

A True Life Story: How My Life was Inextricably Altered by Bipolar Disorder

by Bill Birdsall

Una Piccolo Morte

The consequences of untreated manic depressive disorder are mercilessly insidious. On June 26, 2008, on a beautiful, sunny, early summer day I suffered what my Italian relatives called “*una piccolo morte*”...a little death. My three and a half year marriage to a woman I was in love with, was by now disintegrating. Both of us, each with two young adult children from previous marriages had settled into my house, now ours, after she sold her house. We were on the cusp of a fresh journey with a life partner; making wonderful plans to savor our new union while enjoying the progress of the four young people we had dedicated much of our lives too.

Unfortunately, we had an unseen yet diabolical intruder in the form of a mental illness living amongst us which dashed our best laid plans. During a cataclysmic 24-hour period, my bride (who I’ll refer to as Sara Ann, not her real name) called the police on me, a sheriff and two state troopers questioned me on my lawn, another sheriff returned the following day with an order of protection throwing me out of my home with only 15 minutes notice, I had to tell my daughter (living with us, away at college) that my wife had changed the locks on the doors, denying my daughter access to her home as well, took possession of all our earthly belongings and had my dignity stripped from me in front of neighbors and friends I had known for years. She then divorced me, sending me into debt and despair. As if that wasn’t enough, four months later, after our divorce was final, she informed me that only weeks after she had me thrown out of our home, she called a former co-worker, picked up a bottle of wine, visited him where he lived in another city and slept with him.

I loved Sara Ann; even after the divorce, I was still in love with her. How could this disorder have gone improperly diagnosed after 50 years of life? By now you may wonder: “what did this guy do to bring the poor woman to this moment in time?” A fair question for sure. Here’s what I did...

I questioned her, I challenged her, I pleaded with her, I loved her, I held her, I heaped affection and praise upon her, I supported her career when it was on the brink of dissolving, I gave her hope, optimism and solace when her two children refused to speak to her for months after she remarried, I held her hand during walks and talks in the countryside, I made her coffee in the morning and we watched wildlife feed in our backyard, I laughed with her, I cried with her, I was loyal to her, I made passionate love with her, I proposed to her on bended knee in front of a majestic mountain range, I was going to travel the world with her and I was going to spend the rest of my life with her.

And now it's gone...it's all gone. All because of a lifetime of undiagnosed bipolar disorder. But do you want to know what the strangest part of this entire, tragedy is? The owner of the manic depressive disorder wasn't me; it was my former bride. Her outburst of rage was prompted by my attempt to get out of the house as I sought a separation in order to save my own mental health and figure out what was happening. I was never anything less than a gentle, supportive, loving husband. I was devastated by her pre-meditated actions to have me fraudulently removed from our home. Her extreme reactions at my attempt to escape her 3-month cycles of abuse towards me sent her into fits of raging acts that placed me inside an intractable, living nightmare.

Sara Ann has since acknowledged the agony I suffered before she was ultimately diagnosed. She has also, thankfully, recanted verbally to others and to some extent, in writing, all the horrible lies as she struggled to compensate for her bizarre actions. She even offered to go to the family court judge, who blindly gave her a restraining order against me without the slightest evidence or cause, to recant her story. I did not support her from taking this action as I felt she would be admitting, directly to the judge (as much as I would have liked to look him in the eyes at that hypothetical moment) that she had perpetrated a fraud and perjured herself in writing to another judge during the divorce proceedings she initiated. It is also worth noting that my former spouse had been recommended to a lawyer with a reputation for guiding female spouses through the fraudulent steps necessary to get an innocent husband thrown out of the house by perverting a legal process designed to protect women in genuine danger from an out-of-control male partner.

So, how was it finally discovered that Sara Ann was seriously afflicted? The saying that you never really know someone until you live with them was demonstrably accurate in my case.

