Pathologize This! 2

A zine about mental health

I flop around mentally about my situation. “We make our own reality.” “Everything happens for a reason.” “We manifest what is inside of us.” I reluctantly agree to have sex with a man I meet in the mall in a loose arrangement that includes cash. That month my bills are paid.

The fire returns to my body after the affair. My apartment is covered with dirty dishes, empty Diet Pepsi cans, old newspapers with job ads clipped out and laundry I do not have the energy to do. I lie down on the couch, where I spend most of my days. I turn on the tv and imitate my teenage sibilings, look ma, I’m channel surfing. I become mesmerized in the images, the slasher movie, the international figure skating championship, the Woody Allen film. After four hours I turn the tv off, feeling loopy. I draw a bath and hear my voice free-associating-swearing, shouting, making percussive sounds with my lips, singing at the top of my lungs. Who is this? Have I fallen off the deep end? I sing more laugh, playing in my bath, and then the part of me watching myself falls away. Now I’m 100% crazy, rules of behavior gone, and I pass through humming to naming each of my knuckles to being President Bush addressing the nation to saying the word “dissect” over and over and over until it is unrecognizable.

I pick up the razorblade from the side of the tub and stare at it. Then I start to cry. I cry for myself. I cry for my aunt, my grandmother and my two great uncles. I cry for my sister. I cry for my father. And finally I cry for my mother, for the lasting vision of my mother, chasing her six year old down the street, angry, terrified, and alone.

Then I sleep.

The next day, I get the urge to call my mother and for the first time in my life, tell her I love her. I pick up the phone, start to dial, and then put down the receiver. Instead, I walk into town, noticing the candles in my neighbor’s window, the stars in the sky, getting lost in the texture of the woman’s hair in front of me, having trouble suppressing my smile.

Only you. Twentyish tablets slide down my throat in slow motion. I imagine lying in a cool lake, floating, fireless. I sit on the toilet and wait.

Then, scene change, I am meeting with Julie for an emergency appointment. My parents, furious and hysterical, had brought me in. "Am I going to die?" She tells me I haven't swallowed enough to hurt myself. The realization sinks in. I start to cry. She asks me if I want to be held. I am surprised- nobody has ever asked me that before and it actually seems like a pretty good idea. She offers me her hand and I take it…and then she folds me into her, gently pushing my face into her blue fuzzy sweater. We sit like that for the rest of the session, taking occasional breaks to breathe.

For the first time in months the burning subsides.

I remember being four years old and needing ever so desperately to learn to ride my shiny new two-wheeler bike. I would get up at five a.m. every day to practice. Scraped knees, bruised elbows, even a scratch on my cornea from a tree branch didn't stop me. Somehow the injuries gave me more determination. I'll never forget the day I got it. It was a Saturday morning and my Dad was out practicing with me. He would hold the seat and run with me for a few feet and then let me go. Usually I'd get in about five or six rotations of the pedals and then lose my balance. But then he got me up and going. I gripped those handlebars, focused, determined. The wind was blowing leaves around and I was wearing my favorite yellow flowered dress. I felt my father release me and I began pedaling as I had before. But this time, I felt myself being lifted, carried, I had the sensation of flying I would feel in my dreams. Balance kicked in. I got it! I got it! I'm soaring!

It's December, 2002. I am off the medication that therapist #17, Lila Zorn, had prescribed, after extensive weaning. I am unemployed, in the middle of a divorce, living in a town where I know nobody. I am responsible for bills I have no idea how I will pay. My family knows of my situation but nobody makes any offers. I know I am responsible for what happens to me and

Hey everyone.

Welcome to edition 2 of Pathologize This!: A Mental Health Zine We are very excited about the fact that this zine is a serial! We think it's important to talk about feelings, situations, diagnoses, medication, drugs, harm reduction techniques, ability and disability, intersections with other oppressions. Hopefully, doing this can be an important challenge to the stigma around talking about our mental health. We are committed to delivering honest, sensitive, intelligent, gutsy narratives about experience, emotions, and politics.

We are pleased with the extent and variety of submissions we received this time around. Every submission is a significant and important contribution to this project. Thank you!

Before settling into this zine, you should know that it talks about topics such as suicide, self-harm and issues of sexual consent/non-consent. These and other topics can sometimes be triggering and difficult. It is important that you assess your comfort level before reading this zine, and perhaps settle in with a cup of tea or whatever helps you to feel safe.

--Sarah Tea-Rex, Rachel, Iris E.

P.S. Iris LOVES Comic Sans font , so we used it here just for her.

Grief, Hope, Skin
Svea Vikander

Any fleas, any fleas?

He lifted my arm and looked closely. Touched a freckle.

They are this size, but when you pick them up, see legs!

Touched other freckles, asked about them, touched the flower on my hair elastic. Where did I get these flowers and why did they never fade? I took out the elastic to show him the flower was glued on, that I bought it like that. And I turned back to the computer screen but he touched my hair.

They called me Nelum because they kept calling me Lydia, the other white girl who had been to the nunnery. In Sinhala 'Nelum' means 'Lotus', the most sacred flower of Buddhism. They called Lydia 'Water Lily,' which is pretty good, too.

A few days after my arrival, Bhante the head monk - an old man, well-regarded as a therapist, with a shiny head and kind eyes - sat me down for my first dharma talk. I listened to his lesson about the four insights, asked insightful questions, tried to impress my new teacher. At the end I thanked him. I opened the door to put my shoes on. Then he asked me why I was there.

I said I was very sad and he said he could tell. I was sad because I loved people but didn't love them well; I was sad because so many men wanted my body - and worse, for me to love them. I had lost people. Sobs and breaths, stopping and starting. Bhante got up to get me a kleenex. His fatherly face was warm and loving, pure concern.

Don't worry, you are safe now.
You are so innocent.
You are in safe place.
Don't be sad because now you have a good friend.
I understand you, you are so special.
These things will not happen again, no more troubles.
You are safe.

I let myself believe and realized that I had never believed any of these things before. I stood up to put my arms around him, and felt that warm and safe embrace. I felt my grief and hope and knew that my life was changing for the better. He held me and as the tears rolled down he reached out with his right arm and shut the door.

But belief soon turned to doubt. Suspicion. I'd made a living of being looked at. And anyway, a woman knows when she is being looked at. I told him I was worried and he was offended.

Crazy excerpts
by Gail Marlene Schwartz
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I was held by therapist #5, Dr. Julie Hannaford. At thirteen, the anxiety pulsing through my body got so high that one day that it broke inside, like a forest fire. Evenings brought screaming matches between my parents or between my mother and me. And school, which had once been a refuge, had turned into another danger zone. Dana Williams and Eleanor Eichler, sitting behind me in math class, whisper names into my ear. "Gaaaaay… lezzie…" and the worst- "towering inferno!!!" Sometimes Eleanor would wad up little bits of paper, roll them around in her mouth and then spit them into my short curls, where they stuck like snowflakes. Both girls would cackle in low voices, escaping the teacher's notice. My mother would get home from work and ask me what was wrong. When I told her she would say, "Just ignore them. If you let it get to you, you're asking for more." I knew I had to fix the situation, but I didn't know how.

On that day, they are teasing me like always but this time Eleanor whispers, "We're gonna get you on your way home from school-we're gonna take all your clothes and leave you on the side of the road." They sit back in their seats and crack up. This time the teacher tells them to shush but immediately gets back to his fractions. At that moment, I feel something inside of me ignite and my bones turn into sticks, crackling and popping in the flames. I get a ride home and know I have to make it stop. Cut off the air supply. The fire will sink. I can rest. I get inside the house and am alone, thank goodness, my parents at their jobs, my sister at band practice. I grab a bottle of aspirin and Smokey the Bear's image pops into my head-only you, only you, only you…I imagine myself in the ground, calm, cool, quiet. I pour pills into my wobbly hand. Only you. Put them in and put it out. Only you. I imagine dark comforting earth cuddling me like a cushion. I throw the white tablets back onto my tongue. Only you. I grab the ceramic mug with the toothpaste smudges. Only you. Drink.

Not interested in my blood pressure? In my vital signs?
‘Just checking for breast cancer’ he said.
I didn’t even question it.
Give him a phd and he’s certified authority.
Give me walls, give me teenage girl, give me ‘mentally ill’, give me three months of my life in his files.

Took my shirt off.

Dear psychiatrist, my mind’s a little further north than that.

No power to resist when the man whose hands are on your breasts belong to the person who has the power to classify you ‘crazy’.
Don’t even question.
To question is to be pathological inside their institutions.
You have to play the system or the system will play you.
Follow the rules. Keep your head down.
Or they’ll never release you.
Doctor, doctor.
The system…

Don't make it difficult.
You had so many problems before.
Do not make another problem here.

