

In the year of 2019 I experienced personal tragedy when I lost my partner Dylan to suicide. I felt helpless, uninformed, and quite frankly unsupported by a system that in my eyes is dysfunctional to put it mildly. In order to find closure and begin my own healing process I started to research the topic of mental health, and decided to educate myself as best I could. I just needed to understand. A few months later William Wallace reached out to me. This is not his actual name, but a name he chose for this article to protect his privacy. I sincerely believe in synchronicity. I believe we meet everyone for a reason. Initially I was unsure of the reason for William entering my life, but it quickly became clear. Sometimes we get lucky and understand the reason behind certain occurrences. Other times we walk in the dark, and will continue to face the same challenges or encounters, until we learn our lesson, or in my case fulfill our duty. I would like to share a bit about William's story today. Partially because he has helped me understand mental illness better, and therefore help me heal, and because I believe his story needs to be told. I will get into more detail in following articles. William's life has become very complex at a very young age.

When William was 10, he started seeing a counsellor after having witnessed an attempted suicide by his father. At the age of 17, after his father committed suicide, he was diagnosed with bipolar disorder and generalized anxiety disorder, and was prescribed abilify and vistaril. Some of the known side effects of these antipsychotics are restlessness, insomnia, anxiety, and hallucinations. After three years of therapy, and the use of various types of medications, William was admitted into an inpatient mental health facility, following an incident where he cut his wrists with a razor blade. There he was diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder and poly substance abuse. A few months prior to this diagnosis a MRI brain scan revealed a lesion in his frontal lobe. During his time at the mental health facility, William was put on haldol and some other medications. He described to me the horrible results of the treatment, and how it made him feel. He said there were times when he couldn't stop shaking, and felt the constant need to rub his legs. He felt like he was going crazy. All he wanted was to get out of there. According to him it was nothing short of hell. To his relief, he was transferred back to prison. Following a tragic incident, William was sentenced to life in prison at the age of 22.

William is now 26 years of age, and has taught me more about mental illness and the effect it has on our physical as well as emotional well-being, than I ever learned from any book, internet source or our health system. Following are some insights William has shared with me in our conversations over the last two months.

I asked William, what his advice to himself would be, if he was able to go back in time with his current knowledge: "If I could go back and give some advice to my younger self, it would be wisdom in the form of self awareness. I would tell him that the imbalance inside of him, the

problems he experiences, and the corruption he sees is all within himself. I'd tell him that he possesses the ability to fix himself, without the use of drugs (prescription or illicit), without anything other than applied knowledge and timeless wisdom, his world can go from broken and delusional, to whole and centered. Would he believe me? I don't know. But if I could tell him I would have to try."

When William and I first started talking he said something to me that really struck a chord. He said that he never felt as free in the world outside, as he feels now when locked away. Even though he lives in a "survival based environment, with little structure enforced by staff; in an environment full of predators with no authority to keep them in check; where basic physical and mental well-being is at stake, and oftentimes compromised", he managed to achieve the seemingly impossible. William decided to stop being a victim, and instead focus on self-growth, hoping to find the truth and meaning of life he had been lacking all this time. With his words "I sought the truth. I sought what was real, because nothing fake could really sustain me. The hollow feeling of life had plagued me for so much of my life, and led me to destructive behaviour to cover up that hollowness. It was time for me to quit running from that excruciating feeling from within, time to quit trying to cover up my symptoms of anxiety, depression, addiction, and get to the root cause of these things."

For anybody who has never dealt with severe depression, or any other form of severe mental illness, it is hard to relate to the extreme feelings, and turmoil within the mind that one experiences. I know I found it difficult to understand what my partner Dylan was going through when getting stuck in a low phase of his condition. I wasn't even aware of it being anything but build-up anger combined with a series of mood swings. Only after Dylan's suicide did it become clear, that he was suffering from mental illness. You can imagine the variety of "what if scenarios" that came to mind. William opened up about the feelings that arise when being at a low point of the disorder. "When depression is severe enough you don't have energy to do basic things like take care of yourself, nor do you see a point in it. If the fundamental life is taken out of existence, experience becomes a desolate, vicious cycle. Inertia is a hell of a thing. When energy gets so low, it is hard to get more of it because everything is working against you. All thoughts are self fulfilling prophecies validating your experience of negativity. All I could see and feel was negativity. All I could do was think - the last thing I wanted to do. My soul felt like it was being suffocated. With this perspective it was very difficult to change; my disposition seemed back by reason and logic. My hell was reinforcing itself."

