

The Casino Bipolar

Bright lights, pretty girls – the power to make things happen: inside the roulette wheel turns and you are gunning for the Red. The thought that you might lose, that you could confront a painful sequence of Black, just hasn't occurred.

This is because you believe you've been given all the answers.

But if you start placing bets in the Casino Bipolar, I'm afraid the basic law of gambling still applies: the house always wins.

To start with, I personally didn't know why I felt like a winner. There was an indescribable joy in simply existing that made me want to sing. And I sung. I wrote. I worked long hours and slept little. The possibilities seemed limitless.

This ecstasy pervaded my whole being: all my thoughts, emotions and actions were heavily influenced by it. The symbols that ignited my imagination were everywhere. Walking to the pie shop seemed like a creative experience and, quite honestly, a spiritual one. Associations between scenes that crossed my path would form in my head, questions would then be asked and answered, and I had no way of keeping up with all the information.

Several times during my first episode I thought that I might break through and achieve something worthwhile, something meaningful, if could just focus my mind; but therein lay my problem.

I couldn't sit still.

Being elevated raised me above the everyday needs and concerns that I'd held previously. When I felt like my work needed sustained concentration, I dropped it – reasoning that whatever I'd been doing could get done later. I retained full confidence that, at some date in the future, I would glance back and fill in the gaps then, when I had more time.

The important thing was to keep increasing the stakes.

For me, personally, the 'children' left unattended in the casino's car-park were my degree, my job and my relationships with everyone in my family, friendship and work circles.

Already a little self-obsessed, my behaviour became dangerously narcissistic.

I took on tasks and attempted things that were beyond my years and abilities. I operated without a diary and my complex schedule of work and study soon unravelled. I turned up to present a seminar at university two weeks late; I was suspended for forgetting to pay my term fees, when I had the money in the bank to do so: I remember being woken up by a phone-call telling me that I'd been due for work hours before.

“Sorry,” I said, on arrival.

Then I flashed my manic smile. It worked, which didn't help matters. Apparently I could charm myself out of any situation. I had talent, I'd said – so a little room had to be allowed for my eccentricities. Amazingly, the people around me tolerated this.

It seems absurd now that it all didn't blow up sooner.

Not to say that it wasn't a surprise when it did eventually explode. Like someone losing control of a car, one second you're driving and the next second you're gone; it's the speed that does it. The higher, or faster, you've been travelling, the deeper you will fall. Sitting in your vehicle on the bottom of the lake, <http://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/media/writingcomp/index.cfm>

it's hard to imagine that seconds previously you were out in the light – cruising.

Now you are at the mercy of others: triage nurses, doctors, parents. Together they are attempting to pull the wreckage from the water.

I, like most sufferers, thought I would never drive again. There were long months of sitting on the lounge, taking antipsychotics, and reading. No desires presented themselves. I slept often. I jumped through the hoops of the Early Intervention Program, rating my progress from one to ten: ten being normal Justin, minus ten being Justin in the mental health unit, and zero being Justin depressed at home, just out of hospital.

That's where the questions this essay tackles first arose. My Occupational Therapist had the most time for them. She visited once a week and asked me about my degree, my creative writing and my depression.

I described the joy of the high and then the foolishness felt after getting out of hospital, when I realised that the experience was entirely false. It becomes worse if you get fooled a second time, like I did, and fall for it all again.

Then I discovered that what I was mourning in my depression was really a feeling of creativity. There was no work to show for the effort of losing my mind, no masterpiece to present to the world and confidently say 'It was worth it'.

Let me state categorically that neither being high nor being low are very good conditions for focused creativity. And by that I mean creativity that brings results, something to display for your toil.

You don't have time to work seriously when you are manic; what you have is time to daydream about your future exploits. It's the equivalent of being on drugs, which for me also preceded both of my episodes.

It took me until the second psychosis before I got the message. There is a mantra my doctor, a specialist in bipolar disorder, gave me then. He said it worked every time. "If you want to stay out of hospital and lead a productive life, take your medication, sleep regularly and don't drink or use drugs."

It's a winning formula.

My mind is clear: I calmly plan ahead: I can work every day. I'm motivated, in a healthy way. Getting high, on drugs or through mania, only ever stopped me from functioning; I got distracted, lost focus and became antisocial. The low was not worth it, either.

You are unenthusiastic about work when depressed. You focus on gloomy things.

Some say that a lot can be achieved by someone in the first stages of a manic episode. This is true, up to a point. But if you approach it from a purely mathematical position over a period of months, and add up the time lost in hospital, the time taken off work through depression, the missed opportunities when you have to leave employment and the relationships you can destroy with friends, family and workmates, it is actually an extremely unproductive way of accomplishing anything.

If I wrote just one page a day for six months, remaining stable, it would be far better than trying to write a book in two weeks without sleeping and then ending up in a mental institution.

Aside from that the emotional distress itself, for all concerned, should be enough to make a person not want to be sick.

Regrettably, though, we are human. I myself know the feeling of being ‘The One’, and of feeling chosen. Everything makes sense; there’s no anxiety.

You think it’s all going to be fine.

But it’s not fine. Things get very dark, so dark that you never want them to be like that again, so dark that people can, and regularly do, kill themselves.

So for me, I put my brain on the doctor’s diet. I didn’t feed it drugs. I deprived it of alcohol. I drank water. I took my mood stabilisers. I went to sleep at the same time every night and made sure I got my seven to eight hours rest. If I’ve had a problem with sleeplessness since, for more than twenty-four hours, I’ve taken my anti-psychotics.

This is all monitored by my doctor.

An alcoholic can’t have one or two drinks a night: once started there is no going back. The disease can’t be flirted with. It is my personal belief that the same is true of bipolar disorder. The mania can’t be honed; it has a life of its own, concluding in full blown, ‘I am the Lord’ psychosis; the illness takes over the senses.

You can repeat the mantra about not using drugs or alcohol, and instead taking your medication everyday – however – unless you accept that you have a problem, you’ll certainly fail.

Saying ‘I have bipolar disorder’ is an important step; it never goes away – the diagnosis – but the symptoms do, if you treat them.

Getting in touch with my humanity, realising I am fallible, and failing, have been the positive experiences for me. I cry a little more easily in front of my wife now, when we watch moving things on the television. And I’m more willing to help, because I’ve been helped.

Also, having a family who love, were slow to judge and are infinitely patient, cannot be underestimated.

The last thing a patient has to come to terms with is the person they were before diagnosis of the illness. When I examined my own situation, I saw that I possessed all the so-called talents and gifts I have a long time before I first became manic or took drugs or drank. And I’ve certainly had quantifiable success – and real happiness, culminating in marriage – now that I’m treating my brain responsibly.

Acknowledging this has given me power over the illness; denial led to the illness controlling me.