

EMERGENT GRACE

*Christian Persistence in the Face of Serious
Mental Illness*

Erin Michael Grimm



Emergent Grace: Christian Persistence in the Face of Serious Mental Illness

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For information contact: erinmichael@seahurstlearns.com

Dedicated to:

Jesus Christ, my Savior and Teacher;

Todd Grimm, my husband and my love;

Chad, who passed away but has a legacy;

and

Paul Lee and the SPU community, with much love

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E p i g r a p h

Ezekiel 37

37¹⁻² God grabbed me. God's Spirit took me up and set me down in the middle of an open plain strewn with bones. He led me around and among them—a lot of bones! There were bones all over the plain—dry bones, bleached by the sun.

³ He said to me, "Son of man, can these bones live?"

I said, "Master God, only you know that."

⁴ He said to me, "Prophesy over these bones: 'Dry bones, listen to the Message of God!'"

⁵⁻⁶ God, the Master, told the dry bones, "Watch this: I'm bringing the breath of life to you and you'll come to life. I'll attach sinews to you, put meat on your bones, cover you with skin, and breathe life into you. You'll come alive and you'll realize that I am God!"

⁷⁻⁸ I prophesied just as I'd been commanded. As I prophesied, there was a sound and, oh, rustling! The bones moved and came together, bone to bone. I kept

watching. Sinews formed, then muscles on the bones, then skin stretched over them. But they had no breath in them.

⁹ *He said to me, "Prophecy to the breath. Prophecy, son of man. Tell the breath, 'God, the Master, says, Come from the four winds. Come, breath. Breathe on these slain bodies. Breathe life!'"*

¹⁰ *So I prophesied, just as he commanded me. The breath entered them and they came alive! They stood up on their feet, a huge army.*

¹¹ *Then God said to me, "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. Listen to what they're saying: 'Our bones are dried up, our hope is gone, there's nothing left of us.'*

¹²⁻¹⁴ *"Therefore, prophecy. Tell them, 'God, the Master, says: I'll dig up your graves and bring you out alive—O my people! Then I'll take you straight to the land of Israel. When I dig up graves and bring you out as my people, you'll realize that I am God. I'll breathe my life into you and you'll live. Then I'll lead you straight back to your land and you'll realize that I am God. I've said it and I'll do it. God's Decree.'"*

¹⁵⁻¹⁷ *God's Message came to me: "You, son of man: Take a stick and write on it, 'For Judah, with his Israelite companions.' Then take another stick and write on it, 'For Joseph—Ephraim's stick, together with all his Israelite companions.' Then tie the two sticks together so that you're holding one stick.*

¹⁸⁻¹⁹ *"When your people ask you, 'Are you going to tell us what you're doing?' tell them, 'God, the Master, says, Watch me! I'll take the Joseph stick that is in Ephraim's hand, with the tribes of Israel connected with him, and lay the Judah stick on it. I'll make them into one stick. I'm holding one stick.'*

20-24 “Then take the sticks you’ve inscribed and hold them up so the people can see them. Tell them, ‘God, the Master, says, Watch me! I’m taking the Israelites out of the nations in which they’ve been exiled. I’ll gather them in from all directions and bring them back home. I’ll make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel, and give them one king—one king over all of them. Never again will they be divided into two nations, two kingdoms. Never again will they pollute their lives with their no-god idols and all those vile obscenities and rebellions. I’ll save them out of all their old sinful haunts. I’ll clean them up. They’ll be my people! I’ll be their God! My servant David will be king over them. They’ll all be under one shepherd.

24-27 “They’ll follow my laws and keep my statutes. They’ll live in the same land I gave my servant Jacob, the land where your ancestors lived. They and their children and their grandchildren will live there forever, and my servant David will be their prince forever. I’ll make a covenant of peace with them that will hold everything together, an everlasting covenant. I’ll make them secure and place my holy place of worship at the center of their lives forever. I’ll live right there with them. I’ll be their God! They’ll be my people!

28 “The nations will realize that I, God, make Israel holy when my holy place of worship is established at the center of their lives forever.”

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0 . I n t r o d u c t i o n

My Approach, My Story, My Context

My Approach

I BRING A CHRISTIAN, INTEGRATIVE LENS to the management of serious mental illness. The book harnesses the Wesleyan quadrilateral (Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience), in the service of finding meaning, and even optimism, in the face of mental illness. The book addresses social ills as it tackles a more practical problem: therapists often aren't Christian, and those who are, are rarely trained in the Christian tradition as it might intersect with the practice of mental health care; and the Christian tradition, for better or worse, does not consistently integrate modern therapeutic and psychiatric models as it tends to the potentially very real spiritual aspects of mental illness. I propose applying John Wesley's holistic

and integrative approach to Christianity in the service of mental health recovery and maintenance. I am not writing as a professional, but rather as someone with lived experience as a Christian who has been hospitalized twice many years ago, once involuntarily (2015).

In the spirit of Wesley, I wanted to make this book free to the public. It is under copyright. Please see the front matter for details. Should you like the book a great deal and want to pay it forward, please contact Seattle Pacific University Office of Advancement and make a donation to the Richard B. Steele Seattle Pacific Seminary Compassion Scholarship for African Americans.

<https://seahurstlearns.com/giving/> provides links to giving online as well as detailed information about the scholarship.

CHAPTER ONE starts our time together with a word from clergy that responds to hardship pastorally and puts it in the larger framework of the Christian story.

CHAPTER TWO approaches management of chronic mental health challenges using the theological framework of John Wesley, after first providing breadcrumbs from my own journey navigating mental health resources themselves.

CHAPTER THREE is holistic. It touches on how American society is contributing to negative mental health and general poor public health.

CHAPTER FOUR shares true insights gained from my own valley of bones. It closes with my pastoral response to acute suffering and offers robust hope that is Scriptural, based in a close reading of

Ezekiel 37 (my epigraph).

