

Chalice Lighting text (from Unheilig's "Schenk mir ein Wunder")

Ich würde gern die Welt versteh'n	I want to understand the world
ohne Angst nach vorne seh'n	to look into the future without fear.
ich würde gern so vieles glauben	I want to believe so many things
und ohne Furcht ganz Blind vertrau'n	to blindly trust, free of dread.
ich würde gern eine Welt aufbau'n	I want to build up a world,
und voller Stolz in die Zukunft schau'n	to look into the future with pride.
ich würde gern mein Leben leben	I want to live my life,
glaub mir dafür würd ich alles geben	believe me; I would give anything for that.
Schenk mir ein Wunder	Give me a miracle.
sag mir das es sie noch gibt	Tell me that they still exist.
Schenk mir ein Wunder	Give me a miracle.
folgt auf Schatten wirklich Licht?	Does light really follow shadow?
Ich wünsch es mir.	I wish it to be so.

Fear, Hope, and Love

By James Cutts

Before I share today's homily, I would like to extend, essentially, a trigger warning. This sermon contains cursing and descriptions of disturbing events and ideas, specifically relating to suicide, self-injury, and parasites. My goal is not to offend or disturb, but to be clear and precise. If at any time and for any reason you feel that you need to leave, please do so without fear of offending.

When you're young, you want to be like everyone else. You want to fit in. You want to be understood and not an outcast. You want to be “normal.” But do we ever talk about what it means to be normal? My dictionary says it means “conforming to the standard type,” but what sets the “standard type”? Normal, whatever that means, is supposed to be comfortable and familiar – something we know and understand – and something we can go back to when things are tough. Unfortunately, this isn't always the case.

For the first eighteen or so years of my life, I thought things were normal for me. I had loving friends and family, I went to school, everyone could read my mind, I had hobbies and things I enjoyed doing, etc, etc. Perhaps I should clarify, though. Since my earliest memories, I have taken it for granted that everyone always knew what I was thinking. Every thought, every emotion, passing or passionate, was broadcast at maximum volume to everyone in earshot. I lived for nearly two decades with a perpetual low level of terror, never actually feeling alone or safe in my own head. That was, to me, normal. I never questioned it. That was just the way things were. I got used to suppressing thoughts and emotions that I thought would upset other people because I believed – no, was certain – that they would know.

I remember the moment that I first consciously noticed this thing that I had always assumed. I was in Centrepointe hospital – my second psychiatric hospitalization – and had been working with a couple doctors on a treatment plan. We had been discussing my past, my symptoms, my family life, and so on. My doctor prescribed to me, among other things, an anti-psychotic medication. I wasn't too thrilled about the idea of having to take one, but I didn't like the way things had been recently, so I begrudgingly took it. A few days into it, I was eating breakfast in the day room, and the guy sitting across the table from me said something rude to the person next to me. I thought *man, this guy is kind of a jerk* and immediately froze. *Oh, shit! He knows I thought that!* Then I thought about it. No, he didn't know I thought that. My thoughts were mine. They weren't his. I experimented by thinking some thoughts and allowing some emotions that I thought they would think were funny or offensive.

They didn't react; they just kept eating their breakfast.

After about a week or so in Centrepointe, my doctors called me into their office and sat me down. They didn't mince words: Dr. Ugarte came right out and said “James, we think you have schizoaffective disorder.” I don't think I will ever forget that moment. It was so very emotionally charged. They started to explain what schizoaffective disorder is, a condition that combines psychotic symptoms of schizophrenia with mood symptoms of bipolar disorder and, unlike bipolar disorder with psychotic features, psychotic symptoms in schizoaffective disorder can pop up at any time – they don't have to be connected to a depressive or manic spell. That “schizo-” part had really caught my attention, though. All of our society's fears of mental illness washed over me. Up to that point, I had been able to tell myself that I was just having a rough time. Things would go back to “normal” eventually. That talk suggested otherwise. Drs. Ugarte and Madaan talked about a “new normal,” about how my condition was “less serious than schizophrenia” but “somewhat more serious than bipolar disorder” and that I could live any kind of life I wanted as long as I took certain precautions. They “strongly encouraged” me to reliably take my meds, talked about various kinds of therapy I could do, and told me that one important thing to do was to learn to identify “triggering” situations and how to avoid them or deal with them. They said “James, schizoaffective disorder is a lifelong condition. You've talked about always having paranoia, and that is an indicator that, on some level, you have always been experiencing symptoms. You recently suffered a psychotic break. Things are different now, and as long as you don't have to **let** your condition control **you**, **you** can control **it**.”

