

CHAPTER 2: SCHIZOPHRENIA AND BIPOLAR DISORDER

I used to like Caribou Coffee better; however, since I can now get to Starbucks by taking roads that are easier for me to drive, I find the vanilla lattes at Starbucks more to my liking. I'm not really into driving anymore, because everything comes at you too fast. Luckily, the route to Starbucks is easy. I went there this morning and had, of course, a vanilla latte. A barista asked me what I did for a living, and I said I'm a writer. However, I'm not really a writer. I'm not really anything. I once read on the Internet that it is a good idea for people like me to say things like that. I say I'm a writer, but I could just as easily say that I work freelance as a computer programmer. With my background in science, math, and technology, that response would probably be the smarter thing to say. It certainly is more believable to others. I have made two charcoal drawings in my life, so I suppose I could tell people I'm an artist. Regardless, I like writer best. I never know if people are buying the story I'm telling them, but I don't think it matters. Anything is better than telling them the truth.

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It isn't that I'm embarrassed about the truth, because I eventually tell most people I know—all except the women I'm interested in dating. I hesitate to tell people the truth because the truth makes some people feel uncomfortable—or worse, makes them feel afraid of me. Even when the right time comes to tell someone, the moment is still awkward. Nevertheless, instead of having a rehearsed script of how I tell people, I play it by ear. Sometimes I say I have a brain disease, while other times I say I'm a mad genius. To help them better understand my condition, I will often ask them if they have seen the movie *A Beautiful Mind*, which is about the mathematics genius John Nash and his life with mental illness. No matter how the conversation starts, it always ends with me revealing my diagnosis—paranoid schizophrenia.

I have found that a lot of people think severe mental illness is similar to mental retardation and that you have it from birth. I have also found that many of the normal people assisting those with a mental illness don't understand it at all. Even family members who have cared for their mentally ill relatives for many years rarely understand the first thing about mental illness. Truth be told, sometimes even I don't understand my own illness.

Although I have access to everything that I am experiencing, I must try to understand my illness using a broken brain. That's what makes mental illness so complex. Only people who have experienced a severe mental illness are in a position to report about it; however, they are usually too ill to share what is occurring inside their heads.

I wasn't always mentally ill. As a kid, I was a little different, but almost always in a positive way. In most regards I was a typical

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kid. Like most kids, I had friends throughout my childhood, and in high school I dated several girls. Although I was slightly better than average in athletics, my potential came into full bloom in academics. I chose the most advanced courses available and got As in every class. I was on the quiz bowl team, was a co-captain of the math team, and was a member of the National Honor Society. When I graduated from high school I was tied for first in my class of 600 students.

However, that stage of my life is all past now. No longer am I the high-adrenaline, high-achieving, type-A person I once was. I do not think that I'm worse. Instead, I'm different, and in my opinion, probably better. Most people probably wouldn't agree with that, and they might think that my describing myself as different was a bit of an understatement. I prefer to think of myself as quirky. That is just semantics, I suppose. But in reality, I am who I am now, and most people have been very kind to me. Today, people like me are treated much better than in the past. You had to conceal your illness back then. Otherwise, you would be treated rather harshly. I still can't get a date, but the people who know I'm ill have been very nice to me.

Despite their pleasantries, no one with a normal brain can understand me. I take responsibility for their lack of understanding; I simply have been unable to relate to normal people what I have to go through on a daily basis. Since it is a communication problem, I doubt that anyone but a poet could convey in words a true understanding of the depth of mental illness. Not being a poet myself, it might seem foolhardy for me even to attempt to communicate my experiences to someone who hasn't experienced

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mental illness. How can the rational understand the irrational; the ordered, the disordered; and the sane, the insane? You can call me foolhardy then, and I will take the criticism seriously. During the past year, however, I have been giving speeches to community groups around the Twin Cities, and although I won't say that I have been able to convey a deep understanding of mental illness to my audiences, I have created sparks of understanding.

You see, I have a need to be understood. In the past I thought it futile to even try to get someone to understand the horrors I have lived through, and so I have tried to suppress my need to be understood. But as a real need, it has festered under the surface. I know others who feel the same. Whenever I get together with other mentally ill people, the first topic to be broached is our illnesses and symptoms, and I find great relief in knowing that someone else can relate or in the very least, empathize with me.

The first day I met my friend Benji, we were going to a National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) support group to find others who could relate to our experiences. After the support group, Benji and I went for coffee at 50th and France in Edina, Minn., to chat about our lives in more detail. This chat led to a friendship and a dialog about our illnesses that continues to this day.

Right now I am back at Starbucks at 50th and France, and it is bustling as usual. Because it's mid-afternoon though, I was able to score a set of two plush chairs for Benji and me. I plop down into a seat, coffee in hand, and wait for him to join me. He is busy chatting with a female barista who is making his coffee. Coming to Starbucks for coffee is a near daily ritual for Benji and me, and I enjoy conversing with him because he has a life as

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peculiar as mine. He is my best friend, but I'm sure that he would quite readily point out that he is my only friend. Truth be told, I don't care to be around people much, and so I find one friend to be enough.

The 50th and France section of Edina is an upper-class area of an upper-class suburb of Minneapolis. The neighborhood is full of women's clothing stores, expensive spas and salons, and fine-dining restaurants. The movie theater runs only independent and foreign films. The sidewalks are populated mostly by retirees and aging trophy wives with their teenage daughters. Benji and I feel at home here, however, because, through no fault of our own, we were born into Minnesota's upper class.

Benji finally approaches and grabs a seat. He is 6 foot 2 with a regular build and fair skin. I think he is German by ancestry, but he looks like he also has some Scandinavian blood. I'm German by ancestry too, but I'm short and stocky, standing only 5 feet 8 inches tall. I ask him if he is ready, and he nods yes. So I turn on my tape recorder and set it on the coffee table.

"It is Friday," I say toward the microphone, "and Benji and I are sitting in Starbucks. This is the first of our recorded conversations about life, about our lives."

"Very difficult lives," Benji interjects.

I nod my head in enthusiastic agreement. "Very difficult lives—exactly."

Starbucks has taken on a particular significance in my life, and I think in Benji's life too. It's our meeting place, for sure, but

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for me this place is special because, while here, I can relax and forget about the troubles of my life. In the past, and I suppose in some instances even now, the local pub would have played that role. But for me, the local coffee shop is the best. When I'm here, I'm normal. I'm just like everyone else. Quite often, but only when I'm by myself, I completely forget about diagnoses and medications. I'm just me, and I'm normal. Rarely does the normal me—or the former me, if that is more correct—shine through. My mother can tell in my smile and in my eyes if I am in a normal state. My true self shines through when I'm thinking of philosophical theories, when I'm listening to good music, and when I'm drinking a great coffee.

I take a sip of my usual coffee, a tall, nonfat vanilla latte. Since I'm already 35 lbs. overweight, I always go with the nonfat milk because the medicines cause weight gain. “Benji, what are you drinking?”

He sets his drink down. “*Decaf, of course, because I don't drink caffeine—caramel macchiato.*”

“Why don't you drink caffeine?”

In a playful way, he says, “*Because it makes me go crazy.*” He takes a breath and becomes a little more serious. “*It's bad for my bipolar disorder.*”

“That's formerly known as manic-depressive illness?” I ask.

“*Yes. It's a mood disorder.*”

“I consume tons of caffeine,” I say, “lots of coffee. It's because I have schizophrenia, and caffeine is a huge addiction for people like me. I just crave coffee. I've heard some people with my