

Let me tell you about my kitchen floor.

My home is the headquarters for a circus that includes two boys under age 5, two dogs, and two semi-adults trying to make it all stay functioning. That means my kitchen floor frequently is a graveyard of cheerios, partially chewed tennis-ball chunks, Topo Chico bottlecaps and chicken nugget fragments. It's the closest room to our garage, which means it is the most traversed room in my home. It is a central highway and a cafeteria, a holding tank and a creative zone, a jungle for explorers, a jail during cops-and-robbers games, a scavenging chihuahua's first stop every morning, a runway for imaginary airplanes, and a meeting room for big decisions or late night talks.

Usually, it's a mess. But because my wife is a brilliant boss babe, "we" manage to get our crap together enough to clean it now and again. So it was mostly clean on the day in particular that I want to tell you about.

That kitchen floor is the place where I realized I no longer understood my greatest asset and my most comfortable tool: my mind.

To finish the story about my kitchen floor, I need to back up.

Let me tell you about my brother.

I was born 14 months after my brother. We were the youngest two boys of four siblings. We were inseparable for most of my life. In 1989, my brother talked me into running away from home. I was 4, he was 5. He drove the Barbie power-wheel jeep we had inherited from my sister, and he somehow persuaded me that even though there wasn't room for two in the jeep I could walk beside him and push the bubble mower, as if that magically would help me keep up. Eventually a neighbor found us a mile or so down the road and returned us home.

My brother was that influential. He was confident, certain, clear, and convincing. And he was brilliant.

I followed him down the dirt road when we ran away, and I would continue to follow him for the next 20 years. I followed him to Texas A&M, into my major, into my first job, and into all the social circles we ran in. We finished each other's sentences. We spoke a non-verbal language. We thought the same and made the same decisions. Then, at some point, our paths diverged.

I met my wife. I graduated college. I moved away and went to grad school and started a family.

My brother found himself without his runaway buddy for the first time.

Not by intention or design, our realities began to differ. My brother's reality involved a private battle with depression, and a more public battle with alcoholism, battles he was unable to run away from. The depths of those battles were more merciless and perfidious than I understood. I might talk more about those battles in another space, but for now I will tell you that after a dark decade in those battles, he found a new road in recovery. After ten years of life-threatening

depression and alcoholism, my brother connected with a recovery community that brought him back into light. His brilliance and certainty were back, and those traits were now paired with brutal kindness toward those who suffered and those who were marginalized. His caring was unrelenting, his compassion was argumentative. But some battlefields are hard to leave.

In January, 2018, my brother killed himself.

He had been sober for 19 months. He had been teaching at a rehab facility. He confronted life-and-death and anguish and victory on a daily basis. He was a hero. He was also facing a silent, looming mountain. I am proud of him for fighting as long as he did.

Now let me tell you about me.

A month before my brother died, I had a panic attack that rendered me catatonic. It lasted for two days. I felt short-circuited in a way I didn't understand. It felt like a switch had been jolted loose inside me, and I couldn't even figure out where it lived. I blamed the stressful nature of my job, some changes in the structure of my organizations, and some uncertainties in my expectations and skillset. The truth is, I had been masking depression for a couple of years, and as it lurked, untreated and unrecognized, I was becoming less able to keep it in check. That growing creature manifested in anxiety.

Then I got the call about my brother. The world fell out from under me. I spent a week at my hometown. His funeral was on a Friday. I was back in the office on the next Monday. One week later (on his birthday) I took a group of students on a two-state research trip. When I got back from the frantic distraction of travel, the shock and delay wore off. My new reality hit. I had built my identity around being joyful and carefree for my whole life. I had been unflappable and indomitably optimistic. And suddenly I was convinced that I would never be joyful again, that I would never be able to relax again, that I could never be present and mindful again. A horizon of helplessness swallowed me.

I had no experience with how to react to this unfamiliar landscape. Thanks to the providential guidance of some close friends, I made an appointment with a counselor. Eventually, at the counselor's recommendation, I got an appointment with a medical doctor. He diagnosed me with severe anxiety disorder, and major clinical depression. I remember leaving the doctor's office numb, dumbfounded, confused, and scared.

That night, I was putting away dishes from the dishwasher. My wife was putting away some of our infant's bottles. My oldest son was in bed. I opened a cabinet to put away a casserole dish and I froze. I am not sure exactly how it happened, but in my memory I sunk, or maybe even liquefied—like a cartoon character—slowly and quietly dripping to the kitchen floor. I was on my knees, with my face inches from the floor, and all I managed to do was whisper, "How did this happen?"

My wife turned and saw me, and in an instant she was next to me. She was scared and confused. Logically she asked me what was going on. I couldn't talk, much less answer in a way that made sense.

As I wept there on the kitchen floor, my wife sat right next to me. The Cheeto crumbs and broken crayons watched in silence from their stations under the edge of the dishwasher. I struggled to accept the pressing reality: My most trusted and reliable tools—my brain, my heart, my spirit, my charm, my whole self—felt unfamiliar.

Time stopped.

We sat in silence for an eternity. The cold floor and cracked grout felt tangible, and important, and timeless. We both came to a silent realization: This will be hard. This will be the worst hard time. This will be life-changing.

I cried until my lungs hurt. I cried until I was sapped and drained. And then I finally managed to open my eyes. My wife hadn't moved. She was there. Quiet. Steadfast. Near.

I came to another realization. I couldn't do this alone, and I didn't have to.

