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## The Last Page: Learning to Live with Bipolar Disorder, Minus the Stigma

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## LEARNING TO LIVE WITH BIPOLAR DISORDER, MINUS THE STIGMA

Colby alumni are interesting in any number of ways, but unless you know the spies and informants among us, I may be one of the more interesting. I went traying on chapel hill as a freshman, and I went streaking through the quad as a senior—not once, but twice. Serving as the treasurer of the very first (1974-75) and still existing Student Government Association, I also was the business manager of both the *Echo* and *Oracle* and keeper of the exchequer for my fraternity (Pi Lamda Phi). Somewhere amidst all the fun, I also found time to study. In fact, I graduated from Colby armed with a Baker Fellowship that allowed me to go to the M.B.A. program of my choice. And that isn't even the most interesting part.

You see, I chose Columbia University, enrolled, but never got to finish. Unlike many Colby students who prepared hard and went on to pursue their dreams, I became bipolar.

Bipolar disease is a mental illness characterized by severe mood swings, from mania to debilitating depression. Even though my course in life forever changed, I've never stopped searching for a way to make a difference in the world and to use the gifts Colby gave to me. It hasn't been easy—in fact, at times it's been very difficult—but I believe my mission in life is to try to eliminate the stigma of mental illness.

Some may say I have done nothing exceptional, but I know that coping with and surmounting mental illness is an accomplishment in itself. It took me quite a long time to realize this. I had to learn that my accomplishments at Colby weren't wasted just because they didn't lead me to fame and riches. Social Security retired my number when I was 34, and I have held part-time jobs for the past 22 years. Does that mean I'm a failure? Does that mean my parents wasted the \$11,500 tuition (\$15,985 comprehensive fee, 1971-75) they spent on a liberal arts education? Not at all. But I must say that there have been times when I've thought just that.

My plan was to work for a couple of years before pursuing my M.B.A. My first job at an insurance company was a train wreck, and the company placed me in the hospital. I worked for two years as a maintenance man at my old high school, then left that job on a Friday and started my M.B.A. at Columbia the following Monday. I didn't do too well at Columbia, either, and another hospitalization followed. Then I convinced a couple of sales forces to hire me. Like any bipolar person, I always rose like a star—and fell like a meteor.

By the time I was 36, my batting average wasn't too high.

Years later, the fellowship was still good, so I interviewed at the Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania in 1988. They accepted me on the strength of my Colby grades and the prestige of the Baker Fellowship. Alas, Penn didn't go so well either. I withdrew before they too could put me in the hospital. But those first 15 years or so of my life after college were fun compared to the next 15.

By the early nineties, all the professional jobs were over. I was so ashamed of being mentally ill, ashamed of being such a star and failing so miserably. I was sick of listening to the dot-com beamers asking me, "What do you do?" But I never gave up. During the late eighties and early nineties, I worked jobs that were better suited to my abilities and disabilities: apple picker, tractor driver, hardware store clerk, Christmas tree yard worker, carpenter, companion,

newspaper delivery man, AIDS fundraiser, flower-truck driver, late-night office cleaner, and gym attendant.

And over time, I've learned that that's okay.

Today I have been married for 29 years and my wife still loves me. How many people can say that? My son is a dentist and happy at his profession. I couldn't be more proud of him. I have become a stock day trader—and a very successful one at that (thanks to Colby administrative science professors Yvonne Knight and Walter Zukowski). Colby's liberal arts curriculum helped me learn to absorb and deflect life's blows. And today there are a lot of punches going around.

A Colby education is relevant to its graduates in different ways. Some Colby alumni are destined to become chief executives while some are genetically prone, unfortunately, to struggle in life. I believe it's in life's struggles that we each become stronger. I think it was in one of Professor Gustave Todrank's religion classes that I read something by Booker T. Washington. He said, "Success is to be measured not so much by the position that one has reached in life as by the obstacles which he has overcome while trying to succeed."

If Booker T. was right—and I think he was—then I've done all right. And I hope my experiences, even this essay, can help others who are dealing with mental illness. I still want to make the world a better place for all who live on the other side of a great chasm. After all, it was Colby that taught me to lead by example.

