

My Fathers Keeper

[A Personal Memoir of a Family Member of the Mentally Ill]

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Diagnosis – schizophrenia; prognosis...chaos.

This illness, like few others, breeds isolation; not just for the patient but for family members as well. Even though it is now more easily identified and diagnosed, there is still a stigma attached to schizophrenia that makes it a disease no one wants to talk about, think about, or be associated with. People in society tend to shy away from others who have permanent illness, and more so from the mentally ill. It is not because we do not share each other's pain; after all everyone has known someone who has had a terrible illness. But no one wants to be reminded of how fragile we all really are and of the fact that we only have so much power over the direction of our lives.

Our mind makes us individual. It is what sets us apart from millions of other people who share our physical traits. It allows us to form specific opinions and to have our own individual thought patterns. For some, all of that is taken away. Mental illness is often devastating and frightening. Fear is its most powerful by-product. People are afraid of the unknown and the abnormal. It is why they whisper when they speak of it. *Schizophrenia*. The word itself conjures up visions of wild eyed, violent folk, screaming

uncontrollably; unable to act “normal” like the rest of us. Fear of the unknown; fear that it can strike anyone, no matter what the social status or race; fear that a mind can be taken over without warning; these are all reasons why mental illness is kept hidden in the dark recesses of society. It can strike anyone, and people know that.

I was about eight years old when my father was diagnosed with schizophrenia. I have a very clear memory of the day my mother told me. “Baby, your daddy is sick. But don’t worry, the doctors are making him better”.

The symptoms may have been apparent for years but I didn’t notice it until that year before he was admitted to the hospital. The year he returned from Vietnam. My mother must have noticed the changes in him but she was so good at shielding me from it that when I noticed, it was as if it had happened overnight.

A man, once boisterous, was now quiet; who once laughed with utter abandon, now sat still and unsmiling. He would sit at the dining room table straight as a rod, staring into space for hours. At first, when I tried to talk to him he would touch my hair gently with a far away look in his eyes.

Later, even this small loving act disappeared as he sank deeper into his psychosis. The father I had once known was gone forever and replaced by a

stranger. I tried to talk to him but he either didn't, or couldn't hear me. I wondered what he was thinking about at those times.

It seemed he was lost in some far away place that my mother and I couldn't visit. I used to think maybe he had another family in his thoughts, maybe another little girl was eagerly showing him her report card, waiting for that huge smile and the bear hug that usually followed.

I know now that he was in his own personal hell and couldn't find his way out. A world of unknown voices, all clamoring to be heard at once, family members who had turned to strangers, strangers who turned instantly to enemies...

I could only imagine what my father was going through at this time but I had intimate knowledge of my mother's pain. We were both afraid - of him and for him. We were too worried to leave him alone, but often too afraid to stay in the same room with him. It was a painful double-edged sword; being afraid of someone you loved. There never seemed to be enough room in the house for all us; me, my mother, my father and the voices that were his constant companions. We never knew what might set him off but we tried our best not to cross that invisible barrier, because doing so might cause a rant that would last for hours. Most of my father's anger was internalized, geared towards these visitors that we could not see, but there was always a

chance that he would hurt himself in the process of trying to quiet the demons lurking in his world.

With the help of my paternal grandmother, my father was finally admitted to a veteran's hospital. She was a tough lady, my grandmother; a businesswoman in her own right before it was acceptable to be one. After years of living this turbulent lifestyle, the two strongest women I have ever known joined forces and were finally able to get my father admitted to the hospital in hopes that he could get the help he needed.

Two years and numerous test medications later, my father was released to us diagnosed as a schizophrenic, (stable but not cured), with an honorable medical discharge after nineteen and a half years in the Air Force.

The biggest hurdle in dealing with the illness is that schizophrenics do not think they need help. Can you see the problem? You are asking a mentally ill person to understand that they are mentally ill and need help. This is not an easy task and is almost insurmountable when you are dealing with an adult. Many times, even if they realize they are ill, the medication is so destructive they don't want to take it. They would rather stay "clearheaded" and "crazy" rather than be "drugged" and "sane". Our greatest fear in the beginning was that he wouldn't take the medicine prescribed. The angels must have been

smiling down on us because this was never a problem. Thus, some vestige of normalcy could prevail.

And prevail it did, but not the way you might expect. Though things were better, much better than before, they would never be the same. He laughed again but was no longer the life of the party. He drove to the corner store everyday, but couldn't drive on the highway, and never more than 10 minutes from the house. He would do chores around the house, but would no longer be able to work outside of the home. He was a shell of what he had once been but, like starving people given crumbs, we were grateful for what we had, because he was smiling again and we had hope.

Thirty years since that first diagnosis, I now thank my lucky stars that I have a father who is sweet and kind and always smiling. I thank God that my father is still with me, and I always try to remember that as long as I live, no man will ever love me as he does. I am torn between two thoughts – happiness, that we have made it this far and sadness, that my mother is no longer here to complete the picture. She died seven years ago and now, the torch has been passed to me. I accept the challenge, as it is one that I have had since I was nine - To look after my father. I must confess that I occasionally feel the inner turmoil of anger mixed with guilt – anger at the unfairness of life and guilt that I still have not learned to completely count

my blessings. For I know that whatever my mother or I have been through, my father has been through so much more. He has never been vanquished; he has managed to quiet his demons and for this, he is my hero.

It is not an easy road we have traveled, my father and I, but we have traveled it the best way we could – with dignity and with love. That is the best that any of us can hope to do.