The most common and best-known psychotic symptoms are visual and auditory hallucinations, often accompanied by delusions – believing something that isn't true. I've never had visual or auditory hallucinations, but I have hallucinated, and I've definitely suffered delusions. Aside from believing that people can read my mind, a delusion officially called “thought broadcasting,” I have experienced what I refer to as my “partner” or “companion”: a being called “Nothing” (with a capital N). Nothing is vaguely reptilian, with leathery black scales. It is about six feet tall, plus a tail. It has pale, empty eyes,

like a cave-dwelling fish. Its teeth resemble those of an anglerfish, and it has giant claws on its hands and feet. Nothing followed me around for several months, invisible to everyone, including me. It wasn't always there, but when it was, it was just inches behind me, breathing down my neck. I knew it was there, but if it had any idea that I knew, it would kill me immediately. For the moment, it was biding its time, waiting for me to “ripen,” or something. It wasn't always there because it was following other people too. It was going to kill us all eventually, but for the moment, it was just waiting. With the help of anti-psychotics, Nothing's visits gradually became less and less frequent and eventually went away completely.

In addition to being the name of my terrifying “companion,” Nothing was also the name of a clandestine government organization. I believed that this organization had discovered the secret to reading minds and that I was one of the people they were using to train their “operatives.” One night, after a particularly stressful evening, I was driving my sisters home. I really wasn't safe to be driving; my thoughts were lost in the back seat, where I **knew** Nothing's agent was hiding. At one point, I pulled over in a parking lot and called the friend I considered to be the most intelligent and level-headed. She picked up the phone and I said “Eva, I'm going to say something and I need you to tell me that it's not true.” Eva said “I can't promise that, James, but I'll do my best.” I took a deep breath. “There is a government organization that knows how to read people's minds. They are following a lot of people, and I am one of them.” Eva paused for a moment. “I'm sorry, James, but I don't know that that's not true.” I hung up the phone, put the car in drive, and drove on. We pulled up to a stop sign at an intersection, and I stopped. And waited. The car behind me honked, and I startled and drove on. I apologized to my sisters: “I was waiting for it to turn green.” Several blocks later, we arrived at another intersection, this one with stoplights. Laura spoke quietly from the passenger's seat: “This one turns green, James.” The tension shattered immediately. We all burst into laughter, and Nothing vanished from the back seat of the car.

While I have never had visual or auditory hallucinations, I have hallucinated. There is a

specific kind of psychosis called “delusional parasitosis.” This is the delusional, irrational, and inaccurate belief that an individual is infested with parasites. The first time this symptom really kicked into gear was after watching the movie Prometheus. I didn't even get all the way through it; I got up to the bit where the alien is eating the scientist from the inside out and I had to leave. I was at the theatre with Eva when I saw this movie, so I leaned over to her, told her “I need to go,” and walked out into the lobby. There I sat on the staircase, quivering with terror, mentally trapped in moments of that movie: seeing this alien creature crawling down the throat of one of the scientists, watching an alien larva squiggling in the protagonist's eye, riveted in horror as an animated alien head tries to scream in warning before it explodes. A little while later, Eva came out of the theatre. Apparently the movie had gotten too gory for her as well. We went out to the car and I drove her home. On my way back to my dad's house, I was, once again, highly distracted. I could hardly focus on the road because I could feel... things on my legs. I kept slapping at my legs and clawing at my torso, trying to get these things off of me. I got home and talked to my dad to try to calm down. I could feel bugs and worms crawling through my muscles just under my skin; I could feel a snake slithering down my throat into my stomach, making me want to vomit it up. I could feel spiders and beetles crawling up my legs and on my torso under my shirt. This went on to varying degrees for several months. There were times when I literally tried to claw my skin off to get at the things inside of me.

