



NATALEE WHITESELL

Dismantling Taboo

A Story of Mental Illness & Hope

Cover Art by Andrew McIntee

Preface

It is my hope this book will shed some light and hope into the awkward subject of mental illness, “dismantling the taboo” around it. Contrary to what you may believe, if you have struggled with any kind of mental illness and are still standing, you are stronger than you think. It is like wearing a 100 pound back pack all the time, while trying to do normal life. I pray my story will be one of hope for you, and that you will know that you are never alone. I try and write as regularly as I can on my blog, practicepresence.org.

This book is dedicated to my husband, Wes, who is a rock, and my four children, Eli, Abe, Chloe, and Maeve.



My Childhood, Africa, and Love

“You’re going to run one of my businesses,” he would tell me as a 9-year-old girl. “And one day you will inherit the millions of dollars that I have in bank accounts all over the world.

Then there were photos of Greece. Of the home that he was going to purchase for us on some Grecian Island. Blue seas bordered with bleach white houses, all glossy like, spread out before little girl eyes.

My daddy would confide in me, tell me secrets. There were luxury cars held in warehouses on foreign shores. We had bodyguards that we couldn’t see, following us to school, protecting us, because there were gangster types trying to kill us. I couldn’t tell anyone, though.

My father grew up fundamentalist Baptist. So I grew up under a list of do’s and don’ts. I knew very little about relationship. There was lots of hiding things. Hiding that I went to see Star Wars with him. He would ground me if I breathed wrong, if I broke one of the myriad of rules lorded over me. I remember being grounded for nine weeks once for making C’s on my report card. I couldn’t even go to church youth group.

I didn’t understand, at the time, that my childhood was being taken from me. I was being abused emotionally.

I found out, through the years, that my dad’s secrets were lies. Deep wounds that I would bury in busyness and performance and super star Christianity. I would do missions in foreign lands. I would struggle with co-dependency and help others so much that I wouldn’t really care for myself. There was no such thing as

a boundary. I would go to the ends of the earth in the name of a God that I barely knew. I'm not beating myself up for this. What else would a little religious girl in pain do?

As I've gotten older, I've wondered where God was in the midst of what seemed like a dark childhood.

He's just reminded me:

Of my grandfather. Who built me a tree swing after I begged him. And let me eat strawberries from his strawberry patch.

Of my grandmother. Who taught me Psalm 23 while holding me in her lap.

Of my great-grandmother Nicoll, who always, without fail, sent me birthday money and saw Jesus "standing" for her on her deathbed.

Of my mother, who always worked hard to provide for us in spite of being married to a wounded man.

Of my papa, who always made us Sunday lunch after church. He always had a chuck roast on the stove. And played records of beautiful music while we ate.

Of my mama, who taught me Jesus stories through flannel-graph. Don't despise the flannel-graph.

Of my aunt, who was just plain fun.

Of my little brother, who endured countless hours of playing school and being sent to "Mrs. Howard", the mean teacher's classroom, for punishment.

It's so easy to only see the dark. There were many moments of light that would be stronger, that would form the health in me. Moments of love that carried me into adulthood, even though there was deep pain.

I have no excuse to say that God wasn't there. And that it was just a terrible childhood. He was.

It was not just pain that sent me halfway around the world.

It was also Love.

Africa

Part of forgiving my father was recognizing the good in him. The good in him that loved travel and cuisine. And that he passed this down to me. I remember standing next to him while he made the best fried chicken I've ever tasted. I remember him talking about London.

Then in college, my roommate spent a semester in Scotland and came back a changed woman. She spoke of the Highlands and God. It was in these discussions that a good desire planted by my dad continued to take root and flourish in magic moments, sipping coffee from our latest Starbuck shipment (it was mail order only for us at the time) and eating Walker's Shortbread.

My senior year, like all college students, I was wondering what was next. I had no boy.

I was working on my degree in elementary education. I remember driving across the lake in Clemson in my red, yes, red, Acura Integra. Begging God not to live an "ordinary" life. I wasn't in any way ready to settle down and get a teaching job. I know that some of this was pain, deep rooted pain. Most of it was God. And the fact that He made me to get a buzz off of traveling and seeing new places.

I called World Harvest Mission in Philadelphia, PN and left a message. "Hey. I'm Natalee Milstead. And I think I want to do missions." I got a call back.

The man on the other end had humor in his voice, "Do you like the outdoors?" "Yes."

"How does Africa sound?" Gulp. "Uganda." Stomach turning. "Bun-dibugyo."

"Bundiwhere?"

Yes, there was a teaching spot open in a small remote village in the Ruwenzori Mountains of Western Uganda.

"I'm interested."

I graduated and flew up to Philadelphia, PN for my interview. They needed a teacher in three months. I would have to raise support. Like enough to support myself for a year, including one time incidentals like plane flights and housing set-up. They told me it would be nothing short of a miracle if I made it.

I sat in the director of the mission's office, all but begging him to make the decision for me. Do I try and make it, against all odds to Africa? He was wise enough to lead me to making my own decision. I closed my eyes, put my feet on the edge of the high dive...and jumped.

Uganda

"You need to eat those grapes," my fellow teacher told me as we were about to land in Entebbe, Uganda. "Those are the last grapes you'll eat for a year." I stared at my limp grapes on my plate. Quickly, and terrified, I ate the grapes.

We landed and got off the 757 British Airways plane and stepped onto a steamy hot tarmac. I was so exhausted I barely knew what was happening. I do remember buying a whole wheel of cheese. The grapes and cheese. Red flags that I didn't commit to a year in Hawaii.

That night, due to a bomb threat, we changed our plans and ended up at the Sheraton in Kampala. I remember being so thirsty. Within seconds of walking into the lobby, we were greeted with little shots of fresh passion fruit juice. It was cold and lovely and foreign.

I sat on the balcony of our hotel room mesmerized by the filmy, smoky night lights that sparkled in front of me.

The next day, we went to the bank, got a bunch of cash, and boarded a Cessna. It felt like a bond movie. We flew over mountains, green and lush. About an hour into the flight, a grassy airstrip came into view.

We landed to members of the Babwisi tribe greeting us with songs and tears. I had never felt so, just, far away. And intrigued. And tired. And exhilarated. And thankful. And so scared in all my life.

We boarded a couple of Nissan Patrols and headed down the one dirt road to my new home, three hours from the nearest town. We dropped our luggage off and immediately went into the IDP camps surrounding the mission compound. The IDP camps were for Internally Displaced People from the war that was taking place in Bundibugyo. Makeshift mud huts were everywhere. The smell of cooking fires and urine was pungent. Children were running around with swollen bellies. It was like a Bourne film, but without Jason Bourne. Instead, it was little me. Processing the fact that I was just in London, and now here. Here. Where there were rebels in the mountains, solar power panels, and camping shower bags for showers. And a hole in the ground to do your business. Filled with thousands of two inch roaches.

The loneliness I felt was palpable. There was a team there, but I barely knew any of them. I didn't have a phone. My e-mail could only be downloaded once a week. It took a miracle to get me to Africa. It would take a miracle to survive. I was scared to even go to the bathroom by myself.

I began teaching the missionary kids and making a home. Slowly, I was less and less afraid to walk to different teammates houses in the pitch black dark. I learned how to go to the local market. I learned how to barter. I learned how to love Bundibugyo and my team mates. We made fabulous food from scratch. As we had no other choice. I read cookbooks from cover to cover and learned which type of machine gun fire to be concerned about.

Life was slow. And good. And hard. I was often in survival mode as we would hear reports of rebel attacks near us. Once the attacks would get within a certain distance, we would have to evacuate. We had evacuation bags next to our beds, in case we had to run in the middle of the night.

The inevitable happened and we received orders to evacuate Bundibugyo for a season. The attacks were getting closer and closer. We would quickly pack up our school materials into trunks and do school, often, on the run.

We settled in a mountain town, three hours away from Bundibugyo. We had many fun times and the team was family.

