

## “letterS cAN savE my life”

-TO BE READ IN THE EVENT OF RELAPSE-

Dear Me,

This is a letter to me, from me, begun on this ninth day of March in the year 2009. Please read it in its entirety, before deciding what to do next. Do not, I implore you: DO NOTHING RASH! If you feel the need to jump or punch or yell or scream, don't. The only option besides reading this letter from front to back is to call Dr. W. or Dr. S.

I hope that you do not have to call anyone...just find a quiet place to sit and read this letter. THIS contains all the secrets you are looking for and the answer is simple: this is bigger than just you. In fact, this is so big that it has almost nothing to do with you, except for that it probably seems like everything is about you, doesn't it? How do I know that? You're probably asking yourself that right now. That's easy, I *am you*. We are I, born of Mom and Dad, brother to younger Sister...and the familial list goes on. Okay, now I have your attention, keep reading, this will most definitely save your, my and our life.

Number one: have you taken your medications today?

I know, Paxil spiraled me out of control into a weird mania. I know, Auntie has to take meds. I know, I don't like taking meds, I hate that I have been on medication for so long. That is why I don't tell many people about this, although they probably have heard from someone or another that I was diagnosed as bipolar. Stop. Yes, you have a diagnosis of being bipolar. Stop. Do not do any wordplay with this letter. This is MANDATORY. Any word play that should be played will be simply laid out for you, DO NOT read into, out of or around any wording in this letter.

Yes, Paxil can be blamed as the starting point for my crazy episodes. Yes, drinking confounded the problem. Yes, you and I hate this, but yes, I have a mental illness. Read on. Read chronologically, as I have put as much brain power and thought and preparation into this as my little human brain possibly could. Yes, I am a puny little human being. Yes, it would be fun to be more than that, but, I and you are nothing more than that.

Number two: have you been drinking?

You made a deal with the doctors to not drink. Remember? Remember. I and you cannot drink, it is not allowed and it might be the reason why we went crazy in the first place, back in ott-three. Sure, it is scary to give up drinking, for all the normal reasons, but especially for you and me. What if it wasn't drinking that led to my "breaks?" What if I just have a defunct brain that sometimes is acutely rational and can switch to irrational thoughts without much notice. Nay, irrational beliefs. Not thoughts. Even when sane, you and I can think irrationally. But the difference is when you believe irrationalities. Stop. Are you flirting with the belief that you are a god? Stop. Dismiss this thought, it is irrational. I don't want to hear your bullshit about how man and God can be one and the same. The Egyptians followed such thinking...look where it got them!

Do not believe everything you think. You are far from a genius. You are further from the truth with every misguided belief. What is the truth? You are sick. You have been for at least five years, maybe more. But you are lucky, this isn't a sickness of your body, it is of the mind. Your brain misfires, and you believe you are the alpha and omega. No newflash here, bud, you aren't that important. No human is.

So what? Why am I writing this letter? Isn't it obvious? You have gone insane again, or, at least, someone thinks you have. Did you find this letter rummaging through the box in Mom and Dad's attic? You remember the box I packed for times like this: "My Brain." The thought there was akin to this letter's intention, to stop the spiral and the onioning out of your brain and thoughts before you lose it again. Stop. Do not drive while you feel like this. Turn off your XM-Sirius radio and don't go looking for key songs on YouTube or the Apple I-Store. Stop. I know you don't want to understand this right now, due to your chemical imbalance, but do not contact any ex-girlfriends. They have moved on. So have you. Stop. If you don't believe me that you and I are really not that important of a guy, go Google yourself. What did you find? Nothing, probably. Maybe you were cunning enough to find a random link to when you were President of the California Junior Classical League for a year. Who the hell cares about that?! Yeah, you're not that big of a deal.

Number three: have you been singing and dancing like everyone is watching?

That's okay, maybe this third time is the charm. Maybe my letter will help you. Keep reading. There is no reality show. There is no movie being filmed with you in it. Don't believe me? You probably don't. But how else would I know that you were wondering where all the cameras are hidden? No, you are not getting Punk'd. That show is

probably long gone, hopefully, regardless Ashton Kutcher doesn't know who you are, and doesn't care to.

Go read your poem *Disinherit the Wind* and then write a reflection of what that poem means to you. Okay? Done? Good.

