Bipolar: A creative nonfiction story about mental health and education

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Abstract

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Abstract

This is a creative nonfiction story about a woman’s first encounter with bipolar disorder. There is such taboo in our society about mental illnesses and are very little spaces for discussion about the struggles of it. Several topics that come from this piece is the mental illness is compartmentalized into special education alone, and they deal with it mainly through behavioral methods rather than tactically dealing with real issues of it. The diagnosis of mental illness is challenging to diagnose and requires a lot of trial and error with medicines. Finally, research shows that friendship and relationships is what keeps people sane in addition to the medication. The story was analyzed using pattern coding and memoing. Using narrative analysis, this piece seeks to give one perspective of a bigger societal issue and is the beginning of a larger educational piece of the stories of bipolar individuals and the family and friends who support them.

Keywords: bipolar, mental illness, stigma, public pedagogy

A creative nonfiction story about mental health and education

This manuscript is written in the first person context to give a close personal understanding to the subject. The names have been changed and places have been changed for confidentiality purposes. I wrote this as a class assignment early in graduate school, and as time continued I realized it was close to my heart, and I needed to finish and publish it. So many people suffer from bipolar disorder and other mental illnesses such as severe depression, and because of the media and society there is a stigma to these sicknesses. This stigma makes it difficult to admit needing help. The sicknesses themselves are isolating, and the societal stigma does not help. This is close to my heart and here is a glimpse into a person close to me (and probably someone close to you too in their own way). I recently attended a youth conference on social justice and listened to a session by teenagers telling their stories about mental illness. They came to similar conclusions I stated above in talking with adults about mental illness. As far as education is concern this manuscript is to educate people about these illnesses that plagues multiple families and cross cultural and ethnical lines and affects families in so many tangible ways. James Baldwin said, “The purpose of art is to lay bare the questions that have been hidden by the answers” (James Baldwin Quotes, n.d). The goal of this paper is to do just that “lay bare the questions that have been hidden by the answers” through one person’s story, but a reality for many people.

Review of Literature
In this literature review I am focusing on two areas of literature: 1) the literature surrounding creative nonfiction, and the purpose for using it in this piece; and 2) the public discussing and the personal stories of bipolar disorder and schizophrenia. The goal of this piece is to give voice to a marginalized person who has to live with bipolar and to the family around them (Schepet-Hughes & Lock, 1986). Our society isolates mental illnesses and does little to show support for both the people with the illness and the family around them. One of the difficulties of showing support is the fact that the illness itself shows itself in a variety of ways in every person. So the one way that government has tried to show support for people who survive from mental disorders is through support medically and financially (Schepet-Hughes & Lock, 1986).

**Narrative Research**

Using narrative is a way to give voice to issues that tend to be voiceless (Barone, 2007). Since starting this manuscript in 2010, I have met numerous friends, academic colleagues, and family members who are suffering in silence of their mental illness. An academic friend told me that though she suffered from manic depression she did not think that her advisor would believe that she had an legitimate illness and therefore was having trouble finishing her dissertation because she was just lazy though it took everything in her just to get out of bed in the morning. Another academic friend was terrified to admit that she had a mental disorder because her husband threatened to take her child from her if she did. She was deep in hallucinations and created a “partner” to protect her and her child from her husband before being forced to get treatment. The goal of narrative research is to give voice to what is not necessarily talked about openly. It is to understand the perspectives of people who may not even know how to express their realities.

Sparkes (1996) pontificates how we as people tend to sees sicknesses as life changing events and therefore there is a before and after the experience to people’s life stories. There is a sense of before and after a mental illness diagnosis though many of the symptoms showed up long before the diagnosis. Our society puts such a stigma on mental illness that we give great power to the diagnosis and to the point of letting it define people more than any other trait.

**Creative Nonfiction**

First of all, creative nonfiction was started during the New Journal movement of the 1960s and 1970s (Barone, 2009). This got transformed through academia to be formatted to discuss research and in qualitative realms to give representation to people who may not have a voice (Barone, 2009; Predergast, 2001; Schwartz, 2001). I purposely used this method because, first, it was a class assignment, and second, I realized it really does give voice to people suffering from these illnesses who may not know how to describe their experiences and the family of those people who hold on to the secret of mental illness as they try to support their friends and family (Jacob, 2008; Smith, 2012; Stapley, Midgley, & Target, 2016).

