

NAVIGATING BIPOLAR COUNTRY

*Personal and Professional Perspectives
on Living with Bipolar Disorder*

Edited by **Merryl Hammond, PhD**

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Disclaimer: This is a collection of true accounts, many about an author's own experience with mental illness. Bipolar disorder is extremely serious, so please always consult your health care provider before using any information or advice in this book. Using ideas from this book is at the sole discretion of the reader. The anthology editor, authors, and publisher are not liable for any damages resulting from the use of advice or information in this book. Nevertheless, the editor hopes that the accounts included here will be helpful to readers who are "navigating bipolar country."

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Contents

| | |
|-----------------------------------------------|------|
| Foreword <i>Candida A. Fink, MD</i> | xiii |
| Preface <i>Merryl Hammond, PhD</i> | xvii |

PART 1: Reflections by People Living with Bipolar Disorder 1

| | |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| A Bumpy Road to Recovery: Worth the Ride <i>Tracy Windsor</i> | 3 |
| First Anxiety and Depression, Now Bipolar <i>Minji Kim*</i> | 18 |
| My Kids Saved My Life <i>Stephanie Marie</i> | 25 |
| When Motherhood and Bipolar Disorder Collide <i>Tara Mandarano</i> | 32 |
| From Missed Diagnosis to Misdiagnosis to Bipolar Diagnosis <i>Felicity Vine*</i> | 39 |
| Yup, It's an Ongoing Process <i>Victoria Maxwell</i> | 49 |
| Jailed Body, Imprisoned Mind <i>Eric Smith</i> | 57 |
| Learning to Manage My Triggers <i>Amy Dodd Pilkington</i> | 72 |
| Black Garbage Bags <i>Julie A. Fast</i> | 79 |
| Hypomania, This Beautiful Condition of the Mind <i>Paul Bearer*</i> | 84 |
| Finding the Words <i>Sarah Boon, PhD</i> | 96 |
| A Gift or a Curse? <i>Amy Cox</i> | 100 |
| The HeART of Bipolar Disorder <i>Ellie Gainey</i> | 106 |
| Learning to Live with My Bipolar Identity <i>Bruce Saunders</i> | 112 |
| My Bipolar Reality <i>Jayne Warren</i> | 123 |
| After the Treatment of Last Resort <i>Natasha Tracy</i> | 127 |

| | |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Holding On by My Fingertips <i>Janet L. Stanley, MA</i> | 134 |
| It's Hard to See the Light <i>Wayfarer*</i> | 141 |
| How Can I Have a Positive Future Now? <i>Maggie Taylor*</i> | 149 |

PART 2: Reflections by Family Members **161**

| | |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| You Can't Fix It <i>Gina Roitman</i> | 163 |
| My Bipolar Mother <i>Tami Hammond-Collins</i> | 168 |
| I Forced Myself to Smile <i>Lara Beaulieu*</i> | 172 |
| Living in the Shadow of Love <i>Barbara G. Jacobson, LCSW</i> | 179 |
| In the Storm and the Sunshine <i>Catharine McKenty</i> | 187 |
| Living in the Shadow: A Family Perspective <i>Laurel Saunders</i> | 206 |
| Staying Together, Living Apart <i>Olivia Innes*</i> | 213 |
| I Lost My Husband to Undiagnosed Bipolar <i>Isabelle Lipari</i> | 227 |
| My Son's Lost Youth <i>Shauna Michaels*</i> | 239 |
| Mum on the Line <i>Janet Scott*</i> | 255 |
| Traversing Volcanoes <i>Gail Windsor</i> | 261 |
| Volunteering with Marie <i>Dennis Barras</i> | 284 |