I hated myself for being paranoid. This time I cried because I was unable to be loved, because I interpreted every kindness as sexual, and I was so alone and so confused in this hot country of warm touch and smiles.

You have Sri Lankan skin.
For so long I waited for you in my life.
You should stay here with me. I know you will.

Early in the morning there was another storm. He came to my cabin offering a warm mug of tea. His maroon robe was wet as he sat wearily on my bed. I was wearing a long-sleeved shirt and yesterday's underwear. He reached under the covers and put his hand up the shirt, touching the bare skin of my back.

He was crossing the line, and it hurt but it was what I wanted; he had crossed the line a long time ago. I wanted him to offend so that I could trust myself again. Justify those hard-won suspicions. I felt nothing, not aroused and not repulsed. I was in that mug of tea, I was watching it happen, I was caught in the mosquito net, I was under the bed. Like any happy lover, he was being cute, giggling as he explored my body.

Any fleas?
Any fleas any fleas any fleas?

I took his hand off its course, held it in my own. "You can't be my teacher" I said, "You can't be my teacher, I have to leave now. I have to leave." And he gave me the usual begging and apologies. I was guilty, sympathetic; disgusted. I ran away.

I sat at the front of the bus. Like all Sri Lankan buses it was decorated with Hindu and Buddhist images, a shrine of bright plastic flowers and blinking lights. I took the elastic from my hair and looked at the flower glued on it. It was fraying now, a bit floppy, but still intact enough to be ripped off. I wanted to rip it up too, but I didn’t. I just nestled it in with the other flowers and it blended in perfectly; it shook a little as the bus jostled around another hair-pin turn.

Photo by Svea Vikander

Stigma

When I was a child my good friend broke her leg. She broke it quite badly and needed surgery to fix her up. People gave her balloons and presents and cards to make her feel better, and wrote all over her cast with bright colours.

When I was a child someone hurt me and changed me, and something broke inside me. Something I can never replace. When I called out for help, nobody could bear to look at what had broken. No one wanted to give me cards to make me feel better or write on my pain with bright colours.

As I grew I would hurt myself to put my pain on the outside so I could see it and so it could be seen. Sometimes I just wanted to die. People all around who didn't know, didn't get it, told me I was weak and a freak and dramatic and a coward, that there are children with "real" scars who deserved help more than me. So I learned to hide it and live completely alone.

People would be surprised to find out how much of myself I hide because the stigmas that come with mental health problems are too painful for me to battle right now.
I have tried to kill myself 4 times, and my closest friends don't even know.
I am too tired and too jaded and too scared to tell them.
For now, I hope someone reads this piece written by someone too scared to admit she wrote this will look around at the faces beside them and think.

counsellor. I was lucky, in that being under 25, I was eligible to see a counsellor at head and hands for free. However, given that head and hands is one of the few services around which provides free counselling, their counsellor was all booked up the week I called. I was told I would get a call later to schedule an appointment, but that call never happened. I'm sure that if I had actually followed up, things would have been better, but, again, my anxiety struck and I conveniently "forgot" to keep calling. My anxiety kept me from properly dealing with my anxiety.

I feel like this whole situation that I've been in in the past few months has just been one big viscious cycle. I've had anxeity about employement, which has led to mild depression, which has led to more anxiety. I can't pay for help for my anxiety because I'm unemployed. I can't see a counsellor at McGill because I'm no longer a student, and I can't follow through on getting in touch with the free counsellor because of my anxiety. It's funny how the people who need services most are exactly those who are unable to access them.

I feel like all these issues are a direct result of the way that our society views mental health. Our society assumes that everyone is in perfect mental health, or, if your not, it's somehow your fault. Thus mental health services are seen as a luxury, and are thus only available to those who can afford to pay. Our society also assumes that anyone who is between the ages of 18 and 65 and is neither a student or working is somehow responsible for their condition, and doesn't deserve any help from the rest. Thus certain services, which are necessities in life, are only available as either "student services" if you're a student, or "benefits" if you're working. If you don't fall in either of these categories, well, then too bad for you.

I find it really disgusting that the people who expect everyone to pay for mental health services and other necessities are the same ones who complain about unemployed folk being a "drain on society". If you want people to be less of a "drain on society", then why don't you let them have the services that are necessary for them to find employment. Very few people are unemployed by choice, and I'm sure if unemployment itself was a little less overwhleming, maybe more people would be able to get up the energy to find a new job. Punishing folks for being unemployed only makes it harder for them to get out of that situation.

Anyways, I think what this whole experience boils down to is that I feel that there are big problems with the way in which our society treats mental health problems. Until this year, as someone who hadn't previously had any major mental health issues, I understood theoretically what's so screwed up about the discourse around mental health, but hadn't directly experienced this screwed-up-ness. Now I have experienced it, and I have felt the pain of being expected to be able to do something that I'm not psychologically able to do. I hope I can use these insights not only to help out my own situation, but to help promote a better understanding of mental health issues throughout our society, and to change some of the institutions that put me in this viscious cycle.

Anxiety

This article is about anxiety, and how mental diagnoses, though physically invisible, if uncontrolled, negatively color and impact every aspect of existence. Since mental illness is so all-encompassing, it is vital that we eliminate the cultural stigma surrounding these topics so that people can honestly face their own personal chaos.

Work

Fear that you won't peform well makes you preoccupied on the job Soon, you aren't performing well because you look distracted and worried. You worry that customers find you weird because you look crazy. Customers find you weird because you look crazy. They talk to your manager, who talks to you and lets you know that people have been talking and you had better shape up. The fact that the manager is watching you just makes you shake more. You screw up, freeze up, don't talk and smile like you should. Congratulations. You have been laid off because of anxiety disorder.

School

You certainly feel unprepared for the looming finals and papers. Just thinking about your potential performance makes you sick. You try to calm down by brewing a cup of tea. You get back to work. You don't understand any of this. If only you had gone to class. But most mornings you were too scared to leave the house, so you pulled the covers over your head and spent the whole day in bed. You wish you could do that now. How would you perform if you had made it to class or could open a book without sweating?

Sex

Scared of physical contact because you are scared that somehow lying skin-to-skin will fuse your brains so that they can read your mind and know that not every thought is pristine and that you don't really think of them, always, you don't call and don't pursue and don't reveal more about yourself than necessary. And when luck swings your way and you somehow overcame the odds to find yourself breathing next to another human body, you freeze up, feel nothing and disassociate because the sound of their breathing reminds you of once upon a time when it really wasn't very pleasant.

Politics

Scared to speak your mind because of a fear that every slip up you make will be recorded in the log of oppression, you would prefer to stay silent than be judged by the "more P.C than thou" crowd. So your voice, which could speak volumes if heard, remains silent.

Acting Crazy:
spying on, jamming with and crooning about anxiety and depression

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Spring, 2002. I am working on my MFA in multimedia performance. At the moment, I am doing an encore performance of breaking up with my partner -the fourth of such performances over a period of a year. Behind on schoolwork, piles of dirty laundry and dishes covering my apartment, I spend most mornings in bed, alternating between crying, concocting a method of suicide both tidy AND painless, and rolling over to lose myself back in sleep. I spend nights in the same bed, laptop and books strewn about on the comforter, my work continually interrupted by noises that, to me, indicate somebody is trying to break in. Several times I am so convinced that I hide-under the bed, inside my closet, behind a door, heart pumping, senses magnified, cortisone raging.

I was a mess.

Had it not been for a graduate school advisor's suggestion that I start creating using my dark emotional state as material, it's likely I would have dropped out of school. Activist art, for me, was making work about 9/11 and the war in Afghanistan, not about my embarrassing mental weaknesses. I only felt open to Keith's idea because he himself was a well-respected and strongly engaged political artist. So, instead of checking into the psychiatric ward, I started videotaping myself. I started scribbling words about my internal state. I started drawing the pain as it lived in my body. I also began reading about anxiety and depression from different perspectives. I read feminist analysis, explanations and interpretations from various schools of psychology, neuroscience, Eastern and Western religion and quantum physics. I read socio-economic analyses and different books by psychiatric researchers. My own understanding of the nature of anxiety and depression began to shift from a very individualized model to a broader, more systemic paradigm.

