

WALKING THE EDGE OF WISDOM

BY **SASCHA
SCATTER**

*"Ever since they put you away —
you don't seem quite the same.
They cut off all your lovely hair and
gave you a brand new brain.
Sent to the university cause
that was the next step up.
Studying sociology —
they gave you a plastic cup ...
What happened to you
with your brand new brain?
What will they do when
they get you again?
Animal — they're comin to get ya!
Animal — cause you went 'insaane!'"*

- SUBHUMANS "Animal!"

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Resources

For more information, check out **The Icarus Project: Navigating the Space Between Brilliance and Madness** (www.theicarusproject.net)

From The Icarus Project's State Origin and Purpose statement:

Flying Too Close to the Sun

As the ancient Greek myth is told, the young boy Icarus and his inventor father Daedalus were imprisoned in a maze on an island and trying to escape. Daedalus was crafty and made them both pairs of wings built carefully out of wax and feathers, but warned Icarus not to fly too close to the blazing sun or his beautiful wings would fall to pieces. Icarus, being young and foolish, was so intoxicated with his new ability to fly that he soared too high, the delicate wings melted and burned, and he fell into the deep blue ocean and drowned. For countless generations, the story of Icarus' wings has served to remind us that we are humans rather than gods, and that sometimes the most incredible of gifts can also be the most dangerous. The Icarus Project was created in the beginning of the 21st century by a group of people diagnosed in the contemporary language as Bipolar or Manic-Depressive. Defining ourselves outside convention, we see our condition as a dangerous gift to be cultivated and taken care of rather than as a disease or disorder needing to be "cured" or "eliminated." With this double-edged blessing we have the ability to fly to places of great vision and creativity, but like the mythical boy Icarus, we also have the potential to fly dangerously close to the sun—into realms of delusion and psychosis--and crash in a blaze of fire and confusion. At our heights we may find ourselves capable of creating music, art, words, and inventions which touch people's souls and shape the course of history. At our depths we may end up alienated and alone, incarcerated in psychiatric institutions, or dead by our own hands. Despite these risks, we recognize the intertwined threads of madness and creativity as tools of inspiration and hope in this repressed and damaged society. We understand that we are members of a group that has been misunderstood and persecuted throughout history, but has also been responsible for some its most brilliant creations. And we are proud.

Strikes me that I've always found all the good stuff at the edges and in between spaces: the bleed in time between late night and early morning when the mind runs fast and free and isn't afraid to make connections that might normally seem a little strange; the edge of urban neighborhoods where people from different parts of the world cross paths with each other; the edge between different ecologies like the land and the water, the forest and the grassland, the estuary and the ocean—places where different species learn how to live with each other and create whole new ways of interacting; spaces where strangers meet like bus stops and 24-hour diners and underground parties on the edge of town.

The edge can be a dangerous place to be: there's always the possibility of falling off. I know from my own experience that the part of my mind that is the most creative and fluid can definitely be the most volatile and scary. If I'm respectful and use that part of myself in moderation I can do amazing things. So much of my power is in my dreams, in letting go and not being controlled by the rigid society that raised me—in not being afraid to have grandiose visions and plans. But if I ignore the warnings and let myself fly too high—if I go to that place in my mind for too long—it's really hard to come back down. I catch on fire. I forget how to sleep. I forget how to take care of my body. The bridge opens up between the conscious rational world which keeps me together and the unconscious irrational world which keeps things interesting and I start losing sight of which is which. The edges all blur.

I start dreaming when I'm awake.

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tal illness so for the most part we don't talk about it and leave the opinions up to the doctors and the drug companies.

In the end what it comes down to for me is that I desperately feel the need to connect with other folks like myself so I can validate my experiences and not feel so damn alone in the world, pass along the lessons I've learned to help make it easier for other people struggling like myself. By my nature and the way I was raised, I don't trust mainstream medicine or corporate culture, but the fact that I'm sitting here writing this essay right now is proof that their drugs are helping me. And I'm looking for others out there with similar experiences.