PART 3: Contributions by Health and Other Professionals **293**

| | |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Bipolar 101 <i>Kayla Behbahani, DO</i> | 295 |
| The Ups and Downs of the Bipolar Diagnosis <i>Janette Abramowitz, MD</i> | 302 |
| Reflections on Bipolar Disorder from a New York City Psychiatrist <i>Diana Samuel, MD</i> | 308 |
| Bipolar Disorder from the Perspective of a Licensed Clinical Social Worker <i>Beverly Watkins, PhD, MSW, LCSW</i> | 315 |

| | |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Supporting a Bipolar Family with Complex Symptoms <i>Brionna Morse, LMFT</i> | 324 |
| Bipolar Stories <i>David Laing Dawson, MD</i> | 335 |
| Bipolar Disorder and Concurrent Addictions Are an Explosive Combination <i>Anthony Berger, MA, CCC</i> . . . | 347 |
| Let Me into Your Mind <i>Matthieu Zellweger, Photographer</i> . . | 354 |
| Bipolar Disorder and Creative Expression <i>Abdu'l-Missagh Ghadirian, MD</i> | 360 |
| Involvement of Family and Caregivers of People Living with Bipolar Disorder <i>Jens Peter Eckardt, BSW, MSc.</i> . | 368 |
| See the Person, Not the Disorder <i>Sheryl Bruce, MA</i> | 375 |
| Epilogue: Looking Back; Looking Forward <i>Merryl Hammond, PhD</i> | 389 |
| Acknowledgements | 393 |
| About Me, the Editor | 395 |
| References | 401 |

PART 1

Reflections by People Living with Bipolar Disorder

... in which people living with bipolar reflect on how it feels to experience bipolar episodes from the inside out; how the disorder has derailed their formerly ordered, successful, and productive lives; and in some cases, resulted in new perspectives, a fresh start, and hope for recovery.

Jailed Body, Imprisoned Mind

Eric Smith

What you are reading here is the most thorough account I have ever provided about my experience as a person with severe mental illness in jail. From this, I hope you will gain a better understanding about the intersection of mental health reform and criminal justice reform, and why this demands urgent attention and change.

Diagnoses and attempts at treatment

I have a long and complicated history with mental illness.

I was about 13 years old when the first psychiatrist I saw suggested to my parents and I that I was possibly “manic bipolar” at the time. At age 15 or 16, I was then seeing a different psychiatrist who suggested I be tested for bipolar disorder, and the tests yielded results suggesting I met the criteria for bipolar disorder. My symptoms included periods of high highs (mania), followed by low lows (depression).

Since then, psychiatrists who saw me at my worst diagnosed me with schizoaffective disorder, and those who did not see me at my worst diagnosed me with bipolar disorder.

My “worst” looks like someone who appears to be awakened from a dream, as my thoughts and words were far from aligned with reality. I recall looking up at the daytime sky and thinking snipers were hovering directly above the clouds, and I sometimes saw and heard shots fired at strangers who were miles away from

my physical position. I recall looking up at the nighttime sky and thinking there were aliens in cloaked ships trying to determine if the people of earth would be valuable allies or savage enemies as they observed all the daily conflict around our planet unfold. My “worst” was also permeated with delusions (especially during my psychiatric hospitalizations), as I repeatedly called the FBI, various consulates, and embassies to provide what I sincerely believed to be actionable intelligence about threats against world leaders. During my hospitalizations I was also convinced I was hearing orders directly from the mouths of senior CIA staff but not in the context of hearing voices as can be attributed to a symptom of mental illness. Rather, I believed I was hearing their orders by way of a cranial implant developed by the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) that allows covert and undetectable communications to exist between clandestine assets and mission leaders. In addition, I believed spies from other countries were looking for a way to kill me that would not be tied back to them and their respective governments. In short, at my “worst” I had textbook psychosis with delusions, hallucinations, and paranoia.

