

# Introduction

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## Call and Response

*Lukas Klessig*

My father was many things, some of which remained hidden until now. His was a life of service, but also a collection of contradictions. Periods of gloom, despair and languor fragmented his activity and accolades. He measured himself by the contributions he made – to family, to society, to the environment, to the many social movements in which he directly participated.

Never one to simply spectate, except when an unwell mind sidelined him, he had a direct hand in the Civil Rights movement, the anti-war movement during the Vietnam War, many iterations of the environmental movement, and several other causes.

Above all, he was an educator, bent not only on being on the right side of history, but on teaching others how to do the same. He devoted much of his life to teaching thousands: in universities, in schools, in special programs, on environmental projects and assignments, and as a father and unrelenting thinker.

His teaching reflected his commitment to future generations. Upon learning that he carried the APOE4 gene linked to the development of Alzheimer's disease, my father realized that the knowledge, experience and angst collected over his lifetime would soon be lost. He decided

to share his insights in a memoir he titled *A Good Life with Bad Genes: Living with Bipolar Disorder and the Prospect of Alzheimer's* and a companion collection of essays he called *Apologies to My Grandchildren*.

This body of work is a personal story but also an apology to future generations on behalf of his boomer generation – and a call for them and us to do better. My father believed, correctly, that his generation had been poor stewards of the world they were handing down to their children and grandchildren.

The manuscript he left behind was more than just an apology though. My father was issuing a challenge to the younger generations, to anyone who might read his thoughts. The world faces many serious problems ahead, most of them of our own making – political turmoil, climate change, environmental degradation, and a passivity within the population that keeps us from solving these ongoing and impending crises.

We have so far failed, collectively, to rise to the challenges before us.

## **The Challenge**

My father understood facing immense challenges on a personal level. He was a good man, an accomplished man, but not without problems. He spent much of his life battling personal demons and his own restless mind. Most notably, he suffered arduously with bipolar disorder. Everything he did in life, which as you will see was plenty, was accomplished despite swings between immobilizing depression and edgy, raw mania.

In the popular imagination, as well as in mainstream culture, bipolar disorder is often conceived of as long stretches of sadness and empty days punctuated by periods of energy and euphoria. The sufferer might sulk

around their dark house for weeks when suddenly the clouds part and they have a breakthrough of joy and motivation.

Most people with bipolar disorder experience something different than that depiction. The long bouts of depression are absolutely true. But the opposite of depression is rarely euphoria. Bipolar disorder causes people to cycle between depression and *mania*. Some bipolar people enjoy blissful periods of exhilaration, but they are in the small minority.

Mania, for people like Dad, is rarely pleasant, characterized by agitation, anxiety, and a restless uncontrollable energy. Rather than feeling joyful, they tend to feel on edge and out of control. Some bipolar people experiencing a bout of mania *are* out of control and sometimes veer into delirium and worse. That psychosis can produce hallucinations, delusions and outbursts.

My father only descended into delirium once and ended up in a psychiatric ward as a result. Otherwise, he would endure episodes of nervous and unextinguishable energy when mania started to surface. His mind became restless, his demeanor singularly driven by tasks near and distant, his irritability heightened by any hindrance to their completion. Mania relieved the slog of his depression, but it was far from enjoyable.

Still, he preferred his manic self over depression because mania at least allowed him to get things done. People in a manic state often engage in reckless behavior. They may not comprehend risks and danger or they may fall into the hedonism of drugs, alcohol, or harmful sexual habits. My father didn't do any of those things. He was far too principled, pragmatic, and strong-willed to engage in self-destruction or impulsivity. He threw himself into work and his ambitions instead,

sometimes working himself into a state of utter exhaustion that could have landed him in the hospital.

That compulsive drive wasn't pleasurable, but he still craved these periods of productivity. His ambitious character made him hate being idle or feeling useless. When those hated feelings arose with depression, weeks or months became nearly unbearable. Self-loathing and helplessness combine to crush someone who has always been compelled by a sense of duty, service and accomplishment. Mania was uncomfortable but at least he could get things done.