It's obvious now, but it wasn't to me then. I was stressed. Living in really intense circumstances. If I hadn't been carrying pain, it would have probably been different. But the pain, the stress, I believe began to erode away at me mentally. Slowly.

I lived in Uganda for two wonderful but hard years. I still often dream of it. I long to go back. It did what God wanted it to do. It excavated pain. It made me dependent on Him. It showed me that I love other cultures. It found me the love of my life. It gave me permanent wanderlust and wild stories of drinking wine on savannas. And becoming family with some of the most amazing people on this planet, the Babwisi tribe and the WHM Bundibugyo team.

Love

In 1998, I saw a boy in Colorado, where I was training to go to Africa. I stalked him mentally, stealth-like, for several days. I avoided him, acted aloof, ignored him, did everything I could to not show interest. I was always thinking about him, though, because I had a crush.

I had a crush on Wes Whitesell and I didn't know what to do with it. So I yelled at God one night. Because I had a mentality that if God gave me something good, that He might just yank it away.

Back to the crush and stalking.

My aloofness paid off. One night he came and ate dinner with me. Although he says he doesn't remember doing it.

As a matter of fact, he said he didn't remember me at all until I came back from hiking one afternoon with black workout tights on.

Classic.

We smoked a cigarette on top of a rock one night. It was one of those crisp, clear, Colorado nights. We were young, full of dreams of living across the pond and following Jesus. We talked a lot and I had a gut feeling.

I barely knew him, but I knew we could be friends. Which is what, after 12 years of marriage now, has saved us.

I had to say good-bye to him two weeks later, never knowing if I would see him again. I fell in love with him for many reasons. He had all the chick magnets of playing guitar and watercoloring, aloof, in the corner. But the best thing was his laugh.

He got my address. We said good-bye. I spent the next few days in agony, wondering if I would ever hear from him again. I got a four page letter about a week later. Beautifully written. With his phone number on the bottom.

Trembling, I called the number. I got his mom on the phone and stumbled an introduction. I got off the phone feeling like a silly little girl. He called me back.

We talked briefly. I was off to Uganda and he was off to Kenya. The first year, after meeting each other, was me spending probably too much time guessing whether or not he liked me. I never saw him while we were in Africa.

I finished my first year in Africa and was heading back to the States. I spent the summer in Ireland. Where I began to learn that Jesus really really loved me. During this time, I received an e-mail that meant business, in my mind.

It went something like this,

“Dear Natalee, I want to drink and dance with you in a foreign bar.”

I was both excited and mad. He better be interested. I went and sat on a rock with my friend Mya overlooking the Irish Sea. We sent up some pretty powerful prayers that night. We were both single at the time. I begged God, girlishly, to marry Wes Whitesell, hotty.

I finished my time in Ireland and flew back to the States. It wouldn't be long before I would receive a phone call. He asked me to go on a road trip. We were

both needing to go to Michigan, me for support reasons and he because it was where he lived. He was in Florida on vacation with his family.

I remember asking him what his intentions were with me. He muttered something vague. Grant it, I barely knew him. But I was on a mission. I knew that I was going back to the bush of Africa. I wasn't going to live in the bush one more year and torture myself with wondering whether or not Wes Whitesell was interested.

After his vague mutterings, I said something like, "You've got issues then." And I rolled over and went to sleep.

When I woke up, he said that he thought I was pretty. Just a week later, he told me that he wanted to be the father of my children.

That being said, I had some expectations.

I flew back to Uganda. I didn't hear from him for three weeks. As you might imagine, it was hard to function. I couldn't call him, because I was in the bush. My slow e-mail only produced heartache. Nothing.

I would go to the MK school, which relatively private, and stare at cocoa trees. Wondering if I would ever hear from Wes Whitesell, hotty, again.

It was the longest three weeks of my life.

Through a hilarious series of events that I won't go into right now, for the sake of not embarrassing my dear friends, Wes found out that I was not hearing anything from him.

On the day that I thought I could take it no longer, and God knew it because I had been telling Him, I received a care package from Wes.

In just 12 days from time of shipment from the States. It was an East African miracle. It would be one of many confirmations that this crazy long distance relationship was from God Himself.

6 months later, on January 2, 2000, I got engaged at a castle that we happened upon in Scotland. It shocked poor little me, who thought she would be single for the rest of her life.

I married Wes Whitesell, and watched him become a man. A man who would become the father of my four kids. Who would eventually have to say good-bye to his dream of missions to care for the kids and me. Who would take a day job to support his family. Who would come home, everyday, for years, after he got off work. Who would take the kids when I was depressed. Who would put his dreams aside so that I could heal. He, along with God, is the reason that I am well today. He put his dreams aside so that I could have mine. If there was ever a picture of Jesus...

I know there have been times when he wanted to run away. He didn't go anywhere.



My First Psychotic Break

It was an intense six months.

We were living in Dublin, as missionaries. The year was 2005.

We were part of a program called MAP, the Missionary Apprenticeship Program, with a non-denominational missions organization. We were on staff of a nine month program that focused on discipleship, walking “MAPPERS” (usually fresh out of college students) through culture shock, with the goal of placing them on mission teams in other parts of the world. Dublin was the perfect training ground. It was different enough from the States, English speaking, and had the amazing ability, be it the weather, or the difference in the way things work, to provide a rub. If you could survive Dublin, you could survive anywhere.

We were a young family. My husband Wes, contrary to his free spirited personality, managed the books for the team. We brought our first born, Eli, over as a nine month old baby. He was now 2. I had just given birth to our second son, Abe.

Right after Abe’s birth in January, he became sick with RSV. He was immediately hospitalized, in the middle of the night, one cold wet evening.

I would spend the day with Abe, pumping milk for the night and nursing, and Wes would spend the night while I stayed with our other son at home. We were in Crumlin Hospital. You could see into all the rooms on the ward, from inside your room, as huge picture windows were in each. On either side of us was pediatric disaster. There was tragedy all down the hallway. With a little abandoned boy on the end. I never saw any family come to visit. And he would just cry. The nurses

were good to him, as they were to us, but they couldn't keep up with his newborn needs.

This was a tough week. We were in the hospital, alone, away from home. Soon after our other son would break his arm and need to have surgery to set it back in place. Meanwhile, in the midst of this, we were throwing huge parties, where I was cooking for at least 50 people. I was responsible for the care of two interns. I was also busy preparing for two talks to give during our major training week. All with a newborn and a two year old.

I look back on that time period, and I was living under low levels of depression. I was longing for rest. I was like a bag of parched bones walking around. There was little relief.

We had a wonderful team. A supportive team. It was actually some of the best community we've ever had. But we were all under the pressures of running a program. The support they provided was good, but we were spiraling.

Spiraling from having one thing after another happen to us in a 6 month period, both self and circumstance induced. And, I would find out later, I was carrying pain. Open wounds that manifested themselves in undiagnosed anxiety and severe OCD. I always thought I was dying. I lived under a constant cloud that something bad was going to happen to me or to one of my immediate family members. Frankly, I was a wreck of a servant of God. I was doing way more than God even expected. I was doing what I expected of myself, which was being some type of super human Christian.

My First Psychotic Break

It was June, 05. We were at the training week and we (Wes, Eli, Abe, and I) were living at the YWCA in Greystones, a small fishing village in Co. Wicklow, for two weeks, along with the rest of our summer interns and MAPPERS. I remember few things from this time period. What I do remember, is terrifying.

I remember obsessing over one of my lectures. Thoughts would race through my head all through the night. I wasn't sleeping much. Eli said that he saw his cousins (Lola and Sophia) from America upstairs near our room. I thought that he was seeing some type of ghost. I was freaked out. Darkness was beginning to overtake me. I was exhausted and unable to fight.

It all climaxed on a 5 mile hike one day. We were all walking over the mountain from Greystones to Bray, a little village near by.

