

Medication Liberation

Laura Delano

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WILL HALL You took psychiatric medications for over ten years?

LAURA DELANO Yes, I was first medicated at age fourteen, and it was a profound existential insult. Having that “bipolar disorder” label put on me made me feel so alone, completely separated from humanity.

WH What was going on that got you the diagnosis?

LD Intense anger and rage. I was hitting puberty, beginning to question everything about my life, and I was confused. I didn’t have a good relationship to my emotions, always trying to push

down uncomfortable feelings, and it just got to a boiling point. I felt like I was possessed, I felt like Jekyll and Hyde. I was sent to a doctor and I described my anger to him as “uncontrollable,” and I think that is why they said, “This is more than typical teenage angst.” The psychiatrist said the anger was a sign of mania, and that I had bipolar disorder.

I was always told, “This is chronic. You will have this for the rest of your life.”

At first I said “Screw you” I am not taking medications. My defiance was an asset. Looking back now it was definitely one of my biggest assets: self preservation.

But then I felt so lost in my life, I was suicidal and completely separated from other people. I had this realization that something must be seriously wrong with me, because I had tried everything and I wasn’t getting better. I thought to myself, “They must have been right all along. I must be bipolar.” So I went back to a psychiatrist, who put me on medications after our first session.

WH What would you have wanted to say to yourself instead?

LD I would say “What you are going through might just be an episode, a period in your life that you will move through and come out the other side of. You are human just like every other human being around you. You are not abnormal, you are not broken, you are not dysfunctional, you are not diseased. You are feeling emotions, which are human things, and you are feeling them in intense ways. Take some time to find people you trust to help you figure out why you are feeling this way. The answer does not lie in a bottle of pills; pills will take you even further from yourself. Despite what they’re telling you, you are not broken forever. You are not broken even in this moment.”

WH Many people reach a point of desperation, and the diagnosis and medications feel like the only place left to turn.

LD After seeing the new psychiatrist, I actually felt these incredibly powerful, positive feelings, and a sense of hope. It was amazing, I hadn’t felt hope in such along time. I truly believed everything was going to be ok, because they were going to fix me. But for the next nine and a half years

my life grew continually darker and more hopeless.

As the years went on, more medications were added. I kept telling myself, day after day, year after year, that eventually the drugs would fix

me. It never happened. I was on five medications at the same time, in very high dosages, and the suicidality got worse and worse. I lived all through my twenties assuming that I would never make it past thirty. When I look back now I realize that I had no faith in myself, because I'd come to believe I was broken, and had absolutely no power to change my life.

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WH What medications were you taking?

LD I was on nineteen different medications over more than ten years. In 2010, when I began to taper off, I was on lithium, Lamictal, Effexor, Ativan, Abilify, and Seroquel. I had the impression that the more medications I was on, the more “sophisticated” my meds regime was. It sounds perverse, but I was kind of proud, that I was so “sick” I needed all these modern drugs. I had a little pill bag I brought with me everywhere I went, like my security blanket.

WH You get attention from experts who wield special neuropsychiatric jargon. For many people it's a ritual that assures you you are being taken seriously, that your suffering is real.

LD It's human to need an answer, that something is only valid and legitimate if you have a definition for it and a label to explain what you are going through. But it's freeing to be in a place today where I don't need an answer why I feel certain things, other than because I am a human being.

At the time when I was on medications my diagnosis was the only meaning in my life, and I worked very hard at being a “good patient.” I

was on top of my “symptoms,” reporting back to my doctor. It made me feel important to be a part of the medical dialogue.

WH Somehow those “dialogues” tend to go well only as long as the doctor leads. How did medications fuel a ten-year downward spiral?

LD On medications I was profoundly emotionally, physically, and existentially disconnected from myself. I felt I was performing a role in life; nothing felt genuine. The medications also took a physical toll. My thyroid stopped functioning from the lithium, so now I have hypothyroidism, an endocrine disease. I had sexual dysfunction, cognitive issues, memory issues... I didn’t even realize it wasn’t normal to have chronic gastrointestinal problems. But the most important effect was existential. I was a slave to these medications; they were in control and I had no agency in my life. When I had a feeling or thought, I would ask myself, “is it my medications or is this my feeling? Do I even have any genuine feelings?”

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WH Were the medications helping with your symptoms?