I have also struggled greatly with depression. I have had periods of near-constant suicidal thoughts and far less frequent thoughts of harm to others. I cannot count the number of times I have considered committing suicide, although there have only been four actual attempts. There were times when I tried to shut my emotions out completely, and times when I started injuring myself just to be able to feel **something**. I have taken drugs, both prescription and illicit, in order to try to better “control” what I feel and think. I have had periods of refusing my medications because I wanted to be rid of all this shit and thought that denying my problems could get me that.

Tausha has been an extremely good friend to me, and the origin story of our friendship is a

strange one. We met at a Halloween party. If we'd ever seen each other before, I don't remember it. We started talking at the party and hit it off rather quickly. At the end of the party she gave me her phone number and said "call me some time, we should hang out." This was in October – then November – of 2011; before all of my mental health shit blew up and everything went to hell. A few weeks later, I was driving home from work. Things had been rough lately. School, family, work, romantic issues... I was approaching the stoplight at the bottom of Providence, near the reactor, and was looking at the red lights of the stoplight and the brake lights of the cars in front of me. I thought, quite distinctly, "you know, I could just not hit the breaks." It occurred to me how much things might suck if that **didn't** kill me, though. Realizing what I had just thought freaked me out and when I got home, I decided I needed to talk to someone. I had only seen Tausha once in total and hadn't spoken to her since the party. Somehow and for some reason, I called her up and told her what was happening. She talked to me until I was able to go to bed and promised to talk to my mom in the morning. Tausha has remained a close friend to today, and when things get bad, I always know that I can go to her. She has, in no uncertain terms, saved my life multiple times.

Friendships sometimes come from strange places, and my friendship with Bri is no exception. Although we met some time during junior high, probably, we never actually interacted until last summer. Strange though it is, it would not be wholly inaccurate to say that we actually bonded over a mutual displeasure at the Westboro Baptist Church, although I don't imagine finding people who disagree with the WBC is particularly difficult to do. Bri is hugely inspiring to me. To me, she epitomizes what I understand the Bible to say Christians should be. She is kind and compassionate in a way I don't often see. Her heart and mind are always open, and she is rational and level-headed enough for me to know that no matter the issue, I can throw my crazy thoughts at her and get sane and intelligent responses.

My life has changed dramatically in the past two years. Symptoms have gotten worse and then gotten better. Medications have come and gone, as have friendships and romantic interests. I have

been hospitalized eight times, and have spent a total of over three months in psychiatric hospitals. I would not wish what has happened to me on my worst enemy, and so a part of me makes me want to justify telling you all of this. I mentioned earlier having our society's fears of mental illness wash over me. I know that you understand, whether you have experienced all of what I am talking about or none of it. I know that you understand because you are compassionate and loving people. I want to share my experiences with you because I want you to know it from the other side. Someone was once on the internet bashing people with mental illness, spouting some eugenics bullshit about how we need to remove people with mental illnesses from the population. I tried to describe Nothing to him. I told him "you don't need to be afraid of people with mental illnesses; we're already more afraid than you will ever be." Some of you have told me that I am "brave" for being able to talk about my troubles with you the way I do. That's not how I see it. In my mind, I reach out to you not because I am brave, but because I am weak. I reach out to you because I can't make it any further on my own and need help from people I know will support me.