Now, if you still think you're such a big shot, go relate your reflection to Doctor S. or Dr. W. No? Chicken...you are probably getting it now, huh? Stop. Do you really believe that something "strange" is going on? If so, take a look in the mirror. You might be the strange one.

Number four: have you shaved in a few days?

It doesn't really matter either way. Just make sure to keep presentable. No one is going to guess the battles that are going through your mind, if you don't appear to be fighting any. There are NO SUCH THINGS AS MIND READERS. Tell yourself that until you believe it.

Unless someone is really, REALLY trying to harm you, you can pretty much trust others to leave you alone. Just don't make eye contact and definitely do not tell strangers strange things. Do not be the Boy Who Cried Wolf or Chicken Little...if you do you are lowering yourself to the level of that guy on the 3rd street promenade in Santa Monica who just yells random stupid stuff at people. Don't be that guy! If you fear for your safety, go back home. That's always a good rule of thumb. Go back to your parents' house and call Dr. S. or Dr. W. Trust your family and the doctors, above anyone else. Even you! And trust this letter, it was written with the best intentions.

Number five: are you starting to question your name?

Don't. It's that easy! Every time that you want to call yourself a new name and every time that you wonder what others want to call you, you must start reading this letter from the beginning because, obviously, nothing is sinking in. This letter is the only key you need. Don't go Matrix-Mr.-Anderson on me, there is no real "key" in your mind that will unlock the secrets of the world. Secrets are secrets for a reason, anyway.

Think of your name-gaming as what it really is: similar to that kid who killed people at UVA after he put the tell-tale "?" as his sign-in name on his class's sign-in sheet. Definitely, don't be that guy, either! And don't yell "Don't Tase Me Bro!" at cops, that's a sure way to get in trouble, besides, it's played out.

Number six: don't fear the number six.

Only creepy people fear numbers. Just like the guy in Pi and Jim Carrey in 21. You are not in The Truman Show or Liar Liar, either. So stop trying to tell the truth all the time; everyone lies some times and life is better that way.

I'll repeat myself: you are not on a game show, reality TV show or a movie set. This is your life. Live it like you always wanted to. Do nothing crazy. Crazy is as crazy does. Sane is as sane does. Do sane, it's more becoming of you.

Now, since we've decided that this isn't some show, you can rest assured that there is no audience other than those who can see you. They aren't really an audience, they are just passersby. Let them be, and they won't even notice the time you are having. Make a performance, and they will become an audience. This is because people are inherently curious, especially about odd behavior in other people. Maybe it makes them feel more normal, who knows?

Number seven: stop rhyming, unless you are writing a poem!

Clang association (which means incoherent speech marked by rhyming words and gibberish) is not something you usually do. But, I know I have always worried that I would start rhyming too much and be found out. Don't worry, be happy, nobody is watching you that closely.

Number eight: have you hugged your mom today?

Go hug her. This will make her feel better, although she might still cry, but at least she will be having one of her "good cries." And talk more with your sister and your dad. They get you better than most and they will help you through this. Try not to focus too much on the past. And, for God's sake, stop thinking that the Past leads to the Present. You are not a present for anyone. And, no, there is no winning or losing this game called life. First, it ain't a game. Second, you will get no more presents than you already have been spoiled with from your generous family, friends and Happenstance.

Number nine: have you been to church lately?

Go. You won't spontaneously combust. You are not, despite what some exes might say, the Devil. You aren't even *that* evil of a guy! Okay, I kid: the italicized "that" was a

joke, have a sense of humor, already. Not about the wrong things, mind you. Don't go laughing at inside jokes to people who don't know the inside joke, that's just weird and it makes people uncomfortable. Uncomfortable people are more likely to look for a reason that they feel uncomfortable than comfortable people, obvi! You don't want to be the reason, apparent or real, for others' discomfort.

Just remember, on your way to church: you don't have to confess right now. Wait. You can confess when you are of saner mind. Maybe: pray some. Don't be creative with it, stick to what is tried and true: say an Our Father or sit in silence. Now is certainly not the time to be original.

So...what is this collection, anyway, you might ask. Its title is probably giving you a headache. Remember why you chose it? Remember correctly, or move on to reading. MAKE SURE NOT TO JUDGE THIS BOOK BY ITS COVER, after all, you designed it, remember? Remember. Also remember: you wrote it, so, in a way, you could pull yourself out of the depths of depression or, much more importantly, you could regain sanity in the event of your going manic or delusional. Yes, that is correct; you have been insanely delusional in the past. Don't worry about hallucinations though, you don't do that stuff. At least you haven't yet, so I would still be careful of what appear to be anomalies or strange behaviors in yourself and others.