This shift led me to wonder about the value of sharing my story-in essence, of bringing that shift into my art practice. As a relatively privileged person (white, upper-middle class, uninstitutionalized American with access to decent health care) and as an activist, I wondered if creating a performance could challenge stigma, reduce isolation and help shift the paradigm of mental health towards a more systemic and community-based model.

search. I feel that employment anxiety is something that runs in our family, and the fact that I had never been faced with a real job search before only made things worse. Every time I applied for a job and was rejected, I got upset. And , because I was afraid of getting upset, I would often times chose not to apply for jobs that I didn't feel I had a strong chance of getting. I would often times call somewhere asking if they were hiring, and when they said "no, but we'll take your resume in case we want someone in the future", I would "forget" to send in my resume. I would procrastinate from working on the job search by finding other things to fill my time with. I knew, in my conscious mind that I wasn't doing a very good job of finding a job, and I had plenty of advice from other people as to how I SHOULD be doing things, but the problem was that, giving the anxiety that I had, it was just not really that easy for me to do things the way I knew I SHOULD be doing them.

One of my sources of advice was through the career services office (CAPS) at McGill. As they understand that people often need help with the job search just after they graduating, their services are open to alumni for up to a year after graduation - not just to students. I had a number of appointments with a career advisor there, who was able to do a pretty good job of giving me things to work on with my job search. However, telling me what to do, and providing me with the psychological tools of doing it are two completely different things. It was pretty clear that the career advisor in question had little to no understanding of how to deal with the anxiety I was facing.

I would often time have a friend suggest to me: "Why don't you use the McGill counselling service?". Well, it turns out that, while the McGill career services are available to folks who have graduated, the counselling services are not. I feel that I am definitely not the only person who has had mental health problems caused by the transition from the school-world to the work-world, but somehow the folks at McGill student services haven't had the sense to realize that folks who are in this sort of transition might need a counsellor and not just a career advisor.

All this time I was living off of my savings. I was lucky to have come from a family background in which my grandfather left me some money when he died, and so I've never had to worry about running out of money, although spending more than you're making is always stressful. You'd think that as someone who lost their job due to circumstances beyond their control, I'd be the perfect candidate for EI. Well, that was certainly not the case. In order to get EI you have to have worked a certain number of hours in the past year. While I had been being paid to work on my Master's thesis, that work didn't count for EI purposes because it was paid in the form of a grant rather than hourly wages. And, while my TA work paid enough to support me for the fall, it only amount to about 10 hours/week and thus, again, I didn't have enough hours of work to claim EI. It's interesting how even the unemployment system is set up so as to privilege certain forms of work over others.

Given my lack of income, I didn't feel like I could afford to pay for a

The Vicious Cycles of Mental Health

I submitted my Master's thesis in August of 2008. This was the end of my studies (for now at least), and the end of at least one of my sources of stress. I thought that being no longer a student would mean that I would have more free time, be able to put more time into the things I love to do, and would in general be happier with my life. Well, as in turned out, I was wrong. The year since then has actually been full of anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues. Not only that, but, because of the particular situation I was in, I found it very hard to get any help about the particular issues that I had. I feel that there are some really deep structural problems in the way that mental health is dealt with in our society, and that it is these deep structural problems which created the gaping cracks that I fell through.

According to the values of our society, between the ages of 18 and 65 you should either be a full-time student or a full-time worker. Since, as of August 2008, I was no longer a student, I decided that it was time to find some work. I decided I wanted to pursue a career as a CEGEP teacher, and as my Master's degree would qualify me for this work, I started applying for teaching jobs. There are three times of the year that CEGEP teachers are hired - in August, December, and May just before each term of classes begins. I had applied for a couple jobs in time for the August interviews, but was still too busy with my thesis to really give a good interview. So, in September, I had no more school to do, and was still unemployed. Luckily, my department at McGill was hiring TAs, and since I was not graduating until the winter, was able to work as a TA for the fall.

This TA-ship was work, which was good, and it just barely paid the bills, so I spent most of my time in the fall doing volunteer work and activist organizing. I concentrated on working on my resume and improving my teaching skills so that I could get a CEGEP position for the winter. By the time November had come around, I was starting to realize that I didn't have a backup plan in case I didn't get a CEGEP job. And this was starting to frighten me. When I was a student, I was always able to get a summer job as a research assistant, which is not really something you can do when you're no longer a student. I had been working as a TA as well, but the union rules say that you can only be a TA as long as you're a student. Thus, I had zero work experience outside of the university setting. I also had the privileged position whereby I had known every time that I applied for a job that I would get it, and thus had never really developed job search skills. Thus, the prospect of being unemployed for the winter was really scary.

I also knew that my prospects of getting a CEGEP job for the winter were slim at best. Enrollment in CEGEP usually drops from the fall to the winter, and so some schools actually had to let teachers go. The few openings that there were were snatched up by the experienced teachers from the other schools. Thus, again, in January 2009, I was left without a CEGEP job.

At this point, I knew that I had a lot of anxiety tied up in this job

Now, six years later, the project has evolved into a play, a community dialogue, an arts workshop and a blog. The piece was a selection of the New York International Fringe Festival and was awarded funding for a stigma-busting tour to universities in partnership with VSA Arts of Vermont; I've presented in collaboration with community partners in Canada including the Canadian Mental Health Association in Ontario, Nova Scotia and Saskatchewan, the College Committee on Disability Issues, the Anxiety Disorders Association of Canada, the Canadian Psychological Association, the Beers Foundation as well as numerous other community groups in Montreal. *Crazy* was also presented in California and will be featured as part of the Philadelphia GLBT Arts Festival this spring. I have developed the project in tandem with conversations with audiences and participants throughout the process, making the work a living and growing entity.

In this article, I'll talk about *Crazy* from the perspective of an artist whose practice, along with my concepts of mental health, blossomed into a paradigm of interconnectedness. I'll begin by articulating goals and describing the project's structure. Then, I'll discuss the changes I experienced as an artist within a framework of theoretical questions with a particular focus on stories about my interactions with audiences throughout the process.

GOALS AND STRUCTURE

When I began work on *Crazy*, I developed a set of goals that continue to morph with audience feedback and dialogue. My current goals are:

- to expose my own darker side in the interest of destigmatizing the experiences of anxiety and depression, known in mainstream North American culture as "mental illness;"
- to create openings for deeper relating beginning with the invitation of my story
- to shift paradigms about anxiety and depression beyond the oversimplified and unproven assertion that "mental illness is caused by a chemical imbalance in the brain;" and
- to host a public conversation (as opposed to the private ones occurring in doctors' and therapists' offices) about an issue that I strongly believe has social roots (and therefore social remedies), such as isolation, economic injustice, environmental toxicity, nutritional issues, and violence.

The structure of the project changes somewhat each time I work with a different group, depending on the context and the needs or interests of the particular audience involved. However, there are four main components to the project: the play, the post-show conversation, the workshop, and the

online blog and resource list.

The play is a 50 minute one woman show that integrates monologues, character portraits, storytelling, movement, video and audience interaction. The stories are drawn from my remembered history and center around my experience as somebody diagnosed very early with anxiety and depression; most tales are framed by interactions with the 18 counselors I've seen in my 42 years, beginning at age 5. I very purposely include humor and lightness which audiences consistently report allows deeper access to the material than simply going directly into the pain would. The central metaphor, my first two-wheeler bike and the story of learning to ride it, serves as a connector, something most people can relate to, calling into question the "otherness" of those who have diagnoses. There is also video footage interspersed with the live action, including a character I portray called The Conductor, shots of me at four learning to ride my bike, and stills of me crying pulled from footage shot during a particularly difficult period of depression when I was making my video journal in graduate school.

The stories included have been, in part, chosen in response to audience discussions and tales told to me, in an effort to reflect a broader social reality. For example, during the anti-stigma tour to colleges and universities in Vermont, our workshops consistently revealed that a majority of audience members knew somebody who had attempted or committed suicide. These conversations led me back to my own experiences with attempted suicide and the realization that including those stories could significantly deepen the connection between the audience and my material.

After the performances, I will typically have several people from the community working in the mental health field onstage with me to help field questions about the topic rather than keeping conversation focused on my particular story. This structure yields a fluidity in conversation in which people are able to talk about both the artwork and the topic, moving back and forth without compromising either.

At many venues I have offered a creative workshop component of the project; this has enabled audience members to reflect on the subject kinesthetically and imaginatively as well as interactively. Workshop exercises include the Spectrogram, reading a series of statements and inviting people to stand on a continuum in the room with one wall being "I strongly agree" and the other "I strongly disagree." This served as a great conversation starter; after people decided where to stand, I would open up the floor for them to discuss why they chose to stand where they were. Other exercises included poetry writing, challenging people to expand notions of the word "crazy," and a movement exercise which allowed them

It was my turn. I rolled over and wrapped his him in my arms. "I love you too."