In this way, my father learned to navigate the bipolar storm fronts of his twenties and thirties, toiling furiously in the weeks when mania gave him a reprieve from the suffocating depression. His life moved in fits and starts around his bipolar swings but at least he was moving, at least he was progressing forward. For these decades, my father didn't have the tools to escape these dramatic cycles between depression and mania. He ultimately just found ways to grapple with the unsteadiness and anguish of such drastic highs and lows and struggle through.

For a long time, his strategy of whirlwind productivity during manic episodes worked so well that he was able to camouflage his disorder almost entirely despite his many obligations. He maintained a hyper-productive academic and activist life and early career by cramming all of his work into the few weeks each semester when mania fueled his output. When that wave of energy started emerging, he would get as much done as he could, spending day and night in a productive frenzy before slipping back into the black hole of lethargic depression.

My father was a functional manic and a despondent depressive. Each persona took a heavy toll on his life and his psyche. Mania bestowed the ability to contribute and achieve but robbed him of the satisfaction that neurotypical people enjoy from accomplishment.

Depression represented a vast void. Life was an uncertain balancing act with the spectre of depression and the risk of manic exhaustion ever present.

Throughout everything, the depression never killed his spirit or ambition. The mania never sabotaged his goals or principles. He would not let them. Even when his mind betrayed him, he still *wanted* to and *needed* to accomplish things. That need and purpose spurred him on and left him intent on living as healthy and full a life as possible.

As we will see, this resilience came not just in spite of his disorder, but also because of his struggle. He was determined not to let bipolar disorder ruin his life and that determination repeatedly rescued him from doomful despair and untenable frenzy.

## **What Dad Knew**

The story which follows ensures that Dad's insight doesn't leave this world with him. His need to contribute before facing diminished abilities wrought by cognitive decline from early onset dementia sparked his most profound and personal writing. Through the chronicle of his dramatic journey, his greatest desire was to help future generations navigate the world his generation had imperiled and to show those battling mental illness that they could prevail. He would not allow death or Alzheimer's to threaten that endeavor.

The book you hold in your hands is that story along with my own reflections. My greatest desire is to share his story with people who could benefit from its wisdom while offering my own perspective on the author, my Dad. I think that you will find his journey a beautiful and provocative narrative, an entertaining meditation on the tribulations of

the human condition and a call to contribute to the betterment of the world no matter what challenges you face. Dad's example of strength despite flaws and purpose despite uncertainty have nurtured my soul. I know that these words could do the same for others. It is my obligation to share them.

I have, therefore, framed this book as a call and response. My father's call and my response. Teacher, student. Father, son.

My father left behind so much to ponder – an overwhelming amount, actually. His full manuscript comprises hundreds of pages of memories, anecdotes and introspection and another hundred or so individual essays. Given the great breadth of this work, I have chosen to focus on the first part of his narrative, those pages that deal most directly with his early life as a student and activist when his struggle with bipolar made his life a compelling drama of trauma and tenacity.

Too many people dealing with mental illness or other major challenges simply give up. They lay down and die. They're still living, in the most literal sense, but they succumb to the death of their potential – slowly, day by day. They lose forward momentum and their pursuit of greater meaning and purpose. My father almost died from such hopelessness. The fight to live, to thrive, can seem an impossible battle. It is not.

We all face adversity, setbacks, burdens of some sort. Without a sense of heartfelt purpose, it becomes far too easy to let difficulties define your present and future. My father understood that his existence was, and would be, maligned by bipolar disorder. But illness does not equal death and he refused to be a victim of his illness. That fortitude has inspired and guided me through my own mental illness reality.

Dad showed me that while you cannot simply wish any problem away, you can face challenges head on with the tools of ambition and purpose. These tools can be fuel for your fire, they can ignite and keep

your flame burning. People are never “cured” of bipolar disorder (and most other mental illnesses). There is no pill you can take to make it disappear. Psychological therapies and lifestyle strategies can make the condition more manageable, but they are not perfect. What my father’s turbulent story reveals most clearly is, yes, the importance of treatment but, even more, the vitalness of purpose and consistent goal-seeking.

Bipolar disorder, as well as the specter of Alzheimer’s that shadowed his later years, tested my father’s sanity and taxed his mind and body. However, through it all, he accepted the hand he was dealt. He was not a victim. Tough times only made him work harder to reach his cherished goals. Recognizing the fragility of his mind only made him more undaunted in reaching them, including the completion of his manuscript. Without the very real prospect of losing his mind, his efforts to write these words for clarity, posterity and others’ benefit might have dissipated into complacency.