**Stories of Mental Illnesses-Bipolar and schizophrenia**

There is a ton of research out on mental illnesses especially in recent times since Congress passed the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990. On the narrative front many of the articles are about using narrative as therapy for patients and their families (Potter, 2013; McCann & Clark, 2004). There were a few articles written for health professionals to help them as they worked with the people suffering from these illnesses (McCann & Clark, 2004).

**Bipolar**

I was a bit sad. I was alone in Los Angeles, and my family was thousands of miles from me. I wanted to go home for the summer. I was working and going to school, but I was just lonely. It seemed that I just could not make any really good friends. My sister made friends so easily. She was always talking about this friend and that friend. Her life was so much easier than mine especially since she was still in high school living with my parents. It seemed like I spend my life on hamster wheel: wake up, go to work, come home, sleep, go to church, and then do it all over again. I had stopped eating as much because I was so stressed out about work and school and keeping all my plates of life from dropping. I had talked to my parents and sister about it and they did not understand my frustration or my loneliness. They could not hear the voices
I heard. Someone told me that the previous tenant of my dorm room had done some cultic ritual in my room and it was as if the walls were talking to me out loud. I tried to talk to my parents about it, but they just didn’t get it. The fear kept me awake at night making the stresses of the day so much greater because there is no rest.

That night I was just trying to get the voices out of my head. I have no clue what I actually said. I just remember being really scared. My sister said I was yelling on the phone how much I hated her and yelling other nonsensical things like that. All remember is waking up in the hospital. My dad made me stay in the hospital for two weeks! The doctors were telling me I had a mental problem, and I was manic, and I would never be able to live a normal life without taking medicine that made me feel weird. They drugged me the whole time I was in the hospital. I could not move. I could not think clearly. I just wanted to go home and my dad would not rescue me. He flew into town a week after my first episode while I was in the hospital for a conference, and he came to visit me, but he left me there the whole time. I didn’t understand why he didn’t take me out. I could have stayed at the hotel room. I knew what happened was serious, but I didn’t know how serious.

When I did get out of the hospital we had to drive to northern California to drop off my stuff at my aunt’s house. It was a 9-hour drive, and I really did not want to give up my stuff. I knew it was safe with my aunt, but I did not know when I was coming back to get it. I did move home with my parents. They lived in rural Maine. It was far from the familiar, and the move was scary. I only knew them and my sister, and I didn’t want them to think of me being crazy. I didn’t think I was crazy. I didn’t want the people on the movies or the ones that I saw in New York City one time when I was child talking to themselves. I had been scared of the voices my whole life. I told them I was afraid of the dark. Why didn’t they know that I was afraid of the dark because in the dark I heard the voices? I remember my parents had a lamp when I was child, and it would come on after we turned it off at anytime. My mom said it had a short in the circuit and that was the problem, I was positive there was something terrifying going on it. Maybe it was possessed like in the movie I saw a glimpse of that one time.

Eventually I got better, and the voices started to get quieter, but they never fully went away and my doctor help me to not have to take as much medicine as I was taking in the beginning. After a year of living with my parents in Maine transition was upon us. Transition and change were two of my triggers for this sickness, but I was moving with my parents, so I thought I was fine. I had calmed down with my medicine, and I was doing well, so bipolar was far from my mind plus my family was there to protect me this time. I believed this episode was a one-time thing and I was back to normal. I had to move with my mom and sister before my dad could come down because he had to work and we (my sister and I) needed to start school at a community college before he could come otherwise we would just be sitting there for 4 months. I was taking a Native American Literature course. There was an overwhelming amount of reading about really weird stuff highly spiritual and a bit scary. As I was reading it I started having a hard time distinguishing reality from the stories. It was as if someone was touching me while I was lying in bed. That started out every once in a blue moon and then started happening more frequently. I was terrified and my mom and sister acted as if they could not understand my fears. I was sleeping downstairs by myself on the other side of the house on an air mattress because we did not have any permanent furniture yet and I snored really loud and neither my mom nor sister could sleep with me in the room with them. My mom and sister were upstairs far from me sleeping in one giant room. So as the fears and feelings got more frequent I moved myself up to sleep in the same room at them. I would wake up through the night screaming, terrified. I didn’t want to go back to the hospital again. I wasn’t crazy. I wasn’t making this stuff up. I didn’t think I was, but I was the only one who felt anything, so after a week of this and no one sleeping, I let my mom and sister take me to hospital. They drugged me again and told me to take more medicines and find a psychiatrist to go to. Unfortunately, this was a really small town and I didn’t trust anyone with my secret. I didn’t want to be treated as if I was crazy and I didn’t want to stay drugged up all the time and I was scared that the medicine may or may not work.

