

THE MINDFUL  
SON





# THE MINDFUL SON

*A Beacon of Hope through the*

*Storm of Mental Illness*

JAMES L. HICKMAN

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Huntsville, Alabama

The Mindful Son

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To consumers of mental health services  
the world over, their families, and the  
professionals who work hard for their  
betterment



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## **List of Abbreviations**

AAMU	Alabama Agricultural and Mechanical University
CMHS	Consumers of Mental Health Services
CRDC	Consumer Run Drop-in Center
DHR	Department of Human Resources
HMCMHC	Huntsville/Madison County Mental Health Center
LSAT	Law School Admission Test
MHA	Mental Health Association
MHCNCA	Mental Health Center of North Central Alabama
MSW	Master's Degree in Social Work
NAMI	National Alliance for Mental Illness
NARH	North Alabama Regional Hospital
NASA	National Aeronautics and Space Administration
PLA	People Living with Addictions
PLMI	People Living with Mental Illness
SMI	Serious Mental Illness
SSA	Social Security Administration
UA	University of Alabama
UAH	University of Alabama in Huntsville

UASL	University of Alabama School of Law
UHC	University Health Center
VRS	Vocational Rehabilitation Services

## PROLOGUE

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The writers of fiction say that it feels to them as if the story they are telling is truly occurring, perhaps on some distant plane of reality. Although, my account really happened in this existence, the memories I invoke to provide this memoir seem strangely surreal. I don't know if my mind contains some work of fiction within its depths and am unlikely to ever find out until I share my story of real life wonder with you.

How many fiction-writers, who feel in some dark corner of their imagination that their stories may actually be real somewhere else, would continue writing if they were characters in their own works? Would a seer of such realities continue to write if he knew he stood a good chance of being roasted by a dragon or framed for some crime he had not committed?

As the chronicler of my own journey of recovery from serious mental illness, I can't afford to dwell long on such questions.

While I assure you that I will not reveal to you at the end of the story that it is all a dream, I cannot promise you that aspects of it will not seem like one.

I lost my mother at age seven, to schizophrenia, when she passed away. Thanks to the loving care of my maternal grandmother, among others, by the time I was twenty-one, I was primed to enter law school. That same year, I too, was diagnosed with this devastating disorder, after I had my first psychotic break from reality.

The year before I was diagnosed with my illness, I pedaled a bicycle across the country to raise money for children with disabilities. I never suspected that I would soon have a disability of my own.

Eventually I was in a position to remain in recovery from schizophrenia and to provide care for other people living with mental illness as a health care professional. Ultimately, I was able to rescue my older brother, Bert, also diagnosed with schizophrenia, from homelessness.

I have known vexing poverty and ample surplus in successive waves. I have been friendless and I have been loved by all. I have known hunger as an orphan without an attentive parent and been spoiled with advantages few can claim. I have been considered a fool and a genius, depending upon when people crossed my path. I have been a slacker and an athletic champion depending upon my frame of mind. A failure and a success: I finally learned what it takes to remain on top.

The events described in this journey you are embarking upon with me are significant for a variety of reasons. Anyone who seeks understanding of what having a mental illness is will discover that in these pages. They prove beyond doubt that recovery from serious mental illness is obtainable, and they provide concrete information on how this recovery can be sustained.

The wisdom I acquired through years of trial and error is now at the disposal of anyone who reads these words.

This story is inspirational! Anyone who reads this book will know that great obstacles are surmountable with determination and the application of certain principles.

Greater understanding of the community of people with mental illness and their families will be fostered in my account. Professional providers of mental health care are special people, and this book is a window into their world as well.

This is the story of the ultimate triumph of a family devastated by mental illness over the course of thirty-four years. Many dark days are recounted in this voyage, until we finally reach the light together.

I have become a messenger of good omen though its delivery is arduous and has left indelible marks upon my spirit. It is with a free heart that I now proclaim its contents to you.

## REFLECTIONS

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*I*t is the summer of 1995 and I am pedaling an Italian road bicycle across the Texas plain. The thin tires are reinforced with a special tape to support the chubby body with which I began this journey, a month ago. Thirty pounds of my flesh has now been scoured and melted away by relentless exercise in the summer sun. I, along with one-hundred of my fraternity brothers from across the nation have chosen to spend our summer making this trek in order to raise money for children with disabilities.

I am an American Studies Major at the University of Alabama, (UA), home of the Crimson Tide, and this trip seems to fit perfectly with my chosen field of study. In American Studies I have learned a great deal about the history, sociology, and literary tradition of the nation. Now I am examining much of it's topography in a very personal way as I watch my sweat drip to the earth for mile after punishing mile.

The Crimson Tide won the national championship in football, in 1992, my freshman year. I was a football champion on a city level, in my hometown of Huntsville, Alabama, but three years and too many keg parties to count have taken place since I wore a pair of cleats.

The cleats I now wear are fitted to the pedals of my bicycle. Their special design locks into place with a twist of my ankles. I had no idea that these shoes were a vital part of the gear I would need for my trip, until I had already pedaled half way across California. It was then that the reality of what I had gotten myself into really clicked in my mind. I was considered a Fitness Champion at Huntsville High School, and had my picture taken for the year book.