We didn't talk about the magic that had happened that night for weeks. I'm still not sure what occurred, except that the world looked a lot more beautiful after I emerged from the sand and glass, and that it bonded Orphan and I in a way that I have never experienced before. Ambiguous. Gray.

On day after I got home from school, I made a beautiful discovery in the bathroom. Hanging on hooks were our jackets. Orphan had tied the sleeves of my jacket around the whole of his in an embrace of leather and cloth.

Orphan got better after another week. He started eating on his own, and keeping his subconscious-turned-conscious inside his head. He went home to the West for a while to prove to his family and friends that he was not dead. We had not contacted anyone on the occasion of his slipping out of reality. Life turned back to normal, except that my subtle body had entered a realm of sand and glass and had not returned unscarred. The tethers between my ego and my I had been loosened and tethers had been created between Orphan and Baby. I was confused; everything surrounding my understanding of him was gray.

On my last day of school, I was startled to find an anti-psychiatry exhibit erected in the library lobby. I strolled around, skeptical about the assaulting displays about Hitler and human experiments with pain and how our children were being diagnosed with made up diseases and being pumped full of expensive drugs. Feeling lost, I struck up a conversation with an elderly gentleman by telling him a little bit about Orphan, that I didn't think he was bipolar, that he had some kind of psycho-spiritual breakdown and we didn't send him to the hospital and how I hoped it was the right thing to do, but it had been exhausting. He said all Orphan needed was a good friend to care for him, not drugs or doctors or a hospital or a diagnosis. The old gentleman went on to talk about his seventeen years working at the Douglass Hospital. He told me about doctors who trained other doctors how to perform a lobotomy in seven minutes and about the drugs and the complete disregard for the "mentally ill" as people. And then he told me about a radio show he managed for the hospital, exclusively for the patients, how he never turned anyone away, from the hallucinating to the incontinent, and how the station was a bubble into another way of being, how the patients picked the music and how it was mostly classical, how the doctors didn't understand how he made progress with the patients without drugs or straight jackets, how the patient's behavior/function/control/ articulation at the radio was incomparable to anywhere else. And the old gentleman said he told the doctors one thing that they always dismissed.

He said, "I told them I used that dirty, four letter word. I used love."

launched into infinity, my ego shrinking to a shadow of whisper with only two familiar buoys of relatable experiential concepts: one, the tragedy of the world Orphan had been unfolding for me of cruelty and hierarchy; and two, the fear of that tragedy that made the entire landscape my psyche had been launched into as course as sand and as brittle as glass (those two substances one in the same, both states existing simultaneously). I shuddered, cold, sobbed once, could not move again. Orphan, if he was even Orphan at that point, stopped chattering, prophesying and said my name.

"Baby."

He said it again. He asked me if I knew my name, where I was. I stared at his outline in the smudgy dark of my room. He asked again. I nodded slowly. The glass cut, the sand scraped.

"Look," he said. "Look, this is your tie-dye pillow we're laying on. And this is your room. With your green wall. And your paintings on the wall. And your computer, there on your desk. It's on. And your books. You love your books. And me. It's me. It's just Orphan. I'm just a boy. I'm just a boy that teaches you yoga. I'm just a boy. I'm not anyone else. No one is watching us." I nodded again. He pulled my stuffed bunny from under the covers. "Look, it's Bunzy. Remember you introduce him to me once. He used to be pink when you got him but now he's gray because you loved him so much? Do you remember?"

"She's a she," I croaked out.

"Okay, she. She used to be pink but now she's gray. Gray is the color of love."

I croaked out, "Gray is every color and no color together." The sand scraped, the glass tore, and my ego shadow solidified slowly, back to it's usual resting place in my inner landscape. I rolled away and began to cry, seeing visions of a city burning, of myself with slit wrists, of a fire truck outside of a friend's house. The world was brittle. I thought if I moved it would crumble apart like one of those fungi shells filled with spores. The slightest pressure the fine green chalky powder spores of the world would burst out and the casing would crumble, becoming indistinguishable from what it had contained.

"What are you seeing?"

"Terrible things."

"I love you Baby." He was on top of me at that point, his hands holding either side of my head. I nodded again, a few tears leaking from the corners of my eyes. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry that happened. I'm sorry. I love you. I can't kiss you. I'm sorry."

I looked into his eyes and even in the darkness I could see him slipping back into the madness that came after his saner moments, but before his prophesies.

to respond kinesthetically to the play.

THEORETICAL QUESTIONS

Crazy changed me. The project was born out of a very isolated individual experience and has blossomed into a platform for alternative social discourse about a topic that is still often taboo and around which many fears and extreme thinking still revolve. It is this dialogic nature which makes *Crazy* a community arts project. Collaborators and audience members who have come in contact with the project have also repeatedly reported being impacted by it. I think those changes are complicated, interesting and worth sharing.

As the project grew and developed, it became clear that it was not about my personal healing but about the place of my story in the context of a larger social conversation. I developed some core questions that have guided me in the work and that I will use in framing this section:

1) How can engaged/activist performance be structured to optimize opportunities for connection and transformation for both artist and audience, without becoming "therapy?"
2) How does autobiographical work create openings, offerings, and genuine opportunities for change, avoiding the frequently levied criticism of self-indulgence?
3) What role do boundaries play in forging nourishing connections between performer and witnesses?

Performance that transforms: artist and audience

When I first began generating material, my intention was not to create a performance to share with an audience-my intention was to save my own life. The raw material took many forms, including drawing, vocalizing, creation of mask characters and videotaping myself during my worst moments. I never had any intention of sharing this material with anybody. Once I had moved into a different energetic space and was able to look objectively at my artistic goals, I realized that utilizing some of this material, edited, refined, and placed into a structured performance, could help me make a stronger connection to the audience and help them make a stronger connection to the material.

Many people who encounter *Crazy* equate it with Drama Therapy, which is not the frame in which it was created. Did writing and performing *Crazy* heal my "mental illness?" Did it take away my depression and anxiety? The answer is a resounding no. However, *Crazy* did help me tremendously and continues to do so. Through researching and developing the show, and

through the ongoing process of revising, I gained a sense of power and collusion with my dark times and no longer view them as a problem I need to "conquer" or get rid of. To me, this is enormous progress and represents a new period of self-acceptance. That does not translate, to me, into therapy but rather a politicization of my experience, gaining confidence in my own radical understanding of myself and finding the courage to take my own path.

Also, perhaps most importantly, through providing a community forum for conversation and visibility of these experiences, my vulnerability has become connective tissue and vital for understanding the deep pain of others going through similar experiences. By crafting a project that is dialogic in nature, I have produced something antithetical to the mainstream North American "solution" to psychic suffering- medication or therapy, both individualistic responses. Facilitating a community art project that is living and breathing is a sign of my own transformation and integration of the more systems-based analyses I learned about through my own development and learning. I frame this through the lens of art as activism.

Audience feedback from different stages of the project reflected transformation for participants as well. Written evaluations yielded many, many variations on comments including: *I didn't know [depression] was so widespread… After seeing the show I didn't feel so alone… I didn't know such joy or accomplishment could be created out of that kind of suffering…. I learned a lot… It was a different perspective on mental illness than I'd heard before… It inspired me to want to get help when I'm down… It made me aware there are other people in my own community struggling like me… The humor of "Crazy" allowed people like myself who work as part of mental health services to become more conscious of how I communicate with my clients living with mental illness… Experiencing "Crazy" significantly altered my attitude from one of ignorant judgment of others to one of awareness and sincere attentiveness…The breadth and depth of student engagement during the performance and follow-up discussion and workshop was the strongest I've ever seen. "Crazy" gave our students new models for personal and community development…* In general, the layered approach (performance then panel then creative workshop) gave participants a rich experience, building upon established safety and moving toward personal engagement, and seemed to be an important aspect of the success of the project.

Generosity vs. self-indulgence

Staying open and, indeed, encouraging dialogue with people who came into contact with the work remains key for me to staying on the "generous" long journey into the awakening of a more powerful, whole and enlightened self. For me, my friend Orphan was going completely off his already slightly crooked rocker.

He was in a good place for him to let go. Pink insisted that he not go to the hospital, and I agreed with some trepidation, recalling the radio interview and what he had said about the anti-psychotics post-MDMA. But my trepidation about non-hospitalization grew during the next few days as I watched Orphan bend himself frantically into painful yoga positions, refuse any food offered, count obsessivly, stop speaking, then start speaking again, but in tongues. Our house turned into his personal ward. He reorganized everything and we are still finding things in weird places. I found sentimental photos of me and an old boyfriend crumpled on top of the fridge. He threw his clothes in the garbage. He would associate everything he heard with what I though was nonsense but what Pink defended as code that his subconscious had created and was spinning to the surface. And Pink was determined to help him. He could not go back to his father's house. He could not go the to hospital.

