

The Instruments of Precision

By Jason Cheung

Stage Direction: Enter Stage Left/Right, playing an excerpt from *Brandenburg's Concertos No. 3*

Movement No. 1 (Please Time), alternatively, play Pachelbel's *Canon in D*

Introduction

I am currently a volunteer for the Manitoba Schizophrenia Society and a Network Ambassador for the Mental Health Commission of Canada. For seven years, I was a speaker with the Speakers Bureau at the Canadian Mental Health Association, Manitoba Division. I am also a performing artist and an advocate for recovery in mental health issues. I, myself, am also a survivor of a serious form of mental illness, a tough one, too—schizo-affective disorder. It is a brain disease that combines the worst of schizophrenia with an affective disorder (in my case depression though I can experience hypomania as well). Ups and downs and rapid cycling (alternating mood changes) are common occurrences in my illness.

I want to take you on a wonderful journey of music, drama and truly holistic experiences, to help you see how you can recover from mental illness. By picking your battles more decisively, with the help of exercise, diet and emotional supports, such as trauma-informed care, one cannot only recover from mental illness but thrive from it.

Mostly I want to tell you how trauma affected my overall health, and how trauma-informed therapy, particularly self-regulation therapy, have saved my life. Let me emphasize that through hard work, dedication and a lot of support from others, you too can overcome the stigma of mental illness and attain recovery and hope.

Recovery is possible through persistent Love, Compassion and Hope. (Reiterates)

Stage Direction: (Start shaking the strings) An Analogy to How Trauma Happens?

Talk: This is what trauma sounds like.

Talk: Here are some of my experiences:

(Scratching of the violin)

When I was 21,
I had my first psychotic episode
I was diagnosed with schizo-affective disorder at
My mind ceased to function the way it used to.
I can recollect a time when I could think, write and chew gum at the same time.
That is no longer the case.

(Draw bow down)

I wish I could have a better brain where I could answer
Jeopardy questions within an instant and fraction
Of a second, or play Sudoku.
My thinking process, as my psychiatrist describes, is a little
Bit rusty. Just like my violin.
He said, with time and practice, I may achieve, to
Some extent, my previous power but may not be able to fully regain control of
my freethinking mind.

I compare my brain to my violin. Both are instruments
Of precision.

(Draw bow down on several tones)

The anti-psychotic medications do not help either.
They slow down my cognitive functions to that of a
Paramecium.

(Staccato on the strings)

Stage Direction: Draw string down. (One string)

Stage Direction: (Pause, and then Talk):

The neurobiology of every cell in my body through childhood, experienced trauma—through bullying, and the process of immigration, and my negative experiences with my father. My father was a wonderful man, except he also had a serious form of mental illness, major depressive disorder (with possible later onset of psychotic features). He died by suicide at the age of 52; he would have turned 60 this November. In my family, the odds of surviving a mental illness are about 50 percent in the male side of the family. My uncle and my dad both died by suicide, while my other uncle and I survived, no, we thrived and live wonderful lives. These events have shaken me down to the core.

Stage Direction: Begin by playing the first part of Pachelbel's *Canon in D*

- 1) As I grew older, I experienced more and more trauma, forced to leave home by my father at the age of 19: being robbed, once at gunpoint while I was working at Domo Gas Station. Being forced into staying in the Psychiatric Ward for 3 months, and I was then diagnosed with schizo-affective disorder.

Also, the death of my father through suicide when I was 26 affected me greatly. With all these traumatic events resonating in my body, my body reacted to it very negatively. I am no scientist, but I can hypothesize that my weight gain cannot only be attributed to the medications I was on, but also, my lifestyle and my emotional responses at the cellular level. I have been in various kinds of counseling: Talk therapy, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, and now Self-Regulation Therapy at Klinic with a K right here in Winnipeg, Manitoba.”

- To understand how my mind works, I have to first warn you that I only have some insights and no Eureka's! yet.
- As you may know, the brain is comprised of networks of nerve cells called neurons, which allow the transmission of various electron impulses through various neurochemicals. When working properly, pathways are created which allow brain functions to be completed.
- Just like a violin – when it is working properly, one can produce completely beautiful music.
- The brain and the violin need time to be “re-wired” to create order amid the confusion.

