

ONLY LOVE CAN HEAL

by Matthew Groff

In high school, I had a reputation as an "absent-minded professor": I would bump into lockers or bang my shoulders on the frames of doorways while walking lost in thought. This would send my large stack of books flying, the dog-eared papers in my rat's nest of a notebook scattering everywhere.

I carried deep dark secrets that I believed no one knew. As far back as the fourth grade, I have memories of feeling as though I just wanted to die. It may seem strange that a fourth grader could have such thoughts. I knew these feelings were irrational; I knew of fellow students whose lives seemed far crueler than my own. In fact, for some reason, these individuals seemed drawn to me, telling me of their traumas. I could not understand why. I had no answers; all I ever did was to listen and ask questions. My challenges and setbacks seemed so minor compared to theirs that I was ashamed to share my dark thoughts and feelings, even when they were sharing theirs with me.

In college, I took a placement test to get into the honors section of freshman chemistry and I had the highest score ever for an incoming freshman. A fellow student who had heard of my score asked for my help. He never went to class; he just read the books and took the tests. He was just not getting the nuclear magnetic resonance thing, which was about interpreting graphs of peaks and valleys into chemical structures. We studied together for six hours before the test and he received the highest score in a class of 300 honors students. I received a D on the very same test. I taught him everything he knew about the subject but, with the clock running and a pencil in my hand, it just did not matter.

Essentially, I could not read. Decades later I was diagnosed with Scotopic Sensitivity Syndrome, a kind of dyslexia in which, for me, the point I would focus on would be like the crest of a wave traveling across the page as I read, which would induce a sense of motion sickness and fatigue. Finding the beginning of the next line was also very difficult. Written assignments were nightmares that would be the source of actual nightmares for years. I stopped going to class; I spent my time helping others study and supporting them as they did their work. The strange thing is that my friends never seemed to know I was failing all of my classes. They never knew that at times I just wanted to die. They were very willing to share their challenges and traumas, sometimes until 2 o'clock in the morning, but I was not willing to share my own. Mine seemed so insignificant by comparison that I felt ashamed.

I started dating my first girlfriend ever. As we were getting closer, she started asking questions I did not want to answer. After we broke up, I found out that she suspected I was suicidal and felt she needed to place some distance between us for her own protection, just in case.

My parents called around this time, late in the second semester. They had seen my grades and encouraged me to find work and a place to live. If I was too lazy and undisciplined to succeed at college in spite of all my obvious gifts, I was not going to come home and sponge off them. The world seemed to have nothing for a person with my challenges – not even pity.

I was on the Honors Cabinet at the University of Pittsburgh; I had keys to the Cathedral of Learning (the centerpiece of the Pitt campus); and, even after hours, I had access to "the highest classroom in the Free World": the Honors Suite on the 34th floor. There, late one night, I stood on a window sill and picked up a phone and called the closest friend I had ever had. I asked him to give me a reason not to jump. He drove from his home to the campus. Later, I did the math: He must have averaged over 100 miles per hour. I am ashamed that I had anything to do with putting his life, and the lives of others, at risk. Yet, without that phone call, I might not be here today.

He met me in the Honors Suite and took me to his parents' home, where he lived. I spent the next three days with him. I came to realize how much I had meant to him in more ways than I had before realized, and how much what I had considered doing would have hurt him. That would have been a pain he never deserved. I felt loved, but I felt some of the feelings he was sharing I could never honestly return. So, even though he offered to find an apartment where we could start a life together, in fairness to him, I needed to go back to my home town and start a life of my own. They say you only hurt the ones you love. Unfortunately, sometimes I have found that the ones who love us most, we hurt the most.

I found a job and a place to live back in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, where I was born. At times, I was riding my bicycle to three different jobs to save money to buy a car. I was abusing every kind of legal stimulant I could find. This gave me the drive and determination I always felt I was lacking, but I started becoming obsessive about working out and restricting my food intake.

I had gotten very heavy during college but, in the nine months after I left Pitt, my waist went from 48 to 32 inches. I bought a Speedo bathing suit to celebrate my "six-pack abs," but I never had a chance to wear it in public because I was beginning to have new problems. I did not want to eat. I

could not sleep. I started to believe people could read my mind and I could read theirs. I started to think I had superhuman intellectual powers and that the fate of the human race depended on how I chose to use these powers. The conversations in my head were becoming "loosely associated," long chains of strange conclusions building upon themselves.

One day, driving to one of my three jobs, I realized I did not know where I was or how I got there. I pulled over to a pay phone and called a hospital. When they asked my name, I just could not come up with it. They asked if I had a driver's license and if I could read my name off that, and that worked. I took an ambulance ride to a community hospital, where I met my first psychiatrist of many. He placed an involuntary commitment form in front of me: It said I had lost touch with reality. "Reality? What is reality anyway?" I asked. "That's my point; sign here" was the reply. Apparently, a psychiatric ward is not the place to wax philosophical.

This was the winter of 1984. During the next seven years, I had seven community hospitalizations for "manic episodes with psychotic features." I was on Prolixin, Haldol, Stelazine, and Mellaril in addition to various antidepressants, anti-anxiety agents, and lithium. Lithium was the only medication that seemed to have any lasting benefit and, although I would try to wean myself off the others as quickly as I could, I took lithium for 24 years.

Between hospitalizations, I dug ditches, cleaned toilets, or did whatever other low-paying job I could find in order to pay my rent and buy groceries. In 1990, in a respite bed of a Community Rehabilitation Residence after my seventh hospitalization, I met Diana, the woman who later became my wife. I have not needed hospitalization or any medication other than lithium since then. Love heals.

After losing my thyroid gland, as many who have taken lithium for decades have, I decided it was time to try to get off this medication. Previous attempts had landed me back in the hospital and I had much more to lose this time. I decided I needed to take it slow; I needed to give my body and mind time to adjust. I needed time to learn life skills to compensate.

I took the Wellness Recovery Action Plan™ (WRAP®) training. I had key supporters who were given warning signs to look for and criteria for deciding when things were breaking down. I had committed to honoring their advice if they told me to restart my medication or sign in to a hospital, even if I did not think it was necessary. It took five long years, decreasing my dose one pill at a time, from 2,400 milligrams a day to zero, but I have been lithium-free for 52 months while working full time during that whole period. I feel

more in control of my life than I ever have. Today, I work full time for the Pennsylvania Mental Health Consumers' Association as a recovery specialist to help others, like me, achieve their own dreams.

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