Conversely, when I’m not at my “worst” I tend to have no psychosis, delusions, hallucinations, *or* paranoia. For years leading up to my first psychiatric hospitalization, I had a history of having far too much energy (mania), followed by some deep crashes (depression), but other than the high highs and the low lows there was no psychosis to speak of. As a result, I was initially diagnosed with bipolar disorder. In the years since my last hospitalization, schizoaffective disorder is again not considered a likely diagnosis for me. Psychiatrists now think I have bipolar disorder with psychotic features, although I have had no form of psychosis since the beginning of 2012.

From the late 1990s until 2012, I went through about 15 years of failed medication regimens. I had been prescribed virtually every

Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitor (SSRI), antidepressant, benzodiazepine, antipsychotic, and other types of medications that a person with mental illness is prescribed. The list is extremely long, and none of the meds adequately managed my symptoms. Not only did the medications not work, but they also all ran the gamut of untoward side effects: persistent hunger, rapid weight gain, upset stomach, fatigue and lethargy, insomnia, abnormal dreams, agitation, and so on.

My arrest for criminal trespassing

I was arrested once and only once, on a charge of criminal trespassing.

In the weeks and months leading up to my arrest and subsequent first psychiatric hospitalization, the reality was that a long list of medications had failed to help me, and none of the counsellors or psychiatrists I had seen up to that point could help me make any sort of meaningful progress. This, coupled with the fact that psychosis, delusions, hallucinations, and paranoia were noticeable for the first time in my life was of the greatest concern to my parents at the time. While I had been diagnosed with bipolar disorder for about a decade at this point, I was truly losing the ability to experience and process reality. I started believing that I was working on behalf of the FBI and CIA to gather intelligence that would prevent assassinations of world leaders and the next major world war.

On the advice of one of my former psychiatrists, my parents had me arrested in the hope that it would result in me being transferred from jail to a psychiatric hospital where I would receive the inpatient care I desperately needed. The psychiatrist who made this suggestion was doing so with an expert understanding that this would be my best chance at finding sanity. When my parents told me that they were going to call the police and have me arrested, I was in a delusional state in which I believed I had power over the

police, so I said: “Sure, go ahead and call the police!” I then calmly sat on the front porch waiting for law enforcement to arrive.

When the police pulled up, I was still calm. I recall thinking that if I were taken to jail, it would only be because it was part of my mission to be there. In my mind everything I was experiencing and was yet to experience was a product of a clandestine mission plan, and it was my duty as an asset to follow through.

In the holding cells

I was taken to a local police station and stripped of my clothing, watch, and shoes. I stood naked in a holding cell, where an officer searched my naked body for anything dangerous or contraband. After what seemed like 30 minutes, I was then ordered to put my clothing and shoes back on to prepare for transportation to the Bexar County jail.

Another officer arrived to transfer me to the main county jail, and he put me in the back of his patrol car to do so. When I arrived at the jail, I was convinced I would be set free because of some delusion-based power that police would follow my orders if I gave them any. Because I also believed I was an agent of both the FBI and CIA, I was not eager to leave the situation at the time because I had a responsibility to follow through on my mission. At this point, I started to believe I was at this jail for a reason, namely, to gather intelligence about threats to world leaders from inmates in the jail.

After being placed in a temporary holding cell at the county jail, I was taken in for processing by an officer. He ordered me to place my fingers on a scanner to confirm my identity, and so I did. The officer then looked at me and said the person my fingerprints showed in the system was clearly not me: I am Caucasian, was in my mid-20s, and weighed about 180 pounds at the time, but my fingerprints returned a result of a middle-aged male who weighed at least 250 pounds and appeared not to be Caucasian. In short,

my fingerprints matched someone else's identity, and the officer let me see the screen he was looking at to confirm that. He said: "This needs to be fixed." Regardless, the fact that my fingerprints produced someone else's identity only fed into my delusions and psychosis. I was even more deeply convinced that my job as a CIA and FBI agent was either to find the person my fingerprints incorrectly matched to get information about my next mission, or to assume the identity of that person as part of my mission. In any event, I believed the Bexar County jail was the right place for me to be as my (not real) clandestine mission unfolded.

