

**Through the Open Door:
A Bipolar Attorney Talks Mania,
Recovery, and Heaven on Earth**

**by
HILARY
MARTIN
CHANEY**

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Talks Mania, Recovery, and Heaven on Earth**

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Foreword

I am a Social Security Disability attorney; I represent those who are applying to receive benefits for a disability and I just won another Bipolar Disorder case for the dearest and most deserving of clients. I have a soft spot for her myriad problems: psychotic breaks, commitment to psychiatric hospitals, hallucinations, deep depression, panic attacks ... you name it. I felt such gratitude when I won the case, knowing she would have some modicum of assistance as she wades through her mental illness morass.

For so many clients, SSD benefits just mean they can get health insurance and medications. For some it means they can just buy diapers for a baby. For all it means they can deal with their illness in a healthy way and get the professional treatment they need, the same type of treatment that could prevent the next tragic school shooting. Understanding the nature of the illness from the inside is what will solve our mental health crisis. With dedicated provision of mental health services for all, and with understanding from those surrounding the sufferers, we can beat this thing. I know we can.

The day I won my first Bipolar case was a glorious day, one when I felt proud of my profession as an attorney and lucky that I have found somewhere to

do good while living with a mental illness.

Yes, living with a mental illness. I am 37 and was diagnosed with Bipolar Disorder in February 2000. Here's my story.

Part I: My Bipolar Journey

“There are two types of people in the world: Those who conform themselves to fit into the world, and those who change the world to suit them. Be the latter.”

- Phil McMath

Chapter 1: The Storm Descends

I had always been a go-getter, an overachiever. In high school I was a three-sport athlete at Norfolk Academy and a straight A student. I was accepted to Princeton, Duke, and the University of Virginia. I went to Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Virginia, on a full academic scholarship and I captained the volleyball team for two years, earning all-conference honors all four years. The future could not have been brighter.

I graduated from W&L in 1998 and started working at Capital One in Richmond, Virginia, as a project manager. I dove in to all the perks of being a grown-up. Got my own apartment, bought a car, found a group of friends and had a good time with the nice salary I was drawing.

Then life started to speed up. I started to party too hard and stay up too late. I spent a bit too much money. By New Year's 1999 I had started the skid that follows a flight too close to the sun. I was stressed about my job because I didn't know how I could keep waking up every day in the movie Office Space. I was stressed about my boyfriend, Sean, because he did not have a degree or a full-time job. I was in a big city that had a lot to offer those who grew up in its gentrified embrace, but that sniffed superiorly at outsiders. The stress from being

unhappy seemed to swallow me whole.

I must note here than although Sean did not prove to be the right guy for me, he did very admirably, considering he was riding shotgun on the Bipolar roller coaster. He took care to get me help when I could not help myself, and I am forever grateful for that.

Sean's family took me out to dinner on Valentine's Day 2000, a Monday. If you're like me and a million others, Valentine's Day has generally been a disappointment ... a day bloated with chocolate and expectations. For a day when we honor perfect love, it seems a lot more like an annual reminder that our love is not perfect enough.

On that Monday night, I ordered my favorite Italian dish and engaged in the usual small talk, but found I had no appetite. I was not nauseous, but nervous. That night I could not sleep. I couldn't explain what was brewing in me, but something stormed all right.

Chapter 2: Spinning

The next day I went to work. I was distracted, and again I could not eat. I was tired, but energized. I felt sharp, wired, caffeinated. As I lay down to bed that night, I wondered where my mind was going. It felt unharnessed, like it had jumped its tracks. Racing thoughts ... spinning gears ... the documents in my brain's hard drive were shuffling and re-shuffling like a deck of cards.

I went to work on Wednesday having had no sleep since Sunday night. I kept reassuring myself that it was no big deal. People operated on little or no sleep all the time, right?

I actually felt pretty effective at work. Multitasking came naturally. At 2:45 a.m. that day, I got into my car and drove to Capital One and worked for a good two hours at a frantic pace. That was the last I saw of Capital One for over a month.

