lives for ourselves thus far, and we have tremendously bright futures ahead of us. I did not always have this mindset, but as I have gotten older and wiser, I understand that the bulk of our struggles are in the past and my time with my parents is limited. Not a day goes by that I do not think about them and the pain that they constantly endure. To this day, we all battle with our addictions and mental illnesses as a family, which will never escape our lives.
For me, going to school has always been a struggle. The thought of waking up at an early hour, getting ready to see people I don’t really have any desire to interact with, the responsibility of homework and expectations of your peers and professors looming over you. This may make me sound lazy and unmotivated, but I am actually the complete opposite of that. I have a burning desire to learn and to make good grades, to have a lot of friends, and to impress my teachers and the people around me. However, due to my anxious behaviors and depression, this was always a challenge for me, and would continue to be so this very day. Unfortunately, this was not something I knew when these behaviors began to cause an issue in my life.

At the start of middle school, every morning was a battle. I would cry and complain about how I didn’t feel good so that I wouldn’t have to go to school that day. My parents could not get me to take the bus, for no reason at all. It’s not like someone was bullying me or giving me a hard time at school, there was just something wrong that none of us could identify. I would miss a lot of school because of this. Eventually my parents set me up with the school counselor. We met often and talked about how I felt, how things were at home, and at school. She gave me a “job” in the library before school everyday. When I looked back on this, it was simply a way to entice me to want to come to school everyday, giving me something to look forward to. Still the underlying problem was not being addressed.

College was a completely different bagaima though. As a commuter, it can be hard to make friends and to settle into your niche in college. This was the problem. I encountered as I stopped wanting to go to class, and stopped so many that I eventually fell so far behind I was failing several of my courses. It was not until this point that I went to my parents because I needed help. My mom brought me to the doctors shortly after this where I met with a therapist. This was practically the best thing I have ever done for myself in my life thus far. I realized that if I wanted my life to change and to improve I needed to take the action myself. If there’s one thing that I want you to take away from this then it is that taking the initiative and to get help is very important. I have a burning desire to learn and to make good grades, to have a lot of friends, and to impress my teachers and the people around me. However, due to my anxious behaviors and depression, this was always a challenge for me, and would continue to be so this very day. Unfortunately, this was not something I knew when these behaviors began to cause an issue in my life.

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How much does it take until you give up? We have endured ourselves to believe in the minimum heights we can accomplish when we are in our low stages in life. We’ve convinced our minds that pain is an insurable situation in a time of defeat. Dsmoye utters our name for the calling of pain, but how much can we take? A striking story will be told, with hope of an open mind.

After years of my dad and older brothers living in Palestine while my mom and I lived in Syracuse, my family’s visa issues were resolved and my dad and brothers were due to arrive! I was seven years old and so excited. I wore the best outfit I had. When I finally saw my father and brothers, I was astounded, they were so tall and handsome. At that moment, when I hugged my father, I knew I would always feel protected in his arms and in the presence of my brothers.

Years went by as memories were made. My father taught me traditions from my culture. He taught me to cook, work, and how to be a young lady, but most of all he taught me how to love. I never smiled as much as I did with my father. He became every good thing in my life. When he began working in our family business, I would wait until 3 o’clock in the morning everyday to see him. I loved him so much… but that all changed on October 1st, 2013.

On that day, my father was in our shop. Half an hour before the shop closed, a man came in demanding money and my father was tired and helpless from a 15 hour shift every day. He reached down to close the safe when the man shot my father in the stomach. Out of fear, the man ran away, as he left my father bleeding on the floor. I still remember the lines of police cars outside of my house.

Upon getting the news, my mother rushed to the hospital. Her eyes were puffy and red; her heart had stopped. I later found out that she was in shock and our best friend, our hero, we were stunned to see our role model, our hero, our joy and laughter on a bed filled with blood. I felt my father’s beautiful soft black hair for the last time. I knew I would never see his beautiful smile, and I would never kiss him goodbye anymore, because this was our goodbye, I kissed him for the last time.

Days went on as we had our traditions. 3 days of mourning for my father. My father taught me to be strong so I had to suck up the pain and serve the visitors like a good girl would. When my mother finally came home, it was as if she were a body without a spirit, it, I missed her beautiful smile.

After several weeks, the man who killed my father was finally captured. An odd request was asked at court for someone to speak up against my father’s murderer. I did it. I pled in court for the justice of my father, with tears filling my eyes, and courage filling my heart, I spoke for him. The man was sentenced 25 years to life.

This event taught me to never take anything for granted, you never know when you might lose it. In the security we live in, we are so filled with the idea that pain is a source of death. Although that may be true, I learned that courage is a source of survival. I was only 11 years old when I lost my father, almost lost my mother, and spoke out against the murderer of my father.

Unfortunately, there still remains misunderstanding, fear, and stigma about mental illness. Our hope is that this publication will have an impact on the reader, and that through these powerful and moving reflections, the reader will gain a new appreciation and sensitivity for the myriad challenges that are faced every day by members in our communities. Additionally, we hope that the reader will recognize the resilience and courage in these stories, and understand that there is hope for treatment and positive social supports to make a difference.

We are grateful for the author’s in the Le Moyne College community included in this publication, and we appreciate their willingness and courage to share their personal stories. We could not have accomplished this project without their voices. For questions or further information about this publication, email kearneae@lemoyne.edu

This publication is made possible by a grant from the NYS Office of Mental Health.

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IT'S A LONG JOURNEY, BUT...
WE WALK TOGETHER