Number ten: are you worried that you are crazy or that others might think/know you are?

Stop. Stop over-thinking, over-analyzing and definitely do not overreact to anything. Remember that paper you wrote in Negotiation class? It was about how "silence" could be a useful negotiation tactic and your teacher hated it. Oh well, just remember that *you* believed in that tactic and use it whenever you are unsure how to proceed. Don't give in to impulses or whims. Be safe: you are not invincible, although your elated mood might tell you otherwise.

Number eleven: are you looking for something?

First of all, what is it that you are looking for? Did you ever have this thing before? If not, you probably don't need it now, of all times! Is it something that could potentially be construed as dangerous? If so, leave it be! Since the doctors wish you well, they probably won't be too excited to see you marauding around with even the safest of potentially dangerous objects.

Number twelve: are you thirsty or hungry?

Quit your pontificating and go eat something. Drink water, not Red Bull or anything that has all those random, unpronounceable “ingredients.” Make sure to use the restroom when you need to and DO NOT even think about disrobing in public, you could get in a lot of trouble and, besides, you aren’t too impressive of a nude, anyway!

Number thirteen: do you have something to say?

Write it down. Don’t share it with anyone else. Read it a few times over before putting it away. If it makes sense to you, that doesn’t mean it will be well received by others. If it doesn’t make sense to you, it definitely won’t make sense to anyone else!

Number fourteen: are you feeling awkward?

What is making you feel awkward? It probably is your own thoughts, right? Most likely, no one else even notices that you are awkward or that you are losing your edge and/or cool. If they did notice they would comment on it, or at least they might ask you if you are okay. STOP. Don’t now start worrying about every time anyway has asked if you feel okay. STOP. No really, STOP DOODLING IN THE MARGINS OF THIS LETTER! You are probably looking at your doodles like they are the Rosetta Stone to your awkwardness...they aren’t. THIS LETTER is the answer to what is going on with you. Read it in its entirety and, if you make one more mark in the margin you might just be hospitalized again. Yes, *again*.

Number fifteen: okay, you believe me and this letter, so now what?

Make sure you took your medications today...and yesterday. Make sure to take them tomorrow, the next day and everyday that they are prescribed. Good. The last two times that you have gone delusional, you thought you were being watched by a large audience on television. Your innately curious personality wanted to know who was watching and for what reasons. You were unsure if it was a large fraternity prank, like a Punk’d show, but in a longer, episodic movie format or if you were being taught not to be such a joker and a jackass.

Let me assure you. You are not on TV. You are not being recorded, except for the times that you actually see someone with a camcorder or maybe just a smart phone, you aren’t even being photographed. I know, this hurts to realize. It hurts because you are probably thinking along the same lines as you did the last two times. You see, you eventually decided that you could do something great with this gift of being the

protagonist in an episodic film prank...you begin to believe that, if you follow all the laws and rules and you don't get "caught" doing anything illegal or immoral, you will win a prize. You even convince yourself that the longer this "show" goes on, the bigger the prize gets! Sounds good, and unfortunately you have to let that hope go. You haven't and you won't win anything. True, it is a great rule of thumb to not break laws. But, no one is actually watching this show you have imagined for yourself. I know that this is hard and saddening to realize. Take some time chewing it over, mentally. I know that you had grand ideas for how you could turn that "prank" on itself. You were going to give whatever prize you had imagined that you were owed to charity and you were planning on helping everyone as much as possible...

It definitely sucks to have such a positive dream smashed...but it isn't all that bad. You are coming out of a delusional episode. Yeah, "congratulations, you have not won anything, but the realization that you have a mental illness!" Sucks, right?

Well, I argue that the "sucks" depends...after all, your illness is not terminal. And it is fleeting in terms of its existence: you might be delusional for a few weeks, but then you get to be sane the rest of your life!!

So, you ask, what should I go do to make this all just go away? Go write something. Maybe write about what is going on, internally, to better understand how to move past it. After all, writing is your passion, remember? Before everything changed and you began to feel like the king of the world, you wanted to be known for your ability to harness the written word. Well...get writing! Perhaps you can focus on someone other than yourself rather than simply being so self-centered...go write somebody a letter. It might just save their life, as this letter has saved ours.