CHAPTER FIVE I highly recommend if you're worried that you're damned or are worried that to go off your meds is a Christian thing to do. It also features a word from clergy on the topic.

THE APPENDIX features my most popular blog posts, which were written at different times of my self-understanding as a person with serious mental illness.

THE AFTERWORD shares my thoughts on school and mental health, which is a major topic right now, and for so many reasons. You can read my thoughts in the afterword, where I advocate for the Wesleyan model.

The Good Samaritan showed neighborly love to a person who was beaten and ritually unclean, while a priest walked by. To live out my commitment to the Christian faith, I defend the dignity of LGBTQ+ folks, without letting that dictate my theological or personal belief system. There will be no hate preached here, nor will there be partisan bickering advocating for one side over the other.

My Story, My Context, and My Audience

WHEN I THINK OF ALL THE DRAFTS I HAVE BEGUN and left unfinished at the various times I have sat down to write this book, I am reminded of how many different ways I have viewed myself over the years as I have come to grips with the diagnosis of schizoaffective disorder. For the first two years of losing contact with reality, I did not have knowledge of what was happening to me except that everything had become remarkably difficult. There was the ebb and flow of experiencing extreme existential terror, followed by learning about what my suspicions were, reality testing them, and realizing I was safe. A moment of peace and calm would ensue once my deepest suspicions of betrayal or unpopularity were disconfirmed.

Upon having my paranoid thoughts disconfirmed, I would find life again to be effortless and wonderful, and I would reflect upon how difficult life must be for those who had actually been raped, who were indeed falsely accused of being terrorists, or who had had other reasons to fear acutely for their very lives. In a word, I suffered from delusions.

Now, in remission, in the safe fuzziness of Risperidone, Zoloft, and Lamictal – an antipsychotic, an anti-depressant, and a mood stabilizer, respectively – I can let down my guard and write to you, grateful that, unlike some people in this country, I am profiled only insofar as I share about my disability. I am white, and am in a relatively safe position to write this book, while many are not at liberty to reveal weaknesses because they already have enough persecution to deal with on a daily basis.

I am privileged, and have been able to find treatment and

professionals. I can read, and learn about my condition on the internet. I *have* internet access. I can also afford to have many books on the subject of psychology and religion. So many people in the United States, and in the larger world, lack these things. I went to a global mental health meeting held at the University of Washington in 2018. There, people discussed not a patient's right to *refuse* treatment, which is a common theme in the United States' debates around mental health; but rather, the broader right to *obtain* treatment in the first place, which is more of a need in the rest of the world (and among the uninsured in the United States). It is a question of access, and frankly, most people lack access.

I am writing to people touched by the mental health crisis who are Christian, or who are open to becoming Christian, and who are eager to hear how faith can enrich life's challenges and even create space for optimism. Our mental health crisis in the United States has resulted from the medical reality that is ill mental health. I had seizures and almost died at birth, which can cause brain damage. But in my case, it was also fueled by from failing institutions, a lack of morals, a lack of purity of thought and intention, and confusion about the role of the teacher and the professor. In short, I made educators into priests. And priests into salesmen. There was boundary confusion and role confusion and my desires became disordered, which pushed me into not knowing where to look or where to find that which I sought. This was especially true once I encountered difficulty.

There are problems with NAMI, but I won't insult the organization – the National Alliance on Mental Illness saved my life. My spouse, Todd, has said that he cannot imagine how differently things might have worked out if it weren't for NAMI,

health insurance, and a woman we met along the way who knew how to combat the stigma of serious mental illness with the power of storytelling. This woman's son has been in prison for several years with serious mental illness of a seriousness that I have only touched briefly, and many years ago. But she was brave, and she shared her story so I could learn from it.

I believe that the best shaper of lives is Jesus Christ our Savior, and that if we contemplate his ways and commit to modified fellowship, insofar as our illnesses allow, we can grow in a spirit of accountability and love, such as was modeled in the world wide Wesleyan holiness movement. We can find peace and accountability and rest in the knowledge of Christ, even amidst terrifying and alienating symptoms. With medication and professional help, then we can start to rehabilitate the United States and the interpersonal and systemic injustices that have been festering for decades, especially since the rise of the COVID pandemic, which has wreaked havoc on nearly everyone's mental health. Especially that of our children and our elderly.

I am writing after having encountered the works of John Wesley (1703-1791) and their recent iteration in the ministry organization Spirit and Truth, which is bringing about a Wesleyan revival in our age. For more information, see their website www.spiritandtruth.life, which describes the organization as, "a movement of Wesleyan-minded Christians seeking to awaken and equip the 21st century church, through the power of the Holy Spirit, to share the Gospel and make disciples of Jesus Christ. We long to see a new movement of Christians who are empowered by the Spirit, rooted in the truth, and mobilized for the mission."

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, prioritized bringing

the gospel and salvation to the poor and the downtrodden, and disciplined his followers. He didn't convert and move on. Rather, he set up accountability groups and Bible studies. My hope is to disciple my readers and encourage the growth of a movement of Bible believing Christians who embrace the Good News and find hope.

1 . T h e G r a c e o f L i m i t a t i o n s

Let's open with the Word of God...

MY KNOWLEDGE OF MYSELF AND my treatment-adherence, and my ability to learn my limitations and to stay within them, are what keeps me doing well to date. But none of this would have been possible without a sermon I heard on November 26, 2017. With my former pastor's permission, I am beginning my book with it. It sets the stage. May it bring you some of the comfort and wisdom it has brought me. Sermons have a way to speak to the heart, and they do this with the training and authority that a lay person like myself just can't beat. The sermon was written and preached by Rev. Dr. Chris Pritchett, Teaching Elder, PCUSA, in Seattle, Washington. The Scripture reading comes from Genesis 3:1-9. Title: "The Grace of Limitations."