A year went by and I was relatively stable. My sister left for college. Again I was reminded how much
easier her life was as she made friend after friend after friend. She went away to another state as if it was nothing to leave her family. Why couldn’t I do that? So I decided to not talk to her. I didn’t need the reminder of my lacking. And at the same time my mom was home with me while my dad worked like crazy and she became my best friend. Even when she was frustrated and anger at me she always listened to me. Maybe that was as good as friendship would get for me. If I were to have best friends they would be just like her: patient, listening, and the one difference is I would like them to be younger so we could do more stuff together. I eventually decided to try college again about 200 miles from my parents, so not a few thousands miles (like my sister) and if I needed to come home on the weekends I could. Anything I needed they were right there. After a year of being there things were working out well and again I was relatively stable, and everything was great, and my parents made the announcement that the job situation was not working out for them where they were and they were moving again to the middle of no where Hawaii. I didn’t want to go with them. I wanted the city life and to be a fun adult at a bigger university so I decided to join my sister at her school the University of Boston. The city was ginormous, but I had visited once and it was nice. If my sister could make friends and find her way there, then I thought I could too.

I moved into the dorms. Since my sister already had a roommate I had to stay in a different room. My sister would come visit me and I would visit her. She brought me into her church, and oh my gosh, the school gave me so much support as I came from a small school to this huge school. I had my own private tutor, note taker, and they gave me scholarships. I had never been given a scholarship. It was an amazing feeling to be praised for something I never was praised for in the past. School was not my thing, and my extended family always was excited for cousins and the family friends who had good grades, and I finally was getting the good grades and the scholarships like them, but it didn’t fulfill that part of me that still wanted to be seen and known.

Eventually my sister was graduating and we decided to move together into an off campus apartment. We searched and we searched and we searched. Everything was expensive and not super close to campus, and it was a really scary time, but it finally my turn to make a decision so that was exciting. I was telling my mom about my fears and she told me that whatever apartment we picked her and my dad would help us pay for it, so after a big argument with my sister I demanded that we get an apartment in the south part of the city. Initially it was fine, I had financial aid, my sister had financial aid, and my parents were doing well helping up make up the difference, but then my sister graduated and had trouble finding a job (and when she did find a job it was across the city and we only had one car), and I couldn’t work because school took up so much of my time, and then parents were having job troubles. I hated having to take the bus across the city from our place to the school. It wasn’t fair my sister got to drive the car and she was being selfish with it. She never let me drive. I hated her for it.

