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Shattering my OCD Prison

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idea of the “wounded healer,” the self-sacrifice needed to perfect a craft to serve others in deference to taking care of oneself. More significantly, my interactions with Ignatian service programs and the inherent counseling nature that develops when a community engages in open dialogue about social and personal issues kindled a fire within me. Fueled by this passion for service, my successful academic performance only confirmed to my OCD that I would be negligent and evil to focus on anything else. However, I was able to co-habitate with my OCD because of the compassion and kinship I experienced at Saint Joseph’s. This Ignatian community shattered the first wall of my OCD prison: loneliness and my internal isolation.

This relief didn’t last, however, as I became a medical student at Creighton University. At Creighton, I decayed into a place of endless distress. My cognitive reserve was empty, and *I needed help*. I spent weeks in spiritual direction with a compassionate Jesuit who fought hard with me to focus on the distant call of future patients. But spiritual guidance was no substitute for evidence-based clinical care, and I had spent long enough convincing myself and others that I was a healthy medical student coping with the prototypical bout of imposter syndrome. As the stress and anxiety of failure paved the path for depression, solitary confinement, and further OCD ritualization, I surrendered to the awareness of my medical reality. And so, I lit my life on fire and dropped out of medical school. And thus Creighton broke the second wall of my OCD prison: the fear of accepting vulnerability.

Over the next several months, I began to dismantle the barriers that prevented me from seeking help. I started to diagnose the developmental challenges I had faced as a result of my OCD, and how this unwanted companion had influenced my personal life and professional work. I had to have the courage to lose control over the idea that I was in charge of my OCD. So, I underwent a formal psychiatric assessment, and for the first time a psychiatric professional held my truth and affirmed the diagnosis I had feared. I received enormous

consolation to be seen and heard in that moment. Cradled by the honesty of those initial therapeutic interactions, the third wall of my OCD prison fell: powerlessness against my secret illness.

After my depression lifted, I began a new position at the University of Pennsylvania in the department of psychiatry that gave me access to the Center for the Treatment and Study of Anxiety through excellent health insurance. I enrolled in a full-exposure-with-response prevention therapy course that undid the final wall inside my mind. The “what if” that defined my OCD was confronted, and the capacity to sit within the chaos of uncertainty became my strength. *Liberation through uncertainty*. I had never considered that accepting the doubt of everyday life would be the cure to my persistent anxiety. With the fourth wall of my OCD prison removed, I was free.

Liberation was the central theme of my Jesuit education as it unlocked every cognitive, emotional, and social dimension of my life. Jesuits, like Dean Brackley in El Salvador, inspired me by their courage to be witnesses to the world’s fires and become conduits of justice. I was taught to be insatiably curious and never ignore the inner rumblings our minds express when we are experiencing moments of desolation. The emphasis on reflection and personal excavation offered a blueprint for me to identify and cultivate vulnerability as a tool for growth. And the focus on communities of shared purpose propelled me to seek help. Each of these dimensions permitted me to dissect the pieces of myself I most feared. Thanks to my Jesuit education, I share my liberation in the hope that mental health be more intimately enmeshed as an outcome of Jesuit higher education in the future.

Joseph Harrison, a graduate of St. Joseph’s University (2012), is currently a graduate student in the master of behavioral and decision science program at the University of Pennsylvania. He remains active in advocacy for mental health awareness and enjoys exploring the latest coffee roasts around town.