* * *

MOST OF US ARE AWARE THAT SOMETHING is missing in our lives. It's true for every human being on the planet, so you're not alone. But we each have unfulfilled desires, unattained goals, things that we believe would make our lives better, happier, or more content if we had them. In every garden of life, God has placed something that is beyond our created reach. It is something we can see, but we cannot have. For some it is a better past, and for others it's a desired future that God has not created for you. It may involve work, health, a relationship, or an achievement you desperately want, which may or may not be just beyond your reach.

But what if I told you we were designed this way? That the God we believe loves us with an unconditional love, who created us and brought us into being, also created us with this feeling that something is always missing in life? That the longing in each of our hearts and lives is meant to be there, and that finding joy and peace and contentment in life doesn't come from trying to satisfy our longing, but rather by embracing the longing and accepting life's limitations. That part of God's pathway to joy for us is that when we choose to live within our created limitations, we discover that we have everything we need, and life naturally becomes a gift of gratitude, rather than a problem to solve. Does life itself ever feel to you like the whole thing is a problem to solve, a destination for which we are all searching? This way of living comes with a perpetual low-grade angst. It is both exhausting and frustrating. But Genesis 3 helps us to see that we can be free from this inner struggle.

The first two chapters of the Bible are incredibly important because they reveal what God had in mind for us from the beginning. Before sin entered the world and before we started

making our choices, God made clear what his choice was for us. And it was paradise. The rest of the Bible is essentially the drama of God's recovery plan after we started making our choices. But we can only imagine the beauty of the Garden of Eden. The language of the text is not scientific or historic, but poetic and metaphorical. So, the garden was not so much an actual place as a relationship with God and all creation that was in the right place.

Humanity was blessed with the distinction of being made in the image of God, as both male and female. We were blessed to have good work caring for the garden God created. We were blessed with intimacy when God created partners for us, and we were blessed, as our text says today, with the freedom to eat of almost every fruit of the garden. We are still blessed with all of these created gifts. There is no question of that.

The question is, are we paying attention to our blessings? Blessings are not things we achieve for ourselves. They are gifts that come only from God's hands. And they account for the things we value most – someone to love, our unique talents, our health, the breath in our lungs, the rising sun every day. These are not things we earned. They come only by the hand of God. When we pay attention to our blessings, we soon realize that we cherish them so much more than our achievements. So all that is left is gratitude.

The verse of the poetry tells us little about the garden. Frankly, most of what we are told is focused on the limits of this paradise. The one thing described in considerable detail is the tree in the middle of the garden whose fruit Adam and Eve were forbidden to take.

The placement of this tree, in the midst of the garden, is incredibly significant. Had it been located on the distance fringe of

the garden, they could have ignored it. But no, every day they had to walk by this tree that was not theirs for the taking. Remember this is before the fall. It's the garden God created and called good. So there is always something missing in paradise. That tree represents the object of your longing—the thing that is missing in your life.

I don't know what the tree symbolizes in your life. I know what it is in my life, and with some reflection you will remember what it is in yours. It isn't hard to find because, remember, it is in the middle of your garden. In some way, you pass by this tree every day.

Our text today finds Adam and Eve staring at the tree. They have to wonder what is so special about this fruit? Why can't they have it, too? Our theologians can tell us exactly what is special about the tree. It is the mark of God's grace upon their lives. This is the grace of limitations.

How can this be a grace when it feels like a curse?

It's a grace because it reminds them they are creatures and not creators. Only God creates life. In spite of all our hard work, we don't create our lives or really even "make a living." We receive life as God's unfolding drama. And this created mark of limitations is a grace because it means that God is set on dignifying humanity with the freedom to make choices. Without that limitation, there is no choice for humans. And no choice means no freedom, and no freedom means no dignity.

Every time you confront this thing that is missing from your life you have to decide how you will respond to it. It will either become the altar where you kneel in prayer before the God who alone is whole and complete, lacking in nothing, or it will drive you crazy as you obsess over how to find what you do not have. It's your choice.

This is how God honors humanity like no other creature on earth.

Much of pop-psychology today tries desperately to make you feel better by claiming that you are not to blame for your choices. But all that this really does is rob you of your created dignity. “You’re a victim,” some claim. “Blame your employer, your spouse, your environment,” or best of all, “your parents.” But that is not what our most primal poetry claims. Adam and Eve had a wonderful environment, and they had no parents to blame for their problems. Imagine that. Still, they chose to reach beyond their limitations. I’m not claiming we are not sometimes victimized, but we are still responsible for our own choices.

Never let anyone take away your created dignity to choose and to be responsible for your life.

The most fundamental, primal, choice we make is how we respond to created limits. In the words of theologian Karl Barth, all sin begins with ingratitude. Consider that idea for a moment: All sin begins with ingratitude. Even though God has created our garden and already called it “good,” we take a hard look at what is missing and say it isn’t good enough. Judging the work of the Creator in our lives to be too slow or too fast, too dull or too frightening, or simply too limiting, we reach for something more. We reach to become gods who can recreate life the way we want it.

We try to recreate not only our own lives, but also our spouses, children, employees, friends, anyone whom we deem not good enough. Who do we think we are? We are ungrateful. That’s who we are. Gratitude always embraces limitations.

This is not to say that we should not try to make improvements in the garden of life. Of course we should diet, save, work hard, stand up for important causes, and strive to be all God created us to

be. But there's a big difference in doing some gardening and in becoming obsessed with a different garden. When we are grateful for the life we've been given, we look around and realize that even though something is missing, it's still a pretty incredible place to live. When we are not grateful, we ignore the thousands of fruitful trees we've been given and we pitch our tent under the one tree we cannot have. But when we reach for this one thing that's missing, it is then that we lose the garden. And on the way out of the gates we realize that it was paradise. Only now it is paradise lost.

A man flies in from out of town to bury his father who died suddenly. The son wanted so much to become somebody important in his career, so there wasn't time for a lot of visits home. On the plane ride to the funeral, the son decides to cope with his grief by writing a letter to his father. The letter essentially says, "I've always loved you, Dad." As the tears stream down his face, he curses himself for not writing sooner. What was this man's created limitation over which he reached? It was his career—he reached for too much—and it cost him grief and pain.