But I feel so alienated sometimes, even by the language I find coming out of my mouth or that I type out on the computer screen. Words like "disorder," "disease," and "dysfunction" just seem so very hollow and crude. I feel like I'm speaking a foreign and clinical language that is useful for navigating my way through the current system, but doesn't translate into my own internal vocabulary where things are so much more fluid and complex. I can only hope that in the near future we will have created better language to talk about all this stuff.

But I know for a fact that it's not so cut and dry. For all the talent we have in our little carving of the population, there should be whole sections in the stores with books of our stories and different road maps for young folks at the beginning of their journeys to follow, books to help illuminate the path for others so they don't have to struggle so hard in the dark.

But it's really hard. As a society we seem to be still in the early stages of the dialog where you're either "for" or "against" the mental health system. Like either you swallow the anti-depressant ads on daytime television as modern day gospel and start giving your dog Prozac, or you're convinced we're living in Brave New World and all the psych drugs are just part of a big conspiracy to keep us from being self-reliant and realizing our true potential. I think it's really about time that we start carving some more of the middle ground with stories from outside the mainstream and creating a new language for ourselves that reflects all the complexity and brilliance that we hold inside.



I was 18 years old the first time they locked me up in a psych ward. The police found me walking on the subway tracks in New York City and I was convinced the world was about to end and I was being broadcast live on primetime TV on all the channels. After I'd been walking along the tracks through three stations, the cops wrestled me to the ground, arrested me, and brought me to an underground jail cell and then the emergency room of Bellevue psychiatric hospital where they strapped me to a bed. Once they managed to track down my terrified mother, she signed some papers, a nurse shot me up with some hardcore anti-psychotic drugs, and I woke up two weeks later in the "Quiet Room" of a public mental hospital upstate. I spent the next two and a half months of my life there, another couple months in this strange private "behavior modification" program/halfway house that my mom put me in, and the next bunch of years of my life trying to figure out how to set my life up in such a way that that shit would never happen to me again.

Before the big dramatic crash back in New York, that whole previous year I'd gone off to college and had been living on the other side of the country in Portland, Oregon. I'd lost contact with most of my old friends and had basically spent the school year studying in the library, immersed in academic books and ignoring the outside world. At some point in the spring, around finals time, I'd gotten sick and gone to the school health clinic. The short version of the story is that the nurse gave me a prescription for penicillin and I had an allergic reaction to it and almost died. To counteract the effects of the penicillin, the hospital gave me a hard core steroid called Prednisone which totally fucked up my sleeping schedule and, along with the bit of mescaline and lots of pot and coffee I'd been indulging in early that year, sent me off the deep end.

It seemed innocent at first, if not a little strange. Somehow I managed to have this infinite amount of energy—I'd ride my bike really fast everywhere and do tons of sit-ups and push-ups after sleeping badly for two hours. Pretty quickly I slipped into a perpetually manic state, and by the summertime had this idea to start a food co-op at our school which somehow mushroomed into this grandiose plot to destabilize the US economy by printing our own currency! That was just the tip of the iceberg though. I seemed to have a new idea every couple hours, all involving connecting different people and projects up with each other, and actually managed to convince a number of people around me that my ideas were really good. We started stockpiling food, putting flyers around town, and building our little empire.

Then it got even crazier. I started to think the radio was talking to me and I was seeing all these really intense meanings in the billboards downtown and on the

highways that no one else was seeing. I was convinced there were subliminal messages everywhere trying to tell a small amount of people that the world was about to go through drastic changes and we needed to be ready for it. That year in school I'd been studying anthro-linguistics and I was totally fascinated by language and how the words we use shape our perception of reality. I started reading way too much meaning into everything. People would talk to me and I was convinced there was this whole other language underneath what we thought we were saying that everyone was using without even realizing it. It seemed like a big computer program someone had written or an ancient riddle or just some kind of cosmic joke. It always seemed like people were saying one thing to me but actually saying the complete opposite at the same time. It was very confusing.