LD Definitely not. They were perpetuating the symptoms. At one point I was on both an anti-narcolepsy medication and a sleeping medication *at the same time*. It just didn’t make any sense. I was on 80 mg of Prozac; and 400 mg of Provigil because I couldn’t stay awake during the day, which is just a massive amount. So basically I was taking intense dosages of speed, and

I was “manic” all the time during the day, racing thoughts, inability to sit still, feeling really “grandiose.” And of course at night I had such bad insomnia from the stimulants that I would be on 10 mg of a sleeping pill which would bring me down so much and I’d feel very depressed. But instead of looking at the pills I was taking, they called me a bipolar “rapid cyler” because I was going through these highs and lows. At the time

I believed it was all medically sound, and that it was my so-called “treatment-resistant mental illness” causing these problems.

WH Did they inform you about any risks?

LD The told me about minor things like headache and constipation, and that side effects would settle down in a few weeks as my body adjusted. They didn’t tell me about any potentially permanent side effects. Two months after I started lithium, my primary care doctor called and said she had never seen abnormal thyroid levels like mine. The lithium had

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given me thyroid disease. But then when I told the psychiatrist, she said, “You should feel grateful that you have Hashimoto’s disease, because out of all the auto-immune diseases, it is the most manageable, it is easy to get it right with medication. So you should feel grateful.” And I remember then actually feeling guilty for being so angry that my thyroid had stopped working. I thought, “Oh my God, who am I to be so angry? I should be grateful.” I was in a place where I had lost my voice: the unequal power dynamic was so real I was unable to question the doctor. The power psychiatry had over me was total.

WH Did the meds affect your suicidal feelings?

LD I believed my suicidal feelings were just a symptom of my bipolar disorder. I had a very serious suicide attempt in November of 2008 but actually, in the weeks leading up to that, I had recently been on high doses of Lexapro, Klonopin, and Lamictal, which had given me akathisia. Akathisia is a drug-induced agitation and inability to be still; I had this very intense energy vibrating through me. Leading up to the attempt I was incredibly

“manic,” that’s how I understood it at the time. I saw no other option than to take my life. Today I’m just so grateful am still here. I look back and see that it wasn’t me that wanted to die. It was medicated me.

WH How did you change your belief you had bipolar and needed these medications?

LD In February of 2010 I found myself on a locked psychiatric ward. I wanted to kill myself, but at the same time also I didn’t. I just knew that if something didn’t drastically change, I’d die.

I decided to quit alcohol, which was a daily part of my life after college. Ironically, alcohol became the only thing keeping me alive, because it helped me not care how hopeless and lonely my life had become. After I quit drinking I got enough mental clarity to start wondering, “Who am I off of all these drugs?” Eventually I asked my psychopharmacologist if I could try coming off. My “treatment team” did not agree for quite some time, but I persisted. Eventually, I began to taper off.

WH What difference did sobriety make?

LD Quitting alcohol ignited a sense of agency and a glimmer of hope. And then, two months after I started reducing the medications, I found Robert Whitaker’s *Anatomy of an Epidemic*. I couldn’t put it down: it was my “Aha!” moment. I realized that the meds, in fact, might have been making me “sicker” all along.

WH Was the withdrawal difficult?

LD I tapered off five drugs over five months, which is very, very fast. In the beginning, I had a lot of light sensitivity and exhaustion. I felt like I never had a moment of peace. The insomnia was horrible, and because I’d been on sleep medication for ten years, I was scared I’d never be able to sleep on my own again. Very strange smells came out of my skin, toxins of some sort, and terrible acne broke out all over my face, neck, chest, and back, in

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a way that I had never experienced before. I felt profound despair and intense, debilitating anxiety. The anxiety was beyond anything I had ever experienced. It was physical agitation so bad I wanted to rip my skin off.

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time, my head ached, the migraines were so intense that I just wanted to tear my head open. I had cold sweats. It was so horrible. It was really hell on earth.

WH What helped you through this?

LD I leaned on my 12-step community at the time: people dealing with their own emotional and physical pain, and learning how to live with their feelings. I couldn't have done

it without that community. I was also lucky to not have to worry about things like rent, a job, or caring for children. I lived with my family for almost a year as I was withdrawing.

WH How long did it take to actually start to feel better?

LD For the first three months it was hard to get out of the house, and things kept getting worse. At six to eight months in I began to feel less bad. At about a year and a half I actually started to have moments of feeling good, when I felt like I was physically healing and slowly starting to settle into my emotions. Today I am off meds completely and I have my life and my health back.

WH What advice do you have for others who might want to get off medications themselves?

LD It helped me to view the emotional, physical, and mental pain of withdrawal as a sign my body and mind were heal-

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ing. That helped me find meaning in the experience, to feel like I could keep going.

There is no one right way to come off drugs, but it is important not to rush into anything. Take some time to really think about how you want to do it and who you want to support you. Who is going to be there for you? ■