My Journey of Spirituality and Resilience

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In 1988, I started to write in a journal to explore my experience with prayer and spirituality, my psychiatric illness, and my troubles. To this day, I still write and pray, but the words on the paper are different because I am viewing my illness in a different light. For these many years, my journal has been private, but now I am sharing my story with you. I hope that you will find this writing interesting and inspiring.

With time, I have come to consider that difficulties can teach us many different lessons. Our experiences can help us to better understand ourselves so that we may find out who we are and who we have become. After living with a psychiatric illness for the last 17 years, I feel that I now know who I am, where I am going, and who I have become. Isn’t this what life is all about, to know oneself?

During this long journey, spirituality has given me the resilience and the capacity to bear and live with personal pain, to accept difficulties and to find meaning in my experiences. Prayer has led me to this acceptance in my life and there is not a day that goes by without prayer and a strong spiritual connection with God.

I grew up in a loving family with parents who demonstrated kind, considerate and respectful values. My life with my brother Neil and sister Lisa was special and extremely happy. My parents and siblings always knew what was going on and we stuck by each other’s side. We attended church regularly and our Catholic faith was important in those early years. As a child, I was innocent, healthy, and full of hope and love. My high school years were pleasant with a large group of friends and playing sports alongside my brother. My mental health was something I never thought about. I was always smiling and motivated to make new friends and curious about the new world around me.

In 1983, I entered the University of Massachusetts in Boston which was my first choice as I wanted to attend a school close to home. I was motivated to get good grades and graduate. I thought that with hard work I could be a successful student and make a difference in society. I had always wanted to help people, so majoring in psychology seemed like a good idea. There was something about the human spirit that captured my heart, and I wanted to
know how other people coped with and managed difficulties. I had no idea that I, myself, would need to develop resilience and coping skills later in life.

In college, I began to experience loneliness and the dark feeling of depression. I could not understand what was happening because up until that point in my life, things had always gone well for me. During this time, I began to attend Mass in the school chapel looking for relief from the dreadful pain that was so difficult for me. Loneliness is the absence of having a connection to this world as a human being. I longed for connection and thought if I could just develop my social skills, I would make friends and feel better about myself. I was unaware that my loneliness was a result of my depression.

Resilience was a term I was not familiar with, but as my illness progressed, it became clear to me that I needed to be resilient in order to stay alive. I took a lot of time to pray and my spiritual life became special to me as I was more able to feel a tender spiritual bond.

After college, I began to experience more painful and troubling thoughts and emotions. My symptoms included depression, paranoia, scrambled and even suicidal thoughts. Being psychotic brought me into a world far away from the world that I once knew. I believed that people were talking and laughing about me and as a result, I became more isolated and emotionless.

During this time, I turned to prayer and believed in the spiritual power of prayer for myself and for others. I prayed for people in need and for people who were on the street and homeless. Prayer was my life saver and helped me to find a place for myself in this world. Mother Teresa's words convey the meaning of prayer:

Do I reject myself because I often have strange and painful emotions or do I accept myself as I am? If I can't accept the pain that I harbor, then I pray for support and a spiritual acceptance of my suffering no matter how I feel.

Along my journey, which has been filled with many trials and tribulations, prayer has kept me moving forward down the right road of spiritual wholeness instead of self destruction and death. I am proud to be a Christian and a man of love and prayer even when I am not feeling connected to the world or other people. When I pray, I can focus on being a child of God and not someone with a mental illness. Prayer allows me to be fully alive and spiritually awakened which has made all the difference.

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