Whatever was going on, it was obvious I was the only one who could see it because no one knew what the hell I was talking about! I'd try to explain myself but no one seemed to understand me. At some point it got to where I couldn't even finish a sentence without starting another one because everything was so fucking urgent. There was so much to say I couldn't even get the words out without more new stuff that needed to be said appearing on my tongue.

One of the things that made the situation so complicated and inevitably so tragic was that no one really knew me well enough to know that I'd totally lost my shit and was about to crash really hard. In 1992 Portland was not the cool anarcho-mecca it is today. The folks around me were just like: "Oh, that's Sascha - the guy doing the food co-op thing. He's just a little crazy." No one seemed to be able to see the signs that I was having a psychotic breakdown and if they did, they were too scared to get anywhere near me for fear I was going to bite them or something.

Thankfully I took what I thought was going to be a quick trip to Berkeley and my old friends realized immediately that something was definitely wrong. They called my mom, she bought me a plane ticket over the phone, and they somehow managed to get me to the airport and on a plane back East. When I arrived at the airport my mom was there to pick me up and bring me back to her apartment. I remember her telling me that in the morning she was going to take me to see "a man that could help me." I didn't like the sound of that much and it was obvious that they'd brainwashed her memory clean so that she wouldn't remember what an important role she was playing in the grand scheme. She fell asleep around the time the sun was rising and I snuck out.

After I'd been in the psych ward for awhile they diagnosed me with something called bipolar disorder (or manic-depression) and, along with a whole pile of other pills they were shoving down my throat, gave me a mood stabilizing drug called Depacote. They told my mom to get used to the idea that her son had a serious mental disorder he was going to be grappling with for the rest of his life.

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Early one January morning a phone call came telling me that my old traveling partner Sera had been found dead floating in the Susquehanna River in Maryland. She'd jumped off a bridge and taken her own life. The news tore me up bad, left me really confused and hurt. She had been one of the most brilliant people I'd ever known—with a mind that was sharp as a knife and a heart that was full of the spirit of adventure and passion for living. In our travels together she'd helped me so much in my struggles to figure out why my own life was so valuable. After I heard the news I sat in my room for a week and cried and cried.

And that's when I finally started doing the research I'd been putting off for so long. After a year of not being able to read I started to pick up the books. And that's when I really began the internal and external dialog about my condition and began to try to put the puzzle together, make some sense of it all so it wasn't just a bunch of isolated pieces that didn't fit together. I started talking to friends really openly and using the regular column I had in a punk rock magazine as a forum to talk about madness and manic-depression.

And that's when I started really coming to term with the paradox that however much contempt I feel towards the pharmaceutical industry for making a profit off of all of our misery and however much I aspire to be living outside the system, the drugs help keep me alive and in the end I'm so thankful for them.

According to the Aug. 19 issue of Time Magazine, 2.3 million Americans have been diagnosed with bipolar disorder. Of course, mental disorders are more confusing than so many other illnesses, more based on cultural norms that we'd like to admit. Diagnosis that people get stuck with for life are determined by a set of questions in an official book rather than any kind of concrete blood or piss tests. Diagnosis come in and out of style like fashion designs: it used to be "in" for doctors to diagnose children with ADHD, these days all of a sudden it's "bipolar disorder." It wasn't really that long ago that "homosexuality" was considered a "disorder" which is enough to make you not want to ever step foot in a psych doctors office. Even the real illnesses are so easy to misdiagnose. Someone with bipolar disorder one week, might be considered schizophrenic the next, then "schizo-affective" the week after that. Plus, the drugs work so differently for different people - that's why there are dozens of different anti-depressant pills and they keep cranking them out.

We have yet to create a reasonable language to talk about it all so those of us who do talk about it end up with all of these sterile and clinical words in our mouths that feel uncomfortable and never get to the heart of things and very often skirt around the issues. When it comes down to it, as a culture we don't understand men-



The police picked me up wandering the streets of Los Angeles on New Years Day, 2002. I'd been smashing church windows with my bare fists and running through traffic scaring the hell out of people screaming the lyrics to punk songs, convinced that the world had ended and I was the center of the universe. They locked me up in the psych unit of LA County Jail and that's where I spent the next month, talking to the flickering fluorescent lightbulbs and waiting for my friends to come break me out.

