

My dear Megan,

I hope this letter finds you in fine fettle as the autumn winds begin to blow and football weather embraces us in earnest.

This is the letter that I have been mulling for a while now. Basically it is my hope to open a fruitful conversation exploring the many paths that lead to mental illness and back again. Also to share a few strong opinions regarding the mental health biz that I hope you might find interesting.

A few weeks ago your mother told me that you had settled on a career path: quantitative psychology? Is that right? Are you still on that path? I ask because I understand the whim-of-the-week thing oh, too well. As your career path unfolds before you, I'd be proud to have offered a guiding light or two.

First of all, you must know by now that on my mother's side we have a family history of mental illness. Alcoholism, suicide, depression, anxiety disorders. You know, all the usual suspects. Happily, on my dad's side there's almost none of that. It may sound weird but I have always felt that I can distinguish influences from both sides inside my head. My life has been an ongoing study in how to fit the pieces together harmoniously.

I don't know if you have any hint of what the echo of my mother's brain might sound like inside your own head since you never knew her. But if you ever find yourself grappling with grand ideas of global responsibility, social justice, futility, judgment or God, that could be her circuitry at work. These are all very noble concepts to be sure but they absolutely must be grounded and supported by a resilient, practical mind. Otherwise a life can crumble under the weight of guilt or rage or embarrassment or despair.

Do you know who Alfred E. Newman is? Well that's my dad. "What, me worry?" As silly as that sounds, it can be a sanity saving attitude. If I've ever dropped a ball on a crusade to save the world, it's because I saw that it was risking my mental health to pursue it. While I can't quite embrace my dad's nonchalance, it has been enormously helpful to possess his self protectiveness to countervail my mother's self sacrifice.

The result is someone who is at times resigned, sometimes content, often happy to improve the world one small project at a time.

Regarding the many paths to mental illness that I mentioned, they might be summed up as asking more from a brain than it can deliver. The paths back to mental health basically combine reducing mental loads while increasing mental strength. Preventing mental illness requires knowledge and respect of a mind's limits as well as supporting a person's efforts to build up mental strength. The tools at hand are many. They include friendships, pets, exercise, meditation, gardening, art, church, work, vacations, emotional and physical intimacy, counseling, psychiatry and drugs.

As a psych major you will be asked to concentrate on the last three.

And of these three, the last will probably take up most of your attention. That is what I would most like to address. Briefly, I believe drugs can be very helpful when used sparingly and temporarily as training for the brain. Unfortunately, there are enormous forces at work to get people to take some very helpful drugs far more than they need. My wish has long been for a field to emerge in psychopharmacology devoted to getting patients off their meds in favor of non-chemical ways of building mental health. Sadly there is currently very little financial incentive for this kind of research. Perhaps with the changes we're seeing in the health care industry, outcomes might replace profits as our guiding impulse. If that happens, you might think about pioneering in this field.

That's it! The Uncle Michael lecture is over. Any questions?

Have a lovely semester and Go Irish!

Love,  
Uncle Michael