



The View From My Window

~ a personal journey through mental health

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Chapter 3

For this entry I will be talking mostly about my downfall. I've alluded to it a bit in the past entries but this one will focus on it.

As mentioned by the end of grade ten, I had gone from my highest point in life to my lowest. At the beginning of the year I was just coming off my first competitive kayaking season. Of course I didn't actually do that well performance wise but I was improving at a good rate. I had a bigger social group than in the past, I was in better physical shape than ever and I was doing well in school, all well getting closer to adulthood which I had been planning for so much. Unfortunately, things would fall apart.

Of course, in hindsight, I always had symptoms of an anxiety disorder but grade ten was when they really began to show, still unfortunately they remained undiagnosed for a while. I began having trouble attending school and practice. I always thought it was just from being overworked and physically tired, as I usually did with this type of a problem, I just kept pushing through it with the belief it would pass and only make me better in the long run. School was hard to get to, hard to stay focused in and hard to put in a full effort. I thought this was just because it wasn't overly challenging. Practices were harder to get to and tired me much more than they previously would have. Again, I thought it was just from pushing myself so hard. In reality it was because I was burning a lot of energy just getting out the door and being social, not to mention the physical stress which only made the mental worse.

The first big clue came not long before the Christmas holidays (which is a bit under halfway through the year). I had a day where I was home sick. I had thrown up in the morning and decided it wasn't worth going to school. Again, another missed symptom, as throwing up was from the incredible amount of stress stacking onto me. The body reacts to stress in interesting ways and, in this case, made me throw up as an attempt to show me something was wrong. Understandably I missed that, as these only became clear long afterwards. That day home only made it harder to get back the next day. I went on to miss something like seven of ten days, frequently throwing up and having migraines. Once

again, this seems like a clear and big problem in hindsight but at the time I just thought I had a virus. I didn't even bother going to see a doctor, I just waited for it to pass. After this horrid stretch I was able to return to school and practice normally for about a week and a half, then came the Christmas holidays. A few weeks off was good for me as I got to relax and reset. F

Following the break things were briefly good for a few weeks before the next major sign came. In grade ten, as normal for Ontario students, I had to write the literacy test. I was never one to stress about school work because I had always had a relatively easy time getting good grades. The literacy test however is a requirement for graduation so I couldn't help but get caught up in the pressure of it a bit. (If you're close to taking the literacy test and/or worried about it don't focus on it too much. There are alternative ways to get it such as retaking it in grade eleven. It really isn't worth the worry but I didn't learn about that until later). Anyways I was pretty anxious for the test and when the test day came around, I had what can now be clearly seen as a panic attack. It wasn't my first but it has become the most obvious one of my past and a clear starting point for my downfall. I threw up several times that day, both at home before the school day and at school during bathroom breaks during the test, and had a major migraine. After reading through the test and seeing the questions I realized the test wasn't going to be as hard as I had thought it was going to be.

However, I wasn't able to settle down because I had a new reason to be worried. I've always had below average handwriting for cleanliness and on the day of the test, between a mix of not eating properly (which was a problem for a lot of my journey and to a degree still is), having a headache and being anxious, my arms were shaking. Not just shivering but full out shaking. In order to write, I had to hold my right hand down with my left hand to keep it on the paper. I was confident I had enough correct answers but very worried they wouldn't be able to read my handwriting - if they couldn't read my writing then they wouldn't know the answers were correct and thus I'd fail the test. The potential for that hung over me for several days. Eventually I got passed it because I knew it was too late to change anything but it still stung in the back of my mind. I got my results - not only did I pass but I scored above the average score. I'm not trying to brag but I simply want to show you that you can still trust your mind and self.

As I've mentioned mental illnesses will play tricks on you, make you think things about yourself that aren't true but deep down you're still yourself. You can still trust yourself to be there when you need it and when you're better. Regardless of what mental illness makes you think about yourself it really has no long-term control over you, what you're feeling is real but it will pass, you still get to make the choices on who you want to be when you're past your illness.

Now despite the relative success of passing the literacy test I continued to struggle. I continued to struggle to eat properly. I would frequently only have a large dinner and skip

breakfast and lunch, have headaches and struggle to get to school or practice. It all boiled over as I missed an exam. I wasn't even overly anxious for the exam season, a little bit for the extra marks on the line but not much more than normal because I knew I could get a zero on any of my exams and still pass the class. Unfortunately, my "normal" was still quite anxious but I didn't know that at the time. So, the morning of my final grade ten exam came. I never made it out the door. I threw up that morning and had a very intense panic attack. During the panic attack I called my dad. Thankfully he and my mom were able to alert the school of the problem to avoid me losing marks on it. He had to come home from work and after a few hours of calming down I went in and wrote it past the scheduled time. Interestingly, after that I still attended practice at the canoe club that day. It was another traumatic event that I tried to ignore.

Word had made it around that I missed my exam and a teammate had asked me if everything was all right while we were preparing for practice. I wanted to tell her everything, how I was more scared than I had ever been in my life, how everything was failing around me. All I ended up saying was I was sick, despite how much I wanted to share, to ask for help, I couldn't. I wasn't comfortable putting that much out there and I didn't want to burden her. That was one of the final practices I ever attended, as mentioned I took a week off to try and regroup and haven't been back since. That moment of standing in the hall, wanting to share but being unable to, has been one of the darkest moments of my life. It was when I truly realised, I had a problem and felt truly alone.

Despite this I am doing much better now, my point is no matter how strong you are we all need help and no matter how far you fall there is still hope. I made it out of where I was and you will too.