While trying to figure it out during our all too brief marriage, I pleaded with her that she needed to seek the help of a psychiatrist. I noticed that the lovely highs that I fell in love with were now countered by horrific lows. I researched and concluded that her approximately 12-week cycles of mood swings met 8 of the 9 criteria for bipolar disorder. I did not believe she was suicidal. I confronted her with my assessment; she denied my claims. She refused psychiatric care. I finally told her to at least see our family doctor or I would leave the marriage as this was an unhealthy relationship. Despite my love for her, I was being deeply impacted physically and emotionally by the burden of trying to figure out what was happening. I would not enable her unacceptable conduct with inaction. I was frightened, confused and desperate for answers. She agreed to see our family doctor.

After asking her two questions: "are you suicidal" and one other question, the MD told her she was not bipolar. He pointed to a chart on the wall and told her he would put her on Paxil. My fate was sealed. Gleefully, she returned home with her Paxil. From my observations, it exacerbated her mania and slightly repressed her depressive episodes a bit. Of course after a while she stopped taking the drug which perhaps was good because it was the wrong remedy to begin with.

Finally, after more failed attempts at getting her to a psychiatrist, she capitulated to seeing a therapist. She had neglected to mention to me she had been to five others in the past. The therapist was not up to the task and my clever, narcissistic bride convinced her to invite me to a session which turned into a marriage counseling session without my knowledge or permission. The therapist concluded my spouse was not bipolar and that I was “giving up and trying to bolt the marriage”! The family doctor and the counselor were tragically wrong.

The answer to how she discovered her disorder came on an icy, cold upstate New York day during December 2008. The electricity to our house that she legally commandeered through the family court system was gone, due to a severe ice storm. The order of protection, used to get me to capitulate to demands during our divorce proceedings, was finally lifted. The divorce was official in October. Allowed to return into my home for the first time since the order was lifted, I came to pick up my daughters and my furniture, clothing and lifetime of personal affects that she had kept in our damp garage.

There she sat, alone in a cold, freezing house, sitting by a kerosene heater, shaking...not from the cold so much, but from what I can only informally describe as a ‘nervous-breakdown’. My fantastic neighbor across the street was aware of the circumstances. She and her husband had taken me in when I was thrown out of my home by the bogus order of protection. She warned me that my former spouse had been in the house, her car iced over in the driveway, for several days. This was odd because she had a position of great responsibility in the public educational system. Frankly, I was very hesitant to go in the house alone with her but my friends were across the street and keeping an eye on me.

By this time, my feelings for her were a mixture of fear and loathing. That being said, I assisted her without hesitation. When I saw the condition she was in, I took a gigantic and perhaps foolish risk, but I approached her slowly, took her by the hand, and hugged her. We cried. My feelings of love for her were real and sincere, yet she had willfully destroyed me and left my daughter homeless in an instant. I wouldn’t wish this moment of enormously stressful personal conflict upon anyone...it was agonizing. Our basement was flooded because the pumps were off; the pipes were freezing, yet she had been sitting there incapacitated, for how many hours? This was a truly horrible sight to behold. Horrible. I can’t even imagine her agony. For me it was heartbreak on top of heartbreak.

For the first time in nearly six months we were acting as a team again as I suggested she purchase a generator while I wired the electric panel to accept the generated electricity. While she was gone, my neighbor let me run an electric cord across the street which was plugged into his generator. When my former spouse returned she was incredibly relieved to see the water gone from the basement, the furnace operating again providing heat to the freezing confines of our once warm and cozy homestead. My daring, guardian angel neighbor I’ll call Mary, came over to check in on us. Mary brought us a bottle of wine, asked if we were OK, and then left. Opening the Merlot was probably a bad idea, OK, a very bad idea, but we did it anyway.

Though no longer her husband, I seized the moment and asked her to sit at her computer. I asked her, one last time, to take a look at the criteria for bipolar disorder. I can't begin to tell you what a sore spot this was by this point, but the timing, though unfortunate, was ideal. She was at the bottom of the bottom. She read the criteria and tearfully agreed with me; she met 8 of 9 of them. We cried again, only this time, heads upon each other's shoulders, Sara Ann and I sobbed in grief. Thinking of it again fills my head with those mournful sounds as if it were yesterday. The two of us, separate and apart, had lived and were still experiencing, a living hell for the past six months.

