Blog
Spirituality



Balboa Beach, California, the place I go to care for my mental health (Jaesen Evangelista)



by Jaesen Evangelista

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Editor's note: *Notes from the Field includes reports from young people volunteering in ministries of Catholic sisters. A partnership with Catholic Volunteer Network, the project began in the summer of 2015. This latest round of the series features volunteers in Orange, California; Nazareth, Kentucky; and New York City. Read more about Jaesen here.*

I went to Balboa Beach this past week. For the first time, I couldn't step into the sun and bask in the sea air like I always used to do. Instead, I watched dozens of kids playing in the sand and swimming in the water.

Their eyes were wide open at every shell they found, and they ran with excitement when waves crashed on them. The children had no worries, no guilt. They were just happy to be at the beach.

At that moment, I cried. I wanted to be a child with them, playing and running. I so wanted what they had. I wanted the strength to be happy just as they were, to have no worries or guilt. I wanted to have their youthful curiosity, their innocence in learning about the world, and their confidence to show their true selves.

I went to the beach for a reason that day, and I was reminded of it when I saw the children. I so deeply, truly, desperately wanted to never have to struggle with my depression.

In August 2020, childhood trauma, toxic romances, the recent death of my father, and the COVID-19 pandemic forcing me to cope with everything on my own were enough for me to go into a deep and crippling numbness. So, I saw a psychiatrist and was diagnosed with depression.

I felt many different emotions. I was afraid that people would see me as a failure, a fraud. I was ashamed of being seen by my family and friends as the worst of me. But, more than anything, I was numb. I was exhausted. I was sleepwalking in my own life.

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After a lot of time reflecting on myself with my psychiatrist and being asked what felt like 100 questions, I was given my diagnosis. However, I wasn't cured; I wasn't even close. I only labeled the hardship I would struggle with for the rest of my life.

And now, almost two years since my diagnosis, I am still struggling and even more so. Though I have some strength in understanding my mental health, though I have been to dozens of therapy sessions, though I have done every self-care activity from journaling to meditating ... I am still angry, afraid and ashamed. I still don't want anyone to see that I struggled. Or, if anyone did, I only wanted them to see when I triumphed over my depression, never the times I fell apart, never the dark thoughts that plagued my mind. I wanted people to know that I am completely in control.

But the truth?

I am weak; I can't just be happy and do the things I want to do without taking half a day to get up and do them. I am never kind to myself; I always worked hard but never felt like it was enough for self-love. I lived only for the approval of others; I feared letting people down and not living to their expectations. I hated almost everything about myself.

And though it pains me to show these broken parts even in the midst of my struggle, I realize it's more painful to hide. It's more painful to lie. It's more painful and even more exhausting to never show the full picture of who I am.

This is who I am. I am Jaesen Evangelista, I am doing a year of service, and I have depression.

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I was recently urged to take a break to check on my mental health. I was struggling to sleep and eat. I was dreading every day, even if it meant doing something I usually enjoyed. And soon enough I would feel numb like I used to.

I so desperately wanted to push through and say that everything was OK. I wanted to appear as happy and healthy, and, most importantly, strong as I could be to show that I am good enough for serving others.

But it was painful and exhausting. That wasn't the true me.

Though most people think volunteering and service years are for the most virtuous, most strong, and most healthy individuals, that is not the truth. To be honest, I am none of those things. In fact, I am quite the opposite. I make bad decisions, I am weak, and my physical and mental health are terrible.

Upon reflecting on myself and my service year in my time of healing, I learned you don't have to be perfect to do a year of service. You don't have to hide your struggles when serving the poor. You don't have to be tired anymore from trying to convince everyone that everything is always OK. All you have to be is you, the real and honest you.

In fact, a year of service is precisely about finding your true self.



(Jaesen Evangelista)

From finding my own spirituality, living my father's legacy, and advocating for immigrant rights, I have come so far in my journey of finding myself. I know who I want to be, what social injustices I want to change, but most importantly, I am consistently learning how to care for my mental health, even if it means taking a break I do not want to take.

This is the exact place to be a child again, to let go of all of life's worries and insecurities and go on a new journey of being your true self.

You will have your eyes wide open and explore excitedly among all the possibilities before you, to indulge in your youthful curiosity, your innocence in learning about the world, and your own confidence to be your true self. But you will also experience downfalls, despairs and disappointments.

You will miss home, you will not always adapt to your service site, and you will feel that you are failing yourself. And all of that is part of your journey. You are meant to find peace, but also find challenges. Your journey will bring fortune and failure.

No matter what your journey may bring, you will always find new ways of reinventing yourself, healing yourself. This is what a service year can offer you.

And with that journey, you will be supported. You will be welcomed and understood. I am blessed with a community and service site that is fighting alongside with me during my battle with depression. And you will have that too, no matter your own battles.

I used to think that I had to hide all my faults and failures during my service year. I thought I had to cover who I am to be considered of worth: worthy for my program, worthy for my friends, worthy for writing, and even worthy for life itself. I used to feel unworthy of stepping into the sun and sharing my true self, my true journey with both victories and defeats.

But now I stand before you writing and sharing as I fight my depression. Yes, I struggle every day; yes, I fail; yes, I fight.

You and I can show our true selves; we can continue our journey of self-discovery and experience both our successes and sufferings.

This story appears in the **Notes from the Field** feature series. View the full series.