Planning my escape

Not long after, I was moved to an area of the jail with holding cells for large numbers of males. I recall approximately five of these holding cells filled with probably 20–25 people each. We were moved from one cell to another after waiting for a while, and I started to feel the onset of impending danger that was not a result of anything specific other than my mind's decompensated state. I felt like I needed to leave the situation, so I planned my escape to take place during the next mass transfer from one waiting area to another when that happened.

During the hubbub of the next transfer, I waited for all the officers to take their eyes off me, and I then started walking closely beside one of the jail's staff who was passing by at that moment to make it appear that I was with them. I got back to the main entrance of the jail but saw several police cars parked directly at the entrance so I knew I couldn't escape at that time. There was a bench right next to that entrance, so I sat there and waited for an opportunity to escape.

Some time went by, and then an officer approached me and asked: "Are you Eric Smith?" "Yes," I said. He said officers had been looking for me, and I said I had been directed to wait here. I then told him I had a history of mental illness and that I was

on psychiatric medication. He took me back to a cell with a large group of other males and told me I would get to speak with medical staff at some point.

Jail's medical staff and hallucinations

I was taken to speak with the jail's medical staff for what seemed like less than five minutes. They asked what my mental illness diagnosis was, and if I was prescribed any medication. I told them I had bipolar disorder and named the various types of medication I had been prescribed. They wrote some things down on paper that I could not see, and then an officer took me back to the holding area to wait. I began to hear voices in my head, and I started to feel I had developed an ability to hear the thoughts of others unbeknownst to them, so I assumed those were the voices I was hearing.

The voices informed me that in my holding cell were members of various criminal organizations tasked with getting arrested for the sole purpose of finding out why I, an agent of the FBI and CIA, was there. These voices were uneasy about me, so I believed I had to calm their suspicions and let them know I was on their side. Some officers walked by, and I yelled, "Fuck the police!" right at them, as loudly as I could. The officers glared at me, and I shouted, "Your jobs are bullshit!" I started feeling confident this was the right course of action as the other arrested people clapped and laughed at my brazen rebuke of the officers.

"Judge and jury" in the holding cell

After my anti-police rant, the looks on people's faces around me confirmed that I had gained their respect and eased their suspicions. I sat down in the crowded cell and a large inmate sitting on the other side of the cell addressed me. When he spoke, I saw that he had the attention of every inmate in the cell.

- Inmate: “Why were you arrested?”
- Me: “For trespassing at the address listed on my driver’s license, which is my parents’ house.”
- Inmate: “Have you been to court yet?”
- Me: “No.”
- Inmate: “Okay, so I will be the judge and these guys (*indicating all our fellow cell mates*) will be the jury. Now, tell us the story of what happened up to the point of your arrest.”
- Me: “Well, I’m an agent working with the CIA and FBI trying to gather information about threats against world leaders. I’m not here to interfere with you or anyone else in the jail.” (*I believed this self-proclaimed “judge” to be an influential figure among the various gang members in the jail, and felt I had to make him understand my presence was in no way a threat to his—or any other gang’s—power or control.*)
- Inmate: “And what world leaders are you protecting?”
- Me: “All of them, but more specifically President Obama and the King and Queen of Jordan are in danger. Assassination attempts are being planned that will destabilize the entire world and lead to World War III.”
- Inmate: “Okay, I’ve heard enough. Now listen—all of you—no one is allowed to hurt this guy! Got that?”

Our cell mates all nodded in agreement. I went over, shook the “judge’s” hand, and thanked him for his “ruling.”

Transfer to a communal cell

I was eventually transferred to a cell with several showers, toilets, and rows of bunk beds all within the same communal room. As soon as I got there, I believed I was to make contact with a person in that room, because I saw no other reason why I was there. I didn’t know who I was supposed to contact, so I kept my eyes and ears open for a sign about who I should speak with next as part of my mission.