Lucky for Orphan there were three of us there to care for him whenever we could. Pink, Shepard and Baby. We formed some kind of magical, magnetic triangle for him, keeping him from spinning into more dangerous waters. He was not violent towards us, or towards himself, which is why he could say. I was his comfort, the one who was afraid for him and of him, and just listened without trying to understand. Shepard was like a playmate for him, someone who could keep up with him in the land he was walking. Pink was his primary caretaker, and towards the end of his break it fell totally to her, as Shepard and I could not deal with his cycling out of reality, on top of trying to finish final papers and juggle working.

There were so many moments I could delve into, analyze, recall with fear or fondness from that month Orphan was not a productive member of society, but a journeyer into his subconscious. But there was one night in particular that will stay with me for forever. He came to me as I was going to bed, and asked if he could sleep in my room, get out of the kitchen, where he had been spending most of his time. There was the essential Orphan-ness in his eyes for the moment: he was present, not off in an inaccessible world and we crawled into bed together and talked for the whole night as he moved from sanity to subconscious nonsense to shamanic, Gnostic visions. He was freaking me out, but a spell had been cast in my room and we could not leave the space he was creating through his absolute trust in me and my absolute fascination and fear of him. He told me about the horrors of the world, about rape, systems, conspiracies, about his parent's divorce, chopsticks, how we were being watched, speaking in ancient tongues all through the night and I began to enter his landscape. Through chattering teeth he told me secrets that I cannot now recall. But his esoteric secrets turned off my analytical brain, erased it and sent me into frozen void. I have experienced panic attacks in the past, but this was more like ego death and less like the blind fear of being "crazy" that usually grips me. I could not move, blink, think. It was pure, frozen existence. I was

Orphan, Baby, Baby Orphan, Orphaned Baby Orphan

I met a new friend this March. We will call him Orphan because that is what he likes to call himself. My relationship to Orphan began with dislike because he was young and self centered (still in *Cégep*, studying psychology) and contradictory and didn't (and probably won't ever) "get" my "feminism." After a few meetings, dislike grew to curiosity as he adopted my four person apartment as his new sanctuary away from the Anglo 'burbs in The West Island, away from his newly divorced Freemason father and his father's new mistress. He would stay for days on end and we struck a squatter's deal: he would teach me yoga and I would share food with him. He was at Sanctuary more often then anywhere else.

Orphan loved the Internet. He would always play Beatles' albums off of YouTube and one of the first things he showed me was a radio interview about a stint he'd had in the Hospital after some bad acid made him forget his social skills, allowed him to find the radiant light and how the police found him in his boxers, meditating to the neighbor's porch light in the December snow. In the hospital they called what was happening to him a "psychotic break," gave him anti-psychotics which made him have visions of angles, diagnosed him bipolar and after a few weeks, or maybe months (I cannot recall) released him back into a neglectful home. I didn't dwell on the interview, but I thought it was nice that he shared it with me.

Our relationship grew through mutual pedagogy: Orphan taught me things about energy, chakras, numerology and electronic music. He helped open my third eye one night and that is when I decided he was one of the most amazing people I had ever met. I thought he could never be afraid of anything and when he would talk, it was as if another voice was speaking through him, beyond his boyish capacity for expression. We (sometimes just Orphan and I, sometimes other members of the household like Pink and Shepard) would sit for hours and talk, or lie in silence, until I got too serious and he would call me a "blissed out space ninny," a "baby psychic", or a "juice junky" and poke me in the nose, which I found at once condescending and endearing. He would teach me how to fight, and I taught him about poetry. I liked when he would give me lined sheets of hand written poems with such a lack of focus or control that I had grown into writing with, and such an abundance of powerful words and frantic run on sentences that his meaning was undeniably clear and obscured nonsense at once. He would talk about the future, zombies, and the new mind with Pink. He would talk about China and Acid with Shepard. Orphan liked how brains work and was more spiritually awake than anyone I'd ever met.

One morning he came home from a rave with Pink, still buzzing from his first time taking MDMA. I had been up all night writing a paper and he sagged into bed and we cuddled like.... he was on MDMA. He told me all the things the anti-psychotics had locked away had burst open from the trip. He told me his spine felt like a magnet, atomic, on fire, alive and pulsing with energy. He told me about Kundalini Serpent that was once curled at the base of his spine and was now rising to meet her divine consort, Shiva, in his crown. Then he slept for a week, trying to re-balance. Then he began acting strangely. I didn't notice at first, being absorbed in school. He grew quiet. April Fools day was dawning and I was attempting yet another term paper on no sleep and chemical assistance. Orphan was a help at first, letting me read passages out loud and sitting quietly with me as I wrote. Then he began pacing, staring at me and my housemates, withdrawing from contact and muttering to himself. He would count, reorganize, how bouts of innocent confusion and intense mania. For him, it was only the beginning of a month

track. This did not always prove to be easy. After one of the early versions of the piece, a woman I had considered a friend took me out to lunch to tell me that she thought it was "a bunch of middle class whining." Another woman, who herself dealt with mental health issues, told me she thought I should not be doing the play but that I should instead be seeing another therapist. I wish I could report having had a thicker skin but, in fact, these conversations were quite devastating. I debated putting the work to bed, hanging up my creative goals and going back to where I clearly belonged-the nuthouse.

But with every comment like the ones above, there would be numerous others that indicated profound engagement and identification with the themes brought out in play, as well as excitement about the work artistically. At one discussion following a performance for a national mental health agency, a long-time director "came out" to her colleagues about a serious depression she experienced years ago but never told anybody about. This led to an important conversation within that group about stigma within the mental health field. Another woman revealed to the audience during the post-show conversation that she had stayed at a psychiatric hospital years ago, the first time she had disclosed that information to her community, and also said that she needed to do some rethinking about the type of treatment she received there. People frequently pull me aside after the formal group conversation to tell me about their sons, daughters, brothers, spouses, nieces or coworkers who are struggling, or even to share about their own difficulties. I include my email address in the program and have received numerous emails from people who were affected by the piece, including several people dealing with depression themselves. This feedback reflects the spirit in which the work was both offered and received.

The choices about how to present stories about medication is another example of my journey toward making *Crazy* a generous offering. While working on earlier versions of the play, I had discovered a bulk of information about anti-depressant drugs and felt that I needed to share these urgent political views with the audience. It became clear early on that those choices were distancing, especially to audience members who had found relief from taking medication. Once again, I saw that my own black and white oversimplifications about a particular issue resulted in people disengaging from the conversation. Receiving this feedback also forced me to acknowledge that my own views on medication were not so cut and dried, and that sharing this ambivalence was not only more truthful but also created more space for questioning and discussion; it was a more successful way to honest relationships with participants.

Good fences make good neighbors: the importance of boundaries

Boundaries also proved to be an immensely important element of the piece's success in creating connections. In earlier versions, I broke the fourth wall repeatedly, moving in and out of traditional theater boundaries- asking people direct questions in the middle of the play, teaching a breathing exercise, and at one point, inviting audience members onstage to participate in a game show. I thought that this type of "play" would raise the issue of boundaries, something of huge importance in the world of psychotherapy, with the audience. Instead, audiences consistently seemed uncomfortable and many appeared to have trouble focusing on what was happening because they were too taken aback. Having the safety of being observers, audience members could sit back, allow the stories to flow into their awareness and mingle with their own and then, later, process out loud during the post-show discussion (or on their own as they wished). Also, because the topic is still taboo, having me talk about it first, without them needing to get involved immediately, seemed to open the door at a slower pace and create the safety necessary for more open sharing later. Forcing interaction earlier did not yield the same depth of sharing that I believe is a truly connecting experience.

CONCLUSION

Crazy has been a catalyst for community connection around mental health. As the artist, I attribute *Crazy's* success to approaching it as a conversation. The project continues to unfold; two new branches of the project are creative workshops for junior high and high school students and a training for communities and businesses on engaging successfully with coworkers struggling with mental health issues. These projects came directly out of comments and questions posed by audience members. I hope to encourage others to support their personal challenges by utilizing their strengths to make changes in their greater communities. If you are interested do contact me at gailmail@thirdstorywindow.com or visit my company website for more information: www.thirdstorywindow.com/performance.htm.

I try to imagine my mom without the disease. Would she still weave willow branches to protect nesting pigeons from the wind? Would she have a house, a pension, a steady job? Would she still open up her chest, over and over again, trying to save the world? Where is the boundary between personality and chemical imbalance? How fast is too fast? Too sad? Too sensitive? What if madness can't be partitioned out? I worry about researchers, racing to isolate a gene for mental illness. Chromosome 22, search and destroy. I envision a new generation of mentally stable, genetically modified human beings. I wonder about what this would mean, rewrite human history in my mind. No art, music, poetry. No shamans, no prophets.