It's a breathtaking walk. I remember it being a lovely summer day. Minor clouds, minor grey. My thoughts were again racing. I remember not being able to keep track of what time it was. I was heavily in my own world. Walking. Wind. Irish Sea, waving green grass, and climbing up to the top of a mountain, where my life would change forever.

It suddenly felt that one or two dark presences came and hovered over me.

My thoughts became even more fragmented and fast. It felt like crazy thoughts were being poured into my head. Thoughts that were not my own. My mind was going in and out of reality, like a fluorescent bulb flickering on and off. I heard, "Bono is Jesus."

"No, that's crazy. Bono isn't Jesus."

"Your husband is really Bono. And your are Ali."

"No, that's crazy."

It was as if I had been injected with some type of poison, or stung, or stabbed in the mind. As the thoughts continued to play in my head, I started, little by little, to believe them.

It wasn't long before the crazy poison took over. I chased after Wes, "Wes, I think you are Bono." I was confident. I was running after him, as fast as I could. And he was just picking up his pace, running away from me. I just thought he was being a jerk. I was slipping into a hole of being more and more alone. I was walk-

ing into a world that few walk into. I was walking into full-blown psychosis, unknown to me, at the time.

Inside Psychosis

Shortly after the break in reality (I didn't know that this happened) I remember being whisked away from Greystones, back to our home in Dublin for some "rest."

Plans were already made, before the break, for the kids and me to fly back to the States to go with my family to the beach for two weeks.

When we got back home to Dublin from Greystones, I was getting sicker and sicker. My thoughts were spinning out of control. It was as if my reality was being interpreted to me by an outside source. I remember spilling my coffee and getting a rag and when I came back to wipe it up, the coffee was gone. I thought Jesus was coming back and that it was the New Earth. I simultaneously thought that if I made the wrong choice about something that I was going straight to Hell. I got into an elevator at the Dublin airport and was petrified that I was going down to Hell. Literally. I couldn't understand what my friends were saying when they were talking to each other. My mind couldn't make it out. I thought they were speaking in a foreign language, even though they were speaking English. I went from being petrified (in a horrible state of confusion) to being manic (ecstatic that the New Earth was here.)

When we got to the airport, the petrified side showed up. I thought for sure we were going down in the plane and that we would all be killed. I don't really know how I got on the plane. Once we boarded, (Wes had miraculously gotten on the overbooked flight to take me back to States) my thoughts ebbed and flowed between believing we were on a plane to heaven to on a plane to hell. I was having multiple panic attacks, inside of my mind. I was a prisoner and helpless to my reality being interpreted by psychosis. It was darkness that if it was just darkness alone at work, would have probably killed me.

God and Psychosis and Caring for His Little Girl

Something was happening, though, in the midst of the horrible darkness.

There was also Rescuer at work. Even though I was full of darkness and confusion, the Light was greater. It was more in the form of me hanging onto a life preserver in a hurricane, but it was steady, strong, and buoyant across the chaotic mental landscape of my mind. There would be a Scripture. “I will never leave you.” A calm, firm, clearer voice would arise.

A kind man sat next to me, a few seats down, on the plane all the way to Canada, where we would exchange planes to head back to the States. He was body guard like, to me, but with a kind disposition. He kept checking on me, although I was giving him no visible signs that I was not ok. I just remember him strong, and happy, and joyful. His presence calmed me. I remember him playing air guitar while he was listening to his iPod. He was full of life, and so kind. I think he was an angel. Or, as I’m typing this, maybe it was Jesus. I like that it was Jesus, better. I can’t remember his face. I don’t think I’ve ever seen a grown man in my life play air guitar on a plane with reckless abandon. At one point he laid his jacket down on the seats in between us for me to put Abe down on as I was nursing. Who does that?

There was also a scent. It started on that plane and followed me all the way home. It was glorious. It was intensely masculine, a calming aromatherapy of sorts. When I would get anxious, it would calm me down. When my mind wouldn’t work, the smell would come.

Stateside

When we landed in Atlanta, my parents were there to greet us. I was a wreck. But I didn’t really know it. I heard hissing sounds in the Atlanta airport and felt a physical weight so heavy, as if gravity had grown a few extra muscles and was try-

ing to wrestle me to the ground. My parents drove Wes, the boys (I had two boys at the time, Abe and Eli) back to Greenville, SC. The whole way home, I thought that Jesus had come back to Earth. My mind was read meaning into absolutely everything. From billboards on the highway to what my mom was saying to me. I was convinced that we were loaded, because of course, Jesus had come back. My mom was driving. I remember seeing terror in her eyes.

I was psychotic for three weeks after arriving back to the States. Wes and mom took me to a family doctor and they put me on a medication. I didn't want to take it because I thought Wes was trying to kill me.

One of my friends back in Dublin, right before I left, said, "Trust Wes." It was seared into my mind. It felt like jumping off a cliff and hoping that someone would catch me, to take the medication. I took it on trust alone. Soon after, I remember being able to start to understand what people were saying again. I could literally feel my mind coming back to me, little by little, with each nightly dose.

The psychosis ended on a park bench downtown Greenville. Wes and I were sitting outside the Hyatt. It was mid July.

I looked up into the air and saw what looked like a dark shadow fly away from me above my head. I was then sane. Completely normal. In one instant.

The Supernatural and The Fight

I believe that something left me that night. Mental Illness is such a mix. Of chemicals going haywire, wounds and spiritual oppression. I soon found out that there were people all over the world praying for me and for our little family.

I grew up Baptist, and then Presbyterian. I love my heritage, and the people in both of these denominations that have loved me, been a part of my journey of faith. However, in my early experience, I didn't believe much in spiritual warfare, or know how to handle it. After I saw the shadow depart, and became rational

again, my life would change forever. I needed something other than my previous experience and my theology to help me get through what would follow.

It became clear to me, over the next few weeks and months, that I had lost my mind. What would follow would be bouts with depression and OCD. The severest of darkness had left, but I was still in darkness.

I was shaky. I couldn't handle going into certain grocery stores where there was what seemed to me a palpable darkness or oppression. Fluorescent lights, in any environment, were like nails on a chalkboard. My senses were heightened and I could detect spiritual foul play in many different places. Disney movies and cookbooks were about all I could handle in terms of any kind of media.

Daily, I gradually became better, stronger. I was in a grieving process over what had happened, but I was slowly finding my normal self, which I had lost when I was ill.

Abe, my youngest, was 7 months old when I found out that I was pregnant with our third child. All at once, I was hit with recovery, my hormones being all over the place again, my home still being in Ireland (we left when I was ill, so all of our possessions were still there), the grief that comes from recovery, and simply being in between Irish and American Culture. The pregnancy was a nail in the coffin to our dreams of missions and raising our children in foreign lands.

After consulting with our counselor and my psychiatrist, they advised not going back to Ireland. I would be in a weak, vulnerable place with the pregnancy. The loss was almost more than I could bear.

We were living with my parents at the time. I began to have horrible dark, obsessive thoughts. I couldn't be around knives because I was petrified that I would stab someone that I loved and wind up in prison. Each day was a fight. Some days I wanted to die. Prison seemed better than having to battle a severe bout with OCD.

Then throw on top of that all of the goodbye's and transition. Good bye to our Irish friends and American teammates. Goodbye to our cozy little house in Monkstown.

Hello to living in America and living a “normal” life, which was my greatest fear.

After packing up in Ireland, and wrestling with the fact that we were not on God's plan B, we bought a small house and an ugly minivan. My life was no longer sexy in my own eyes. I wasn't “ministering” to people. All of my “cool props” that I had been leaning on were gone. I struggled to live a quiet life. Enter in the third person of the trinity. I hadn't been open much to the Spirit in my life, except to interpret Scripture. My circumstances would require more in order to make it through my days.

The Holy Spirit.

One of my profound first encounters with the Holy Spirit was standing in my parent's kitchen.

X & Y had just come out by Coldplay. The music was background, until all of a sudden, the Spirit inside me pressed pause.

