

## A thinker, philosopher and reader

by Elvia in Texas

In 1996, at the age of 22, I was hospitalized for the first time after severe sleep deprivation during my senior year in college. I was diagnosed bipolar but it was unclear whether that was accurate and if so, what did that mean for me in my life.

My normal life was interrupted, however, and I had to drop out of college and move back home with my family, which I was very unhappy about. I did not understand what had happened to me. It seemed that this had come out of the blue.

I guess there was mood swings before, but I really don't think there is a way of knowing for sure. I remember being depressed when I was 15 and taking life so seriously and pessimistically. I remember having a boyfriend with whom I began to drink heavily and smoke marijuana. A few years later when that relationship ended, I remember switching colleges and when I finally moved to Philadelphia in 1993, I felt happier than ever before, but at the same time I experienced depression.

I was an art student, and it was normal to be eccentric and offbeat. I thought nothing of it, really. But that personality plus sleep deprivation was a toxic combination. I also joined a very strict church in 1994 and began to have even more problems juggling my school and outside activities. I felt so much pressure and wasn't able to regulate my own life nor my thoughts or feelings. The church, in my opinion, was very unhealthy for me and it produced lethal patterns which made my life all the more difficult to manage, until finally I hit a brick wall. After this first hospitalization, like I mentioned earlier, I had no clue how to continue with life.

I spent the next years trying to figure out what had happened and trying to forget or cover up the mistakes. I tried to prove that I was not bipolar after all, until about 2000 when things started to unravel again. I took some meds that didn't work for me at all and became suicidal and very afraid of life. What was happening to me, I did not know. I went back to my first psychiatrist and he improved the medications, but it was still such a mess.

Emotionally, I could not understand what I was doing with my life. I had no direction. I had no sense of peace. I was ill and I didn't understand it. In 2002, I had my second tragic breakdown which was very scary. I wound up in a different state from where I lived and my family had no idea where I was. They found me about three days later when one of the doctors at a hospital found my purse and a number which he tried to see if he could find my family. Thank God he did! I became more cooperative with treatment and did therapy as well as regular psychiatrist visits throughout the next five years. I gained about 80 pounds in one year and drove off the depression cliff just because of hating the way I now looked. I went to weight loss programs, including a residential weight loss program and stayed for a month, two years in a row to try and reverse this problem. I learned that I was the culprit because I had eaten the wrong foods for the wrong reasons. But I was unable to change enough to get this under control and the pounds just kept piling on. I remained a part of the church I was talking about before because this was before I recognized any of the unhealthy things and was learning of some of the internal conflicts within the church. I became obsessed with matters of the church and the bickering going on really drained me of my sanity. I had a lot of friends with mental health disorders in the church, and they weren't healthy companions either. I felt so weighed down and became sleep deprived

again.

In 2007, I was hospitalized for the third time. It was tragic. Horrible things happened and thank God I did not kill myself or someone else in my delusional mess. My parents were with me in New Mexico for the entire month of hospitalization. I was released at one point per my request, but I was still psychotic and they didn't recognize this about me somehow. I had to be involuntarily admitted later that same day because I just was out of my mind and not functioning. I thought all kinds of religious things and scary scenarios which were not true. I had to appear in court because they wanted to retain me, and I did not want to stay. They had to prove that I was a threat to myself.

Again, Thank God the judge believed the psychiatrist because I testified that I was fine. When I finally realized that the fight was pointless, the meds kicked in and I finally began to sleep, which is what I needed. But for the next six months or so, I was severely depressed. At one point, I didn't get out of bed for an entire week, only to eat or use the bathroom. I was exhausted, emotionally and physically from the whole ordeal. I was sick with something that I could not understand. In July of 2007, I went to Menninger Clinic in Houston where I was placed on new medication. I slowly began to come back to life.

Over the last two years, I have recovered, thanks to Menninger and to a step-down program in Orlando called TLLC. I learned to change my habits and take care of myself. I learned to distinguish between the illness and me. I learned that I am normal more times than I am not... because normal is a relative notion. Fear, anger, sadness, etc... are all normal. I react to things in my life, it isn't just in my head and I have found a lot of freedom in acknowledging these parts of me. I am a thinker, a philosopher, a reader. I like the news and politics. But I also like my Adam Sandler movies too. I am eclectic. And now, I don't want to think of myself as bipolar even though I know I am in need of meds. I think the whole notion of mental illness is mistaken in some ways, because we don't understand that it is an illness of the brain that later becomes an illness of emotions. I feel so bad about myself when I think I'm defective, disabled, or crippled. I have stigmas towards myself! I haven't been able to understand this negativity, but my way of combating it is to try and strip away all the complicated reasons why I am the way I am and instead to just accept me for me.

My family is extremely loving and has given me the strength to like myself again. It will take time for the scars to heal and for the memories to fade away, but for now, I am happy and for that I am in awe of God. I'm blessed not just by miracles, but by good people who have helped me along the way, my therapist, my psychiatrists, my counselors, my family, and the hope in me that I thought was dead- but that came back to life somehow. All I can say is find the little spark or glimmer inside and fan it into flames- with all your might... each small step counts.