As many do, I live a life touched by madness. But along with everything else, I have inherited strength, independence, courage. I look to my mother, inspired. She carries her painful gifts every day, finding new ways to live in a world that tries to convince her that she is broken, disordered. Even when she cannot trust her mind, she lives according to her heart. She defies categorization. Her fire, her rages and passions will never be reduced to a diagnosis.

There are things inside of me that scare me. I live with my own dark hollow space, tucked deep within a cage of ribs and behind my belly. I am still learning to live with uncertainty. I am beginning to use knowledge as fuel, an incentive to take better care of myself, live fully. Meditate, do yoga, eat good food. Try to keep my stress levels under control. Write in my journal. Build community.

Like her, I refuse to live a life defined by mental illness. Still, sometimes this ticking in my chest fills me up. It gets so loud I am sure everyone around me can hear. I curl up with it at night, letting the sound lull me to sleep. Can't help but hold my breath, listening closely, waiting for the day it stops.

hypomanic personality? Predisposition to manic episodes? Does she wonder about madness in the blood? Does she lay awake in the night, haunted by memories of car crashes, leather wrist restraints, the smell of hospital antiseptic?

This year I decided to give therapy another chance. I met with a psychologist at my school. A watery, soft-spoken woman, she shook my hand as though afraid to break it. The first time I saw her she asked about my family history. She asked a lot of questions about my mom. She wanted to know about my childhood. “What was it like for you, growing up in that environment?” I didn’t know what kind of environment she had in mind, took a breath and did my best not to get defensive.

I tried to remember. I thought about the white pills she took every morning. I remember her pacing the living room, eyes wild and unfocussed. The fires were coming, she said, and tornadoes. How could she sit still? Once, my sister and I were brought to a friend’s house after school. “Your mom is sick. Your dad had to take her to the hospital.” Soon after that my friend got new friends. She didn’t invite me over after school anymore. I remember mom’s grip on my arm as she lay in a cot in emergency, waiting for a room. Her eyes wide, pleading. “You believe me, right? You know I’m not crazy.” Visits to the hospital, bringing flowers, pajamas, books. The ice cold feeling in my belly when the nurses confiscated the belt from her bathrobe.

But mostly I remember road trips to grandma’s house, windows down, radio playing. Stopping for donuts in Moose Jaw. I remember visits to the public library and bedtime stories, shelves overflowing with children’s books. I remember the journals she gave me to read, each page a work of art. Her impeccable teacher’s cursive interspersed with sketches. Photographs and magazine clippings taped in between dreams and stories. I didn’t try to tell my therapist about mixing cookie batter, planting flowers in the garden, homemade play dough, the sandbox mom built for us in the backyard. She had already come to her own conclusions about what my childhood was like. My therapist said “Oh I see, so she was present.”

A Letter.

There are so many things I could write to you about; so many times you gripped me between finger and thumb, held me up to the light to inspect my faults. So many times you laughed at me, sighed under breath and shook your head like a disappointed parent. The scorn was the worst. You found me ridiculous, predictable, pathetically adolescent.

It had been a strange night; you had made your demands and so I trotted along, trying to impress you. A couple of glasses of wine drunk in the sun made me tired and irritable, and I snapped after one reproach too many. Then apologized and apologized and apologized...never enough, never enough. Anger lost to guilt.

The next morning I explained about cutting. You kept asking what I was thinking, what I wanted, what was going on, but all I felt was numb. No thoughts in my head just a tune, a two bar riff playing on loop. I felt like I was floating away, and the only way to bring myself back was to say, to tell you where I had been and might go again. Lying in my single bed, I wanted you to understand. You didn't. You didn't try, but told me, go to therapy, you're fucked up. Then you left.

All morning trying to decide, too scared to give this up but knowing, knowing something was wrong. I turned up with a card and my tail between my legs. The start of a new habit, yet now it all seems the wrong way round. You said it again, I was fucked up. You laughed. People didn't do this in other places, you told me, it wasn't real, just some silly trend. Where did you get the idea, eh? Did you see it on MTV? You taunted and goaded, finally drawing tears, then offering the strange consolation: we can fuck if you want...would that help?

It was your way, I later found out. You made my body your own. On the beach, you said, I think I understand now, then told me how I felt. I wanted to say No, that wasn't it, but we were in your world, and my voice would just be lost. Months later, you kissed the scar on my thigh, said it was part of us now. You slipped yourself uninvited into my past; claimed my skin as a sign of your progressiveness; treated my body as simple validation.

When I finally ended things, it took so long to learn myself anew, without you at my shoulder telling me that I'm wrong. I have learnt to see that scar again, without your judgment or your love - so inseparable - creeping in. I am untangling shame and guilt, and drawing new lines on my body. Not with a blade, and not through your blue-green eyes. My new scars - etched in black ink or pierced with silver – are all mine.

eight years

sixteen was the year my emotions began to shut off like lights in houses as people turn in- tiny, unpredictable changes to the landscape of a lonely night. the anxiety worm in my brain started growing, overwhelming my ability to rationalize. and i began to shrink inside in direct contradiction to a body that didn't fit, because sixteen in size eighteens is a challenge to beauty standards i wasn't even trying to make. i felt wrong.

and sixteen was also the year that ******* sent me her suicide note, which might have been the catalyst or just one of the low points. clouds rolled in. i started skipping school because i couldn't stand to be looked at. the guidance counselor who had calmly told me my math learning disability meant i would never get into university called me into his office.
my grades were slipping, did i want to talk?
i didn't.
when administration finally demanded i see him, he wanted to focus on my birthday.
"september 11th, 2001 was not a good day to turn sixteen. do you think it set the tone for the whole year?"
i didn't.

grandma died and i started hurting myself where people couldn't see, where i hated myself the most. couldn't visit ****** in the hospital where they'ed put her after she tried to kill herself because just the trip there brought on a panic attack. the hospital, which was good at giving out pills as long as they weren't birth control, gave me ativan for those special occasions where breathing stopped being easy. one small white pill, under the tongue.

at school, they re-wrote my yearbook entry. the only person i wanted to thank was my cat, i said. my homeroom teacher told me it might help to be more cheerful and i tried to make eye contact, looked out the window instead. she left me alone but called me talented and creative in the yearbook, said one day i would be famous. famous was farthest from what i wanted, but i appreciated the effort. she didn't thank my cat.

my first and only doctor's visit in relation to my depression and anxiety was all about making me strip to my underwear, expose the body for observation. all i wanted was some government-funded, or at least partially insurance-covered, psychology. needed her referral. we didn't have a lot of money, could not afford a hundred dollars an hour for

Mad in the Blood

I am my mother's daughter.
I am built like her. Thick strong bones, designed to carry great weights. I have her dark features, her deep grey eyes. Intense. One friend stops conversations, exasperated. "Don't look at me like that. It's like you're staring into my soul." Thin skin. Intuitive, we don't filter well. Veins close to the surface, straight to the heart. Everything gets in. Hearts beat hard, caged in bone. Threatening to burst free. Caregivers, nurturers, we love fiercely. She is a pacifist, but I have seen the mother bear instinct kick in. Do not test this. She has always been impulsive, unpredicatable. I have inherited her need to frantically recreate when life gets stale. Tear up roots. Burn the Earth.
I study my heritage in abnormal psychology. Learn about my mother, pathologized. Her life becomes an axis I mood disorder, a subset of a category of a category in the DSM-IV, numbered and summarized in black and white. Current clinical status and features. Lifetime prevalence rates and epidemiology. Charts and statistics. Biological and psychological theories and therapies. Lists of drugs and side effects. I struggle to reconcile a soul, a whole vibrant life with the diagnostic criteria for 296.4x. I learn that I am considered "high risk". Twenty-five percent, a one in four chance. Genetic Russian roulette. I am reminded that I am living a life within brackets: "average age of onset". I run through lists of risk factors in my mind, ever vigilant. Early onset depression, neurotic personality, high emotionality. Check the box, fill in the circle completely. Trying to remain objective, learning as much as I can, I wonder: If my mind does turn against me will I be able to tell?
I think about my sister. Like my father, she doesn't often talk about her hurts. She is more private, doesn't want to burden anyone. If one of us is affected, I always assumed it would be me – but extroverted and energetic, she too feels deeply and loves hard. She has mom's temper, her stubbornness and selective hearing. Neither one will ever accept defeat. As a little girl she was quick to anger, aggressive, prone to fly into rages. Indicators of

Be forgiving and non-accusatory

People with ADD have a tendency to forget, lose things, be late etc. etc. If an ADD friend of yours is consistently like this, be forgiving. If you find it hard to deal with, imagine how hard they must find it. For example, don't call them 'flaky' because they've forgotten about an appointment with you, it's likely that they're trying their best.. it's just that some things slip through the cracks.