Dear Reader,

I know what it is like to be sane. Sanity is an easy subject for me to grasp. So easy, in fact, it dulls my senses to the point of boredom. The creativity found only in the truly insane aspects of life interest me much more.

I was 21 when I first went completely delusional and insane. Six years later, I am fairly certain that I can tell the difference between the shreds of sanity that people are able to develop throughout their lives and the multitudinous of insanity that comprises the rest of existence. I don't mean to imply that the majority of people are insane; of course this is far from the truth. However, I would argue that the majority of people in this world spend their entire lives ignorant to the difference between true sanity and complete depravity. This, I surmise, is a sad fact of life: most people do not cherish the sane moments for lack of having withstood true insanity.

Sure, there is tons of mental illness in this world. However, how often is it that one lives through the amalgam of suicidal delusions, possible hallucinations, disconcerting thoughts and backassward moods long enough to be able to impart any logical relation as to how this all comes about and how it all feels and *is* when you live through it? In my moments of sanity, I do not argue that I am more or less than any other person who has been through a delusional episode. Still, I realize that I am in a very lucky position to be able to speak to what insanity is and what sanity is not.

If I could sum up craziness in a short sentence, it would probably read like as follows: Insanity is the point at which coincidences become causes and thoughts become beliefs. What does that mean? In my experience, insanity is the placing of the proverbial cart before the horse, in regards to the brain's thought process. More to the point: an insane brain will notice a coincidence and then think that it means something more than merely being coincidental. Then, the insane brain will believe that what it just thought is the truth: that the coincidence meant the very thing that the brain thought it did. While such a belief may sometimes prove to be the reality of the situation, especially for a sane brain, an insane brain will spout off so many arbitrary illogicalities that, to a sane observer, nothing makes sense.

For example, when I was insane, I saw a street named Miller. "Of course," I thought, "my fraternity big brother's last name is Miller!" Herein lays the coincidence. Next follows the thinking that this coincidence means something: "Miller must be in on this prank," I continued thinking, "Why else would the pranksters have changed the name of this street to Miller?" Next comes the believing of the arbitrary and, in this case,



incorrect thought: "Since Miller is in on this prank," my logical sense now failing me, I continued, "it must be a fraternity prank!" Here was an *AH-HA!* moment, which I found myself continuously having when I was insane, and which were very incorrect almost every time. As one quickly notices, the circular nature of such insane "thinking" leads to numerous incorrect assumptions becoming beliefs. These circuitous mental gymnastics is a far cry from the more linear nature of a rational thought process.

Instead of thinking "if A, then B" my mental illness led me to think "if A and B exist, coincidentally, then I believe Z." It was almost like I was thinking backwards. The effect came before the cause and the belief came before any logical testing of a thought.

Maybe this all sounds completely sane to you. Perhaps you think this way at times too. Did you ever notice you are a psychotic maniac?

Or, maybe this is just as I think it is...quintessential irrationality. Then again, who am I to be so sure?! After all, I am diagnosed by my psychiatrist and by my psychologist as Bipolar and by my counselor as alcoholic.

What really sucks about a serious mental illness diagnosis is the prognosis. There is no "getting over" manic depression, at least not in most people's minds. Like death, a diagnosis of this magnitude leads one to the logical resolution that they are merely sitting around waiting for the inevitable. In the case of mental illness, it is almost always the case that both patient and shrink believe that there is no "cure" for the affliction and this belief naturally begets feeling of being trapped in a terrible predicament. If I am diagnosed Bipolar, then I am sitting around awaiting my readmission to the lockdown facility I was in after I went crazy, because my prognosis states that I have a such and such statistical chance of going insanely manic again.

The real stink of a mental illness' prognosis comes from the discrepancies between mental illness and a definitively terminal condition, such as the final stages of cancer. You see, when you are destined to die in at most 6 months, you have free reign to do as you please, you can travel the world, quit your job and/or give everything to your favorite charity. However, when you are only destined to go crazy again, you are well advised NOT to live even one step out of the box, because that would PROVE that you were insane again. I in no way am jealous of those who have cancer, don't get me wrong. But I do envy the ability of others to live a little more carefree than I am allowed to.

