

“Bipolar disorder can be a great teacher. It’s a **challenge**, but it can set you up to be able to do almost anything else in your life.” – Carrie Fisher

My journey on this rollercoaster of life experiences we call ‘bipolar’ started in early childhood. I have always felt a deep sense of self of isolation, despite being the youngest, care-free and most humorous of sisters in my family. I have had a close group of friends throughout my life but I still felt a sense of loneliness, emptiness and a lack of purpose. I distracted myself somewhat by achieving academically, on the sports field and with music. Music has always been central to my life.

I attended Wits University and in my second year, things began to unravel. I was highly stressed and anxious ALL the time, experienced intense insomnia and all of this over a design project which I convinced myself that I was going to fail. I think I was fearful of the unknown. But these intense feelings manifested into my first fully-fledged panic attack – I was destructive: clawing at my skin, pulling my cuticles, breaking things, screaming. My family had to intervene. And so I was admitted to Flora Clinic in May 2008, given strong sedation and diagnosed with Major Depression and Generalised Anxiety Disorder. I didn’t receive any psychotherapy which I didn’t think too much of at the time. I sat on a hospital bed for three weeks, ingesting antidepressants, barely functional. I needed assistance to bath myself at times, which embarrassed me. My family visited me but I didn’t tell any of my friends that I was in hospital. I guess this was due to the stigma attached to depression and mental health in general. A key trigger for my depression was my mom being diagnosed with early onset dementia at the age of 56. She was a highly successful ophthalmologist working at a Government Hospital and in two private practices (in Alberton and from home in Lenasia). From 2006 – 2009 she steadily deteriorated both cognitively and physically and was forced to take early retirement.

Watching a loved one suffer in such a manner was devastating to me and my family. Within years, my mom lost the ability to drive, write, speak, read and resorted to communicating the way a young baby does. Despite these setbacks, she remained seemingly happy, although I can’t imagine how she felt. Eventually, we had to get a day nurse to look after her as the burden of care giving became too much for us to bear. My mom passed away peacefully in August of 2016 – almost exactly 10 years after first being diagnosed with this terrible affliction.

As for my first bout of depression, I recovered given some time and went back to University in late 2008. Some exams were deferred and I completed my degree in 2010 – top of my class. My fear of failure never manifested. Until August 2013... I had just returned from a life-changing experience at the Earthship Biotecture Academy in Taos, New Mexico – a majestic place where I learned so many new things, made friends with people from different cultures and experienced life to its fullest. In Taos, I slept like a baby, had boundless energy and couldn’t have asked for a better ‘holiday’ from work. I was starting to resent my work because of the politics, bureaucracy and rigidity of the institutional systems. This adventure offered me a chance to escape.

In August 2013, I once again experienced intense insomnia, anxiety and a lack of interest in things that used to please me. I isolated from friends and family and tried to deny the inevitable – a hospitalisation. I landed up in Crescent Clinic – which I thought would save me and allow me to rest and recuperate. But my fears manifested once

again and I was chased by the 'black dog' of major depression. I failed to attend group sessions, stayed in my room most of the day, avoided my psychiatrist and just resisted any form of treatment. I didn't interact with patients – I was basically mute and non-functional. After two weeks of no progress, my Doctor referred me to Tara and I was terrified of being sent to 'that place'. I thought Tara was reserved for the 'crazy' people and I didn't want to admit that I actually needed long-term care as my doctor advised.

There was a three week waiting list for Tara and so my sister and her husband offered to accommodate me during that time. This time was very tough on her and her relationship with her husband. I would repeat the same things over and over and just resisted going to Tara. I stayed in bed most of the day, thoughts ruminating in my head.

Finally, the day came when I arrived at Tara, Ward 6. And the first person I saw was you, Tasha, and I was in shock. I couldn't believe that you were in Tara. I was embarrassed and just wanted to disappear. As you know, I deteriorated further after I got admitted. I was chased by fears that I would never return to work, that I would be institutionalised forever and that I would be sent to Sterkfontein. All of these fears were irrational but as you know, depression doesn't follow any form of logic. I was on auto-pilot and devoid of emotions. It was like an out-of-body experience for me. You and other patients tried to reach out to me and I just wouldn't let anyone in.

I am deeply sorry for behaving in such a way. I now realise that it takes more courage to ask for help from others than to pretend to be strong. You have remained a role model to me and I am deeply grateful for that. I will always remember your tenacity, courage and grit and your music will continue to inspire me. Thank you for that!

After being on a cocktail of antidepressants, sleeping meds, etc for eight months and with no progress, I was sent for a CT scan and subsequently a MRI scan (a frightening experience). I was diagnosed with Mesial Temporal Sclerosis, or scarring on the brain with no apparent cause and which supposedly causes mood and memory problems. This diagnosis (which proved to be a misdiagnosis in the end) shook my family and any hopes of recovery faded for me. I felt deeper into the depression and didn't see any way out of this pit. My Psychiatrist pushed for ECT treatment, which I vehemently opposed (as did my family). And on the eve of Thursday 27th March 2014, I had an epiphany of sorts. I told myself I can't do this anymore and that when I wake up the following morning, I will be healed of my depression. And the following morning, I woke up and miraculously, I was not depressed anymore. I don't know if this was a God moment or if it was a combination of medication and prayers from my loved ones. Whatever it was, it saved me.

I was a completely different person. I had energy, light, was all-smiles and was truly happy for the first time in my life. The Doctors and nurses couldn't believe what they were witnessing. My family and friends were relieved. I was relieved. I celebrated my birthday on the 30th of March and went for a haircut and shopped for new clothes. Everything was falling back into place – I reconnected with friends and colleagues, started running daily and started listening to music again – which is a lifeline for me – and I enjoyed living in the present.