Be patient

Similar to # 5. Allow people with ADD some extra leeway. *Please.* Also, don't expect them to be able to be super generous with their time – it's hard enough for a person with ADD to take care of themselves, let alone others. There will be time when they are able to be very giving, so embrace and praise that when it comes

Be accommodating… Embrace difference!

People with ADD are often highly creative and lot's of fun. They are people too, just differently able from your average folk. If you're able and willing, be a friend that can go the extra mile. For example, if you're ready and waiting for them at their front door before leaving for shool, ask if you can come inside and help them get ready. In my life, I've had friends agree to carry some of my medication in their wallets so that any time I was with them and had forgotten my meds, there'd be backup.

Offer your company

If a friend decides they want to get tested for ADD offer to accompany them, or to be there when they get out, or to help them find resources.

Well, thanks for reading this. I hope you're inspired to learn and read more about ADD. Or that you've learned something new. If you think you have ADD talk to your doctor and friends about it and ask around for more help and information-- that's how I did it. You can also contact me at short.attention.questions@gmail.com if you have any questions about ADD or about finding support (I'll treat everything i receive as confidential and anonymous).

me to talk to someone in a pretty, lavender scented office where everything was lined up harmoniously and the lights were soothingly dimmed.

so i submitted to the physical exam in exchange for maybe escaping the way i felt around other people (neon letters on my body marking me different) or figure out why nothing felt good anymore and talking to my friends was like asking strangers for directions.

my doctor was a lean tri-athlete who often half-smiled in the way people do when they don't really want to smile at all.

the assessment was short: take off your clothes we'll examine your depression with humiliation under florescent lights, arms that try to cover fat thighs, stomach, breasts... are useless because we knew the verdict.

and the verdict was: fat.

sitting on the paper-lined table, i looked at the tongue depressors and in my head listed the things i couldn't tell her in front of my mum, couldn't tell her at all, the reasons i wanted to see a psychologist. like: i thought i was gay and people were dying and the only emotion that registered was sad and maybe sometimes i wanted to kill myself and maybe i should because did i even have a right to be alive if my body was this wrong?

and i took the little pieces of courage that existed as reminders that i used to be stronger than this and asked if i could please get a referral for a counselor because i needed to talk to someone.

the doctor looked at me and looked out the window toward the mountains that ringed part of our town. she told me it would probably be better if i went for a walk up there every day, in the sunshine, if i exercised and lost weight. somewhere inside of me i guess someone was getting angry, but i didn't know her anymore and she was pretty quiet anyway.

i took the punishment i felt i deserved for looking the way i did and left the office with my mum, neither of us knowing how to fight the doctor, both of us feeling the shame of having bodies people told us were ugly. cruel words were clouding my head, i think they were clouding hers as she relived the shame with me. i used to blame her for not getting angry, until i realized that she had been told the same thing as a child, taught that changing her body would get rid of her sadness.

it took me almost eight years to realize what had happened, and how wrong it was. the depression came and went, it had strong seasons and quiet ones. the horrible, sick shame i felt over my body was present always, sneakily sticking to me through yo-yo diets and appetite suppressants and the one year i dropped to size fifteen and still wasn't happy. the anxiety fed on both, a satisfied beast. it wasn't hard to come up with excuses not to participate in social activities unless i had something to numb myself- in my late teens and early twenties, i drank a lot in order to be present. when i stopped drinking, the anxiety was stronger. it ate the parts of me i liked best and i couldn't share them anymore. i tried to participate in things about which i felt passionate, but always assumed i didn't have a right to be there, couldn't put myself out in the way that was necessary to create change. i started to feel like i was turning into a stereotype, a fat body with no personality only the assumptions i was sure people made about me- compulsive over-eater, inactive, stupid, asexual, uninterested, snobbish.
then i started to get angry, and i think it was the anger that finally ripped through everything else. at first it was just there, a tool i hadn't used to defend myself in so long that it felt foreign. i didn't know what to do with it, turned it over in my hands trying to find the right end to grab, the right way to use it. i started to timidly dissect what i had absorbed about bodies, about sexualities, about who "deserved" to be alive. finally, i went home the summer before i moved to montréal and quietly asked my parents for help. i started seeing the psychologist my doctor wouldn't recommend for me.

it's not over. that would make a beautiful ending, but breaking through the shit i absorbed about my depression and anxiety is difficult. i'm still walking with the hesitant, shaky steps of a toddler who sometimes wonders if she isn't wrong, if it isn't true that she deserves the depression, that the overwhelming anxiety which often keeps her "safe" from social situations isn't natural after all, for someone who looks like she does.

it isn't, though. i've got a truth i'm half-scared of, but i know it's true. i'm full of clichés about how things are changing, and for once, i'm okay with being a cliché because it feels better than anything i've allowed myself to have in a really, really long time.

Get informed

Learn about ADD. Read more than just this article. Cruise the internet, get informed. Be wary though! There is a lot of bull shit written about it. Get your information from reputable sources. Don't expect a friend with ADD to teach you about it.

Watch out for it

Learn tell-tale signs of an ADD person. If you suspect some one you know has ADD, keep that in mind when interacting with them. Don't let this overrule your perception of them, and don't suggest that they should get tested. However, If the person is a close friend, I think it's alright to bring up the condition casually, in private, without telling them that you suspect they might have ADD. For example you could try casually bringing it up in conversation, say you read a book about it (but actually do that first!) and ask them what they know about it. Or, "accidentally" leave the book at their house (don't expect that they'll actually open it or finish the book, haha (I start books but rarely finish them)).

Be willing to listen

Having ADD can make life really challenging. If someone needs to vent about it, give them space, and lend a patient ear if you can. Remember that if it makes you uncomfortable to hear about it, it may be twice as difficult for the person talking about it. If you feel it's appropriate, ask the person some open-ended questions (i.e. "I hear that you're frusterated that you had such a rough day. How does it make you feel when you forget your backpack at home for the day?," or "wow, that sounds rough, feel free to tell me more about it…").

Be non-judgemental

When someone tells you that they think they have ADD or that they have ADD, don't judge them, believe them. Having a mental health problem doesn't make anyone less smart, loving, or wonderful, and it just might mean they have more trouble showing those sides of themselves. Take people seriously, ADD (or any other mental health condition) is no laughing matter.

medication is just because of the pressure and necessity to be successful, right? "

My thoughts in response: To some extent yes, but otherwise NO. Yes in that I feel that ADD has the potential to make "success" more difficult for me than it is for others; if I were living in a society where each person gave as much as they could, and took only what they needed (a utopic egalitarian society), it's true that my ADD wouldn't be as much of a problem. Yes in that If my school work wasn't compared to that of other students and marked accordingly, my ADD wouldn't show as much. This, I do not deny.

However, let it be clear that even if I were living in an egalitarian society where capitalism wasn't present and my work wasn't compared to that of other people, ADD would still greatly affect my life because it also affects my social life. For example, I have trouble keeping secrets, blurt things out when I shouldn't, talk too much, forget to call friends back (even when it's super important), and am chronically late. I also have trouble finishing tasks (cleaning my room is *really* hard), and following through on projects I've started is tough (I have a list of great projects I've started, but haven't finished).. and *none* of those problems are related to capitalism.

Being an Ally

If I could sum up how to be an ally in one word I would string together the names of three of my really great friends. One of them has has witnessed the transformation that has taken place in my life since getting ADD support and medication. This friend has two other best friends who *also* have ADD – it's as if they specialize in having best friends with ADD. I've come up with the following guidelines by thinking about this one friend in particular, and my many other friends and family whom have supported me in varying degrees.

I only fuck people I trust.
I never really did the one-night stand.
It doesn't turn me on.

I get hot for intellectuals anyway. So first prove to me you're smart, chat me up with some queer theory, and woo me with your wit before we get into bed.

And I'm a sexual abuse survivor.
Which I guess makes me an intimidating partner.
Maybe it's why the trust thing is especially important to me.

It took a long time for me to become comfortable with my body.
Respect that.

But it doesn't mean I can't fuck. That I can't enjoy sex. Or that I can only enjoy certain, particular, socially acceptable types of sex without it meaning I'm repeating the abuse. Or that I have to be into every kink to prove how comfortable and sexually liberated I am.

