



---

## Painting a one-sided picture

*By Elizabeth L. Holzemer*

**M**y 27-year-old brother used to be an artist who proudly displayed his charcoal sketches and pastel paintings on his bedroom walls. The curly-hair, freckled-face philosopher used to be a writer who spent hours transcribing his thoughts in thick spiral notebooks.

That is how I describe my brother.

A journalist meeting my brother for the first time would notice his mismatched clothing and his eccentric personality. A journalist would recoil from his raucous laughter. A journalist would describe the world Elliot occupies with the words "delusional," "agitated" -- "mentally ill."

My brother has manic depression. Even so, I do not characterize nor base his identity solely on his medically diagnosed condition. Elliot is bright, witty and extremely talented. I don't have to qualify his existence. But journalists do.

Every day this shameful practice of reducing people with mental illness to an endless list of negative adjectives is committed in newsrooms across the country. One only has to pick up a newspaper or tune into the news to witness this inaccurate journalism. It's not uncommon to hear a broadcast journalist read from the TelePrompTer, "Up next, the story of Jon Doe. Despite his debilitating illness, he demonstrates incredible courage and has even managed to graduate from college."

At times I am embarrassed to admit that I am a journalist. I've devoted the last two years of my life to a graduate program in journalism. Of the eleven courses I took, not a single one addressed how to report on mentally ill people. Nor was a journalist's moral responsibility to provide accurate coverage of mentally ill people mentioned.

What I learned about reporting on people with mental illness I learned through my own research and firsthand experience from living with a mentally ill sibling.

When will the news media learn? The news coverage of mentally ill people is inaccurate and laced with derogatory language that only further serves to ostracize them. The media continue to paint a one-sided picture: that they are dysfunctional, violent, and a threat to the rest of us in society. Whenever a suspect is apprehended after a shooting spree or an act of violence, the first item mentioned in the papers the next day is whether or not that individual had a history of mental illness.

News media had a field day when actress Margot Kidder was discovered hungry and disheveled in a Los Angeles backyard. How could Kidder of Superman stardom fall from grace, the news media wondered. Reporters kept emphasizing what a travesty this was for someone who made us all believe she had it together. Only recently did Kidder reveal her lifelong battle with manic depression, in an interview with Barbara Walters on 20/20.

When Unabomber suspect Theodore J. Kaczynski was apprehended last April, the news media mercilessly implied that one would literally have to be mentally ill to chose to live in a remote cabin without electricity or an automobile in this century. I don't advocate Kaczynski's lifestyle, especially if he is in fact the mastermind behind a 17-year bombing rampage, which has killed three and injured 23. But my point is: the first thing the news media did was jump on the "does-Kaczynski-have-a-history-of-mental-illness?" bandwagon.

One would think reporters might take seriously the responsibility to promote positive and accurate images of the mentally ill. Yet they seem to perceive people with mental illness only in terms of what they cannot do. And subject them to patronizing and pitying attitudes.

Family and friends are forced to endure shame and humiliation as well. When I told friends about my brother's diagnosis seven years ago, which was originally thought to be schizophrenia, they did not know how to react to the news, or to me. "Was I subject to developing a mental illness too?" they wanted to know.

People could not understand how I continued to function as a healthy human being

when I was living with a mentally ill brother. Some even had the audacity to ask my plans about having children in the future. These are typical reactions; they stem from fear of contracting the illness itself. Most people's attitudes toward mentally ill people are shaped by fear. It is this same fear that further causes the media to perpetuate the myths surrounding mental illnesses.

Will the news media exercise greater care and sensitivity when covering stories about the mentally ill? Will newsrooms and TV stations across the country train their staff to accurately portray this population of our society? Will language improve?

What do we gain as a society when we allow -- or directly contribute to -- the perpetuation of the stigmatization, stereotyping, and misrepresentations of the mentally ill? Is it possible that we have become so anesthetized by the constant bombardment of negativity surrounding the mentally ill that we are beyond repairing our own moral responsibility as humans to think and act with a conscience?

---

*Elizabeth L. Holzemer is a free-lance writer who writes about disability and journalism.*