“Fix You” was the selection. The best way I can describe it was that the words were anointed. I cried in my parents kitchen because more than anything else, I felt loved by the God of the Universe.

I had never felt loved by God in that way. Through a song. I had always been taught that He only spoke through Scripture. My pain was so great and my world was falling apart. He let me know, through that song that He knew it.

It wasn't a wild Holy Spirit moment. I didn't fall out, or have any visions, which at that time would probably have been too much.

What began, though, was the great Intrigue with things of the Spirit. My Spiritual life began to come to life again. I found Joy. OCD/Psychotic Nat began to take her place where she belonged. On the cross. Part of a Story, not an Identity.

In walking this out, moment by moment, in soaking in this, I recovered.

The Spirit showed me Jesus. In all kinds of ways. And the kindness of a Father.

2006-2007 Life in the Burbs.

In 2006 I gave birth to my third child, Chloe. We had just been back in the States for a year and I was adjusting to being a mom in the burbs. Living a normal life. Normalcy is the best teacher because it's in a "normal" environment that there's a calm. There were no random celebrity sightings like in Dublin, no running up Vico road and seeing the Irish Sea spread out before me as I hopped on the train home back to Monkstown. I was going through a good bit of culture shock.

Culture shock not only to leaving Ireland, but to the everyday. Just enough people coming home and driving into garages and shutting the doors to make a girl wrestle with herself. It was the best thing that could have happened to me. I began to see God. It was a time of baby spit up, birds showing up at just the right moment to comfort me, and learning to be Natalee Whitesell, mom of three young children. And it was good. Not without its struggles, but good.

A journal entry from the time:

I'm sitting on a wide wood planked back porch. And there's crickets. The canvas awning gives in to the breeze. It spans the length of the porch.

We've spent the days watching the kids play. Digging trenches. Laughing. Throwing sand. There's a whole lot of wonder on their faces constantly. They are so tired for their naps. And their skin has gone golden. Parents quickly take pictures...trying to capture moments...hoping the lighting and the wind will follow suit.

I think I'm out here tonight in part because I don't feel beautiful.

That is the curse for women, isn't it? I'm starting to see lines in my skin that weren't there before. I've had three babies...you get the picture.

I can obsess about these things. I know, I know. That is so NOT attractive. I would be so much more beautiful if I just didn't care. If I swept away by the tides of the who I am and who Jesus is. Whatever. That is so not where I'm at right now.

So, Jesus, I want to know something. What am I supposed to do...like right now...when I can't stop fretting about my aging body? When I can't even enjoy a bowl of ice cream without feeling fat. Jesus says He is better than all of that. And that what I've inherited should somehow mysteriously take my eyes off of the pooch and the lines on my neck and on my eyes. Like, in theory, it's so good (this Jesus, this Gospel) that that stuff shouldn't really even matter. Like, when the guy that you've had a crush on for two years finally admits that he thinks you're beautiful and is in love with you. Nothing else matters. All you care about is the way the moon looked the night you first kissed. Or what you felt the second he grabbed your hand. It all melts away.

Maybe that's what the ocean is for. And this breeze. And those fireworks over there. And the crickets. And the lights on the canal.

As cheesy as it sounds...while I was in the height of my self-absorption on the beach this evening...I was watching Wes take pictures of the kids. He was literally photographing their every move. Then photographing me. I wondered if that was one little microscopic picture of what He's like with His kids. That He loves and likes us enough to take "pictures." You know, is He warm in that way? Affectionate? Proud, even?

Right as I wrote that, fireworks exploded right in front of me. I'm smiling now. And I just saw the full golden moon shrouded by night clouds.

The same affection He has for Jesus, He has for me. All the time. Right now.

Boy, I needed this little sermon.

I'm glad my flabby pooch led me out here tonight.

another journal entry...July 07

My friend Jane moved an old table onto my front porch. I've never used my front porch because I've always just written it off as 80's and country. But with this table here, it's nice. Although the chairs are not comfortable. They're straight backed with wicker seats. Anyway, I can bring the computer out, not get rained on, drink Crystal Light Peach Tea (yes, I'm still bound to calorie counting, help me Jesus) and read and watch things.

I've needed this. Sitting alone on my 80's front porch. And I didn't even know how much I did.

So, I've been watching huge bumblebees fly around in and out of trees. They always bump into things, though. They're clumsy little things. I wonder what made God think, "round. stingers. wings. black. buzzing. clumsy. Perfect. I'll make it."

The birds have really been singing, too. I know that it's presumptuous, but sometimes I wonder if they sing to me. And when the wind blows, I wonder if that's the Father showing me His pleasure.

(1 minute later.)

Just saw a hummingbird. It literally flew right over to me and looked at me. Like from 2 feet away. Hovering heli-style. Staring. Then he drank from my petunia baskets. I really can't believe that just happened. That's never happened to me in 31 years. Wow. Need to feel the pleasure of that.

I must say that I've been kind of busy and caught up in life. My brother got married at a fabulous location near Hilton Head. The place was three years old, but it felt as though it had been there for 100. There was a gas lamp lined town square. And we ate breakfast one morning on a wide planked porch that wrapped around the perimeter of the inn. The food was beautiful.

The berries were plump and dewy. The bread was made from scratch.

So back to birds singing and hummingbirds and bees and wind blowing. Interesting to tie in with all of this the Scripture that I was just reading. Like, sometimes I think that it's too good to be true. That God somehow wouldn't (or couldn't) send wind or birds at the right moment. Or at the very least, He wouldn't do it for me. I've done nothing to earn such favor or love. Yet I wonder how far the Gospel reaches. Does it reach down and blow my hair? Or give me hummingbirds?

From Isaiah 62 in the Message. Enjoy.

You'll be called Hephzibah (My Delight)

and your land Beulah (Married),

Because God delights in you

and your land will be like a wedding celebration.

For as a young man marries his virgin bride,

so your builder marries you,

And as a bridegroom is happy in his bride

so your God is happy with you.

This is what He most certainly does for all of His children.

Eyes to see, please. Ears to hear.

Culture Shock Lifted

In 2007, I became ok with living in Greenville, and even started loving the city. The culture shock of living back in my southern home town began give way to enjoying the restaurants, the food, the people. I would go on prayer walks with a friend. We walked downtown and prayed for everything from artists, to churches, to businesses prospering, to friends who needed help, to our own junk. It was through praying for this place and the people here with my friend that I began to see God's heart for Greenville, SC.

And His heart is that He loves this place. So I began to love this place.

As I became better, and out of survival mode, my desires for cross-cultural living came back. I longed to be part of a community. I longed for sidewalks and to be downtown in this city that I was falling in love with. This all coincided with me becoming pregnant with our fourth child. We were outgrowing our house in the burbs and would need more room.

I was always looking online for houses. One day, I found the house on Ladson Street.



Ladson Street and Losing My Mind #2

I knew in my head that we weren't on plan B. It was Ladson Street that would help remind me, in my heart, that indeed, in all of the craziness and uprooting of the past, that we were indeed on plan A.

When I saw the house, I knew it in my heart.; A 1935 Craftsman Bungalow filled with stories, hardwoods, and high ceilings. Set on an historic Greenville Street close to downtown.

Ladson Street is in a predominately African American neighborhood. We would be the only white people on the street. We still are. My friend Meg and I prayed on the front porch one day that this house would be ours, and that our dreams of engaging a different culture would be fulfilled again.

We found renters for the house that we were living in and closed on the Ladson house within about a month of that prayer.

Ladson Street is lined with oaks, and according to the residents, at one time the oaks were healthy and abundant enough to provide a canopy of shade in the summer time.

Now, the trees have waned. They are diminished from what they once were.

I'm sure the trees have stories. Stories of people leaving. Stories of people finding a home on this mostly quiet street. Most of the people here are older, kind of like the oaks. But they are in no way diminished.