A woman sits in the first pew at her daughter's wedding. She's overwhelmed by how beautiful the bride is. Then she remembers all of the terrible arguments that drove them apart for so many years. She just wanted her daughter to be better, but now it all seems so meaningless. She wishes, desperately, that she could take back all of the harsh words she said. But as she watches her daughter take the hand of her groom, she knows those years are forever gone. Again, it is not until the garden is lost that we realize it was paradise.

According to our text, we had help in losing our good gardens. We were tempted by the serpent. But the Bible doesn't blame Adam and Eve's fall on the serpent. It blames Adam and Eve for choosing

to believe his lie. Temptation is always a lie, and it's the exact lie we want to hear. The serpent tells us we can be like God and have it all. All we have to do is reach for more. But the only thing we really grab is regret.

As the sacred poetry continues, in the cool of the day God came looking for Adam and Eve. When he found them hiding, he killed one of his animals to cover their naked shame. And now, in Jesus Christ, has God come looking for you and me. He finds us busily sewing together fig leaves of excuses and blame. Then he sacrifices his life on the cross to cover our shame and restore our dignity. Why? Because God loves us too much to abandon us to our bad choices.

If human dignity begins by the grace of taking responsibility, which is what we call confession, it ends by accepting this even more amazing grace called forgiveness. I am amazed at how many people can make it through the first part and take responsibility for their actions, but they cannot accept grace as forgiveness. There is no dignity in simply claiming to be a sinner. It doesn't matter how desperately we try to atone for our sins, we will never climb our way back to the Garden. This is the ultimate limitation – we cannot fix what we have broken. Paradise is recovered only in being forgiven.

The call for us today is to practice living the unsatisfied life in a satisfying way. How do we do this? It requires three regular habits to put into practice, whether formally or informally. First, become aware of that which is missing in your life. Meditate on it. Enter into it. Imagine getting what you always wanted but you know you can't or shouldn't have or pursue. Second, take stock of your blessings, what you have in your life as a gift. Third, in prayer, give thanks for the blessings, release the object of your longing to God, and ask God

to make his grace sufficient to cover what is missing.

On this side of the cross and resurrection, the time has come to recover created dignity to life. The time has come to stand tall again and rejoice. And the time has come to be grateful and let go of the guilt — because God has. But you have to choose to believe that. It is the choice of your life. Amen.

2 . M a n a g i n g o u r M e n t a l H e a l t h

When a Cure Isn't Coming

AFTER FIRST GIVING SOME GENTLE POINTERS, I will tell you my approach to my mental health condition. I will not worry about the possibility that you'll treat my words as sacred or despair if you disagree, because I will know that I gave you the following pointers first. There are many other books out there. Hopefully what follows will help you with your discernment. If at any time you're reading a book and start experiencing symptoms, put down the book for a while, or forever. That includes this book. Also, please don't give this book to someone as a cure or to force them to take medicine.

This book is meant to help people who want to explore how management can be meaningful. Now for some breadcrumbs from my journey:

- Don't forget that I am neither clergy, a theologian, nor a mental health therapist/psychiatrist. Never prioritize what I say here above the advice of professionals, medical or spiritual.
- I recommend Dr. Peter J. Bellini's *Truth Therapy* if you are looking for a holistic lens to healing body, mind, and soul that gets into the mind in particular, and immerses us in Scripture.¹ I have met Dr. Bellini and felt the anointing of the Holy Spirit in his presence. He is a godly man and he really cares.
- Be selective of what mental health memoirs you read, because some are ungodly, depressing, incoherent, and/or will lead you astray. There is, admittedly, something healing about reading books by people who are living well with their condition, but a lot of them push people into an immoral lifestyle. Some will even blame Christianity for the mental illness. They have a point – not all Christianities are healing, especially not legalistic Christianity. What I offer here is a lens that has helped me. Maybe it will help you, too.
- The two secular memoirs I recommend are *The Center Will Not Hold: My Journey through Madness*, by Dr.

¹ Bellini, *Truth Therapy*.

Elyn Saks,² and *An Unquiet Mind: A Memoir of Moods and Madness*, by Dr. Kay Redfield Jamison.³ Both were instrumental in getting me to see how common it was for me to be triggered and to blame the trigger on the actual event rather than the fact that my brain was ill-equipped to deal with any stress.

- The Christian memoir I recommend is *Darkness is My Only Companion: A Christian Response to Mental Illness*, by Kathryn Greene-McCreight.⁴ Unlike me, she is ordained. She suffers from bipolar disorder and is a theologian with a PhD. As the title suggests, she experiences her illness as darkness. I don't experience mine that way. It's important to remember that if you do, you're not alone. Her book will help you find meaning.
- Be selective of what books about mental illness you read. Avoid books like *Insane Consequences: How the Mental Health Industry Fails the Mentally Ill*, by D.J. Jaffe,⁵ which pathologizes the mentally ill and lumps us all into one basket – namely, the criminal basket – and also diminishes our ability to trust our doctors. I have schizoaffective disorder, and other people who have it

² Saks, *The Center Will Not Hold*.

³ Jamison, *An Unquiet Mind*.

⁴ Greene-McCreight, *Darkness Is My Only Companion*.

⁵ Jaffe, *Insane Consequences*. In his defense, Jaffe, who just passed away, is a passionate defender of the seriously mentally ill. It's just not therapeutic to read the book. It opens with mug shots of mentally ill criminals.

have caused great harm. Reading about this gets me down a dark rabbit hole meditating on the ungodly things people have done while ill with my diagnosis. Don't focus on that, and have confidence in the medical care you receive, wherever possible.