Stage Direction: (Pretend to tune violin)

I guess, in my case, there must have been some trauma that I did not recognize initially, but I think my neuro-networks have begun their healing process. Although I may never regain the glorious mind of the high school days, I am sure I can learn the skills and attain competencies required for me to succeed.

Each Violin is different and each person is different.

- 2) Therefore, now you may ask, how did I recover, from a person staying in bed watching *Star Trek Voyager* all day long (I still like watching the re-runs) to becoming an ambassador to the Mental Health Commission of Canada and an active speaker in my community. It wasn't easy. I will go through some of the chronology.

I often wonder how people with certain mental disorders cope
With the loss or damage to their higher thinking
Functions. In a case by case basis, I have learned they
overcome the odds and finish university, go on to grad
school and get a PhD. They engage in professional endeavors and health
promotion, both as authority and consumer.
I often think to myself, "If they can do it, then I can do it"

(Begin playing Beethoven's *Ode to Joy* on the violin)

Learning how to learn again is definitely one of the most daunting and
challenging tasks I have had to face.
Just like the out-of-tune violin, the brain's memory cells are scrambled and
chaos ensues.

It's a long healing process that some cannot walk on their own. I, however, am
cautiously optimistic regarding the potential of recovery. After reading the
journal *Schizophrenia Today*, I have reasons to be hopeful. I saw pages after

pages of trauma; also saw resolve, courage and eventual success in people's recovery. That is just so inspiring! It is like the feeling of triumph when a violin tune is played beautifully, after hours and hours of practice.

No one said the road less travelled is an easy one, but with faith and hope and compassion for life; it makes the journey easier.

- 3) In 2004, I have decided to return to the workforce but I needed help, so I enrolled in the SAIR center of learning and work training program. I first volunteered at the Manitoba Schizophrenia Society, and then started my second assignment at the Canadian Cancer Society as a casual data entry clerk. I worked there diligently but was laid off in 2 ½ years' time. Nonetheless, I was still having problems with my health aside from the schizo-affective disorder, namely diabetes and digestive problems.

- 4) The Paradigm starts to shift when I started going to the Unitarian Universalist Church, where I also started volunteering at the Canadian Mental Health Association Manitoba Division since 2005. I was hired and worked as a data entry clerk, promoted to fundraising assistant and database assistant. I worked there until my health was affected by my meds change this past January. My tenure there lasted eight years, a quarter of my life. The meds that I was on, at the beginning balloon my weight to over 210 lbs! (Stage Direction: Show Picture of Spirit's Call Choir on slide)

Once I recognized my trauma history and became trauma-informed (I didn't know these terminologies when I was going through it), I sought help, tried to cook more and adjust my lifestyle. Last year I incorporated an exercise routine by signing up for the Y (YM/YWCA) in Winnipeg Downtown. I then lost about 10 pounds over a period of six months. (Hold up photo) Here is a photograph of me back in 2010, 2011. I was over 200 lbs. Now I am a square 150 lbs. Don't get me wrong, I am not trying to tell people to abandon their medication.

NOT AT ALL.

My doctor would not help me if he did not believe that I am ready to go. My psychiatrist believes that to my benefit, it would make sense to reduce the number of psychotropic medications that I am on, now I have been stable for more than 10 years.

It is just not the weight – even though that part of the story – (Stage Direction: An aside: I lost 46 pounds since last February. Yes that was last February (or about 14 months ago). Recovery is possible through persistent Love, Compassion and Hope. (Reiterate for 2nd time)

I am counting the blessings I have received from my friends and church family. Sometimes life's lessons need not be complicated. A few simple notes played with passion can sound as beautiful as a symphony.

(Play two or three pure notes)

Failing in one thing does not mean ultimate failure.

Simple gifts of life surround us all the time if we reach out towards the treasures of our lives.

This is my treasure! (Hold up Violin).

Not only will we gain compassion and competencies, but self-worth and dignity as well.

Stage Direction - Last song: "You Raise Me Up"

Jason Cheung is a local independent performance artist who advocates on mental health issues, specifically recovery through his dramatic re-telling of his personal story of lived experience. He is involved with the Manitoba Schizophrenia Society and the Mental Health Commission of Canada as a volunteer.

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