

It's funny sometimes how people come in and out of our lives without so much as an exchange of a glance, a nod or a brief hello. Most of us simply blend in a crowd on a busy avenue or in a bustling shopping mall. Brian was not one of those people. Even if he tried Brian could never make himself invisible in any such environment. A physically imposing man of well over six feet and two hundred pounds with well cropped red hair, he almost immediately attracted attention as soon as he entered a room. Yet that attention was not born out of any feeling of discomfort or intimidation one might experience upon meeting someone like Brian for the first time. He was one of those people that you could automatically make a connection with regardless of what kind of day you were having or what kind of mood you were in. I was one of those fortunate enough to have made such a connection.

When I first met Brian at one of our support group meetings a few months ago I was immediately impressed by his genuine demeanor. We immediately hit it off as only two veterans fighting a lifelong battle could. Our initial conversation flowed and was without hesitation. And being something of a historic nuts and bolts freak myself, I became even more impressed when Brian told me about his 1957 Chevy that was in pristine condition. I have to admit that "wow" was the first word that popped into my head when he mentioned it.

Although a vibrant and physically active person Brian became a regular participant at support group meetings sometimes going to different locations, days, and times. And though he was an educated and well-spoken man, Brian had the ability to interact with any one irrespective of what kind of background they came from. Indeed, Brian struck me as the kind of person who, if someone less fortunate than himself needed help, would be the first one in line to offer that help. Sometimes that help would simply appear in the form of open and honest conversation during support group meetings in which Brian was in attendance. He, like most of us in these groups was struggling with mental illness. Or as we in group like to call it, a mood disorder. An avid bowler he informed that he had switched his bowling night

from Thursday to Wednesday and would therefore be attending the scheduled Thursday night meetings. That was typical of Brian. Always respectful and courteous of others.

I was always glad when Brian did show up at any of the groups. I knew if he was there it was going to be an intimate and productive meeting. I deeply appreciated the fact that when he was in an acute phase of his illness he was still able to marshal the strength and courage to attend. And, as any one with a mental illness can attest to, just the act of getting yourself to move let alone leave the house often requires a herculean effort. Even so, when Brian was there the conversation flowed smoothly. He would always talk openly and honestly about what he was feeling whether it be good or bad. One of the things I admired most about Brian was, even in the firm grip of his malady he never conveyed any sense of being ill at ease. You see, Brian had a sort of quiet confidence. A confidence that many of us even on our best day can't seem to forge. A confidence that I'm sure he himself was not even aware of. A confidence that, because of the very nature of our conditions, prevents many of us from acknowledging.

At the conclusion of each gathering in which Brian was a participant it was not uncommon for many of the other people who attended, myself included, to leave feeling much more at peace and content than before the meeting convened. That was the kind of affect he could have on an assembly that on many occasions did not flow very smoothly. There were many times that I as a facilitator was not having such an easy day, and therefore had difficulty attempting to hold conference with folks who come from vastly different backgrounds. Brian could sense this and somehow, though laboring through a difficult day himself, always stepped up to the plate and forged the meeting forward. That was Brian. Everyone else was the hurricane and he was the eye. Indeed, Brian sometimes had such an impact on the meetings that he became as conspicuous by absence as much as his presence.

And so it was that during one of our regularly scheduled

Thursday evening support group meetings that I noticed Brian's absence. No matter I thought. He probably switched his bowling nights again and simply didn't have the time to call and let me know. I always appreciated that about Brian. Ever respectful of other people no matter what the circumstances. A few days went by and I still hadn't heard from him which was unusual, especially after missing a meeting that he genuinely enjoyed in the past. Looking back I probably should have reached out to him. But, like Brian, I was busy with everyday living and merely looked forward to the next meeting in which we could exchange war stories. It wasn't until the following Monday I discovered that all of the reasons I surmised about Brian not being able to attend turned out to be painfully untrue. Brian, after a decade's long battle which he fought with every fiber he could muster, succumbed to his illness and took his own life that very Thursday August 21, 2014.

The story should end there but it doesn't. Not with Brian. Although I try my frustratingly best to understand why anyone would want to take their own life I find myself completely unable to condone or condemn such action. I guess it's because of my own intimate relationship with mental illness that renders it impossible for me to take any such stance. I look back and reflect upon how many times I fantasized about concluding my own life. It is through these parallel journeys that enables me to at least somewhat comprehend the wrenching pain that Brian was enduring. The kind of mental anguish that forces many of us to keep recycling the same coldly terrifying thought, that the only way out is to leave and never come back. It is the kind of emotional torture that, with its hallucinogenic power holds us hostage to our own desperation, and blinds us to the endless agony of the ones closest to us. I suppose this is why some people view it as a selfish act and I suppose in many ways it is. After all, while in the tight grip of a mood disorder the only thoughts most of us entertain are that of escape. Escape through any means regardless of the consequences. That's why Brian's death came as such a devastating blow. Never once did he come across as a self-centered person. If at any time during the last few moments of his life he was able to see through the false fog of his own

condition I believe he would have continued to fight it no matter what the pain. Brian, although he was not conscious of it, was a fighter. He would have continued the struggle if for no other reason than for the people who were closest to him. Humanity was one of Brians' strongest attributes.

Although I knew Brian for only a few months, what essentially amounts to a brief hello in the time scheme of life, it felt as if we were lifelong friends and the only obstacle that kept us from meeting sooner was life itself. I immediately liked Brian and as time progressed formed a strong bond with him. I have no doubt that had I gotten to know him better I would have grown to love him. And even though I mourn the fact that life did not give us the opportunity to form a lasting friendship, I will always be grateful for the brief time that life did allow me to know him.