- Meditate on what is holy and godly and how you can continue to serve God's human community, even if it's just by praying – continue to take your medicine and have faith that you will find stability. Don't study bad things people have done or read disturbing books.
- If you are caring for someone who is mentally ill or are a church member supporting someone with mental illness, read *Troubled Minds: Mental Illness and the Church's Mission*, by Amy Simpson.⁶
- As a church, you should have a safety plan so you are prepared for danger – don't be ignorant or unprepared. But nurture the goodness of the person and focus on Amy Simpson's work. Most mentally ill people won't hurt you. We are much more likely to hurt ourselves or to be the victims of crime. And we are sensitive when perceived as a threat. It only makes our lives harder.
- For a comprehensive worldview of what I propose, written by a pastor and professor of theology and disability, and a doctor of nursing practice, read *Christian Ethics and Nursing Practice*, by Drs. Richard B. Steele and Heidi A. Monroe.⁷ The book integrates the

⁶ Simpson, *Troubled Minds*.

⁷ Steele and Monroe, *Christian Ethics and Nursing Practice*.

four strands of Biblical moral discourse (law, holiness, wisdom and prophecy) with the American Nursing Code. I have read the book at least three times because I know one of the authors and that he walks the talk (my correspondence with him ends my book).

- If a person expresses intent to harm others or self, take it seriously and seek professional help or call 911.

The next section features my own approach to mental illness and Christianity.

THE WESLEYAN SCHOLAR ALBERT C. OUTLER, characterized Wesley's theological worldview as a quadrilateral, featuring the following four elements, in descending order of importance:

- a) Scripture
- b) Tradition
- c) Reason
- d) Experience

Not every scholar agrees that this was Wesley's intention to create such a schema, but it is generally accepted and highly useful in the management of my mental health condition, so I thought I would share it in a book. I will now share how the Wesleyan quadrilateral has enriched my life as a person with serious mental illness.

a. Scripture

SCRIPTURE REMINDS US THAT WE ARE NOT God (which is important if you suffer from delusions or egomania).

Remembering the primacy of Scripture, I learn to be suspicious of thoughts that make me feel exceedingly special. Of course, we are all special, and we are specially made in God's image. But mental illness is part of the fallen creation and our fallen human condition. While even us mentally ill are very special in God's eyes, don't forget that none of us is more special than the other, and Scripture reminds us of that. It also says that the weaker are to be treated with greater care, so take heart in that.

Scripture should be read in community, but this is difficult with some mental illnesses. For me, I can suffer from paranoia, and so

sometimes I need to take breaks in my interaction with groups. But don't be afraid to be in community, in whatever capacity that looks like right now given our, at times, challenging condition. Sometimes our communities are online.

Through this value I remind myself that I'm not a prophet, and I have a well-worn path to better self- and other-understanding. For more on this, a great deal more, see Dr. Bellini's book *Truth Therapy*, which provides ample access to reading Scripture through the lens of mental health.

Reading scripturally and in community is where one experiences consensus and Holy-Spirit informed reality. Surrendering to this heals our flawed thinking, flawed thinking that we learn sometimes even within the church, sometimes especially so. But not all communities are created equal, as the reading below of a fragment from Franz Kafka, a 20th century writer, will show.

In Kafka's shorter text "On Parables," a group of people discusses parables and determines that their only function is to tell us what we already know; namely, that the incomprehensible is incomprehensible. Towards the end one man disagrees. The text concludes with three voices:

"Concerning this one man said: Why such reluctance? Were you to follow the parables you would yourselves become parables thereby freeing yourselves of your daily worries.

"Another said: I bet that this is also a parable.

"The first said: You have won.

"The second said: But unfortunately, only in parable.

"The first said: No, in reality; in parable you have lost."

(My translation from the German)

The text is structured around the contrast of two types of readers,

which applies to readers of the Bible as well. Kafka leaves us attempting to either cut off (if we are literal readers – fundamentalists) or bridge the parable’s frame (if we believe in parable – “the Bible is symbolic”), so that the end we are left straddling this very axis. We therefore *experience* the very point around which the text hinges. And this is what we frequently encounter in Kafka’s works, and in Biblical interpretation. We see “reality” (social justice gospel), which gains definition through our discovery of the shortcomings of the “ideal” (holiness fundamentalism that is not responsive to the needs of today). The text, including the Biblical text, is the marker of the gap between these methods. Kafka was Jewish and stays in the gap, but my conclusion from this parable is that we need bifocal vision to move forward constructively in this time. In short, a Wesleyan, integrated lens. Perhaps the reason that Kafka leaves us at the axis of representation was because he didn’t have a Christ who, himself the Word, could bridge that axis of representation. Christ, and striving for the mind and yet also the action, the physical body of Christ as it manifests in the lives and bodies of his believers, is the answer. We need to blend social justice with holiness, and to do so in a way that is reasonable and sustainable.

b. Tradition

THIS VALUE IS IMPORTANT BECAUSE THERE are books written by mentally ill people, that claim to be authoritative in their

treatment of psychiatry, psychology or theology, when really the person is not trained in those fields, and could cause harm writing with a false authority to suffering people who will believe anything because they really need help. Some of us even make up blogs about this without stating that we're not professionals.

Some writers and speakers will make us feel bad for needing our medicine, - some ordained people among them. Some will make us feel damned because we have mental health challenges. So, this brings me to a related point. By tradition, I mean tradition bifocally. Scientific tradition (which Wesley, writing in the 1700's, called reason) and religious tradition.

There have been serious advancements in the mental health field, and we need to be able to trust our practitioners. But we should also put our faith in the tradition of the historic church, remembering that historic, orthodox Christian faith makes us compassionate, saves us from being fundamentalist or purely historically minded (both of which cause over-rigidity of thinking and despair if you're not doing well). Also, when you know that people have settled on the historic, traditional aspects of faith across the centuries, you realize that there is something bigger than you, bigger than all of us, and that is Christ, our Savior, and his body, the church. Truth must be discerned in community, and church tradition assures us that it is being discerned in the community not only of the present day, but the Christian community across the ages.

