

In preparation for my 50<sup>th</sup> birthday, I've committed to working on myself. My goal is to do several things every day. Exercising to restore my arms to a human shape rather than the massive turkey-wattle variety, namaste-ing with yoga (and my cat who runs to the mat the second I roll it out), eating more veggies, writing my novel, and – the most difficult one – doing something that scares me. Every day. I'm type-A like that. Living on the edge.

Here are five of the anxiety spiking things I've done in the past week. I am fully aware that these make no sense, but here goes:

- Wore a white shirt
- Put my clothes down the laundry chute with jeans on the top
- Left my green plate underneath the blue plate in the cabinet
- Drove the most direct route home and turned left into the driveway instead of right
- Typed a period at the end of a sentence that ends in the letter "d"
- Listen to a radio station whose station numbers add up to any of the numbers I'm afraid of (like 9, 1, 2, 3, 0, 7, 4)

And, for reference, here are five things I've done without overwhelming fear.

- Driven 2000 miles through mountains at night during a thunderstorm, on unlit backroads I've never seen before, and in the middle of nowhere
- Pet and picked up an injured or sick bird with my bare hands to bring him to a rescue organization
- Picked up a homeless person and driven him where he needed to go
- Held the hand of a dying woman in hospice
- Attempted to help an injured rattlesnake in the middle of a road in Iowa

And here are some things I tried to do but didn't because I was too scared.

- Use one, two, four, or seven pieces of toilet paper at a time
- Keep my white shirt on when I started having more than the usual number of heart palpitations
- Write sentences as I think they should be written rather than trying to avoid typing letters that I've now associated with negative things
- Eat chocolate cereal (or any food that I have suddenly decided will be my last meal if I eat it but I'll be fine if I don't)

So by now you know something else about me. I have mental illness. I'm petrified of doing things most people do every day without a second thought, but I do things without hesitation many people are scared to do. I am Jack Nicholson in *As Good as it Gets*. For those who aren't familiar with the movie, I have obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD).

I'd say it's ruining my life, but I've become oddly attached to my OCDs and won't badmouth them. They give me the illusion of control. They make me believe, even for a second, that if I shake my thyroid med bottle 26 times before taking the sixth pill out or wear both pink and green somewhere on my body, I'll make it through the day without dying. So, I both love these little guys and loathe them.

Fortunately, they're pretty quiet, nearly invisible parasites. Unless people know me really well, they have no idea I have a co-dependent relationship with my own intrusive, irrational, yet lovingly overprotective thoughts. If they saw me drive around the block to avoid turning left into my driveway, they would probably think I was listening to NPR Driveway Moments or jamming to my favorite song. At worst, they'd think I was quirky. But the truth is darker. The shitshow inside my head is every psychoanalytic professional's dream.

I've always been an overthinker with a budding anxiety disorder. Starting when I was about seven, I would sneak my mom's nursing textbooks and read them, regularly checking out my body for signs of rare diseases. When I asked my mom if she could see my internal organs through my stomach like the kid in her book, she started hiding her books. But I kept finding them. Even Little House was traumatic for me. I worried about getting anthrax for years after seeing an episode where someone came down with it and died.

In junior high, things got worse. I started worrying obsessively about vomit. I would line the floor from my bed to the toilet with towels every night for fear I might wake up, have to puke, and not make it to the bathroom in time. I created my own barf bags and brought them with me everywhere I went in case I had to throw up and there was no bathroom nearby. And ever since the Tylenol poisonings in the '80s, I've been worried that my food has been tampered with. My brothers loved me because I would give them any piece of candy that had "holes" in it. These holes were created by air bubbles. I knew it then and know it now, but I still don't like to eat any food that has a hole that could have been created by someone injecting poison into it. And if the safety seal didn't work properly? Forgetaboutit.

(As an aside, I would never give my brothers, or anyone for that matter, food that I truly believed to be poisoned, so even as a kid, I knew deep down that my fear was irrational.)

The OCDs began, I believe, as a way to force structure into an otherwise chaotic mind. I also have diagnosed ADHD, so my brain doesn't stop. I am always thinking and thinking and thinking. One time in college I was drying my hair, and I suddenly felt extremely uncomfortable. I soon realized that, for the first time in my life, I was without a thought in my head – for five seconds tops – and it was the most disconcerting thing I'd experienced probably ever. And you know what? I haven't experienced it since. For nearly 50 years, I've only spent 5 seconds not thinking. But the thoughts aren't nicely organized or packaged. They're scattered and oddly connected.

And the OCDs bring order to the madness. They're like, "Hey, you hate structure and routine, but you need it. So make sure you put those shampoo bottles in order on the shelf, will you? Come on, it's good for you." Sneaky little bastards, they.

About 15 years ago, I tired of them. It was time to break up. I didn't need to touch that little good luck pouch on my rearview mirror before driving anymore. I could manage without them. And so I told them to eff the freak off. And they did. I went cold turkey normal, and it was awesome. Liberating. Hopeful. Refreshing. And not as lonely as you might think.