Speaking of envy, I am jealous of those who do wrong and get blamed for it. This sounds weird, even as I write it, but I am really finding it unfair that people who are

mentally affected are chided and given shit for the bad luck of the genetic draw. It sure as hell is not my fault that my aunt has schizophrenia so I have a greater percentage chance of developing a mental disorder. And it definitely doesn't make me a morally bad person that the random synapses that chose to fire in my brain led me to say and or do things that were inappropriate to onlookers but which seemed very apt to me, given the delusional infrastructure in which I was thinking and acting. I guess this is why I am writing about all this, despite the embarrassment that I feel every time I think about other people learning of my illness. I am writing because I want to give a little insight into how it feels to think insanely and more importantly how hurtful it is to make jokes at a sick individual's expense. I doubt very highly that some of the people who have joked at me and who have probably made remarks behind my back would consider themselves half-morally decent if they had made similar remarks about a cancer survivor.

But now I have jumped onto a soap box, haven't I? I am considering deleting that last paragraph of two, but I guess I should leave them, despite how politically incorrect and whiny they sound. Back to my main point...

I am bipolar. I can be and think and act inappropriately at times. During my initial delusional "break" from reality (or psychotic episode), I happened upon a severe car accident. An old man had rammed his car through a farmer's market near the 3rd Street Promenade in Santa Monica, California. The large amount of blood and chaos that ensued made me think I had happened upon a movie set, which is something that you somewhat become accustomed to in Los Angeles. The more of the trauma and carnage that I witnessed, the more inappropriately I began to think: "I need to do something." However, as opposed to a rational onlooker of this type of accident, I wasn't trying to think of ways that I could help. Instead I was putting the mental cart before the horse. I began to believe and know that this surreal accident was a prank put on by members of my fraternity. I surmised that they were trying to teach me a lesson about the malificent nature of my drunk driving, since around this time I was a full-blown alcoholic who drunk drove way too drunkenly and way way too often.

My irrational thinking didn't just stop there, however. I threw in a large dose of my competitive nature and my incorrect desire to never be wrong. I began to devise a plan to one-up the pranksters behind this scene in order to show that not only did I learn my lesson, but more importantly to me to teach the pranksters a lesson of their own!

I wasn't sure how far the reach of the pranksters was, so I decided to test the surrounding shops to see exactly how far this prank extended. I went into a McDonald's

and saw the security cameras. Surely the pranksters had access to these cameras' feeds. I ordered a Big Mac, friends and a Coca Cola, all supersized, paid for the meal and promptly left without the food. The plan I was developing as I went, ad hoc, was to continually throw the pranksters off of my trail. Obviously, this was a large production and Ashton Kutcher, my frat brothers and anyone else on the prank wouldn't have gone to so much trouble to merely let me walk away with the big AH HA moment of Punking me...so I knew I had a little bit of play in my proverbial leash in terms of how far I moved away, stringing the pranksters along the whole time.

As I left the McDonald's and fell back among the mob of onlookers on the Promenade, I realized the general flow of foot traffic was back towards the scene of the "accident." Perhaps the producers, I mean pranksters, had planned ahead for me leaving the scene and were ready for this possibility. They were using the flow of the crowd to herd me back to the Punking. I quickly began walking against the stream of extras and cast members. I ducked into a flower shop, grabbed a dozen roses and headed back to the street. Now, I was going to have fun with these pranksters...if only I could turn this terrible, tragic scene into a romantic comedy...

I spotted a voluptuous young lady with a beautiful face and tears streaming down her cheeks. I approached this woman, handed her the flowers and flashed my smile. More tears came out of her eyes and she could barely manage a nod to acknowledge my deed. She was definitely in on it too and what an actress, being able to force tears so fast and hard! I needed to find a place where the pranksters didn't have such control over everyone. How did they know, anyway, where I was heading. Then I KNEW how they knew where I was planning on going: my eyes! My eyes were giving me away! I needed a hat or, even better, dark sunglasses. I probably needed a disguise, too...

Luckily, 3rd Street Promenade is home to a multitude of clothing and apparel stores. I skirted into the Sunglass Hut and found the biggest, darkest sunglasses I could...but wait, I thought, they'll be looking for me in a disguise. And then I realized that Sunglass Hut had security cameras, too. Most likely so did all the stores around that shopping plaza...I had no way out!

