

Embracing Vulnerability with Louis Theroux

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I'm a major Louis Theroux fan – I've got the t-shirt, the tote bag and he's my dream dinner guest. My adolescence was spent watching his documentaries, fascinated by the curious interview style – his awkward yet approachable mannerisms that put his interviewees at ease, even in the most difficult of circumstances. After a dive into the world of his weird and wonderful subjects, I would return to the comfort of my normal life. This routine hit a snag in 2017 with the broadcast of *Talking to Anorexia*, in which Theroux focused on two of London's eating disorder treatment facilities, one of which was my home-away-from-home in my late teens.

While my anxious brain had imagined scenarios that might expose my past, none of these involved prime TV and an idol of mine. I'd never met Theroux and yet here I represented one of his case studies. My initial reaction was one of denial, with plans to strike it from Theroux's portfolio. Yet I wanted to get ahead of people asking my thoughts on it, unaware of my close connection to the content. I watched for the wrong reasons, still reeling in shame and trauma, with the experience having a less enjoyable Truman Show quality to it.

Over the years I've become more accepting of this period of my life, the silver lining being that I have a far better understanding of mental health, and recently decided it was time for a second viewing of the documentary.



Past behaviour

Ironically, I have always loved food, sharing recipes with friends, hosting dinner parties to a Monica-like degree and writing about it for work. Yet, consumed by the ambition to ace my A levels in 2013, I set up a study schedule that left little time for food. An unhealthy medley of knowledge and stress filled the ever-shrinking space in my stomach until I became a shell of myself, physically depleted of fuel and mentally detached from the bubbly woman I had once been. On results day I recall feeling numb as I stared at my perfect grades. Missing on the list was the sole qualification necessary for survival: health – a failure I didn't acknowledge since it wasn't academic.

Among other things, the documentary explores the relationship between patients and parents. I

remember mine watching my every move, or as Theroux puts it “treading on eggshells”. When they politely asked me to eat more, they were met with outrage from a teen who felt infantilised during her coming-of-age years. There were instances of carefully-worded comments and crinkled brows from my loved ones, all of whom tiptoed around the gangly gazelle in the room. “I’ve got it under control”, I would repeat on cue with a reassuring smile. Control, absolutely. Under control, far from it.

When university came around, I convinced them that a freshers’ diet of alcohol and Dominos pizza would do the trick. My personality, however, had already fallen victim to the illness, leaving a meek mannequin who didn’t fit in. Kilos drastically disappeared, and I was admitted to hospital by reading week of the first term.

Adjustment period

My journey began with a week at an eating disorder clinic near my university before a transfer to London – a godsend for my parents who were alternating a three-hour round trip to face a daughter they no longer recognised in appearance or attitude. I banned my sisters from visiting, believing that it wouldn’t be real if there were no witnesses. They turned up regardless, their loving stubbornness mirrored by my lack of eye contact and one-word answers.

As I watch the documentary, I relate to someone off-camera who hurls “prison” when asked how it feels to be at the facility. Screams from patients would penetrate my already nightmare-rich sleepless nights, along with pinpricks to check my blood sugar level. It was a freedom-less alternative to the classic freshers experience. While those in halls were playing drinking games, I was receiving a daily cocktail of vitamins, blood tests, and a ban on leaving the premises.

The documentary also brought back memories of meetings with doctors, where I would make my case for discharge – a practical version of a university essay, backed up by facts such as consistent weight gain and “healthy bloods”. I returned to university after Christmas, with a year ahead of weekly weigh-ins and blood tests. My hallmates, though aware of my disappearing

act, were caring, judgement-free and even partook in my calorie-rich smoothie supplements. In a twisted way, it brought us closer together.

Secret’s out

To this day, however, few of my friends know about this period of my life. Part of the difficulty with talking about my experience with the illness is the misconceptions surrounding it – that anorexia is an unhealthy desire to be thin. My experience bore no relation to this, and I have always felt frustrated with assumptions that I wanted to be size zero. The documentary addresses such stereotypes, with professionals describing its association with control, adversely affecting personality traits of obsession, compulsion and perfectionism. The programme concludes by describing it as an illness that “intertwines itself with positive qualities like conscientiousness and self discipline and makes them poisonous”.

I was struck by Theroux’s behaviour in this documentary, visibly moved by the suffering of those in the grips of the illness. At times he struggles with his words, worried that he might trigger the patients’ disordered behaviour. Other moments include comments filled with empathy. “I’m so sorry that you’re going through this”, later adding that “no shame should be attached” to her symptoms. Shame goes hand-in-hand with eating disorders and is something that I’ve struggled with since the day I was admitted to hospital. After being discharged I feared bumping into a patient I met “inside”, someone who could shatter the defensive walls I had built around me. Only now do I realise that I was detached from the positive aspect of such an encounter: proof that both of us have recovered and are living in the real world.

Of course there are still moments of upset and PTSD. I’m an anxious mess when I visit the GP, convincing myself that they will never let me leave, and now suffer from insomnia. Yet I now find the humour in it and make sure that it’s never taboo. The last hurdle has been opening up about it in public and embracing vulnerability over shame. As we ardent fans say,

we gotta get Theroux this.