I was quickly given the diagnosis of bipolar disorder again and loaded down with meds. "That's so reductionistic, so typical of Western science to isolate everything into such simplistic bifurcated relationships," I'd tell the overworked white-coated psychiatrist staring blankly from the other side of the tiny jail cell as I paced back and forth and he scribbled notes on a clipboard that said "Rispedal" in big letters at the top. "If anything I'm multi-polar, poly-polar—I go to poles you'd never even be able to dream up in your imaginationless science and all those drugs you're shooting me up with. You're all a bunch of fools!" And so I paced my cell.

Every time you get locked up it gets harder to put the pieces back together. Physiologically, the brain and body take longer to recover. It takes a lot out of someone to go through a mental breakdown. Picture being bipolar like a pendulum swing with suicidally depressed at one end, delusionally psychotic at the other, and with healthy and stable somewhere in the middle. If you swing over to one end you're bound to swing back over to the other side. After months of sleepless mania it's inevitable that some serious depression is going to follow, all your reserves are depleted.

Finally after the month in jail, a couple weeks in a Kaiser psych ward, and four months in a halfway house for people with severe psychiatric disabilities, I finally got it together to be able to move back into my old collective house in North Oakland. I was taking a mood stabilizing drug called Lithium and an anti-depressant called Welbutrin.

The ground I was walking on was still a little shaky. I was only just beginning to be able to read after not being able to focus for months and months. I got a full time job really for the first time in my life, started going to therapy and taking really good care of my body. Made it through my one year anniversary of getting locked up and felt so blessed that I had made it that far.

I didn't realize it at the time, but I, like millions of other Americans, would spend years wrestling with the implications of that diagnosis.

Manic-depression kills tens of thousands of people, mostly young people, every year. Statistically, one out of every five people diagnosed with the disease ends up doing themselves in. But I wasn't convinced, to say the least, that gulping down a hard full of pills everyday would make me sane. Honestly, at the time I thought it was a bunch of bullshit. Their treatment of me on the ward didn't give me much faith in the medical establishment.

The mental ward was like some kind of twisted circus where the psychiatrists would come visit everyday and write our scripts with these huge expensive gold and silver Gross pens emblazoned on the side with the names "Prozac" and "Xanax" while we all sat there, shaking and drooling on ourselves, staring off into space and pacing the white hallways. It was a nightmare.

I'm not really sure why, but that bipolar diagnosis didn't last very long. By the time I got out of the halfway house I'd ended up in five months later, the doctors were blaming the whole incident on bad drug interactions: the high levels of Prednizone they gave me at the hospital mixed with all the coffee I'd been drinking and hallucinogens I'd been doing. It had just been too much for my fragile system. It was going to take a while to recover, but I'd be able to lead a normal, healthy life like the rest of the population. That was good news for sure.

For years afterwards that whole period of time was something that I somehow just shelved away into a far corner of my brain cause I never knew quite what to make of it. Somehow it didn't all fit together. It just became another one of my crazy stories that I'd share with new friends' sometimes if they were getting to know me. "Yeah, ha ha, I'm kinda loonytoons, for real, man: check out what happened to me when I was a teenager..." But lingering in the back of my mind was always this fear that somehow I was going to end up getting locked up again.

For someone who had been diagnosed with a "serious mental illness," the next six years of my life were pretty amazing. I traveled and worked and had big adventures all over the places with amazing folks. The company I kept didn't stigmatize people who were a little eccentric or weird, if anything we reveled in it, wore it on our sleeves. It seemed pretty obvious to me that my crazy behavior as a teenager had been a perfectly natural reaction to being raised in a crazy environment.