When William was still in his childhood years, at a time most sensitive to external impressions, his father told him about a vision he had, where the devil tried to make him throw William into a

pond with alligators, when he was just a baby. He told William that he himself would not make it to heaven, because he had committed the unpardonable sin, that he committed blasphemy against the holy ghost of the bible, which would get him a ticket to hell. William However would be granted access to heaven. William says: "This broke my heart because I loved him so much, and I didn't understand why he wasn't going to make it to heaven." They spent many a nights on the floor together, with his father telling him stories. Some days they would be in tears, hugging each other tight, as his father was lamenting the time when he'd be pulled into hell. Massive arguments ensued between his parents. William's mother tried to protect him by stating that his father was delusional. She asked William to stop listening to him. William was confused about which side to take, but at the same time determined to stand by his father. Right around that time William started to withdraw socially, and anxiety became a feeling that was going to take over his life. He started to struggle in school, found it harder to focus, went from one of the more athletic children to having no desire to be physically active. His friendship circle started to shrink. He began to recede into the world of video games where he found stability and release from the dreariness and struggle of real life. His life revolved around the TV, and everything was gauged in relation to it. His main concern became how much time he had to spend on whichever given task, before getting back into his fantasy world, where problems didn't exist.

At the age of 17 William found a new escape in drinking alcohol. When William was 18, a year after his father committed suicide, he got into serious drug usage. He tried just about every drug he could get his hands on. William states: "some of the most serious delusional experiences partially came from using methamphetamine and bath salts. I would often hear people say things, that they couldn't possibly be saying. Yet I would literally hear their voice saying them. Usually it involved some type of violence or plot against me. I became extremely paranoid. I couldn't look people in the eyes or speak properly."

Winning the battle against mental illness is a very long and painful process that takes incredible commitment and self awareness. It means turning your attention inward, and facing the demons that have been buried deep down for a longer period of time. Confronting imbalanced emotions is not an easy task to begin with, but for someone who is dealing with a mental disorder it can be daunting to say the least. For William, who had been avoiding this confrontation as a subconscious defence mechanism, it was the beginning of a journey to freedom. He committed to discover the root of his suffering to find true fulfillment and peace in life. He began to read books on psychology, philosophy, science, history, spirituality, self help, and just about anything else that offered advice on creating balance in life. He was fortunate to share the dorm with someone who practiced meditation, and soon began practicing mindful awareness and more sophisticated forms of introspection himself. When asked about his motivation to make such a drastic change, William said: "what really sparked the process towards balance within self was the realization that I possessed the innate ability to change myself. I initially believed I had no

ability to change, that I had no power over my state of being. With the realization that I could change, instead of feeling powerless against my pain, I knew I had the ability to one day overcome it. It was the spark of energy I needed to get momentum. This belief in eventual victory over my inner struggles was the force which carried me through times of resistance and doubt. Yet this was only the first step. Change is not easy. I had to break years worth of conditioning and ingrained patterns of thinking. Essentially I had to rewire my brain. Dedicated intention is necessary because it is so easy to slip back into old patterns.”

It took William 4 years to get solid footing, and fundamentally change some of his old beliefs. However he began to see significant improvement within months of immersing himself in growth conducive practices. It is a journey that doesn't end, but in order for it to start we have to take the first step. William took that step and has turned around his life. Though still in prison, he has established a life that offers balance and equilibrium. He is enrolled in the Braille program and continues to work on his personal development. He is currently working on his first book, and is hoping to collaborate with universities to make a difference in the field of mental health. One of his dreams is to have a family of his own.

When I asked him why he chose the name William Wallace for this article he said this: “The character William Wallace from the movie Braveheart ignites inspiration on a mythological level. His singular focus toward a noble cause, and his undying identification with freedom, fascinates me. His cause is far from easy and ultimately costs his life. He sacrifices temporal comfort for the bigger picture. Freedom is an intangible asset; one of immeasurable value and in Wallace's eyes it is better to die on a journey of freedom, than live a life of corrupt subordination. His is a story that proclaims the virtue in living a life filled to the brim with deeper purpose.”

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