They have stories. Stories of growing up in the South as African Americans. Once one of my neighbors told me the story, sitting on her front porch, of a cashier who had a hard time taking money from her. She thought her hands were dirty and didn't want to touch the money. Because she was black.

Soon we began to know the residents of Ladson. They are some of the richest people that I know. I didn't feel crazy anymore because there was humanity in the air. Sweaty stories of broken lives. People that needed Jesus as much as I did and talked about it. I felt home.

In April of 2008, I delivered our fourth child, Maeve. I was able to make the nursery that I had prayed for, in the house that I loved, that I could raise my children in. The prayers that I had prayed on many runs in Ireland for a kitchen with lots of light and a gas stove were answered. We had rich community at our local church. We were in a place of healing. Healing from the love of our neighbors, our church.

We even had a block party. Not once had it been done in the history of our neighborhood.

We all fed around 500 people that night. Several houses on our block all contributed. We even had food left over. A DJ blasted hip hop in our front yard. I bought Grey Goose. Because, when I was at Costco buying the liquor, I had the sneaking suspicion that that's what Jesus would have bought; French and good. The best. People still talk about that party today. How people picked up their own trash. There was a spirit of respect. An air of the Kingdom fell on our home and on our block that night. Blacks and whites came together. Racial tensions were dissolved, for a night, with a party and a feast.

Ladson Street, and the residents on it, are medicinal. It's not without issues, as nothing on this earth is, but it was a tremendous piece of the puzzle of recovering from my first illness. There's a different everyday on Ladson. There's the everyday of Mr. Bobby sitting on his front porch and waving to our kids. There's the everyday of Susan being real and making me laugh. There's the everyday of her son Jimmy bringing our trashcan back from the edge of the street. And the everyday of Ruby keeping her front yard meticulous.

Psychotic Episode #2

I don't really know what happened this time. If it was the stress of four kids or the pressures that I put on myself, or postpartum hormones, or an attack or what, exactly. I don't remember being under lots of stress, which is why the second episode seemed as though it came out of nowhere.

Almost 3 years later from my first episode, on the birthday of my oldest son Eli, I lost my mind again. I was at his birthday party. It was at the very beginning. I remember wandering around thinking, again, that the New Earth was here.

I was whisked away from the party after telling my husband that I thought he was Jesus.

What would follow would be three weeks of casseroles and people coming to care for me from my church during the day. I was unable to care for my children. My kids were 5 down to 5 months.

I don't remember much, but I know I was in it for 3 weeks. I came out of it and was well for about a week, when our house caught on fire. With all of us in it. We were all fine, but we all watched our upstairs burn, barefoot, as we had all run out with no shoes. Not knowing, as we were watching, if we were going to lose everything.

A whirlwind of fire trucks and people showed up. People from my church kept appearing. Friends came and took our kids and clothed them and put shoes on their feet.

Adrenaline pumped through my body and I remember packing up my fridge, trying to save our perishables.

It was all too much. I went back into psychosis for another three weeks. My second episode lasted for about 6 weeks total.

We had home insurance, and got an amazing remodel after the fire. Our home, through tragedy, would become even better and even more of the place that we

wanted it to be. My recovery this time was full of picking out light fixtures and faucets and visiting the house everyday.

We were out of our house for about 4 months.

I don't remember much of my recovery from this time. I know one thing, though. My husband took the kids, gave me breaks, believed in me and reminded me, constantly, who I am.

a journal entry from December, 2008

I'm starting to think it's worth it.

Worth it, to walk through pain, through unmet expectations, through unmet desires that are ravenous at times, through house fires, through mental illness, through humiliation, through the out of controlness of four kids, through loneliness...

To experience what it's like to be covered, like a warm blanket.

To feel all of that crap, so that I can feel this...loved, tended to, spoken for. Even though He knows absolutely everything about me.

It's worth it, to know that I'm a part of something much bigger. It makes it all bearable, joyful even, to know that our little lives are not so little...that we're connected to Glory. That the kingdom comes through brokenness, through weakness. Through things that seem little and insignificant like babies being born on the run.

The kingdom, at times, feels like utter madness and upsidedownness.

I don't think I've ever been happier this Christmas about the fact that Jesus came. And about not only the fact that He came, but that He comes. Daily. And is not afraid or put off by all of the things that makes us "us." We're never too much. Never.

Deeper Into the Trinity

After walking through deep mental darkness, I began to question again. There has to be more to God.

A local church here hosts a prayer room on Monday nights. I went, as I was struggling with depression and desperately needing healing. Two prayer servants met with me and prayed with me. This was the first time I was exposed to healing prayer.

I began to tell them my story.

They listened to my story and then they began to pray with me. They explained that they would listen to the Father for awhile and then they would begin to share with me what they felt the Father said to them.

And it felt right. They led me into asking the Spirit to reveal a memory that He might be wanting to heal. I don't remember what memory came up. It was something to do with my dad. What I do remember is that as I forgave him, some of the depression that I had been experiencing that night lifted. What really blew me away, though, is what one of the prayer servants said at the end. We had closed up the session, but she grabbed me and said, "I feel like there is one more thing that the Father wants to say to you." "You are as strong as your husband."

I wept. The Spirit told her something about me that only He could know. I was believing, for months, that my husband was the strong one together one and I was the weak crazy one. This was a major root of anxiety and depression for me. I thanked her. I was blown away by a Father who loves me and the power of the Spirit, all bought for me by Jesus.

Soon, we would start attending this church as we were craving to learn more about the gifts of the Spirit. I grew up thinking that all of it was crazy. But I couldn't deny what happened to me in the prayer room that night. I couldn't deny that I felt lighter, loved.

A few months later I was asked to attend a women's group. I've struggled with these groups in the past, but this one I felt different about. A group of us were asked to go on a six -week journey where we would study the gifts of the Spirit. I enthusiastically said yes.

It was the best study I've ever been a part of. Coffee was always brewing. We met late into the night, each time we met, talking about Jesus, the Father, the Spirit. We talked openly about all of the gifts of the Spirit. Healing, prophecy, words of knowledge. We learned how to get "pictures" and "words" from the Father for each other. I saw a newborn baby healed of his fever right before my very eyes after we prayed for him.

I wasn't blown away by the power that comes from these gifts, although that is certainly there. I was blown away by the love that I experienced. The love of a Father that would give such gifts for the encouraging of His people.

What was so wonderful is that our mentors taught us that we had power. We had power, and the Love of the Trinity. They taught us we could hear from the Lord. We could have a relationship with Him that would fill us up to overflowing. They helped us into the confidence of Daughters. This was a major turning point for me Spiritually.

I also began, during this time, going to a Healing Prayer counselor to help work some of the root issues that might have been causing my mental illness. We worked through memories of my childhood. Dark places that had always just remained dark places. We would invite Jesus into these memories. And He would show up! I would see Him, in my Spirit, in many of my darkest memories from childhood. Through forgiveness of people that had offended me and hurt me, I came into a greater freedom than I had ever experienced.

Through the bible study with these amazing women, and healing prayer, my Spiritual life began to come alive again. In spite of walking through such darkness

both in childhood and adulthood, I met Jesus of Nazareth, through the power of the Spirit given by the Love of the Father. I learned that I did not have to live as an orphan, barely making it from day to day.

These experiences would be foundational as I would have to walk through my third and worst bout with mental illness.



Losing My Mind #3

We were prayer walking in my neighborhood right before I entered into my third episode. Prayer walking was one of the most fun things I've ever done. We met all kinds of people. We got to hear God's heart for my neighborhood and pray for His Kingdom to come. It was a wild journey of learning we mattered. We were priests, and partners with God. It was fun to hear what God was saying over others as we prayed. We prayed for roofs, for flowers, for gardens, for hearts.

A journal entry from the time:

Abe is sick this morning, home from school.

The boundary for this morning was right outside my front door. Within earshot.

Maeve, my 3 year old, wanted to go. So I strollered her up and bundled her up.

Hamster like, I walked in front of my house. Simply praying for the Kingdom to come. To this spot. To the cozy confines of earshot.