Three years is certainly a long time to refrain from any form of physical exercise. This really dawned upon me, the first day of our journey, when we crossed The Golden Gate Bridge, in San Francisco. Mark Twain always said that the coldest winter he ever spent was a summer in San Francisco. Now I know what he meant.

The third day of our trip I was told that we would be climbing the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Pushing that bicycle by hand up a mountain was a challenge. But when it started snowing on us, the

*task became that much more demanding. Who would have thought that snow could fall in such soul aching drifts, and in the middle of June? When one of our support vans finally rolled up beside me to carry me the rest of the way up the mountain, I didn't protest.*

*Rolled up in the blankets in the ski lodge at the top of the mountain, I still couldn't shake that cold from my bones. The next day, the vans had to shuttle all of us down the other side of the mountain, to Carson City, Nevada, the state's capitol. Our leaders informed us that bicycling downhill on ice at those speeds posed too much of a risk to our safety. I had no problem with their assessment as the idea of being splattered all over the side of a mountain would not be an appealing idea to either me, or the grandmother who raised me.*

*I want to attend the University of Alabama, School of Law, (UASL), after I graduate next year. I worked there as a copier's assistant, all last year, and have labored persistently to maintain a high grade point average. The UASL is extremely competitive, after all, and it will take more than the relationships I have cultivated with many of the law professors to pave my way there.*

*For now, I must pedal along this dreary highway, foot after foot, mile after mile. But at least I am in great shape again, and the journey is not as grueling as when I first began. Since I began this tour, I have slept beneath a blanket of desert stars and camped by a murmuring river at the bottom of a canyon inhabited by Native Americans. I have gotten in closer touch with my dreams and each mile I complete I know will bring me closer to seeing them coalesce into a beautiful reality.*

*A semi truck is speeding past me at a high rate of speed. A rock spins off one of its tires and bounces off of my helmeted head. Another one strikes me in the abdomen a microsecond later, and I feel the sharp pain throb in my gut. A feeling of despair washes over me as I contemplate how much more of this trip I have to endure. I pedal harder, now, resolved to continue on, thankful that one of the rocks didn't knock my teeth out. My mind begins to wander further now into the depths of my past, visualizing some of the obstacles I have already faced.*

I was born in 1974 and by 1975 my mother had been diagnosed with schizophrenia. Schizophrenia is one of the world's most devastating mental illnesses. It often strikes women following childbirth. When it struck my mother, much less was known about how to treat this illness than now, and the medication available in those years was not nearly as effective as today's.

The disease coursed ferociously through my mother's mind and she was never the same again. She constantly suffered frightening hallucinations and delusions, and was drained of energy by the disease and the myriad of medications she was now forced to swallow. My mother and father were divorced shortly after her diagnosis.

At age two I was removed from the custody of my mother, by the court, on the recommendation of the Alabama Department of Human Resources. I lived in a series of foster homes, until age four, when I moved, with my father and older brother, to Portland, Oregon. During those formative years my primal instincts were activated as I confronted poverty, hunger, and neglect, in an apartment complex in a poor neighborhood. I learned to navigate in the world of older and larger children who were also impoverished but who at least all seemed to have parents who were present in their lives. My father drank heavily and would leave my brother Bert and me to fend for ourselves for weeks at a time.

After my mother had been married to my step-father, Dave, for a time, the Alabama Department of Human Resources urged the court to return Custody of Bert and me back to my mother. By the time we moved back to Alabama, with my mother and step-father, both of us had been altered, emotionally, by our experiences in Oregon, much the way our mother had been altered by her mental illness. Her appearance was usually somewhat disheveled, and she often had a look on her face as if her mind was in some place far distant from where her body was.

Living with my mother, I saw her affected by the symptoms of her illness, in other ways. On one occasion she hailed down a passing police car and swore to them that

somebody was out to cause harm to herself and her children. Then she disappeared for a time and I was told that she was in the hospital. This was a recurring theme of all the delusions I saw her struggle with, in my short time with her.

After a year of living with my mother she passed away. I never learned exactly what the circumstances of her death were. I was told simply that she had a heart attack. When Dave informed my grandmother and me, what had happened I went out to the dogwood tree in my grandmother's yard and just sat there, feeling numb inside.

I was reared, from then on, primarily by my grandmother, Colice, who was assisted by a hodgepodge of families. Dave continued to support my family financially, and emotionally. My brother Bert continued to live in Dave's home, until he was twenty-five. Dave was a highly intelligent engineer and he did much to ensure that his step-children developed an intellectual mindset. He always wore threadbare clothes that he purchased from the Goodwill store that made him look very much like a Caucasian looking version of Gandhi.

My grandmother had formerly been a wealthy business-woman; however she had spent vast sums of money in her attempt to maintain the well-being of my mother. She often wore once-expensive, pant suits that had become somewhat outdated, and tended to give her the regal mystique of a Buddha.

What remained of her fortune was a duplex house in a working class neighborhood. When I was ten years old, Grandmother sold the duplex and moved us to an apartment complex in a wealthier part of Huntsville. From then on, I attended those schools that my grandmother considered the finest in our community. I eventually became the third generation of my family to graduate from Huntsville High School, and had the opportunity, thanks to my grandmother, step-father, and federal Pell grants, to attend the UA.

The events of my childhood are far more complex than can be summed up in a few words, and are certain to be of interest to people. Experts in mental health matters, of all persuasions, will want to understand the full nature of my childhood in