I got up off the floor.

Don't get me wrong, I am still on that kitchen floor, making sense of the fleeting and distorted horizon that happens to everyone as we grow up. And even in rational moments that have come since, part of me still wants to be there on the kitchen floor with my wife. Staring down uncertainty. Together. Frozen in time.

But even though I will always be in that moment, time keeps moving.

So I got up off the kitchen floor.

Some days that is easier than others. There are still more bad days than good. But in the midst of this battle, I am learning.

I am learning that even though I thought I understood the importance of mental health, I unequivocally underestimated this fight.

And unfortunately, I am not the only one.

More than 40 million American adults have a mental health condition. That's almost 20% of the adult population of the USA. The number of youth with severe depression is at an all-time high worldwide, and has doubled since 2012. Of those with diagnosed depression, 76% are either insufficiently treated or not treated at all.

Suicide is the second leading cause of death among 18-25 year olds.

I have heard about crises facing our country: opioid epidemic, generational disputes, gun violence, the tide pod challenge even got national attention. But too often, that scene plays out on

a kitchen floor somewhere, and the silence is deafening. I am so grateful my beautiful wife is there to help me keep moving.

With her help, and with God's grace, there are three ways I keep getting up off that floor every day. I love myself and forgive myself by working on myself Mentally, Physically, and Spiritually.

The first way is Mentally.

Our brains are weird. I don't claim to understand them, but I recognize that when I partake in select activities, I feel better, and my mind works better. For example, I see a counselor regularly. That was strange for me at first. I thought therapists were for people with worse problems than me. The truth is, therapists are for everybody. Go see somebody to help you make sense of what bothers you, and what doesn't, and how to keep all that together.

I also journal as often as I can. I don't intend for anybody to sit down cross-legged and write out "Dear Diary..." every day. For me, journaling is usually an email to myself or a scribble bullet list in a notebook. It chronicles where I am, what I have been thinking and doing, and it helps me relieve some of the weight piled up in my thoughts. I don't spend a lot of time on it, but the more I do, the better I feel.

Lastly, I make lists. You probably thought of to-do lists when I said that. But there is a problem with to-do lists. They frequently turn into scary and intimidating displays of what we haven't yet finished or accomplished. That can be counterintuitive. So I make "did lists" instead. Every day, I make a list of at least three things I did that day. Sometimes I write it. Sometimes I type it. Sometimes I think it out loud on my drive home. But however the list happens, I take a second to be grateful for all those things. That sets me up to build momentum for the next day.

The second way is Physically.

Our bodies are weird. I don't claim to understand those either, but I recognize that there are some things that make mine work a little better. The first one is sleep. I used to pride myself on my ability to sling 12 cups of coffee in a day and power through with max energy and productivity on two hours of sleep. Now I recognize that is neither healthy nor productive. I am more careful, more deliberate, and better at all the things I do when I am well rested. You are too. I mean it. And my product on 100% functionality is always better than more products on 50% functionality. More than that, I manage my emotions and my self-perception better when I get a full night of sleep. Get good sleep. And getting good sleep takes good planning.

I also exercise at least four days a week. I don't know how all the machines in my gym work, and my mile time is probably slower than everyone who might read this. But I ALWAYS feel better after a workout than I did before it.

Finally, when I eat better, I feel better. I gave up Dr. Pepper and lost 20 pounds. The truth is, eating healthy doesn't have to be hard. And we all work better when we make little changes to be mindful about our diet.

The last way I propel myself to getting up off the kitchen floor every day is Spiritually. Of all the things I don't understand, this may be the biggest one. Our souls are complicated. And in this passage, I don't aim to influence how you believe, I only mean to tell you what I KNOW works for me.

Gratitude is a fruit that yields better harvests in the future. The more thankful I am, the more I have to be thankful for. As a Christian, I know that God called me to give thanks in all circumstances. That didn't say to give thanks FOR all circumstances, but to give thanks IN all circumstances. No matter what I am facing, I have a counselor and a guide to help. I made a goal a year ago to foster deeper gratitude every day. One way I do that is to write a letter every week to someone who has been on my mind over the last few days. I started out trying to handwrite them, but now I email them. The point is, I make them long and meaningful. And each of them leads me to a place of expressing gratitude for the team around me. Each time, I am blown away by how much better I feel.

In addition to finding gratitude. I spend a few minutes each day meditating. That sound hippy and weird, but its more pragmatic than it sounds. I begin each session by thinking about Psalm 46:10 (Be still and know that I am God). And then I force myself to be still, and to listen. I find meditation is most effective after I spend some quiet time with my bible, or after reading a daily devotional. I am going through Richard Blackaby's Experience God Day-by-Day with a friend right now. Every time I read, I spend a minute to meditate on what that means, and to clear my mind and my heart of the noise.

The last, and most transformative thing I have seen since I lost my brother, is that serving others makes my own life and health better. I got talked in to helping with Kindergarten through Second Graders at my church on Wednesday nights. It's weird. Kids are weird. Especially when they aren't mine. But every time, I find new life and light. The more we pour into others, the more we are filled up.

This has been a long, indulgent activity. But it's important to me. Shannon's legacy is important to me. You are important to me.

I am thankful to have found that kitchen floor, and I am eternally grateful that I have so much to learn and to do. I am thankful for my wife. I am thankful for my sons. I am thankful for the strength to get up. And I know that whoever you are, you can get up too.

Let's keep getting off the floor. Together.