I saw him across the street. I said, "Hello." He was friendly, inviting. In a good way. And kindly responded back to me.

I asked if there was anything he wanted me to pray for. His English was broken, but good. He's Puerto Rican, I discover. And a construction worker for the house across the street.

We chat. I explain that I feel a little crazy. He laughs.

I notice the tattoos on his neck. They are Chinese. There are about 4 characters on each side. He responds that the tattoos are the names of his kids. I think that's cool. And I let him know.

He mentions that he wants prayer to be a better person.

As I pray, I know that he is loved. Just as he is. I pray something along those lines for him. He thanked me, and I walk away.

Then it came. As quickly as a thunderstorm in summer. I heard the Father say over him:

"I would tattoo his name on My neck. Just like He tattooed His kid's names on his."

I told him. He melted. Tough Puerto Rican. Melted.

Because that's what Jesus does. That's what the Father's heart does. It melts.

15 minutes on Ladson Street. Just 15 minutes. Right outside my door.

Mission teams from all over the country showed up in my neighborhood the summer of 2011. They painted houses, cleaned up yards, and replaced roofs. An African American gardener moved into the worst part of the hood and started one of the most beautiful gardens I've seen. We now have asparagus growing our parts.

We prayed for four months before I got sick.

On June 8th, 2012, I was sitting in my back yard. It was the morning. I was doing my morning thing and out of nowhere, I felt a horrible darkness in the form of a thought. It was similar to 2005 when I was on top of the hill in Ireland. It was a crazy thought, twisted, and not my own. It felt as though I was stabbed with it, and it began coursing through my mind, gradually taking over reality, for a moment, as though it were truth.

In my Spirit, I heard, "Call Wes." It was a battle to pick up the phone. Part of me wanted to believe the thought, because it was grand. The sane part that was still there, picked up the phone and called my husband. He was at work. I was alone with my four kids. My voice, I'm sure, was frantic. "It's happening. I just had a thought." Wes said simply, "It's not true." Temporary relief.

I sat on the couch and cried. My kids were running around. From out of nowhere, my daughter Chloe threw the book, “Jesus Calling” on my lap. I turned to the date. It said something like, “Tell me your deepest thought.” I immediately went outside to the back yard and told Jesus the thought that was terrifying me. I heard, in a clear voice, “That is a lie.” Relief again.

I fought off psychosis for about a week.

One June 14th 2012, I again lost touch with reality.

I was in it for three months this time, all summer long.

I came out of it, one night while sitting downtown with my husband. Just like the first time, in one instant, after three months of war, I was back

Recovery

This time, recovering was the hardest it had ever been. It’s the loneliest of places because it’s not talked about. Mental Illness brings judgement, probably more than any other illness. It is seen as the ultimate weakness. “Why can you just not get yourself together?” “Why can’t you just hold your thoughts captive?” I wish it was that simple. I was fighting to hold my thoughts captive. As hard as I could. But at some point, the illness set in. It’s like fighting off the flu. At some point, even though you are doing everything you can to stop it, it comes. It, like all disease, is a part of the fall.

The next few months would be full of weakness, grieving, and being pissed at God.

I had gotten sick in the darkest of ways. I just ignored Him for about three months. I was afraid to pray or read or do much of anything. I think, in part, my brain needed to heal from three months of trauma. So it was ok. What was not ok was thinking that I couldn’t pray my pissed offedness at God.

I felt betrayed. Thrown to the wolves. Abandoned. Left to fend for myself. And I kept it inside and smoked cigarettes.

Then, throw on top of that having to deal with shame and humiliation of posting random things on my blog and Facebook. And texting strange things to people. And doing all kinds of other weird things.

I felt overwhelmed. I was in so much pain, like someone had sawed my limb off. I didn't know who I was. I had been gone for three months mentally. I had lost a summer with my husband and kids.

Yelling it Out

At first, I was just pissed at the enemy. Mad at the fall. And I would go in the back yard and yell at him.

I brought this up in my women's group, and one of my mentors very kindly suggested that I bring my anger before God, instead of the enemy. At first, I got mad at her. Then I knew she was right.

I knew I had to face God, about three months after my episode. I went out into my back yard. And let God have it.

I highly recommend doing this.

We weren't meant to suffer, to be mentally ill, to lose summers with our kids. God knows this. He sent his son to reverse this.

The God of the Universe can take our anger. And not only can He take it, but He cares. I know He cares because I yelled at him and cried to him and He didn't strike me dead on the spot, like I somehow imagined he would. I know He cares because I felt compassion from Him. And anger that His little girl would have to walk through this nature of suffering. I believe He was pissed that I got sick. Why did He not intervene quicker? I'm not sure. Faith, even if it's a feeble faith, is trusting in spite of not knowing all of the answers. Like a child would trust a good parent. The child might not be able to understand why he can't do something, but he/she knows they are loved. Good parents would never hurt their children. I became convinced that God, my good Father, did not send the illness.

That didn't solve it alone, yelling it out that one time. There would be multiple conversations in my back yard over what happened. The key is having a conversation. Wrestling through every single nitty gritty feeling. Every hurt, every feeling of betrayal. This didn't happen overnight for me, but I remember having to come to a face off. I was either going to believe that He was Good. Or I was going to hate him and not trust him forever. I decided, with my mind only, that I would believe He was good. Good even though it didn't seem like it. Good even in the midst of the mystery of the fall and how things work, Good even though I had people shun me and not know what to say to me. Good even though people felt pity and sorrow for me and had all kinds of answers of what had happened. Good even though I felt a basket case. Good even though I had walked through mental illness. Three times.

My heart followed in believing this. It was almost as if he just wanted my weak, trembling "Yes." "I will still follow you and believe you are who you say you are."

As soon as I said Yes, He began the process of restoring my soul.

The Courage to Face It

I received a diagnosis of OCD and Bi-Polar 1. For the longest time, I didn't want to face this. It was too much of a monster, too scary. It meant too many things in my mind. It was like one big identity suck for me. As if someone had just put a straw to my brain and sucked Natalee Whitesell right on out of there. It was hard, at first, to not just see myself as diagnosis, to live out of the illness instead of living out of my identity in Christ.

The Courage to Face Myself

I was sitting in my backyard one morning. I was actually starting to obsess about having cancer, which in the past would have ruled my day. Yes, there is OCD here, but this morning, I saw something completely different.

Of course, all of this stuff is always a mix of things. This morning I saw my own sin in it. I have been a fearful woman most of my life. Extremely fearful. There are many reasons for this, but one solid reason is my own sin. Me. The Old me. Or “the flesh” as many people say. As I’ve been growing in the Love of God, seeing my own junk, even the scariest, most embarrassing stuff, is no longer lethal to me. He loves me because He loves me. Which makes the beauty of the cross all the more appealing. My sin, in fact, is huge in all of this. It’s not the sole reason for me getting sick, but it does play a part. This morning was a repentance session.

Real repentance feels so good. I get to throw all of my sin on the cross. And receive the gift, the GIFT, of not having to earn anything. The more I see that I am enjoyed, and that God did not begrudgingly send his son to die for me “a worm”, the easier it is to see my own junk and to see the depths of it, but in no way feel condemned. Every last bit of this is supernatural, and ever last bit of it is open to all who would believe in Jesus.

There is nothing that will give you courage to face Mental Illness and yourself quite like the Cross.

A journal entry from the time

The light came in through the window this morning in a different way.

"My mercies are new every morning." I heard it. Today, in the mystery of how Things work, I would believe it. After months of having to learn how to stand tall. And walk again. After feeling confined, mentally, to a hospital bed.

Recovery from mental illness is a bitch.

It's a lonely road. Not because others don't suffer, but because of the taboo of being weak. I don't like to be weak. I fight being weak.

And I've been fighting. Fighting to save myself. Striving to heal and medicate. Going to my default mode of performance. I'm a good girl, damn it. I will be a good homemaker. And teacher. And friend. And wife. And mother. And writer. And riser above of all things. And Christian.

