

BY MARIE SINCLAIR AND NELLY SINCLAIR



Living with Mental Illness

THESE ARE MY THOUGHTS. I find no satisfaction in life. All it does to me is take and take till it sucks the joy out of everything.

I have no motivation. I sit in math class and I listen—and I don't. What I'm really doing is waiting. I don't know why, because as soon as I'm done waiting for this to finish, I'll be waiting for social studies or lunch or break or for the weekend to be done or to see Dave.

It's hard not to ask, "What's the point?" I'm like a hamster on a wheel. I keep running forward, hoping for something new, but all I'm doing is going in circles.

I've kinda given up on listening. I have no energy. And then that little voice wakes up and pounds in my head and all my thoughts go rushing through, bouncing from side to side in my brain. The anxiety awakens, stretches its fingers into cooler, lighter thoughts, darkening them with poison till all I know is doubt and fear: *I'm better than this, look what everyone else can do, you can control these thoughts, stop feeling sorry for yourself, you're not trying hard enough, you have no future, look at everybody you keep hurting, look at all those mistakes you make, you know better, you don't deserve forgiveness, look at all those pretty girls, her hair is always perfect, why can't I do that to my hair, you are ugly, you are different, you are worthless, you are selfish, damaged, pathetic, crazy, confused . . .*

My thoughts spin out of control; my anger at myself, at life, at God grows and grows, swelling inside my chest.

The anger is easier than the empty, numbing desperate hole that forms under my ribs. Anger—powerful, hot, furious,

exploding anger—I can understand. It's familiar, it's dangerous, but it's common.

Emptiness is different. It's scary. It's lonely. It's freakishly quiet. It creates desperate feelings that cause desperate actions. It turns colors gray and my food bland. Satisfaction disappears, and I am left traveling a watercolor in which all the paints have dripped down and mixed together.

I panic, grasping for things that used to make me happy, people who made me smile. I draw a beautiful picture, watch a good movie, take a long bath. Nothing works. I am let down, unsettled, unhappy. I draw closer to my family, desperately seeking an arm around me, protection, someone to just hold me and take care of me. I want to lie back and never move because when I walk I feel like I'm wading through water.

My body aches, my heart breaks, my head hurts. Sharp objects catch my eye. I find myself thinking about all the ways I could hurt myself. The morbid thoughts are always running through my mind, yet I know I never could . . . it would be easy for me . . . but the people around me . . . I am trapped.

I am always plotting, always dangerously close to death. Death is my ultimate fear, haunting my dreams, poking its head into my thoughts. I am merely an idiot on a conveyer belt, slowly headed toward my own destruction. So why not tease it a little? When life is hell and death is hell, what do I have? My twisted logic says that gives me the right to get as many sh-ts and giggles from it as I can.

Whatever that takes.

But something about it still isn't right. . . . »

Stories of Grace and Truth

Our stories matter to us and to one another. The Mental Health Task Force of Disability Concerns is initiating a story project called "Stories of Grace and Truth."

This Christian Reformed Church ministry wishes to collect stories from people who have mental illnesses and from people who support them: How has the hard-hitting truth of mental illness impacted you or your family? What are the challenges, the struggles, in your life from day to day? Where have you experienced moments of grace or difficulty in your faith journey? With each author's permission, these stories might be used in print and online to build greater understanding about mental illness.

The goal of the Mental Health Task Force is to promote safe dialogue about mental health within the body of Christ. The task force comprises therapists, parents, and chaplains from both Canada and the United States, including resource consultants for Faith and Hope Ministries of Classis Quinte. We invite you to share your story with us. Please send it to stories@crcna.org or to Disability Concerns, Attn: Stories, 2850 Kalamazoo Ave. SE, Grand Rapids, MI 49560.

Stories will be kept private until released by the author. When necessary, authors may request anonymity.

It's hard not to ask, "What's the point?"

THREE YEARS AGO my eldest daughter began exhibiting some strange symptoms and behaviors.

It began with unexplainable stomach pains and descended from there to extreme depression and anger.

Our journey into mental illness began officially the day we received a call from the Christian school, informing us that our daughter had handed out a suicide note. She had managed to disrupt and disturb her entire class, and the school asked us to pick her up.

We took her straight to the child and adolescent mental health unit of our local hospital. By this time in our journey, we had already experienced cutting and other self-harm, running off in the middle of the night, threats, and violence directed toward us and our belongings. She had also attempted to jump out of the car as we were driving at highway speeds. Things were truly out of our control.

Over the next two years our daughter spent, on average, five months of each year in the child and adolescent psych unit: the first year in Lethbridge, Alberta, and the second year in Calgary, since the hospital in Lethbridge had reached the end of its resources.

During this time our daughter's behavior escalated to more severe cutting, running away for up to five days at a time, and a complete breakdown in school. My reaction was to work harder and harder to control her illness and get my daughter back. I researched, read, studied, and drilled numerous doctors and social workers to learn about her illness, which is bipolar affective disorder, formerly known as manic depression. I pushed every professional I came into contact with in order to get the best care for my child.

All of that was for naught. Even when things were "better" (my daughter wasn't

running off), other painful signs of mental illness were fully present. Because of the dual nature of bipolar, we fluctuated from anger and dangerous behaviors to depression and suicidal behaviors. It was hard to decide which was worse. The help we received from the hospitals and professionals was at first quite questionable: my daughter was clearly overmedicated and couldn't think straight at all; and she suffered greatly from numerous side effects: a debilitating and demoralizing skin condition, as well as digestive problems so severe that she needed surgery.

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After two years of living this nightmare, I began to fall apart. I felt I was losing the battle for my daughter and the rest of my family and myself. My life was like the *Titanic*: slowly sinking. I struggled with depression and no longer had any perspective. I lost hope.

It was at this point that God reached into my life and rescued me. He led me to a 12-step program that required me to spend 30 minutes of quiet time in God's presence every day, no matter what. God taught me that he is God and I am not—and that it is not my job to determine how things turn out. That is God's job. God taught me that all he requires of me is 1 percent of effort: full obedience to his will. The other 99 percent of success is trusting in God to work things out.

This is where I now sit. My daughter's last hospitalization ended Jan. 21. She is

presently the most stable that she has been since our journey began. But we are not done. Bipolar is not curable and can only be managed. It is a cyclical illness, which means we can count on it to return again and again.

When I say my daughter is doing well, I mean that she is physically and psychologically safe. But with the severity of her illness, that can and will change as the seasons pass and life throws its stressors at her. Doing well also means that she is not pregnant, not running away from home, not doing drugs. We have lowered our expectations for her and released her into God's hands. For the time being God has chosen to allow our family a season of peace, but I know that every good day is a day to give thanks for, because we never know what the next day will bring. The only thing we can count on is God's providence.

I used to think of God's providence as something that took over only after my extreme hard work—and only if I deserved it. But now I know that God is in control and loves and provides even when my hard work leads to no effective good at all. I am learning to look to God for instructions about my 1 percent and to leave the other 99 percent in God's very capable hands. ■



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