Let me be straightforward. As if I've been beating around the bush thus far. You – individually, personally, and collectively – are the reason I am alive today. Every time I fail a test and feel like such a worthless idiot, every time I'm dumped or rejected and feel like I'm not worthy of being loved, every time the stress just gets to be too fucking much and I just want to get away from it all forever, you are why I refrain from killing myself. Because I know that, even if I don't love myself, there are people who love me. You are why I am alive today, and for that, I can never thank you enough.

Seeds of Light

When I last spoke with Rev. Molly, she discussed what she referred to as the "seeds of light". She encouraged me to "give them hell, and give them hope". Although I have had plenty of hell to share, I don't want you to leave thinking I am completely without hope.

Standing on the outside of a situation, it is much easier to find the good in it. Not infrequently will people tell me that they can see how much I've accomplished and how I've grown and matured in

the past two years. They're not wrong. I am a distinctly different person now than I was in the summer and fall of 2011, and in many ways, I believe I am actually a better person in terms of morality, compassion, and healthy self-care.

As a Buddhist, the idea of being present in the moment is an extremely significant one to me. It is not easy, as I am sure you know, but I have found momentary enlightenment in strange places. Nothing helped me once, actually. I don't know how to explain the feeling of simultaneously knowing with absolute certainty that something is standing behind you, ready to kill you, and knowing with absolute certainty that that something doesn't exist and is only a figment of the chemicals in your brain. I honestly don't imagine I'll ever figure out a good way to explain that, because you can't use reason to explain something that is inherently unreasonable. Be that as it may, there was an instance where Nothing was standing behind me, and I was wracked with terror at the knowledge that this **thing** was there, ready to kill me. At the same time, however, I knew Nothing wasn't there. It wasn't real. There were two conflicting parts of my psyche arguing with each other in that moment. One part said that there was real and present danger, and the other was trying to reassure the first that everything would be okay. In that instant, I stepped out of myself and watched the conversation. I froze the world and looked at myself as a compassionate outsider. Here was a person who was afraid and confused and frustrated and oh so tired. He had endured so much already and knew that there was so much more yet to come. Present in that moment, I sent Nothing away, calmed the fear, thanked the reassurer, and took back over myself. I was me, and because I loved me, I wasn't going to let something else control or hurt me. My delusional persecutor helped me achieve greater love for myself.

I don't want to put words in anyone's mouths, but I somehow doubt that there is anyone who has never been afraid of Nothing. Let me explain: I believe Nothing to be aptly named. On a deeper level, I believe that it was not a murderous monster nor a mind-reading government organization that I was afraid of, but truly the idea of nothing. Both incarnations of Nothing challenged my existence. They told me that I didn't deserve to live or that my existence would end. They challenged my right to life,

and that terrified me. They were fear incarnate. And who amongst us has never felt fear? Who has never worried that things might end, that they might cease to be, that things might change forever? My psyche put an interesting twist on the idea, but I don't believe to be completely alone in this fear, and I find that quite comforting.

As I said, from the outside, the good is easier to see. I have been told many times that it is so clear that I have matured so much from my experiences, and that people can see how much I've gained and that that's so wonderful. My first impulse upon hearing this "praise" is to slap them upside the head. How **dare** they tell me that my experience is so wonderful? How **dare** they talk about what I've gained, when all I can see is what I've lost? Stepping back, though, I see that, once again, they are not wrong. I have grown. I have matured. I have changed on a very fundamental level. And in all honesty, I don't know if I would give it up. If I had the chance to go back and give up this experience and all I've learned from it, I don't know what I would do. I have set new highs for terror and lows for depression, but I have grown so, so much. I believe our "purpose" in life is what we make of it, and based on my experiences in the past few years, I have set my purpose: I will use my skills to help people who are suffering from mental illnesses to heal, and to help their friends and loved ones grow in compassion and love. I will change the world. I was given something awful, and I will use it to better everyone, because I will not let my experience put me down. I am stronger than it, and I will help others to be stronger as well.