You have to understand this part of the story though: I was raised by parents with pretty radical leftist politics who taught me to question everything and always be skeptical of big business and capitalism. I also spent my teenage years growing up in the punk scene which actually glorified craziness and disrespect for authority. Also, from the time I was a little kid everyone always said that I was very sensitive

to the world around me and the suffering of others, maybe too sensitive, and I just chalked it up to that. My world view didn't leave any room open for the possibility that my instability and volatility might actually have something to do with inherent biology. So I went on with my life.



My mom came home from work one early Spring evening to find that I was curled up on her kitchen floor, almost catatonic, telling her that I was really sorry but I just couldn't take it anymore and I was going to kill myself. I was 24 years old. My hands were covered in cuts that I'd let get infected because I was too preoccupied to pay attention to what was going on with my body. My clothes were dirty and torn. I was getting lost in neighborhoods that I normally knew like the back of my hand and couldn't look anyone in the eye when I talked to them.

There was a repeating tape loop in my head constantly telling me what a horrible person I was and that I was a liar and a hypocrite and a coward and I didn't deserve to live. In fact I was obsessed with killing myself. It was like a broken record—throwing myself in front of a car, jumping out of a window, shooting myself in the back of the head, carbon monoxide in the garage, swallowing a bottle of pills, etc. It was exhausting and horrible and I was convinced it was never going to end. I was living in my own personal hell.

The strangest part was that a couple months earlier I'd been on top of the world.

Focused and clear and driven, getting up in front of crowds and giving talks about exciting and revolutionary things—organizing half a dozen projects—I was the model of an activist. I hardly had time to sleep. But at some point in the middle of it all I just crashed. I stopped being able to get out of bed. All the confidence I'd had suddenly disappeared. I stopped being able to focus on anything and I started feeling very awkward around even my oldest friends. All my people were really confused about what to do for me. One by one all my projects fell apart till they were all just a halo of broken dreams circling above my head as I wandered the city streets alone.

I soon ended up back in the psych ward and then the same halfway house/rehab program out in the suburbs that my mom had put me in as a teenager. I was miserable and lonely. The doctors weren't quite sure what I had so they diagnosed me with something called schizo-effective disorder. They gave me an anti-depressant called Celexa and an atypical anti-psychotic called Zyprexa. I was in group therapy everyday. There was an organic farm to work on down the road from the halfway

house and after a couple weeks they let me volunteer there a few hours a day sewing seeds and potting up plants in the greenhouse. Eventually I convinced them to let me live there and I moved out of the halfway house and just came for outpatient care a couple times a week.

It took a couple months, but for the first time I could see that it was obvious the drugs were actually working for me. It was more than the circumstance—it actually felt chemical. Slowly all the horrible noise and thoughts faded and I started to feel good again. I remember watching an early summer sunset over the fields at the farm and realizing I was happy for the first time in months and months. Once I moved onto the farm full time I would come into the city on the weekends to work the farmer's market and hang out with my friends.

As obvious as it was that they were helping me, I really just saw the drugs as a temporary solution. They made me gain a bunch of weight. I always had a hard time waking up in the morning. My mouth was always dry. They were relatively new drugs, not even the doctors knew about the long term side effects of taking them. Besides which, the whole idea just made me feel really uncomfortable. How would I talk to my friends about it? What if there was some global economic crisis and instead of running around with my crew torching banks and tearing up the concrete I was going to be withdrawing from some drug I suddenly didn't have access to anymore? I didn't want to be dependent on the drugs of The Man.

But I didn't worry myself too much about the long-term. I was just happy to have my life back. As the leaves started to change color, I was already planning my trip back to the West coast, to my people in California. There was a room in a collective house in North Oakland and a job in Berkeley with a bunch of my friends waiting for me. I started hanging out with this cool traveling activist woman named Sera and we made plans to hitchhike across the country to participate in the big Seattle protests against the World Trade Organization. A few days after the frost came and we put the farm to bed, Sera and I had hit the road.

And back amidst the familiar, I slowly put my life together once again.