I also want to acknowledge the prophetic tradition in this section about tradition. As Revelation teaches, social injustice can be structural. Our work for structural justice in an oppressive society must be done with discernment, and in relationship with communities who are experiencing the structural oppression. I don't

want to make this a philosophical tract about social justice, but it would be foolish for me to ignore the fact that mentally ill are also victims of structural oppression, and that mentally ill people of color are particularly disadvantaged.

There is a strong social justice tradition in Christianity. African-American Evangelical faith leader, Dr. Brenda Salter McNeal, has shown that for our witness to be authentic to outsiders of the faith, we cannot ignore social ills like racism (see her book *A Credible Witness*⁸). This is true even if we are feeling particularly oppressed as people with mental illness. Dr. Salter McNeal's more recent book (*Becoming Brave*⁹) shows that these social ills must be addressed structurally and at times politically.

We cannot spiritualize injustice. We are *bodies* making up the body of Christ. Not just souls. In his book *Truth Therapy* Dr. Bellini talks about how racism is a cognitive distortion that can be remedied with the Bible and faithful study of the passages he provides in the book. Let's not forget though, that it's not just a *cognitive* distortion but also a *bodily* distortion, that can kill people of color. Resmaa Menakem argues that it is not just white supremacy that we must combat, but actually white *BODY* supremacy.¹⁰ White bodies, not brains, perceive black bodies as a threat. It is visceral, says Menakem, who himself is an African-American man who works as a body therapist with both violent offenders and also with police officers (who can also be violent offenders themselves). Jesus was

⁸ Salter McNeal, *A Credible Witness*.

⁹ Salter McNeal, *Becoming Brave*.

¹⁰ Menakem, *My Grandmother's Hands*.

bodily crucified. We can't forget this. It is a matter of not only social health but also of our mental health to remember that our souls are in *bodies* while we are on this earth. I will talk about this more in the reason and experience sections that follow.

c. Reason

NOW THIS ONE – REASON – MARKS WESLEY as a man of the 18th century, leading up to the Enlightenment. The primacy of “lived experience” is what the liberals often advocate for, and it is not enough. We must also be rational, which is a perspective traditionally ascribed to the conservatives. Because of this, I often put reason and experience together, because, you need both to be balanced.

But this also has implications for mental illness, where reason and experience can both become disordered, burdensome, and perhaps even deadly. Mental illness, especially serious mental illness, impacts both our reason and our experience. In fact, people will kindly refer to us as “experiencing” mental illness. This is the nicest way to say it because then we're not labeling a person with a permanent label of “mentally ill.”

When I'm experiencing symptoms of mental illness, my illness history triggers my reasoning capabilities on a meta-level: I know I need to take my medicine, avoid stress and, given that I find it healing to share about my illness, share with safe people that they should not to take my behavior seriously as a reflection of my best self, apologizing and repairing harm wherever possible.

(By the way, the more consistent we are with professional help and medicine, the more we study the fruit of the spirit, and the more we strive for the mind of Christ through studying Scripture, the less often it is that we harm people. This is especially true when our condition is stabilized and we are into the long-term management phase. Sometimes when we're just getting our dosages settled in, we can be more agitated than previously. For me, it took 4 years to get on the right dosage, but I never gave up hope and neither should you.)

d. Experience

EXPERIENCE IS THE TRICKIEST FOR ME, WHICH IS why I'm glad that the scholar of Wesley I mentioned earlier, Outler, put reason ahead of experience in the quadrilateral.

I have experienced what is clinically termed as a "lack of insight." Meaning that I experienced myself as being fine and normal, while really, I was putting myself in serious harm and almost died from my behavior. I have compassion for those who have harmed others while ill, but only if they get on medicine and stay on it, because the fact is that the experience of mental illness can make us dangerous to ourselves and/or others. I was hospitalized involuntarily once. It was traumatic and impacted me for years, so I'm not going to talk about it here, but this is why we need to stay on medicine. We often cannot trust our experience. Mental illness, in some ways, is an experiential illness. I have little signs, like if I'm shaking my leg it means I need to get up and do yoga, take a shower, or stop whatever I'm doing because I'm starting to leave my body.

Or sometimes I'll wake up really early and will think, "Oh, think how much I could get done if I got up now!" But then I am reminded that I need to keep a regular sleep schedule and just lay in bed until a reasonable hour, trusting that I'm training myself in good habits for the long haul, prioritizing long-term wellness, social and moral accountability, and responsibility. These allow me to maintain a solid Christian witness.

There's another important thing I want to add to experience. Recently, there has been a growth in the popularity of polyvagal therapy, which focuses on our experience of our *bodies*, specifically, via the polyvagal nerve. This nerve has been called, by Resmaa Menakem, the soul nerve. If you're like me and have a hard time with therapy, then I recommend reading Peter Levine's approach to our experiences in the body in *In an Unspoken Voice: How the Body Releases Trauma and Restores Goodness*.¹¹ It is the culmination of a lifetime's work bringing healing to people who suffer from PTSD, which I acquired in multiple ways over the course of my growing up and experiencing illness. In contrast, I really dislike *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, Body in the Healing of Trauma*,¹² which is written by renowned scholar Bessel Van der Kolk. What I don't like about is the style and approach of the book itself, though others, even with the same illness as me, love it. It is triggering for me to read and makes me feel like I have to heal the way he describes or I'm flawed. And it really starts out by talking about how dysfunctional we can be, and how trauma usually causes all sorts of other illnesses. Very upsetting. I still haven't been able to bring

¹¹ Levine, *In an Unspoken Voice*.

¹² Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*.

myself to finish it, though others swear by it and say it really helped them find meaning and recover. I am deeply empathic and experience whatever surrounds me, so I can't read such books.

Also related to the experience quadrant, I will say that I have mystical experiences and feel heavily the anointing of the Holy Spirit often, even as I write this. Some of this may be due to mental illness, and in fact secular mental health therapists would definitely say that that was the case. I've heard of pregnant women thinking that they were birthing the messiah, and of men thinking they were Jesus. They felt it down to their very bones, experientially. But Scripture, reason, and tradition, and the Christian community clearly contradict that experience. That's why all four need to be together.