Nighttime came around, and I realized this large cell with bunk beds and more than two dozen inmates is where I would be sleeping. Rather than sleep, I stayed awake all night because I believed that was how I would earn the trust of every other inmate, using my power and influence as a CIA and FBI agent to prevent police from messing with other inmates. Next morning, the person in the bunk next to mine woke up and asked me if I had been awake all night. I told him I had not slept at all because the police wouldn’t mess with anyone while I was watching them. “You’re crazy, but I appreciate what you did,” he said.

At lunchtime, that same person said not to eat the yellow cake if it showed up with my lunch. I figured this mention of yellow cake was my sign that he was my next point of contact as part of the mission, thinking of yellowcake uranium that would be of interest to both the CIA and FBI.

The person sleeping in the bunk on the other side of me practiced voodoo and would draw intricate pictures of people to place hexes on them. He was regularly drawing pictures and showing catastrophic events to me telling me that some could be prevented, but some had already happened. I viewed this inmate as my source of news from the outside world and he had me believing nuclear war had struck and that World War III had indeed begun. There

were no windows anywhere near this cell, so my hallucinations and delusions were running amok with vivid images of the apocalypse, supported by this inmate's drawings. I woke up one morning a few weeks later, and this man had been removed from our communal cell. I asked other inmates what happened to him, and they told me he was removed for practising magic against others, but I'm not sure what actually happened to him.

I started to think some inmates could hear my thoughts. I felt like that could put me in danger, so I told the officer watching our cell (there was always an officer at the front of this cell) that I needed to speak with a doctor because I was having a psychiatric medical emergency. I figured a hospital would be a safer place for me to be than a jail. The officer told me to calm down, and then said I didn't have the right to call 911 for an emergency of any kind. After a lot of arguing, he finally called a superior to speak with me.

When the superior arrived, he took me into the hallway right outside the communal cell. I placed my hands above my head against the wall to let him know I was not a threat to him, and I demanded to speak with a doctor about a psychiatric emergency I was experiencing. I also told him what I had told someone else earlier, that I believed President Obama and the King and Queen of Jordan were in danger and that assassination attempts were being planned to destabilize the entire world for what would become World War III. The officer told me he would set up a meeting with the jail's doctor.

Visit to the jail's doctor

Not long thereafter, I was called out to meet with the jail's doctor for the first time. (Earlier, I had discussed my diagnosis and medications with a nurse who was part of the jail's staff.)

I didn't have my glasses with me when I was arrested, so I would squint whenever I looked at something out of arm's reach the

entire time I was in jail. This is relevant to know, because the female officer who came to get me to bring me to the jail's doctor called my name and I looked up at her with squinted eyes.

Officer: "Hey! If you don't quit mean-mugging me right now, you and me are going to have a big problem!" (I understood this to mean that she would physically hit me to un-squint my eyes. I didn't view this officer as a part of my mission, so I didn't bother too much.)

Me: "Yes, ma'am." (*Politely.*)

Officer: "Did you just say 'Yes, man'? Do I look like I have a pair of balls?" (*Aggressively.*)

I just shook my head to indicate "no" to her question, and she then escorted me to the doctor.

As soon as I saw the doctor, I told him I was not being given any medication and that I was diagnosed with a mental illness that required medication. I said that if something happened to me because I wasn't getting medical care or medicine, that it would reflect badly on him as the jail's doctor, and that could be a problem for his job security. He asked me if I was threatening him, and I said that I was just speaking factually, not threatening him. He asked what medication I was on, and I told him a list of medications I had been prescribed. He said the jail didn't have a wide variety of psych meds, and that I wouldn't be able to get the specific meds I had previously been prescribed. Then he said: "We're done here."