It also doesn't mean that I have be 'fucking' to be sexy. Some survivors do have difficulty with sex but that doesn't mean that there aren't other ways of making it hot, making it romantic, making it totally beautiful to be with them. There are so many ways of sharing ourselves.

I like it when you ask.
I think it's fucking sexy when you triple check that everything's ok, when you ask what to do if I happen to space out or get flashbacks, when you say how do you like to be touched?

Consent - survivor or not - between the sheets or against the wall.
That's what gets me hot.

Destigmatizing ADD/ADHD & Being an ADD Ally

The following informations and stories are based on my own experiences, and I do not attempt to represent all people with ADD.

This is part of an email I sent to a partner, three weeks into our relationship:

> Dear P,
>
> …
>
> … This also makes me realize that we need to talk about why i am the way that i am; what i think about, and how i feel about, 'ADD.' I usually don't call 'ADD' a disability - partly my own doing, because I feel like the word "disability" has the possibility to victimize an individual, and partly because i sometimes get sucked into the (absurd) notion that ADD isn't really a disability, that it is "more fictional than factual" However, I often feel disadvantaged/disabled because of the condition. My close friends know a fair amount about my condition and I am really lucky to have so many understanding and patient people in my life. That being said, I've never had "the ADD talk" with you yet, which I have been thinking about. I realize that I am hesitant/nervous to do so for a couple of reasons.
>
> First, I fear rejection: a lot of people aren't willing to hear about/understand ADD; I really like being with you, and if you react negatively to what I have to say then I don't think I could feel comfortable fully being myself around you, which would mean an unhealthy relationship - something I won't stand for. As it stands I'm comfortable being myself around you, which is really fantastic; I feel like you like me for who I am and I don't need to try and be anyone other than that. I don't want that to change.
>
> Second, I fear judgement: 'ADD' is a highly stigmatized word/condition. I like you: I think

On Medication

I've been on medication since I was 15. Medication has changed my life. Many people report feeling uncomfortable in activist circles sharing their mental health problems. Due to the fact that a lot of stimulant and other ADD medications medications*** are made by large pharmaceutical companies (which we all know are bad news) a lot of anti-capitalist folk are against medications, some adamantly so. I'm anti-capitalist, but I still hand money over each month to the pharmaceutical giants. Why? Because it's either that, or having my life a living hell. Medication means that I am able to function at a similar level as my peers. I still have to work a lot harder at school than I should have to, but I can assure you that I would be close to failing out of universityl if I wasn't on medication and if I wasn't getting disability support from student services.
[*** often I type the same word twice, and I decided to leave that part unedited to give you a taste of how my writing looks before it's edited…]

Personally I don't give much credence to people who don't believe in ADD, or who are against medication. However, I am lucky to be this convicted. A person who is against meds, clearly has never experienced my life pre-medication. It's almost laughable how ignorant I think they are.

On Politics

I've thought a lot about the poltics of ADD and how ADD relates to modern capitalism. As it stands in our society, success is based on your ability to perform well. So, naturally, people who can't perform as well as others will struggle.

A Popular Opinion: "Having ADD is just a hurdle in life that some people have to deal with; the reasons why they take

the same as mine before I went on medication." I also talk a lot about my experience, and try not to implicate them too much. I make a point of stating that in my opinion, having ADD doesn't make anyone a lesser person. I've seen people decide they'll would go get tested, but then procrastinate, and never really do it (many people with ADD tend to put things off, especially when they will require having to follow up on things).

Fear

Fear of the unkown can set in, once a person is convinced it's possible they have ADD. What if one gets tested and finds out they don't have it? This could be embarassing and one might worry about what their family would say. And if they find out they don't have ADD, then what is it that makes their life so difficult?

So, my friend finally got tested. And he tested highly positive. He is now getting help at school, is on meds, and seems a lot more relaxed. I'd like to point out that my said friend is a really awesome person and ADD isn't all of him. He is loving, kind, intelligent, compassionate, goofy, hilarious, and dependable. However, *ADD affects nearly every aspect of his life, as it does mine.*

In my experience, one of the reasons people whom I see as being ADD don't want to get tested is because they don't know what they would do if it turned out that they didn't have ADD. If it isn't ADD they say, then why is my life a living hell? If I don't have ADD then why do I fear that "I'll lose everything I own out on the street every time I go outside?!" – you may laugh, and so do I to a certain extent, but only because I think it sums up beautifully a huge difficulty for people with ADD… and because it perfectly describes my life before medication.

you're a good person and I value/care about your opinion. I think a lot of people jump to a lot of incorrect conclusions about ADD; there's a lot of 'shit'-talk about it, mostly by people who don't realize that they haven't the slightest idea what is fact from what is fiction when it comes to the condition; a lot of people's lives are highly and negatively affected by ADD and many people don't realize the seriousness of it. That being said, I have no idea what you know about ADD and any past experience(s) you've had with ADD-type people. Whatever opinon(s) you have on the matter will affect me (because I like you) even if I don't want them to.

ADD affects my entire life; it may not be apparent that I have ADD to a lot of people for three reasons: (1) I take medication that helps a fuck of a lot, (2) the ways that ADD affects me aren't the traditional, stereotyped ones, such as "I can't ever stop talking or sit still, im addicted to nicotene, caffeine and i have a bad temper" and (3) I've developed a lot of coping mechanisms. That is, I have learned ways to limit its impact on my daily life by increased self-awareness.

Yah .... I feel nervous saying all of this and actually hitting the 'send' button. I really wish I didn't, but I do.. I guess that's life.. some things are easy, some things are hard(er).
Anyway, we should talk about this for real as this email is totally just a pre-amble/disclaimer.
I'm gonna come try and find you and hopefully we can sit outside in the sun together for a bit.
Bye,
-Zee

ADD is a condition that affects every aspect of my life. It also affects some of my friends and family members.

What is ADD/ADHD?
(Attention Deficit Disorder/Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder**)**

A lot of people don't really believe in ADD – they think it's over diagnosed (one of those rumours from the 1990s that may or may not be true), and they think that therefore most people that say they have ADD it don't actually have it... that they're making it up, or that the doctor they went to go see was cooky, or that they are exaggerating their problems to get attention.

Do you know how many times I've told people I have ADD and felt like they didn't believe me? Felt like they thought I was a whiner…(ok, so I *do* literally whine about lots of things, but I mean this more figuratively than literally). Do you know how often a person with ADD tells another person they have ADD and that other person asks them to give examples of how they know… give them proof.. convince them. To these people I say fuck you. I know my head, I know my body. I also scrounged up $1200 to go through 6 hours of one-on-one testing with an ADD specialist, who told me that my IQ was really high, but that my reading speed was in the bottom 5th percentile in terms of the average reading speed of a first year university student (I was in first year at the time I got tested).

In reality ADD is a condition that expresses itself differently in each person. Lots of people who don't have ADD share similar complaints as those that *do* have ADD. The thing about ADD is that it is ranked on a continuum. It's when characteristics such as impulsiveness, forgetfulness, inability to focus, the feeling of being scattered, difficulty multi-tasking etc. start to significantly interfere with your daily life that a person may be considered ADD. In the testing room, ADD is considered present in a person when their ability to perform tasks, solve problems and answer questions accuartely is less than their IQ would normally stipulate, with other learning disabilities having been controlled for.

Intersections & Privilege

I'd like to include a class analysis here. People who are poor have to wait much longer for testing than those who can scrounge or shell out the money to get tested by a private practitioner. Also, some medications are really expensive (up to $2/day; $60/month, with the cheapest ones being about half that price at best). Also, because people of colour disproportionately experience poverty, access to support becomes also affected by race. Finally one could argue that it is a matter of gender as well, because families may be more willing to spend money on their son's medicall expenses than they are on their daughters; furthermore, ADD has been incorrectly stereotyped as something that mainly affects young boys. This is an intersection of class, race, gender and disability.

Getting Diagnosed

A close friend of mine was recently diagnosed with ADD/ ADHD. It took a year of us living together for him to finally bite the bullet and go get tested. He complained (and rightly so!) of having difficulties organizing his school work, would often forget things at home that he needed for the day, was impulsive, could only concentrate in super-quiet places, and said he had difficulty paying attention long enough to listen to people, even when it was really important. I echo these problems, however medication has drastically reduced the negative effects of ADD on my life.

So why and how does a person finally decide to get tested? And why would they hesitate in the first place? How does one tell another that they think the other has ADD and that there is help available for people with ADD, but not upset them? For me, first and foremost comes the challenge of bringing up ADD casually, in a way that doesn't make a person feel threatened, possibly comparing their expressed grievances as being "exactly