So, I told myself, if I was had and if they were going to give me my comeuppance and teach me my lesson, I was going to go out with a Bang! I quickly thought through the best AH HA moments of my favorite movies...Gladiator was so powerful because the protagonist died saving Rome...Braveheart passed, too, with Wallace's amazing "FREEEDOMMMMM" roar... no, no, I decided, I don't want to DIE to turn this prank on its head! What about Jerry McGuire! I could have a Rod Tidwell moment...dancing and

celebrating after catching the game-winning TD!! I kept the sunglasses over my eyes and headed back to the Promenade, ready to dance my way to fame...

The really interesting part of the 3rd Street Promenade in Santa Monica is just how many weird people there are intermixed with the shoppers and sightseers. My dancing and singing, despite being a bit bizarre, probably fit right in with these weirdos, street performers and indigents. To the normal shopper, I was probably trying to get attention because of some unfulfilled childhood dream, or I was maybe just trying to earn a few bucks dancing and singing for their entertainment. But, to me, my dancing was the dance of a genius who had figured out that he was being pranked and Punk'd BEFORE they had completed the prank!

I knew that my dancing was gloriously confusing and confounding the producers...I must have danced for forty minutes, all the while singing in chorus with the ambulance and police car sirens. Then I realized what I had done...I had stolen sunglasses that I had not paid for! DAMNIT, I knew that the pranksters could now turn that on me. I could rightfully be put in jail for stealing, even if I was stealing from my own set! I had to give back the sunglasses before the pranksters and producers caught me!

As I reentered Sunglass Hut, and placed my chosen sunglasses back in their display case, another opportune thought hit me: Shawshank! Yes, although I didn't want to go out like Braveheart or Gladiator, and despite my best Rod Tidwell impersonation (which for some reason incorporated all the famous lines of Jerry McGuire - "HELP ME, HELP YOU", "the human head weighs eight pounds", and, of course "you complete me") not ceasing the scene outside, I decided I could recreate Shawshank Redemption's big climax.

In a jiffy, my shirt and shoes were off, leaving only my board shorts, and I exited Sunglass Hut, and was back, again, on the Promenade. I began crawling through the grass and even into and out of the fountains in the middle of the plaza. After crawling for about one-hundred yards...I stood up and did my boldest Tim Robbins impersonation. Both hands stretched out to the sky and my head slowly lifted toward the heavens. I felt so in-character that I would later state that it had rained that day in Santa Monica, when it truly had not. This was not only a slick play on words, but it would also come to be a point of contention with my psychiatrist as to whether I had in fact hallucinated during this episode...

I must've stood there, in my glorious and probably obnoxious pose for a full ten minutes. I had to give the producers time to capture my proposed ending to the prank from every

angle, after all, didn't I?

But this game of cat and mouse wouldn't end as the mouse had hoped. I was not going to get my way that day...and as soon as I had realized this fact, I booked it for my shirt and shoes in Sunglass Hut, put them on and was headed back to my truck. I wasn't going to play this game anymore, here at the Promenade. So what? Maybe Ashton Kutcher and his producers had paid tons of money on this set and set up...probably my fraternity was expending tons of energy to prank me. I knew though, that I had to get back to my house and to devise a better way to end this game of theirs.

As my I pulled my truck onto the Eastbound 10, I was fairly certain I saw a green van with a camera trying to get one last shot of me fleeing the scene...

You see how craziness thinks and looks? These thoughts and actions were not normal, for the most part, because they were all based on a belief and premise that was incorrect and irrational. The thought that the accident scene at the farmer's market was a movie or television set was wrong and led me to think other irrational thoughts and to act crazily. But, as I sit here today, reflecting on my previous thoughts and actions I can learn from them what is and what is not acceptable to think and do! This is where my hope lies: in the fact that we, as humans, can learn from our mistakes! Building upon successes and minimizing the repetition of mistakes allows us to improve our own situations, as well as the situations of others...it is due to our ability to learn that I am certain that we can improve the circumstances surrounding mental illness!

Dear Doctors,

Have you ever been called “highly functional?” Would you like to be called that? Think about it for a moment...

I have been called highly functional, numerous times, in the recent years after my episode. I’m not even sure what these two words mean, when put together like that, but I know for sure that I don’t care much to be called them.

I guess those who use the wording highly functional think that I am broken. I guess if you lose an arm or leg you can play sports, to a degree, and be highly functional in that sport *considering* your injury. This isn’t my arm or leg we are talking about, however. We’re calling my *brain* highly functional. The very part of me that makes up the most of what I consider to be my *self* is being called into question. This is like telling someone that their soul is pretty good. Or that they are, on the whole, a highly functional person. Try that one on for size. Look in the mirror and repeat slowly to yourself, “I am a highly functional person.” Feels good, doesn’t it?