To be clear, he didn’t, and I don’t, glorify mental illness or belittle suffering. My father simply understood that his diagnoses (his bipolar nature, the threat of dementia) could be both a blessing and a curse. He refused to allow these afflictions to limit him, to steal his identity and intentions.

That resilience is the lesson I hope this story, as a collaboration, imparts to you as well. Serious and even grave challenges may cause you twists and turns, detours, setbacks – but what is that road but life itself? If you can retain and reinforce your purpose, if you can focus on what you want your life to mean, if you can keep your flame burning – if nothing, not even major mental illness can destroy your ambitions – you will be charting a path to fulfillment. Perhaps, to a good life with bad genes.

Like my Dad did.

## SOUL IN ICE

Lowell L. Klessig  
July 23-24, 1977  
Portage, Alaska

Like menthol t'was cool  
Like sky it was blue.  
Bluer even than sky  
The blue thru and true.

Of heart it had none  
10,000 years in a bowl,  
But break now a piece  
And peer into a soul.

Broken and melting  
To sea goes the soul.  
Sculptured by sun and wave  
The soul is still whole.

Some in bergs have grown  
Hoary in summer's stew.  
Mustache of mountain black  
But with soul still blue.

Portage they call it,  
Tanaina Indians, Chugach Eskimoes  
And Russian fur traders,  
Glacier trail of no mosquitoes.



It's retreating now  
Leaving a lake,  
Where the icebergs float  
Until small they break.

To and down the creek  
They bob-bob and play,  
Changing with every wave  
A new sculpture every day.

While the big ones lay  
Giant ships in blue bold,  
Afraid to hardly move  
Momentum in hold.

Giants slowly dying,  
The icy bier not fully cold  
Enough to save the soul  
Till this story is told.

# The Itch

Lukas Klessig

Michael Levin

A Component Exercise

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My father, especially when tilted toward mania, always needed to be doing something – something important. The mission was accomplishment and it crept into all aspects of life. All work didn't make him a dull boy, as the saying goes, but frivolous pursuits didn't interest him.

He cared deeply about his work, but also family, politics, creativity, conservation, travel. As a young man, much of his restless energy funneled into risk-laden activism. Later in life, he would redirect it into family, academia, teaching, writing.

When an idea or task was important to my father, he would have no peace until he fully explored or achieved it.

This task-oriented focus and singular determination kept him plowing ahead – but not without cost, not without drawbacks. His mind never felt like it had enough, his ambition and accomplishment never coalesced into victory.

When you think this way, you never feel fully successful no matter how much you achieve. That insistent itch that Dad had, you can never quite alleviate it, not completely. Any sense of resolution remains elusive, fleeting, distant. The more you do, the more work you see ahead of you.

This mission that never ends often intensifies with mania, but it doesn't have to. I experience a similar unquenchable drive for fulfillment and achievement and, while a tendency toward bipolar traits is in my genetics, I am never fully bipolar or manic.

Clinical depression, akin to that which Dad suffered as part of his bipolarism, does occasionally strike me down. Yet, even in the fog of depression, the drums of pent-up ideas, of unfinished creations, continue their diffused pulse.

Like Dad, for my whole adult life, I have navigated a nervous energy and a quest for contentedness that hovers perpetually just out of reach – so goes the itch.

The itch is a double-edged sword that I, too, have attempted to wield. I share Dad's impulse for doing and his physical and mental intolerance for idleness.

This unquiet nature is a bonanza for productivity, but much of the time, it really can feel like a curse. The next task always needs immediate attention. The taste of victory is semi-sweet, but increasingly diluted by the tide of duties to come. My father recognized that saccharine flavor all too well.

When the Civil Rights Movement succeeded in its major goals, when the troops came back from Vietnam, when his conservation ideas became legislation, Dad was still looking, still searching for wholeness, still running the last mile.

He remained on that treadmill his whole life, straight through his career, into retirement and on his death bed. With every milestone passed, he was always instigating a pestful compulsion for more purpose – so goes the itch.

My feet follow the same never-ending path. The road always continues beyond the destination.

Fortunately, I've found a few ways to rest along the way.