On Thursday, which marked four days with no sleep, I began having bizarre thoughts. I felt like I was very close to Jesus and God. In my sleep-deprived state, I wondered if perhaps I was Jesus? Surely the lack of sleep was playing tricks on me. How crazy it sounds to say you feel like Jesus! But to be sure, I felt a huge capacity for love, and a tremendous empathy for those around me. All the while, my mind continued

to race and leap and somersault in a hundred different directions.

I watched the program *Later Today* with Florence Henderson. She interviewed Michael Clarke Duncan, who was starring in *The Green Mile*. He played a character that could heal people by touch. Michael said he felt lucky to play someone who felt like Jesus. He felt a gift, and a currency flowing through him, as he inhabited the role. I thought, Bingo! Someone feels just like I do! This realization calmed me down and revved me up at the same time.

On Thursday, Sean sent me to my doctor who gave me a sleeping pill, which didn't work at all. Later that day, we called my parents and told them to come home early from their vacation. I only had a few minutes on the phone with my mom because she was on a cruise ship in the Caribbean, but I said time and again, "Mom, do you trust me? Do you REALLY trust me?" She was very concerned and only wanted to comfort me as best she could, so she lied and said, "Yes." Trust became a central theme in my relationship with my mom over the next decade. She tells me that when she thought there was no way to escape the Bipolar vice grip, God would say "Trust in me, Heather." Over the years that turned into God saying to her, "Trust in Hilary," and she started to believe in it.

I kept trying to eat, to no avail. I couldn't even

swallow. But boy could I talk! My speech was stream of consciousness. I felt I could not talk fast enough to keep up with the rapid firing pistons in my brain.

By Friday morning I was terrified. Five days and nights without sleeping or eating. "Could you die from insomnia?" I wondered.

Chapter 3: Picture Perfect

The next 48 hours are blurry and the chronology is inexact for me. I know on Friday afternoon we packed up my Jeep and Sean drove me from Richmond down to my hometown of Norfolk. We thought about checking me into Norfolk General Hospital, and I tried to direct him to the hospital, but I was a babbling, dehydrated, frenzied mess so we got lost.

I was still feeling overhyped and excited. Though seriously impaired, my brain seemed to be revealing things to me. Looking back, it smacked of hallucination, but to me it seemed I was getting a picture of an altered reality, or of a different dimension, or of a future time. Or all three.

Sean drove me past some familiar landmarks. I was so tired that I could barely peek out from under my heavy lids, but I do remember a vision that shocked the hell out of me ... it was a picture of Heaven on Earth.

We passed a public housing project on the right, which had always looked run-down and sad. The bricks were always mildewed, the grass was more dirt than grass, and the people were weary and poor. There were never any children outside.

The vivid scene I saw when we drove past the

projects that Friday in February was simply spectacular. I saw beautifully manicured lawns, and graceful trees, and bright flowerboxes. There were fluttering curtains and freshly painted doors, and lots and lots of kids laughing and playing in the yards. The sun shone warmly and the sky was a pure and perfect Carolina blue. And the birds! There were brilliant songbirds of every color soaring and sailing and singing in the bright sun. And there were happy mamas and proud papas and friendly neighbors. There was lots of smiling and joking and carrying on. The kids in particular waved and beamed as we drove by, and it was as if they were saying, "Come on over, join the party!" Because it looked like the happiest place I had ever seen I wanted to be with them. To this day, even when I'm not manic, I still think that was my view of the future for our world.

But we had no time to join the picture perfect tableau. I was about to jump out of my skin. I was sure I was dying. For some reason we passed up the hospital and instead checked into the downtown Marriott. I didn't flinch at the cost. I just whipped out my credit card and checked in that afternoon.

The hotel room yielded no sleep. So we went home to my parents' house.

We went up to the guest bedroom and I fell onto the bed, beyond exhausted.