

A Place for Everyone -Leslie Gates

Throughout my life I have been fortunate to have been surrounded by kind and generous people. I was raised in Napa and my great grandmother lived on Brown Street just across the street from the Napa river. My great grandmother was from Oklahoma, she was raised poor and stayed poor most of her life. To say she was poor was purely a statement on an amount of money, she was rich in her beliefs, values and generosity. Mae believed there was goodness in everyone she was sincere in her thoughts of others. There was always room for forgiveness. Mae believed in second chances, third chances and just as many chances as a person needed to get it right. Mae never judged, she accepted whoever you were. She extended her heart and hand. Even if you didn't really need it she would sit you down and fix you a bowl of beans, a cup of coffee and present you with her last biscuit. There was always enough for everyone and everyone deserved a place of comfort.

Mae grew old as I grew up and I spent many weekends helping her bathe, rolling up her hair for church and playing dominos with her and her friends.

I looked forward to those weekends; I had no way of knowing how deeply this gift would impact my life.

We all have stories that shape our beliefs and there are times when we must revisit and revise what we think we know about ourselves and the world around us.

For me this was the day I received a 6 am phone call from my son's roommate that he was acting oddly.

He was 45 miles away and as I drove through and out of the valley as the sun was coming up I had no way of knowing that all our lives were about to be abruptly shaken and to never be the same.

When I arrived, my son had no idea who I was. He was agitated and irrational. How could he not know who I was? I am a nurse and my first thoughts were of him experimenting with drugs.

I was assured by the roommate that this most definitely was not the case. My mind was racing what do I do? After much coaxing I convinced him to get in my car, I was taking him to the emergency room.

Surely, they could help. After what seemed like hours (in hindsight most likely 10 minutes) we arrived at the emergency room. Except now he had changed his mind and didn't want to be there. I was able

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to convince him to stay and after much pleading they checked him in quickly and took him in the back.

While he was in I called my husband and described the situation and waited. I had a lot of time to think and kept telling myself it's got to be drugs all the while knowing in my heart this did not really fit - I was hoping it was drugs. It seemed like an eternity when a doctor - a psychiatrist came to talk with me. She explained that he had a psychotic break, his drug screen was clear. It's not drugs? A psychotic break? What does this mean? She went on to explain that she could not make a diagnosis she needed to send him somewhere safe to sort it out. I was crying by this time and she took my hand and said, "I know you are worried and afraid, can you imagine how fearful he is?"

This all happened 12 years ago, and he has since been diagnosed as having Bipolar I. There have been many tears, hospitalizations, medication trials, regrets, fits and starts. There has been joy and triumph. There has also been deep pain. This is our story. I now have a deeper appreciation for the unseen, the untold and the stories of others.

I now really see the people laying on sidewalks, pushing shopping carts, living in make shift tents, talking to themselves. I see them, they are someone's son, brother, father, they are someone's daughter, sister, mother. They are someone and have all have a story that has impacted their life.

Some people don't understand, and they mock and judge others and their stories. I see it, I feel it. The words of the psychiatrist come back to me. "Imagine how fearful?" As I add the words- these uninformed people must be?

We can be like Mae and have enough room for everyone, we can see the value in all and believe in second, third and infinite chances. We can choose kindness and compassion, over fear and judgement. We all have stories to share and we all have choices to make.