Finally, for an extreme example of ungodliness that prioritizes the experiential without any other checks, there are reiki practitioners and healers who believe only in experience and don't work with Christ's energy, but instead work with their own or with evil spirits' even, which they call "shadow work." Christians can be healers, and people can be healed in the name of Christ. But people who heal must be experienced and must submit to the authority of Christ. When really desperate, I went to reiki, and I felt specifically less Christian afterward. It is extremely important to realize that there may be a spiritual battle taking place with mental illness. There are definitely chemical issues, or trauma issues, or even bodily or psychosomatic factors to consider – and Wesley would argue for an integrative, holistic approach.

All Four Together

Scripture, tradition, reason and experience together, in that order, help us to balance out and, I would argue, also help keep us healthy in the first place. We are told to test the spirits, and that requires communal discernment and knowing the mind and heart of Christ by attending to Scripture, tradition, reason and experience. If we could raise our children attentive to all four aspects from day one, think about the resourcefulness and godliness that would follow for future generations; however, it should be remembered that there are many children who grow up to develop mental illness and who had great parents. I wish therapists didn't build rapport with clients by emphasizing the client's total innocence. The next chapter talks about the relationship between the client and their relationship to society.

3 . A u t h e n t i c D i s c i p l e s h i p , A u t h e n t i c W i t n e s s

Mental Health's Connection to Social and Spiritual Health

MERITOCRACY IS A MYTH, AND CULTURE is not a creation but is instead a being. It is a being, just like aspen groves, sequoias, coral reefs, and flocks of birds, which fly across the sky in their predictable patterns. And American culture is broken. Piety, the development of spiritual disciplines, is not enough in a broken culture. The Bible teaches that every culture can be broken, and that we have a God who seeks to mend it. It is relationship as process, not stasis. The story of the Old Testament is the story of God's persistence in seeking to establish and then to maintain, a covenant relationship with Israel. The Gospels teach us that Christ died to make the covenant permanent and unbreakable, but that we still

have our own free will, and are able to reject it.

We must disciple people to be authentic witnesses to the redeeming love of Christ. That includes striving for justice and acts of mercy. Let's look in this chapter about what this means for mental health and public health.

Our health care system in the US is functioning poorly. We are not attending to the spiritual aspect of our problems, in health care or even in the church. My afterword talks about how we are not invested in a holistic approach to education either. And it is all connected. We are not holistic in the United States, but, rather, we are atomized. In first drafts of this book, some commenters remarked that it was odd that I had incorporated racial justice – the thing is, that marks their thinking as atomized too. We are to be integrated and realistic Christians. I am proposing a Christian realism that doesn't forget that as Christians in America we are historically situated in a highly racialized world.

There must be a merging of piety and justice, and there is no real spiritual sustenance without food on the table. With food deserts, to name just one example of how health intersects with community health, especially with communities of color, but also amongst poor white families, communities that don't have healthy options for food acquire bad eating habits and poor mental and physical health. What you eat matters for mental health. But if the only thing to eat is fast food because you are located in low-income areas without grocery stores and farmers' markets and are experiencing the cumulative effects of state-supported¹³ segregation that took place in the history of our country, then there is a problem.

¹³ See Rothstein, *The Color of Law*.

And if you're working long hours and can't afford gas, that is another hardship.

The abandonment of entire swaths of our nation, like the Black community in Flint, Michigan, is a tragedy. There are recent books that also document the deaths of despair in the white community as well, for example the books *Tightrope* (for a liberal take)¹⁴ or *Hillbilly Elegy* (for a conservative take).¹⁵ It comes from a systemic failure to address basic human needs; and under such neglectful conditions, mental health challenges flourish.

The willful ignorance of the privileged to the plight of those who feed their wallets, and our unwillingness to take partial responsibility for it, leads to the mental distortions that accompany the faith lives of the rich who don't see their riches as something to be shared or leveraged for justice and the flourishing of American society and the world. It creates a spiritual and emotional egomania that contributes to a unique soul suffering among rich people who often suffer from anxiety and depression and addiction issues.

For a Christian perspective of the hypocrisy: missions abroad that bring about more injustice at home, are not missions at all. John Wesley said that he went to Georgia to convert "the natives" but realized that he needed a conversion first. His faith wasn't as deep as the faith of the Moravian Christians who accompanied him on his voyage. He didn't have that experiential element of the faith that he later wrote about when his heart was "strangely warmed." Similarly, in the United States, you can't preach prosperity abroad while abandoning fellow Christians in abject poverty within our very

¹⁴ Kristoff and WuDunn, *Tightrope*.

¹⁵ Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy*.

borders. We are making disciples in other nations and not discipling our own people. This is not to say that nativism and prioritizing making disciples only in the US is the answer, but it would lead to what Dr. Brenda Salter McNeil has called “a credible witness.”

There is also the opioid crisis here in the States, and the spread of addictions and other behavioral challenges. It is all connected.

Our culture, as I said above, is not a creation but a being. And the Christian form of that being is the body of Christ, as described by the apostle Paul. Jesus said he was the vine and we were the branches. Branches should have no part in cutting other branches from the vine of Christ and the fullness of a Christian life. The state of the poor in the United States, the poor of all colors, including the systemic injustice suffered by the Black community and the economic exploitation of people of color generally, marks us as a corrupt country. And Christians who don't work for justice – it doesn't have to be the way the liberals do, there are many ways to right wrongs – are not justified. We don't often see it in ourselves, but it has come to the fore with Covid. We must repent, and after repentance comes a soul change that manifests in meaningful social action.