So, for being broken as a human, I guess I need to be repaired. That’s where the medications I take come in, kind of. They don’t really *repair* my broken brain and self. But they mask the schism between what is real and what is delusional.

I also cannot help but think that the term highly functional is said as some sort of compliment. Just like you pat the stupid kid on the head for trying his best, maybe my therapists are lauding the effort of my mentally incompetent self.

On a similar note, who determines the best someone else can be? Who has the verbal control over anyone’s self-actualization? Is it the patient’s doctor? Or is it the family member who has been given power of attorney over the will and last requests? What gives anyone the right to declare that I am at my best and that I am functioning as highly as I can or ever will?

It’s my choice to select a quasi-suicide of self-improvement by saying that I have reached my pinnacle, not yours...

I could end this all there. Writing a letter this cynical is probably not going to get me very far with any of you, however. Yes, I sometimes feel sorry for myself. Sure I can often find reasons to be angry with where my life currently is. But that is not the end of the story.

The fact is that I am grateful to you for all that you have taught me and all that you have had to put up with. And, as much as I had always wished to not ever need medications...I am thankful for the safety net they provide.

So, now that I have gotten out my rant, I guess the next question is what can I do to become more highly functional? I mean this from a personal growth perspective and a professional one...how can I leverage my experience and talents to achieve more and more and to be a true man for others?

I could live life as if these episodes never happened! I could continue pursuing the passing of the CA Bar and the practice of law and I could sublimate my experiences and emotions about those experiences through poetry and narrative. I could forge a mask so sturdy and full of smiles upon my face that no one ever would know what I have been through...

or,

I could share my story...Yes, I think that I should share my story! Whether I am called highly functional, deranged or what have you, what really matters is if I can help other people who suffer from mental illness find solace in our commonalities and find strength and guidance to beat their prognoses. But, I cannot do this alone. I need you, and others like you to share my story, too! After all, we're all in this together, right?

Dear Friend,

You're probably wanting to turn my words against me, now, to give me a proverbial dose of my own medicine, huh? If it were even somewhat apropos, I bet you would throw in my face my comment that you "used to have a great life." I mean, look at *me* now and say that and it would be only fair. "You used to have a great life." And you'd be right. I sure did have it made before that final year at Southern Cal...

I say it would only be fair, and I'm right, thanks to the million times that I went for my friends' jugulars when in a heated debate. I guess I hadn't matured enough yet to let things lie. Neither had I learned that devastating someone with an emotional outburst would do more than merely win an argument. Such open call outs often leave lasting impressions.

What would I take back, if I could take back things and relive the past in a different way? A very loud part of my brain screams, "Don't take anything back...the past is the past and you should move past it...you're better for it...it made you who you are today!" And, yet, regret remains. Because I essentially severed ties with people to whom I had grown so close. How many friends have I put off this way? Too many. How many times have I lashed out and ripped someone else's sense of self or dignity right away from them? Countless. What a bunch of shitheads I was...and sometimes continue to be.

I think the beginning of this letter is incorrectly stated. I give you too little credit. You easily could just pick up the phone and chide me, if you so desired. But you haven't and you won't. And, you were there for me. You called my parents. You helped save my life.

I sometimes wish I could explain what was going through my mind that day we went to Will Rogers State Beach and downtown Santa Monica. How could I though, and not seem completely delusional and crazy? Driving across the 10 from Los Angeles to the beach, I wasn't thinking weird thoughts, I was believing them. One minute we were acting out a scene from Good Will Hunting, the next I was informing you of my epiphany related to A Beautiful Mind. How could you have known what to do in those moments? I always have had my off-the-wall ideas and I definitely have continually acted strange, if for nothing more than attention. Most likely you and the other guys just figured I was being my typical jester self, if not for your entertainment then at least for my own.

I used to have a great life, jestering for my friends. It is without doubt that a number of



years back I would think those words and I would reminisce about better times. Times with you and the guys were some of my fondest memories and they were a large part of my motivation to get back to normal. Well, back to normal for me, which isn't saying much, but you understand.