Today is different.

Not different because I'm different. But different because I realized that He's the Same.

Nothing has changed. In the depths of my suffering and striving is what has always been there. The Cross. The Cross. The door. The land that I couldn't see.

That scandalous place. That place where things can only be received, and not earned. That place where you have to look yourself in the mirror. And see Good.

The Glory of being liked enough, not pitied. Loved and not cast out. Well and not sick. Exchanged and invited.

This is the offense of the Cross. Death to having it all together and earning something nice and shiny because of it. It's the great Lavish. The great showing up with your soul naked. Not to get beat to a pulp by an angry God. But to be dressed by the fact that His garments were gambled for. Crowned not by all things thorny and wretched. Not to drink our own herbal bitters. But to taste what we were meant to taste. Relationship. Favor. Childhood.



After the Storms

Healing

I've found that this is a complicated issue. There is such mystery around mental illness and what causes it. To my knowledge, it is such a mix of things. In my experience, the causes are both spiritual and chemical. One friend said to me once, "I think it is 100% spiritual and 100% chemical."

I believe that Jesus can heal mental illness in an instant. Jesus did it in Scripture. I believe He wants to do that for His people. I think of the verse in Isaiah 26:3 "You keep those in perfect peace who keep their minds stayed on you." However, for me it has been more of a journey because that's what He had for me. I think it's a journey for most people.

Here's what I've found helpful in treating and bringing healing. It must be treated holistically. Scripture says that we are three parts. Body, Soul, and Spirit. It is crucial to address all three of these elements. It is most important in severe cases such as mine to start with the physical. My chemicals were going haywire. I was not sleeping. In order for complete healing to occur, the physical must first be addressed. I am not saying to not pray. Praying for one that is ill while he/she is ill is of the utmost importance. However, this must be in conjunction with helping a person heal first physically.

Life may have to stop. That's ok. I had to work, full time, in conjunction with my caregivers which were primarily Wes and my mom, to get well physically. Getting well takes an inside community (primary care givers, doctors, close friends)

and sometimes even a more peripheral, but safe community to provide other supports (childcare help, meals, etc.)

Here are a few things that were helpful in my healing.

Dealing with the Body

Find a good psychiatrist. I've been to crappy psychiatrists, that treat you as a nut job and not as a complex human being with history. I love my psychiatrist. He is truly a craftsman when it comes to diagnosing. He spent an hour with me on my first visit. Asking all kinds of questions and spending lots of time with me before giving me a diagnosis. He treated me with dignity even in my most psychotic moments.

Don't be afraid of medication. Medication, if you are on the right medication, comes from the hand of God. It has saved my life and given my life back to me. The hardest thing for me in going on medication was admitting that I had a weakness. Not letting pride get in the way. It was in admitting my weakness and acknowledging my need that I began to heal.

Eat good food as much as possible. There's so much crap in processed foods that come prepackaged. I'm not an expert on all of this by any means, but a good rule of thumb is the closer to the earth the food is, the better. Whole foods.

Sleep. Work towards getting on a normal rhythm of sleep, whatever that looks like. For me, it was working towards getting eight hours of sleep a night.

Exercise. Do whatever you can physically do.

Sunlight. Try to get at least 15 minutes of outdoors time a day, even if it is just sitting outside.

Dealing with the Soul

Therapist: For me, this has been crucial. It's important to have someone who is trained in these things walking alongside of you. This has also been good for our relationship as mental illness can erode away at a healthy marriage.

Healing prayer: I have gone to several healing prayer ministers here in my home town. They have been extremely helpful in getting to the root causes, mainly from my childhood, that have produced spiritual strongholds in my life. I have experienced true freedom in these sessions.

Confession: Confessing sins. This is more like a relief and it does NOT lead to condemnation. This can be done in the quiet of your own home, or any other place that feels restful/relaxing.

Repentance: Change your mind about yourself. Refuse to live out of old ways of thinking. Believe what God says about you, and what Scripture says about you. Repentance is fun, because you get to receive the great lavish.

Safe Community: Let a few safe people in. People that can help you, support you, laugh with you, and not always be trying to give you answers.

Extend Grace, not condemnation: I realized, by Jesus's help and my counselor that I had been through a war. It takes time to heal. Patience with myself and grace with myself is crucial.

Forgiveness: There were many that I needed to forgive. It is a release to let them go and hand it over to God. We are not meant to carry injustices committed against us. And forgive yourself, if necessary, for whatever comes to mind.

Don't rush the process: Safe community and the Spirit helps tremendously with this. I often wanted to rush back into things, only to get there and realize that I was too weak.

Finding Identity Again

First of all, to all those who struggle with mental illness, I want to say this: We are warriors and ultimately even though we are weak, we are strong. Strong to face horrible darkness and keep on moving. Strong to keep mothering our children, or going to school, or doing whatever it is that we do. We are fighters.

Mental Illness is just part of a story, NOT an identity. When we live out of the illness as identity is when the illness grows, like a cancer. If your thoughts are, I'm bi-polar, this is how life is going to be, than life will be bi-polar.

I've experienced this first hand. When I live out of the illness I can't get out of bed on some days.

Instead, we must find ourselves, our new selves. I believe that it can only be found in wrestling with God. He has surprised me over and over again with how cool He is, how loving He is.

Each person must find this for himself/herself. Or maybe a better way of putting things is to let yourself be found.

There is a God who knows you, who has a new name for you.

Who has put your illness where it should be. On the cross. It is in realizing that what Jesus bought for you is health, wholeness, and healing. Identity.

He is the best person, by the power of the Spirit, to show you who you are again.

journal from June, 2012

"You are religious."

I heard it. Not in a condemning way. In a matter of fact friend way. From within. From that Voice.

It's easy to try and clean myself up. To tidy all things within. There's something in me that still needs to be some type of housekeeper when I come before God.

He's more than a housekeeper, or some type of paid help. That's religion. That's a box.

A "Yes" to the Man is an invite to a party, I think.

Where, in our messes, our initials are on glasses and napkins, wedding style. We're seated on leather couches. Among good friends. With samplings from a feast on our plates and good wine in our glasses.

Just as we are. In need of knowing that Jesus is the King of the Feast instead of a prudish book-keeper.

Our books were thrown at Him. Our stories, our trying to keep it together stories, or our Hell in a hand-basket acts, were thrown at Him on the cross.

The Curtain was ripped in the temple so that our Soul Lover, Soul Father, God-Who-Is-For-Us could reside in us and lead us to our new non-religious, non-tidy Identities. As Sons and Daughters and intimate friends of God.

The broken, but glorious temples that we are. Holy, now. Set apart for not just some type of harpy, puffy cloudy heaven. But for ushering in and enjoying the mysteries of Heaven coming to Earth.



Mothering

I would say that some of my mothering existence has been plagued with mother guilt. I don't read to my kids enough. I don't love my kids because I smoke sometimes. I can't keep up with each of their folders from school. I don't laminate my carpool tags. If you can get guilty about it, I am your woman. I'm not proud of this. It's just real.

I've prayed and prayed about it, been plagued by it, and been slowly strangled by it on a daily basis. Then you throw in the three times that I've gotten sick and needed to recover.

After psychotic/manic illness, I usually fall into a pretty bad depression. I think it's a mixture of grief, realizing that my mind was/is broken and then the strangle fiends of shame and guilt.

When I'm sick, I can't mother. I tell my kids stuff like their daddy is Jesus. I don't know what day it is. I'm in my own manic world. During the worst of it, people have to come be with me to monitor me and help me. When I snap back to reality, this is the hardest thing to deal with. I couldn't even mother my own children.

The recovery is even more intense. I have so much to sift through. I've learned that I can't stuff it, because stuffing is dangerous for me. So I'm left with four kids, the house, a husband, and not wanting to get out of the bed on some days. And on the worst of the worst days, feeling like it would be better for my family if I was just dead.