And they stayed away for a while. Until one day I must have drunk dialed them, and they agreed they'd been pining away for me as well, and we were once again all entwined, living together in near perfect harmony. For years, they stayed mostly in the background, letting me do my thing while they did theirs. I hardly noticed them, and when I did, I was happy to have them there. I was like, yo, you're cute. And they were like, hey, you're cute too. Let's check in every so often, okay?

But along came marriage, leaving a job I loved, the deep loneliness of leaving my friends and family to move to a place without a Trader Joes or a proper breakfast place, a miscarriage, nearly debilitating thyroid disease and accompanying heart problems, issues with my bio son (now resolved, thank goodness), and the big kick in the chest, foster children. And foster children trauma. And relearning everything I thought I knew about parenting. And appointments and phone calls and, well, that is a whole other story. So let's just say, in came the type of stress you don't believe you have the capacity to handle and are yet being forced to. And with the influx came the big change (not menopause, but yeah, that too) – my sweet little OCDs began brazenly inserting themselves into everything I do and don't do. They're like narcissistic, overbearing, always right house guests who won't leave and are certain they know exactly how you're supposed to have your silverware drawer organized. And then "help out" by organizing it their way. You know the type.

I am 49 years old. In less than five months, I will be 50, if I make it that long. (Just an FYI, I had to type the last part of that sentence because the OCDs tell me that if I plan for the future without a caveat, there won't be a future. Not for me anyway. And I just had an epiphany as I typed that sentence. These buggers are mean. Do what I say or you'll die is not a healthy partner who wants what's best for me. Hmmmmm. Perhaps this blog will be the break-up catalyst.)

So, like I was saying, I'm almost 50. And I've spent the better part of my life trapped by my own thoughts and fears. When you whittle down my fears, you'll find that I'm really only afraid of three things: losing the people I love, dying, and vomiting. The first is pretty standard, so we won't get into that. But the other two, well, all of my OCDs and anxieties tie into these two fears. Everything I do and worry about are related to my desire not to die or puke, not necessarily in order of importance.

Here are some fears that boil down to the fears of dying or puking:

- Flying (plane may crash, terrorists may bring it down, I may contract Ebola from a fellow passenger, or I may have a heart issue or stroke and be unable to get to a hospital on time; also, motion sickness and puking)
- Getting the flu (it may kill me or I might puke)
- Contracting a cold (I may cough so hard I puke)
- Working out hard like I used to (my heart rate will get high, which will lead to heart palpitations, which will lead to cardiac arrest, and the AED won't convert me)
- Going into a crowded public place during flu season (see getting the flu above)
- Eating in a restaurant during norovirus season (you know, because puke)
- Being near puke (because it might get me sick or make me puke)
- Getting drunk – I've never been drunk and don't plan to be (puke and loss of control)
- Eating new foods (because they may have ingredients I'm allergic to, which could kill me or make me puke)

The list is about as long as a June day in Alaska, so I won't bore you with the rest. You get the picture.

Another list that's even longer is the list of my OCDs. For reference, I have about 1050 facebook friends, and the number of OCDs rivals the number of internet acquaintances I have. Here are some. If you're easily bored, you may want to just read a few. But let's be real, if you were easily bored, you wouldn't still be reading, so just embrace the madness and stay with me. I'm guessing if you're still reading, it's because you and I are basically the same person, and your own OCD is compelling you to read on. 😊

The list is impossibly long, so I'll try to organize it by category and tell you enough that you can get a clear glimpse of what goes on inside my brain. At this point, I'm writing more for myself than anyone else, but I hope that by putting my story out there, I may help someone or lots of someones.

- I make decisions based on colors and patterns. For example:
  - I put my green Fiestaware plates on top of all other plates because they're green, which is the color of life, and because they're mine, and if my plate is beneath other plates, it's like I'm inviting myself to die and be buried first, beneath the other colored plates (who are, of course, my family members). (During Chicago Blackhawks games, we will put red plates on top because the Hawks seem to do better when their color is on top. Really. It's scientific.)
  - I'm afraid to wear certain colors and patterns for various reasons, such as black (the color of death or the black plague), blue (the color of cyanosis when you don't have enough oxygen), white (you know, the white light), purple (a more serious version of cyanosis), flowers (because they remind me of flowers on a grave), pineapples (because they are the symbol of welcoming, and I don't want

to be welcomed to the other side), grey (a related shade of black and the color of a corpse, or so I've heard), heather grey (because it's like the TV screen in Poltergeist when the evil spirits were in the house)...you get the idea.