The upshot is, she still refused my advice to seek a psychiatrist but did go to a psychologist and even asked me to attend the two sessions which I did. She was diagnosed by the psychologist as manic depressive and paranoid delusional with other conditions as well. I recall seeing my former spouse's stunned disbelief yet sense of relief when the psychologist provided her evaluation of the reason for her behaviors. The psychologist said that "it's unfortunate that Bill didn't come along many years ago". I knew the MD and therapist were wrong. If only they would have taken me seriously!

The psychologist initiated Cognitive Behavior Therapy and her specially trained nurse put Sara Ann on Abilify as a stand alone drug. From my research I thought this medication was inadequate. Though I am not in the medical field I do have a fair amount of knowledge about this affliction, believe me! I was amazed I had gotten her this far considering she wouldn't listen to me when I was her husband. Perhaps that part was perfectly normal...

I considered her request for reconciliation, and through the summer of 2009 I gave her an opportunity to rehabilitate herself with me, and we our marriage, but she just couldn't seem to take ownership of this horrible affliction or her considerably cruel actions. It is important to note, that my loving, emotionally intelligent son and daughter, then 23 and 21 respectively, listened to me and were supportive of my soulful foray into the heart and mind. They did this despite their understandable trepidation and completely justifiable disdain for their former stepmother. This act of unconditional love by my children towards me at this moment of personal despair will warm my heart on the darkest and coldest of days for the rest of my life.

Sara Ann's refusal to seek the proper help, in the final analysis, did us in as a couple once more. I even took her to a highly respected MD who practiced traditional and alternative medicine. He tested her and determined significant imbalances in her neurotransmitter activity and endocrine system. I did my best to patch together a hybrid medical/psychiatric team for her, so to speak. All for naught.

As summer wore on she told me that "this is who I am" and remained firm about not seeking the help of the person she needed most...a psychiatrist who would have counseled her and had her on the best regimen of medications she needed to gain control of her life and prosper. I believe I had gone further than most, but on the other side of this equation, lay my own mental health

which, clearly was affected by this as well. I told her I respected her wishes and that now I must move on for good. This was not without considerable emotional cost to me. I took the risk of opening old wounds and now I was paying the price again. I had reached my physical and emotional limits. My broken heart could no longer bear this unremitting strain.

A week before Thanksgiving 09' she called me after a couple of months since we parted. I was not pleasant to her at all; it brought up so much pain and sorrow. She asked to meet me near a favorite restaurant of ours where after romantic dinners past we kissed in the car afterwards like two high school kids with a huge crush on one another. I agreed. She invited me in her car, where we talked for a while. Nothing new came up other than she wanted me back in her life. A new, better position was coming available to her. How great it would be she said, to have a husband nearby again to begin this new opportunity. This made me feel like a prop to her life.

I felt cold inside. I knew I no longer belonged in that vehicle or in her life. I quietly admonished myself for putting my own well being in jeopardy again. My heart was broken and it hurt very badly to be going through this again. Her appeal fell upon ears that sadly realized that she viewed the world from a perspective of which I could not comprehend.

With tears welling in my eyes, I leaned over to the driver's side where she sat. Like a school boy, I quickly kissed her upon her lips. I abruptly exited the car, walked away and fought off the impulse to look back. I have not seen her since. Slowly, I am moving on. After this tragedy, I benefited from a highly skilled and competent LCSW-R. I was burdened with trauma on several levels. She helped relieve me of the unwarranted guilt I felt, to an extent, and provided me the physical/mental tools to cope with the trauma of what I had experienced. She was very effective and channeled me in a positive direction. Even with professional help and the passing of time, I experience flash-backs to this day. And yes, remorse at a love and home lost.

If you or a loved one is diagnosed with or believes they are afflicted by bipolar disorder, I sincerely believe only one course of action exists that will provide a chance for success in obtaining a productive, fulfilling life and alleviating the commensurate distresses upon relationships.

I gently yet firmly suggest you seek out a psychiatrist. Seek out a psychiatrist... now.

Postscript: Since writing this in October 2010 I have learned through my former neighbor Mary, that during the summer of 2011, a little over a year and a half since the love of my life Sara Ann wanted to re-marry me to advance her career, she accomplished her goal of marriage; only to someone else. I remain single and un-attached.

Bill Birdsall, January 5, 2012