I'm mostly back now. Yeah, I still take my precautionary meds. Yeah, I have been labeled, I mean diagnosed. Yeah, before I ever open my mouth to speak I go through a quick mental check to make sure that I am not and will not sound crazy. And yeah, I *did* used to have a great life. But I have a *better* life now. Crazy or not, ill or not, embarrassed or not, functional or not...I have found a purpose!

If my experiences can prevent others from feeling ashamed about asking for help...if my letters might incite others to seek counseling when times get harsh...if my hopes for more positive outlooks for the mentally ill can stir up more discussion and research on these subjects...if if if. I wish I was saying *when*. Will *if* become *when*? I don't know. And. I hope so.

That hike we took, you and I, wandering through the brush alongside that creek, do you remember that? It was a couple years into my law schooling. Anyway, I remember telling you that I felt like the protagonist in *Flowers for Algernon*. Remember that comment? Well, it was my convoluted way of asking for help. I felt like my brain was rotting again. I felt dumb and inarticulate. I was terrified that I was going crazy again. Here's where I'm going with this: even amidst all the borderline thoughts that I was having at that time, I was able to pull myself together thanks to a few days rest and reflection. This is where my "*if*"s are more than possibilities, they are hopeful potentialities. If...rather, *when* I was able to cognitively balance my thoughts and beliefs and to be able to discern the difference between the two, my reflections led me to hope that this is possible for anyone and everyone, mentally ill or not! Sure, there will be times when people succumb to the tragedy that mental illness can become. And we all have heard these stories way too often. What if people are properly taught about the indicators and early warning signs of mental illness? What if society could let go of the stigma that comes with being labeled crazy?

The brain is a muscle, just like any other muscle in the human body in terms of being able to be strengthened, weakened or even injured. Yet, partially because the brain resonates with such a strong sense of self and identity, and partially because the brain is proactive and not merely reactive, like other organs, and probably for many other more scholarly reasons, when someone injures their brain or develops a brain illness, they are looked at differently than someone who pulls a quadriceps or has heart

problems. Of course, I know the reasons why mentally ill people are treated and thought of differently than other “sick” people. I am just not sure that any of these reasons are completely valid.

I could keep ranting to you, old buddy, but I will stop my whining. I wanted this to be a positive letter. I wanted to make sure to thank you for being there, despite what others may think or say about me. I hope you know how much your continued friendship means to me. And I cannot wait until all these “*if*”s mature into the “*when*”s that they can and should become.

Dear Me,

So they say that there is no such thing as a cure for a defective mind. Doctors have told me that the best we can hope for is to remain in remission, not quite the prognosis one hopes for after developing such a serious illness. I think they are wrong. And, I have to think this way, otherwise what is the point of waking up in the morning?

Just as a series of terrible events led to my disease and diagnosis, why can't a lifetime of focused effort reverse this diagnosis? If my prognosis is to never improve, then I might as well give up. However, if I never give up and never fall back into that hell that is called insanity, can I improve my prognosis?

Perhaps the actual prognosis means as little to me as does the diagnosis. Yes, it is important to have a correct diagnosis to know what I am up against. So, too, it stands to reason that having an accurate prognosis makes for a clearer idea of where I am headed. However, crazy is as crazy does. So then, sane must be as sane does. What I mean by this is that if I act crazy, I will be labeled and diagnosed as such. More excitingly, the opposite holds true, too! If I act sane, whether I am crazy or not begins to matter less since you are the culmination of your actions. In law, there is no way to punish an illegal thought. There are only consequences for illegal actions. So, following the law's line of reasoning, if I never act crazy or demented again, I should not be subjected to being called crazy or demented again.

After all of this thought, I am now certain of what my life goal should be. I will strive to act as rationally as possible, henceforth. This will be how I test both myself and my prognosis. If I start to act illogically or goofily without intending to act this way, then I will know that something is amiss. If something is going wrong with my actions and intentions, then it probably can be cured by a tweaking of my medications and with a larger amount of rest.

As I think through this process we call life, and especially as I try to plan where I am headed in my personal journey of life, I can't help but see so many "if"s turning into "when"s. If I take my prescribed medications is no longer a question, but rather is now a definite. If I act sanely has become when I act sanely. If my diagnosis leads to an everlasting and static prognosis, then surely I must strive on until a time when my prognosis can release me of my diagnosis.

With every sane thought and action, I am eroding the stereotype of mental illness, both external and that which I feared so long ago, internally. I used to wonder if I would ever

have the courage to share my story with others. Now I will...