At that moment, I instantly believed this doctor was yet another reason I was there at that jail on behalf of the FBI and CIA. I figured he had taken his position at the jail specifically to prescribe a very narrow array of medicines that would only benefit one or two major pharmaceutical companies. The way I saw it, if only a few select medicines were used inside this jail (and many

others like it), then the jails were intentionally generating revenue for specific pharmaceutical companies as part of a plan to devalue the competition. In turn, I also believed jail doctors were receiving enormous monetary kickbacks from the relevant pharmaceutical companies. It then became part of my mission to expose this corruption and I believed my ability to read thoughts put me in a unique position to confirm my suspicions about the doctor, the medications, and the drug companies as true, which is why the CIA and FBI chose me to finish out this mission.

To be clear, I was not given any medication throughout the entire time I was in jail.

Moved from communal cell to single occupant cell

When I was taken back to the communal cell after the doctor's visit, I began to loudly explain how the officers were not in charge at this jail, but that the doctor was actually in charge, placed there by the powers that be to strengthen the bottom line of major players in the pharmaceutical industry. I was yelling about how the officers were pawns of the jail's doctor and pharmaceutical companies, and that every person in the jail was being experimented on with medication in their food and water. I was making everyone nervous, so eventually I was transferred to a sparse cell with just a bed, a sink, and a toilet.

Initially, jail staff didn't allow me to see my parents because that required me to leave my cell. In fact, my parents had come down to visit me, and after waiting there for a few hours they were told I wasn't allowed to leave my cell to visit with them. This caused my mom to cry, and a ranking officer who caught wind of this then pulled rank and allowed me to see them. Apparently, this ranking officer had a family member with some form of severe mental illness, and that allowed him to be empathetic.

The visit with my parents was visibly unnerving and sad for them. I recall sitting down and seeing them through the thick glass

window, and my mom looked like she had been crying, and my dad looked exhausted. I didn't want them to be sad, so I stood up and loudly proclaimed that I was in charge at the jail. I was yelling about various things, like how all the illicit drugs being smuggled into the jail belong to me, and how I was untouchable because of the ruling by the inmate/judge who told the other inmates that I wasn't to be harmed. I also remember yelling about how the King of Jordan was sending a jet to transport me to his country so that I could provide him the intelligence I had gathered up to that point. My memory of this visit with my parents is mostly me yelling about things that are attributable to the symptoms of my illness and did not include much of anything that would fit the definition of a conversation.

Pleading my case

At some point during my stay in jail, I was directed to appear before a judge tasked with hearing cases of people in jail. When I got to the small room the judge was in, a woman introduced herself to me as an attorney assigned to my case. I had never met nor spoken with her before. We sat down in a corner of the room, and she asked me to explain why I'd been arrested. The cramped room was crowded and loud, with many different conversations occurring between inmates, attorneys, officers, and the judge. A few short moments into my explanation, a police officer came over and yelled: "Hey! You're speaking way too loud. Quiet down!" I was confused by this because the entire room was noisy, but the officer only targeted me. I began to speak in a tone I thought was much quieter, and a few seconds later that same officer said: "You're refusing to follow my orders! If I have to warn you again to speak more quietly, I'll send you back to your cell without the judge hearing you."

At this point I began speaking in a virtual whisper, and explained to the attorney: "I was arrested for trespassing at my parents' house, and I'm in jail because I am gathering intelligence for the FBI and CIA. I am innocent, and the charges against me are just a cover for a mission I am on while in jail."

She didn't react in any way to my statement. I guess she had heard it all before.

The attorney said the judge would ask me how I plead to the charges, and I was to respond with the words, "*Nolo contendere*" (Latin for "I do not wish to contend"). At the time I thought this phrase meant I was pleading not guilty, but only later learned that it means one accepts punishment but does not admit guilt. I did not feel I deserved to be punished, so I would never have said "*nolo contendere*" if I had known what it truly meant. I felt like I should be honoured—not punished—for allowing myself to be brought to jail to gather intelligence that would prevent assassinations and war.

When my name was called for the judge to hear my case, my attorney directed me to stand.