I don't know what caused this shift in mood – and most likely it was the antidepressants that tipped me into hypomania and no-one was aware of this. I returned to work in June 2014 and felt productive again. I met many new friends due to the Earthship network

and I made plans to start a business together with one of my new friends. We went to look for land to purchase so that we could build an eco-community. Things were moving so fast but I was optimistic and energised by these plans! I travelled to Bloemfontein to volunteer at an Orphanage and help build a cultural centre using Earthship techniques. Each day kept getting better and better. I only felt the need to sleep 2-3 hours a night. I was overwhelmed with joy, fulfilment and peace. Nothing could go wrong.

I also fell in love for the first time. I thought I would marry this man. The feelings were so intense but I had just met him. Things moved pretty quickly but in the end didn't work out. He wasn't serious about our relationship and was seeing other girls and didn't tell me. This really hurt me when I found out. At the same time, I lost my boss to an aggressive brain tumour –which was devastating. The combination of these feelings may have tipped me into full-on mania in early January 2015.

My therapist at the time alluded to me being bipolar but I was defensive and refused to believe her. I was almost arrested by the police on two occasions – for doing nothing wrong but by being at the wrong place at the wrong time. They assumed that I was drunk when I was not and it didn't help that I was argumentative. I am lucky that they didn't arrest me.

The breaking point came when I allowed a fellow patient at Tara - and someone who I thought was a friend - to stay at my apartment. She claimed to be homeless at the time and had nowhere to stay. In the hopes of being a saviour, I allowed her to stay at my flat with me but I didn't know she was off her meds and would be a problem. One night at a public art gallery event, she had an argument with me and was in the middle of a manic episode (she also has Borderline Personality Disorder) and was screaming at the top of her lungs (above the decibel range of the live DJ) saying how sick I was and that I needed to be admitted to hospital again. She proceeded to embarrass me in front of my friends and did not relent in hurling insults at me throughout the night. We arrived back at my flat and she continued to trash-talk me. I decided to kick her out of my flat – and so at 3 am in the morning I drove to Pretoria. This experience was the most traumatic thing I have ever encountered. She went from praising me to insulting me in minutes – a symptom of her erratic train of thought and emotions – and we very well could have easily had a car accident. I drove to the Gautrain train station and made a statement to the Police officials there because she refused to leave my car. She repeatedly told me I would lose my job and the police were not very helpful in calming her (or myself for that matter). Eventually, fifteen minutes before my work commenced that morning, she agreed to leave the car. I drove to work - with absolutely no sleep, adrenaline still pumping and basically collapsed. My colleagues were concerned and asked my sister to pick me up from work. My car was on the verge of a breakdown (the breaks were failing), unbeknown to me. So my life really was in danger that night!

From then on, things started falling apart. I would arrive late to work, be restless, argumentative, overly emotional, over-talkative and just plain unproductive. I would post excessively on social media, send friends countless whatsapps at all hours of the day. I knew no boundaries. I had no filter. I argued with family especially my dad to the point where he ended up in tears. My colleagues raised concerns but I brushed them aside. I had an intense desire to help poor people, some of whom I befriended. I had a business plan/idea that was sparked in the parking lot while I was on a lunch break. I only returned to work 3 hours later instead of the usual half an hour break. I was consumed with inspiration over this idea and it revolved around building an eco-community and music school.

Within one week of me having this brainwave, I was involuntarily admitted to Ward 8 by my Psychiatrist and diagnosed with Bipolar 1. I remained in Ward 8 for 4 months and was discharged in June 2015. I was put on 1000mg of Lithium which stabilised my mood but after a while it caused me to fall into a depression once again. I just didn't agree with Lithium. To compound my worries, I was retrenched by my company (the CSIR) in 2017 because my "research interests didn't match those of the group". But I had a strong feeling they were discriminating against me because I have Bipolar. I felt like a failure and thought I would never recover from this. I had suicidal thoughts, stopped taking my meds and just wished I could not exist. Towards the end of 2018, I had shortness of breath and went to several doctors and was misdiagnosed before collapsing (thankfully at my dad's house) and was admitted to Lenmed private clinic. I had severe pneumonia in both lungs with septicaemia. I was delirious – partly due to the pneumonia but also because of the lack of lithium in my system. I stayed in ICU for 20 days in a critical condition. I had visions of heaven and visions too of a fiery hell – where my life as I knew it was coming to an end. I saw aliens, time-travelled and was tortured in these dreams by the nurses who were supposed to be caring for me. I don't know if these were hallucinations or just a part of my near death experience. But I am grateful to have made it through these terrifying experiences. I am now immensely grateful for family and friends and for life itself – for the simple things: for nature, for animals and for the belief in a higher Power.

I changed medication and now take 800mg Epilim and 100mg Seroquel at night. There is a definite shift in my being – I am more focused, more energised and relaxed, calm and present. I have also found a wonderful psychotherapist who has helped me talk about my emotions and how to handle stress on a day to day basis. I find joy in exercise, music, travel, photography and art. I am also grateful for your activism around Bipolar and mental health. Your courage to speak up and tell your truth is admirable and has inspired me to write my story down. I too have regrets about my past behaviour and actions but it is important to know one is not fully responsible for these actions and behaviour. This disorder results in a series of bad judgment calls and without the support of family and friends, one may step too far in the wrong direction. I am glad to have the support of family and friends throughout my life. I continue to lean on them and hope they too can lean on me.

I remain humbled by my experience on this mental health journey. I have learned failure, patience, empathy, courage, honesty and resilience. I am committed to still change the world in any small way that I can. I am blessed that my occupation allows me to do so and I strive to continue to learn every day.

Thank you once again.

Love and Peace,