Before I knew it we had to move out, and my parents created a payment plan to pay off us breaking our lease. I moved back into the dorms and my sister moved in with friend. I was so alone in the dorms. I didn’t have a roommate. My sister would contact me at least once a week, but I wanted her to contact me more. I wanted her to do stuff with me every day. Then one day she told me she was moving to another state for graduate school and to start a new life somewhere else. I knew she was leaving to get away from me. What was going to do, I didn’t know anyone in the city. I would be alone! How dare she leave me! She already had left me, and now she was really leaving me! The voices started talking more and more. They told me that because I got my hair cut short that I suddenly was no longer girl but a boy, and I needed to throw away all of my clothes because the clothes were possessed and they made me a boy. I had to throw away everything to get rid of the feeling of being out of control. My RA called the police, and the police threatened me, and told me if I didn’t calm down they would put me in handcuffs. SO I shut up, stop screaming, and again I was in the hospital completely drugged up. It felt horrible. I couldn’t move. I couldn’t think clearly. I still believed the voices in my head were real. My sister came to visit me. I only heard parts of what she was saying. That she had to get a root canal, and she cancelled it to come see me. It didn’t make sense to me. I was more concerned with why she didn’t bring more clothes for me. She brought old clothes. It was as if she didn’t even care about me, and wanted to have to wear the hospital gown. So I yelled at her, but didn’t know what I was saying. I was just saying what came into my mind. My mom came to town to bring
me back home to Hawaii with her, but they wouldn’t let me out of the hospital for whatever reason. So she helped my sister pack, and then they were ready to let me out, but I didn’t have anywhere to go, so my sister’s roommate stayed with her parents (who lived in a nearby town), and I stayed with my sister and my mom at my sister’s house. The plan was to stay for a week until my sister moved, and then we (my mom and I) would go on home to Hawaii. When I got to my sister’s place I slept and slept and slept. Then that second night there I woke up and all of the voices were speaking again. They told me that I was going to kill my mom and sister. My mom and sister were pretty freaked out by it all, and threatened to call the police on me if I didn’t get in the car and go with them to the hospital again. I didn’t want to go back but a small part of me know something was seriously wrong so I got in the car. It was scary because the voices were louder than ever telling me to kill them, but I didn’t want to and I didn’t know how to make the voices stop. We made it to the hospital (which was about a 40 minutes’ drive) and had to wait in the waiting room. I couldn’t look at my sister without uttering words of hatred at her until finally she walked away somewhere. After about an hour they took me back and they drugged me again, and I was in the same hospital bed all drugged up again. I just wanted to go bed and they wouldn’t let me. Finally, my sister moved to Texas, and my mom was left in a city where she didn’t anyone just waiting for me to get out, but we didn’t know when I could get out. And finally I did, and it was hard transition, but I was with my parents (again).

As time went on I learned when I get stressed and scared, the voices would get louder and louder. About a year later I had one more episode where I completely lost my mind. I never want to feel that feeling again and yet I live knowing it could happen at any time.

That was scary at times. It is still scary at times. I’ve had to change medicines several times and each time I changed medicines there was a risk of me having a break with reality. My doctor told me that with each breakdown I lose pieces of my mind, and it becomes harder and harder to come back to reality. I have learned over time that when I let my fears take over I can have a break in reality, for whatever reason that is my natural inclination to deal with stressful situations in life. I have learned to calm my mind down by talking to my mom, my sister, and my dad and exercising. It is still hard to make friends and be honest about my sickness with them. Most of them think it is either a figment of my imaginary or they think I’m weird. It’s just hard to talk to people. It’s difficult to have apathy for things I don’t understand. It is as they are just talking to be talking, but none of it concerns my life most of the time. I long for that best friend who would understand me and love me in spite of that part of me. I long to get married and have children (well, adopt children; they say to have children I would have to stop taking my meds and I’m too afraid to stop taking them). God only know if this will ever happen for me, but in the meantime I’m alive, and the meds keep me under control and I’m learning to take life one day at time. Some days are good some days are bad. Every day is a battleground for normalcy.

Discussion/ Conclusion

Several topics on the subject of mental illness and education come from this story. First of all, it tends to be compartmentalized into special education alone, and while there are some overlapping between them it goes beyond special education. That categorization detours many people from getting the help they need. As described in the story the diagnoses of mental illness is complicated and takes a lot of experimenting with medications. Unfortunately, these are medications that would make a sane people insane, so they have adverse sign effects on everyone, but the good outweighs the bad. Another thing to point out is the difference between bipolar disorder and schizophrenia. Finally, point to note is how difficult it is to make and maintain friendships when battling a mental issues. Research shows that friendships and relationships are a bedrock of sanity and dealing with life (Chroniste, et al., 2015), but what does one do when it feel impossible to keep that relationship going?

References


