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The Conditioned Dysthymia of Civilization

Baba Yaga



At nine years old, my world went gray.

That is the only way I have ever been able to describe it.

Colors flattened, scents blurred, sounds faded. The intensity and enthusiasm I had for life was stolen away, and I scarcely knew it.

At eleven years old, I began to hurt myself to try to retrieve the colors. I was alive and desperate and I thought I could drag the rainbow kicking and screaming back into my life. I remembered what it was to see in vibrancy, and I was prepared to die to bring it back.

At fourteen years old, I began to forget what color looked like. I began to give up hope that I could see it again. Not on my own, anyway. It was then that I started therapy, and it was then that I started to wonder if chemicals could help me see again.

At eighteen, after being denied them for years, I was granted the pills I had begged for, pushed for, fought for.

Once a month, they asked me, “How do you feel?” and I had no answer. “Different,” I might tell them.

“Better?” they might press.

“No. Just different.”

So they would raise the dosage or change the chemical, over and over and over, but I remained the same. Different, but not better.

I wondered if I would recognize the rainbow if I saw it again.

I wondered if seeing the rainbow would be worth the side effects.

Anorgasmia, headaches, agitation, nausea, sweating, and brain zaps.

I accepted the idea that I would never enjoy sex the same way again. I accepted that I could never share a bed with anyone who wouldn't be understanding of the fact that I would soak the mattress with sweat every night. I accepted that I would be plagued with the random sensation of an electrical shock through my brain. I accepted that the mood swings I experienced would be much more intense and irrational and that I would sometimes burst into tears without apparent reason. I accepted that I would struggle to complete my thoughts or understand concepts that once came easily to me.

I accepted all these things to scratch an itch that had embedded deep within my bones.

And it never did.

I was never cured. I felt more and more failed by each chemical I tossed into the emptiness I felt.

With no small amount of despair, I began to accept that there might not be a chemical fix for my problems. But I accepted the idea that despite this, the sober, unmedicated me must be insufferable to those around me. I could hardly stand myself- how could anyone else?

One day, in between sobs, I asked my partner if they would still love me if I went off of the pills. They wrapped me in a hug and reassured me that of course they would. I felt unconvinced, but if I was no better for the pills, would I really be any worse without them?

On my own, without the guidance of the doctor I had relied on for every turn previously, I began to slowly wean myself off. My brain felt like it was not my own. The lightning that jolted through my head came even more frequently – sometimes so many times in a row that I had to sit down and wait for it to pass. Simple thoughts seemed to come as though fish swimming through wet concrete – thick and slow and difficult.

Eventually, long after my tapering was complete, these symptoms slowed too, though sometimes I feel as though they have altered me permanently. And eventually, I came to believe that the problem had never been with my brain – at least, not in the way I had been taught. Without the pills, I was not ‘chemically imbalanced’. I was traumatized, yes – both on a personal level and on a societal level – but I was not broken, sick, or damaged.

Maybe my rainbow had gone the way of my childhood – tethered down to a tiny desk and scheduled into oblivion. Maybe my rainbow had gone the way of my innocence – manipulated and violated and forced into submission. Maybe my rainbow could not be painted back into existence with serotonin and dopamine, but rather uncovered from under the dirt of trauma and the muck of societal expectations.

I see flashes of color sometimes now, years after all the drugs have faded from my system – littered among the stolen goods in a shopping cart; flitting between the bodies at a riot; sparkling in the wreckage of a fallen cop car; blinking in the gaps between freight train cars; falling from the lips of my loved ones – only a glimpse, never for long, and always out of the corner of my eye, but more than a drug ever showed me.