Judge: "How do you plead?"

Me: "*Nolo contendere.*" (Dutifully, speaking as quietly as I could because that officer had twice ordered me to speak quietly.)

Judge: "Speak up; I can't hear you."

Me: "*Nolo contendere.*" (In a somewhat louder voice. The officer glared at me and shook his head as if to warn me not to speak any louder.)

Judge: "I said speak up so I can hear you. If you keep wasting my time by not speaking up, then you will be ordered back to your cell to think about how you are wasting my time before being given another opportunity to plead."

Me: (Genuinely confused about whether to speak loudly for the judge or quietly for the police officer, I paused a moment before responding. Then I figured the judge outranks the police officer.) "*Nolo contendere.*" (Loudly! The officer looked at me menacingly as if I were using the judge's directions as a tool to try to diminish the officer's authority over me.)

The judge then sent me back to my cell having heard my plea of “Nolo contendere,” which I truly thought was a plea of innocence.

Transfer from jail to hospital and Assisted Outpatient Treatment (AOT)

Toward the end of my stay in jail, which lasted about 30 days, a court liaison came to speak with me while I was in my cell to determine if I would be a good fit for inpatient care at a hospital followed by an assisted outpatient treatment (AOT) order. Just as I was about to be discharged from the jail, a judge created an order to move me to a hospital for psychiatric care. I stayed in hospital for about three months. From there I entered AOT after being stabilized.

Fast forward through a few more hospitalizations, the last of which ended in early 2012, and I have now graduated *magna cum laude* near the top of my class with a BA in psychology, and I am currently a graduate student diligently preparing to help others as I have been helped. I am also a mental health advocate, public speaker, and consultant with Treatment Advocacy Center.

I credit AOT with rescuing me from the downward spiral that used to be my life. AOT saved me from the criminal justice system, and from insanity. AOT recognizes mental illness is not a crime and allows for civil proceedings and treatment to help remedy many of the complex problems associated with severe mental illness (SMI). The criminal justice system is in no way equipped to meaningfully address what I was experiencing, and that holds true for everyone else drowning in the abyss of SMI from the riptide of arrests and incarceration.

Conclusion

Looking back, I can say from personal experience and with absolute conviction that the criminal justice system is not designed to treat people with mental illnesses. Criminalizing mental illness and the people diagnosed with it is the wrong thing to do; it doesn't

work, and it is a waste of money. Civil (non-criminal) proceedings and programs like assisted outpatient treatment (AOT) are among the best ways to help address many of the complex issues stemming from severe mental illness.

The last psychiatrist I had as an inpatient was astounded that I was able to recall so much of what I experienced from when I was in a decompensated state of mind and told me that is incredibly rare. I can recall all the emotional turmoil that my family and I experienced and doing so is often traumatic enough that I find myself in tears as I recount the journey to others. Being able to relive this trauma is taxing on my mind and body. When I revisit how tragically it all could have turned out (serious harm, injury, even death) versus how it actually turned out, a rabbit hole of dark thoughts haunts me.

However, this curse of being able to remember the turmoil I experienced while psychotic is also a blessing of sorts, in that it allows me to tell my story to help others through changes in legislation, policies, and practices. I am hopeful my advocacy helps society evolve toward a recognition that civil, compassionate, and evidence-based care must replace mechanisms of criminal justice in cases of severe mental illness. In the meantime, countless people desperately in need of medical care continue to live a life like I experienced: jailed body, imprisoned mind.



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I was born in Phoenix, Arizona, in 1983, was diagnosed with bipolar disorder in my mid-teens, and with schizoaffective disorder in 2009. I have a BA in psychology from the University of Texas at San Antonio and am currently pursuing post-grad studies in social work at that same university. I am a mental health advocate, public speaker, and consultant with Treatment Advocacy Center, and I hope to continue this work after graduating. I enjoy spending time with my family and dogs.

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