I’ve had and dealt with paranoid schizophrenia for the last seven years. Although the first three years were the most difficult and today manageable, I still deal with the occasional onslaught of symptoms. I heard someone say recovery is not a noun it’s a verb. It is a continuous process that calls for struggle every day.

For the last few years life has been quiet and peaceful, something I have I come to prefer, something I might have called boring in the past. In my adolescence I was a fun loving guy, the life of the party. I smoked weed on a daily basis and I drank almost every weekend at parties similar to the movies. I got just enough class work done to please my parents. When I went away to college I thought I’d be able to handle it, well I that’s what we told ourselves. We told ourselves that we had gotten our partying out of the way in high school, in college we would slow down. I went off to Northeastern thinking I was ready to take on the world.

Instead we started smoking earlier and stopped drinking later. I pulled all nighters on a regular basis to catch up with work I had neglected. I abused my mind and my body daily with cigarettes, weed and alcohol. Things started to breakdown, spiritually, physically, mentally, then socially. I would sit among a group of friends and go a half hour or an hour without saying a word. When I did speak it was charged with politics and a skewed religious philosophy. People who once used to call me to add life to their party found me dull, boring, oppressive and weird. The phone calls stopped, most people wouldn’t even pick up the phone for my calls. A handful of friends and a girlfriend stuck around in the beginning. They watched me change, without knowing what to do or really what was happening. My grades were just below a 2.0 and I changed my major.

Before I left Northeastern University, I changed my major to International Relations, something far easier than Architecture. I was wrapped up in all the pressing issues the world was facing. I studied a little about the United Nations and various countries throughout the world. Before I knew it, not only did I think I knew all there was to know about how to fix the world’s problems, I thought the government was giving me a chance to. Many coincidences happened, which I later identified as loose associations, and I thought the government was watching everything I was doing. Not only that but I thought that the world’s leaders were reading my research papers and listening to my conversations. Of course, I decided to only speak about pressing issues. Few young adults cared to listen. The loose associations became constant. Every newspaper I read, movie I watched or song I listened to on the radio was filled with secret messages from the world’s leaders, directed specifically to me. With my gpa barely rising to a 2.6 my parents made me come home to attend Saint Anselm.

A new chapter I thought, a second chance. Well it began with paranoia and a grand delusion including conspiracy and espionage. I spent every free moment
watching television or listening to the radio. I thought there were listening devices planted all over my car and house, every classroom, anywhere I could have gone. So I talked through the listening devices to what I thought was either the world’s leaders or whole world whenever I was alone. They talked back to me as I deciphered the scripts of music and movies. I shared my views and opinions about religion and politics with everyone I met thinking they knew I was ruling the world. Well I said to myself God, you and I both know I know nothing of the spiritual life or politics, but I made this mistake of climbing to the top of global politics, I am an empty shell pretending to be wise. Early on I decided I’m a fake, I must be the antichrist. Remorseful but not knowing how to change my situation I felt a crippling and debilitating fear. For almost a year I spent my time in fear, self pity, depression and anxiety that I had changed the course of mankind sending humanity not only to damnation but to destruction.

At some point I hit rock bottom. I wanted to end my life just to make the world a better place. God saw I hit rock bottom, and through prayer pulled me out of the darkness of feeling estranged from God. He gave me an inch and I took a yard. He told me I wasn’t the antichrist and I decided I must be a prophet. After this change of disposition I began my psychotic break. I became manic, crying for joy of my forgiveness for hours and days and weeks, spending days at a time awake in my room laughing about my victory that the government hadn’t stolen my soul. I was redeemed in my mind but everyone else thought differently, I ended up in the psyche ward of a hospital. When the mania wore off I began to question why my family had turned on me, why they were locking me up and throwing away the key. I didn’t understand. The hopelessness and aloneness became overbearing. But I also began medication. I had a moment where I realized I had schizophrenia. I began to recover. Each day my functioning returned more and more. I could express myself and have coherent conversations. I made a commitment to stay on medication; I liked living like this better than before.

I had a wonderful counselor; he waited until I was in a position to hear it without becoming defensive and forever shutting him out of my small circle of people to trust. He told me 4 years ago, that doesn’t seem likely does it? And it hit me. Yes the government may listen to thousands of conversations every day, but how likely is it that they listen to my words specifically, much less put my advice into action? How could thousands of people with schizophrenia who think the government is making a big to do about themselves be any different from me? It all began to crumble. The house of cards was toppling. The web of delusion was unraveling. I began to think clearly again.

I began to go to church regularly and explore the Church Fathers. They had much to say about watching one’s mind and controlling one’s thoughts. By the grace of God, my meager efforts began to bear fruit and I regularly rebuked delusional thoughts until they no longer had significant control over my daily life. I quit smoking weed, slowed down with the drinking, started volunteering and working, had a 3.6 my last semester and graduated from St. Anselm with my head up. I worked full time for two years and over the summer worked a couple 50 plus hours a week doing construction. I think clearer than I ever have before, and continue to explore and utilize my gifts and
talents for the glory of God and helping other people in need. I am satisfied and content with my life and I could ask for nothing more or less.

I want to tell you this story for a number of reasons. I am not bitter, but I was treated poorly by most of my peers at Saint Anselm. I was on the wrong end of gossip; I was excluded, even beaten up once. I hope anyone reading this who knows someone with mental illness can be tolerant and not judge them but be a support to them and do what you can to help the person recover. We all struggle, try to be an angel instead of a stumbling block, I wouldn’t be here or who I am without many wonderful caring people in my life. Of course you have an opportunity to be a listening ear and a kind word, a connection to the world of “normalcy”. I will never forget the nurses and mental health aides that took care of me while I was in the hospital, or family that visited me almost everyday, or the one friend that called more than once to inquire as to why I had disappeared for 4 months. If you can learn about mental illness and abolish your prejudices and stigmas within yourself, I ask you to help us correct the ignorance surrounding the plight of people with mental illness and their families. It would certainly lighten the burden and ease the struggle for many people in the position I was once in.