This is where the love story comes in. I have a husband who's crazy about me. It's hard as hell for him to love me through these times. I'll want to crawl in bed. He comes in and lifts the shades and pulls back the curtains in our bedroom and is just himself. Which is my best friend. He reminds me who I am. Then there's a battle to get out of bed. Most days I do. Even though every ounce of me wants to stay holed up. Other days, it's harder. So, there's been many times where he just takes the kids. All four of them. I married my best friend. Who happens to take his vows seriously. I believe that he has played, along with God of course, the major role in saving my life.

Mothering After Three Manic/Psychotic Episodes

Survival. It's a word that most of us moms are familiar with. I learned that survival was key in my recovering. Meaning that if I had to let the kids watch way more TV than usual, that was perfectly fine. I joined the local Y, which has childcare. I would go and sit in the sauna or exercise. Which was key in restoring my brain. I am in survival mode, i.e. taking care of myself and taking it really slow, for about one year after each episode. Listening to God is key in this. At first, I had to take this piece really slowly, as I was very gun shy of anything spiritual as hyper spirituality is part of my episodes. So I might listen to one spiritual song a day, or meditate on one verse a day. Or listen to songs with no words. My typical survival day looks like this:

8-10 Chill time, kids watch TV

10-12 Y, Exercise, Sauna, Etc.

12 Feed us all

1 Rest time, room time if kids are too old for naps. Possibly more TV for kids

3 Laundry, pick up around house

4 or 5 Start Dinner

6 Dinner

7:30 Kids to bed.

9:30 or 10 Bedtime.

If you are recovering from any type of trauma, your schedule might look different than this. It's best to listen to your caretakers to help you plan your days until you get well. It all depends on your own circumstances and what you need.

I will say that this schedule is when I've been out of my episode for some time. The first few weeks of coming out might have MUCH simpler schedules. Even though it may seem super hard and even if you hate schedules (like me) getting on some type of healthful schedule will speed recovery.

Mothering in Freedom

I'm writing this exactly one year after my episode. As I'm reflecting on all of this, I am realizing that I went through a hell of a lot. I don't say this lightly, but God's grace is sufficient. His grace. The fact that He likes you and understands all of the crap that you have to go through when recovering from a mental illness. I've learned to see Him as a friend, and also as a mother/father for my own children. It's made that mother guilt get less and less intense. It's put it where it should be. On the cross and damned to hell.

I'm learning to mother in freedom. I don't have formulas or answers, but hopefully at the very least my story might offer some perspective.

Mothering in freedom, which means I think, simply knowing God and then, as a result, knowing myself, is the best thing on the planet that I can offer my kids. Mothering in the freedom that I'm loved and liked. Mothering in the freedom that it's not all up to me. Being light, because, thank the Lord it's not all up to me.

God helps me and he's real. If I didn't believe that, I'd be totally screwed.

It's hard, mothering. It's the hardest and most incredible thing I've ever done. I'm in mid-motherhood now, out of diapers and spoon feeding. I can honestly say that I enjoy it...and that there is a light at the end of the tunnel for those who struggle with strollers and pack-n-plays.

I hesitate to give much advice in the mothering world. Instead, I would rather comfort you by letting you know that I struggle, intensely, with being a good mom.

I'm the mom whose kids have bed head when they go to school and at times, whose pants are too short. And double book things constantly. I'm learning to be ok with myself in this. And to work on the bed head, double booking, and pant lengths.

What I can offer my kids, I think, is me. Cuisine loving, travel loving, adventurous, healing me.

This is a journey. Especially in the light of my illnesses. I've lost myself in front of them and am finding myself again.

And being ok with process, being in the process of being a good mom, battling first and foremost to not live under guilt and shame, is the one of the greatest gifts I think that I can give them.

My Mom: An Example

One of the greatest gifts given to me is my mother. My mother is a rock. It's not because she spent lots of time playing with me as a child. Those are not my greatest memories of her. My greatest memory of my mom is the greatest truth about her still today. It's that she gave me her presence. It wasn't in a helicopter sense. She was just always there. Making us, in my early years, mac and cheese and fish sticks.

When the FBI stormed our house to arrest my father for robbing a bank, they were met by hospitality. My dad was on the run. My mom invited them in. There was no need for them to beat any door down. Instead, they were given sweet tea and offered dinner by my mother. The officers accepted the sweet tea, and I just remember sitting around laughing with them as we waited for my father to either show up or turn himself in. She put them all at ease. In the midst of her storm, she brought a sunny like warmth. They were invited into full lives that night, not just the empty tragedy of a man on the run. This is one of my favorite memories of my mother. Even though her world was falling apart, she was inviting others into a different world. A world where a FBI raid ended up in laughter.

This same strength walked me through loosing my mind. She read Scripture to me. She oozes the feminine side of God. And she doesn't even try. One night, during loosing my mind three, I was running through the house in a rage. I was screaming. I was under horrible torment. Wes didn't know what to do with me. He called my mom. She quietly asked me to lie on the couch. She rubbed my back, as I sobbed, and said the 23rd Psalm. That was the only thing that soothed me.

The presence that she has didn't come from years of being the perfect mom. It comes from years of suffering. Being at the end of herself in her marriage to my father. Going on walks, and crying out to God. Knowing that she talked to God is the greatest gift she gave me. She didn't have it all figured out.

We talk daily now. It's not because she had her house clean all the time or did daily devotions with us or made us learn catechisms. It's because she put flesh to faith.

Mothering, I think, is just that. Putting flesh to faith. Painting trust as it really is; hard. But trusting anyway. Even when it feels like the craziest thing on the planet to do.



Voice

It's been a year since I've read the previous six chapters.

After three psychotic episodes, and many minor ups and downs in between, there is hope. I've had dark nights where all I can see is the bed I'm in, or my circumstances that seem impossible.

I can say this, with honesty and conviction. Jesus is enough. He is good. I trust Him.

There were many times that I questioned. I had many battles with God in my kitchen and in my backyard.

I've found a Jesus that is earthy. "The Man in Black" as Johnny Cash says. Who is for the broken, the poor in spirit, the oppressed. Who is near to the betrayed and all those who have experienced injustice. He's also for the religious ones, like me. He pursues the proud and finds those who mask the pain by doing good works.

I was in an predominantly African American church in my neighborhood the other night. There was a palpable communal desperation in the atmosphere. We met for a healing prayer service in a small chapel, where many saints have worshipped over the years. Hundreds lined up in the aisles to receive prayer. I was at the end of the line to receive prayer. I wanted to go home, as the line was moving slowly. Something in me said, "Stay. I have something for you." I waited in that line. I saw people fall as they were prayed for and rest in the Spirit. There's something about desperation that actually leads to rest. The faith in the room was intoxicating. The hunger alluring. God is drawn to such things. He's drawn to peo-

ple at the end of themselves. He came for people at the end of themselves. I had deep hunger that night. The minister prayed for me and gently touched me on the head. I fell to the ground.

I wasn't super spiritual or full of faith. I was just hungry. Someone helped me to my feet, and what I felt was deep rest and joy. Most importantly, I felt hope. Hope that there is healing for mental illness. In the person and work of Jesus on the Cross.

We have an enemy. An enemy who would like to steal, kill and devour. It's real. If you've walked through any darkness, regardless of your faith, deep inside you know it to be true.

Jesus came to kick some tail. And to replace all of the voices in our heads with His voice. He offers us *His* voice. It's stronger than all of the others. It is the calm, steady voice. The peaceful, clean voice. The voice that speaks life instead of death.

He came, among many other reasons, to restore our voice. If you've suffered at all, you have a healing voice. There is purpose in your voice and in your story. *Especially* in the darkest places.

It is my hope that my voice, as unedited, shaky and random as it is will help you hear His voice, finding yours.

You are not your illness. You are you. Unique, no one else on the planet like you, you.

If you are at the end of yourself, take heart.