- I must wear green and pink every day. It could be underwear or socks or a hairband wrapped around my wrist, but I must have these colors on. Because green. Is the color of life and pink is the stereotypical color of girls, and I want this girl (and my mom and daughters, of course) to continue to be alive and well. I get nervous when I take off my clothes and don't have these colors on.
- I have green and pink shampoos, conditioners, and soaps, and I use them with a certain number of pumps, washes, etc.
- I let numbers rule my life. Here are numbers I can't easily do (not just these numbers but any larger numbers that can be broken down or added up to these numbers the way 561326 boils down to 5 if you add all the numbers together until you can't add anymore):
  - 21 – the age my cousin was when he died of sudden cardiac death
  - 22 – the age my cousin almost was when he died
  - 49 – my current age because I don't want it to be my last age (this number obviously and hopefully gets larger every year)
  - 7 – because seven rhymes with heaven, and while I hope to see it someday, I don't want to invite
  - 2 – because I am one of three children, and taking away one of us would leave my parents with two; also, I don't want to be the second grandchild to die
  - 1 – because I don't want the first grandchild on my dad's side or the first granddaughter on my mom's side or the first child to my parents to die
  - 9 – because I'm 49, and I don't want an age ending in 9 to be my last age
  - 0 – I don't want zero to be the amount of life in my body or the number of seconds, minutes, days, years I have left
  - 4 – because there are five people in my original family (my parents and two brothers), and removing me would leave them with four
  - 5 – because there are six people in my original family if you count my son who was basically like a 4<sup>th</sup> child to my parents and six people in my current immediate family if you include my foster daughter, and removing one of those would leave us with four
  - 3 – three used to be a problem because everything bad supposedly happens in threes, and in my family, many people were born or died on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of the month, but I've changed that logic a bit so now I can do three because I want the original sibling group to stay together, but I still don't like to travel or do anything remotely scary on the third of the month, and I won't eat or drink anything that expires on the third of the month either because I don't want to be like the food and expire
  - So basically, right now, only six and eight are safe numbers in my head, and eight is iffy because 48 was the last even numbered age I was, and I'm afraid I may not have another even-numbered age

- Words scare me. I'm a writer, so this is a problem. And this is also something very new. I don't like words like "now" or phrases like "right now" or "at the moment" or "bye" or "goodbye". I hate the words death and die. I won't say them or sing them or write them unless I have no other choice. I say "see you later" instead of goodbye or bye, and I freak a bit inside if others say it to me. It's even gotten to the point of me changing the way I write sentences because I don't want to type too many of certain letters or end sentences with certain letters for fear I will die if I do. I don't like words that end in D or have too many Ds in them. I like words that have my initials in them, but I don't like them to be at the end of a sentence because I don't want the period, which just seems so final, like death, to be next to my initials. And I don't want the period to be next to the D either. Same reason. So I alter my sentences and try desperately to find ways to still write well without doing the things I don't feel safe doing.
- Order of things have become an issue. This is related to the thought that I don't want to die first, and therefore I don't want to be buried first. And I don't want to be the first in the ground with others on top of me (in case someone decides it's a good idea to share a grave with me). So I don't like to do these things:
  - Put anything of mine underneath anything of anyone else's. For example, my clothes in the laundry chute or in a laundry basket, plates (I've already explained), food in the fridge or cabinet, books or papers on the table, bins in storage...you name it. If there are things piled and mine things aren't on top, it scares me.
  - Have anyone's shoes or socks on top of my things. I feel like it's akin to them stepping on my grave, which of course can't happen if I'm still alive.
- Other things also have to be in a certain order or I feel afraid and uncomfortable. It's like their order is closely related to my health and wellness. Here are some of those things:
  - The remote controls on the table must be in order and also pointing in a certain direction.
  - There must be at least three things on the sink in the bathroom, but not four or five. Six would be okay, but would be too much clutter (even for me, which is saying something).
  - The pink brush in the downstairs bath must be the third item on the sink (including the faucet), but not the last item. Pink is for me, and I can't be first or second, but I don't want to be closest to the way out either. And the last item would be closest to the way out. Plus the soap is green, so I want life next to me.

I am really struggling with this. I mean, I know I have a lot of issues. I know that my OCDs are ruling my life (and at this point, coming close to ruining it). But until I wrote this, which I was VERY afraid to do and am still afraid for having done (I wrote die, dying, and death several times), I didn't see the gravity of it all. I thought I was functional, like a high functioning alcoholic thinks they're fine despite starting to drink every day at the stroke of 11am. But unlike most people who suffer from alcoholism, I don't think I can stop whenever I want to. These OCDs are part of me, and I don't know what to do without them. I fear that if I give them up again, I will die. Like instantly.

And though I am afraid of dying, it's not for the reason you might think. I don't fear a lack of existence really. I don't fear what happens after I die *for me*. I fear what will happen to the people I leave behind. And while I don't really have any friends who I believe would be there for me no matter what, I do believe that if I die while my parents are still alive, it would devastate them. I saw it happen when my cousin died at 21. And I fear what will happen to my son who, even at 29, still relies on me and to my husband who would likely never let himself love again and to my adopted and foster children who have stability for the first time in their lives. What would come of them?

It seems to me, writing this, that I place a lot of importance on my own existence in other people's lives. I know that they'd be okay, that they'd find a way to move forward. But I also know that if I lost any of them or my brothers, I'd be lost. I'd shrivel up and peter out, become a shell of who I am. And that feeling is not something I ever want to be the cause of for someone else. So I continue to hold onto these little bastards because I don't know what else to do.