True repentance happens when we are first honest about where we find ourselves, in life and also as a country. Ten years ago at this time I was living in Russia, the result of my having won a Fulbright to study in Moscow and learn about Russian culture and perfect my language capabilities since I was teaching Russian at a university. It was relaxing in Russia. The plants seemed softer, the light more vibrant and yet also gentler, and the people more independent, as though they didn't have to live up to impossible standards. When people worked hard to do well, you could tell it was from personal

and cultural pride, but it wasn't out of arrogance. There was a cultural humility that was so unusual for me to experience as an American. It wasn't poverty that I was experiencing at all, though other parts of Russia featured poverty and desperation – I'd still rather live in the US than Russia, don't get me wrong. But there was purpose and humility, infused with dignity. I think it came from the general hardship of living and making a living in the country.

For the past months, as Covid has spread across the US and our racial traumas have taken center stage; and as our health care injustice and inequity has grown more and more obvious to those of us who usually forget about such matters, – I have had the emotional experience of rediscovering Russia. But this time in the United States. We are not the amazing country that we portray. Sure, there are some aspects that are exceptional, but there is a lot that is not. And as our country groans, I find myself being able to breathe more freely, because there is no longer an impossible standard to live up to paired with the sense that I'm failing by having a disability.

Disability is more obvious in a country that idealizes individualism and exceptionalism, which is what the United States does. And it is a more painful burden as a result. But with the widespread health problems in our country, and with our struggle to educate our children right now, and with the exhaustion and teachers' burnout, I kind of feel like society is grinding to the halt that I was experiencing when I was struggling and everyone else was "flourishing" (read: when the white middle- and upper-classes were not threatened with death and pain; Black people and people of color were, as a group, suffering greatly, and I don't relish that now, they are suffering even worse).

People are seeming softer, gentler, and that they are giving each

other more grace. People seem less uptight even though they are more stressed, and I think that this comes from the fact that we all have a good excuse for failing at perfection right now. The next step is that we stop punishing the vulnerable for the vulnerability that we have thrust on them.

When we acknowledge the realities of our context as Americans, our discipleship becomes authentic. Christ again becomes the head of the church and not our egos or our country. Not nationalism or ethnocentrism, which deprive us, even Christians, of our humanity. Regarding nationalism and politics, I will say of our leaders that there is a special suffering that comes from thinking that to succeed is to forego taking responsibility. Responsibility, especially moral responsibility, is the fruit of authentic discipleship, and authentic discipleship, in turn, makes for authentic witnessing, which, in turn, leads to not only personal holiness but social holiness. Ultimately, more are attracted to Christ's church in a way that is sustainable when our witness is credible. That means holding leaders accountable and urging them to be morally responsible as well.

Many are outright Marxists nowadays, Marxian theory being the culmination of the Enlightenment's suspicion of religion, which deemed religion as the opiate of the masses. I support Black Lives Matter, but not its Marxist underpinnings, which are atheistic. I don't think that racism is the same thing as gender and sexual discrimination, but find that it is worse. Any hardship in the United States, when experienced with Black skin, will generally be worse. Not always, case in point the books *Hillbilly Elegy* and *Tightrope*, mentioned above. But the default, yes. White people can move to the city and blend in, Black people of all levels of distinction can be

profiled based on their skin color and suffer police brutality, sometimes especially once they have moved.

4 . T h e T r e e o f K n o w l e d g e o f G o o d a n d E v i l

Western Education and the Age of Empire

IF CULTURE IS AN ORGANISM, THEN THE NATURE of that organism, the health of that organism, is rooted in religion. All problems can be traced back to religion, religious belief, or the lack thereof. Religion is the foundation of the human mind, and it reflects the divine truth that there is in fact a God, who was the father of Jesus, and that Jesus, in turn, was with God at the beginning and will be at the end. He is the alpha and the omega. A prophet's prophet. The culmination of the prophets and the perfecter of their message. The embodiment of that message of salvation, salvation by a loving God who sacrificed his Son for the sake of the world.

As Christians, our voices are not merely a physical aspect of our having a body. Rather, they are something to be grown into and owned. Voices are how we reach our audience, and how we evangelize the world. To do this well, requires discipleship of not

just our voices but of our bodies. And we must be disciplined into becoming a credible witness, and that includes prophetic witness and alleviation of current social ills that are taking place not just spiritually, but also bodily. Racial injustice is foremost among the ills in our country.

But there are also the universal sins of the flesh.

The integrity of our voices defines our status as Christians, and with mental illness, my “voice” – my witness – was damaged. But this began in secular education, where I was not disciplined in Christ but was rather disciplined in the ways of the world. I became interested in another man while married, and though this is a symptom of people’s illnesses when they are bipolar (and schizoaffective disorder is affiliated with bipolar disorder), I still had to learn to take responsibility as well.

What happened in my sin wasn’t just my fault, and in reflecting I have determined that I should have been more forthcoming about how I was wronged, - but it is no longer my battle and so I’m not going to write about it here. The legal system is all about one person being a perpetrator and one person a victim, and in many cases it is clear cut, but in my case it wasn’t and, therefore, my experience makes me wonder how many other women are not fully recovering because in their hearts they were more confused than the legal system would allow for.

Regardless, acknowledging my sin was the first step in recovering. And I confessed to God and my husband and was forgiven by both. Forgiving the others involved was the next step. Forgiving myself was the final step. There is no way that I could have forgiven myself and others if I hadn’t first been forgiven by Christ. My experience taught me that affairs can be hypothetical,

and urged me to stay pure in thought, word, and deed by immersing myself in Scripture and godliness.

Some people can keep one foot in one world and another in the Word. People with mental illness not only shouldn't do this, but our inability to do this should be a lesson to others who are well. The stakes of going astray are high, it can cost you your mind, your soul, and perhaps your bodily life. Your soul is the most important, and is the nexus of the other two. But enough about my valley of bones, which is being redeemed by my sharing about it here (confession). If I wanted to keep hope of redemption of suffering to myself, I wouldn't have written this book. Let's turn to the Bible to anchor ourselves once more.

* * *

THE EZEKIEL PASSAGE WITH WHICH I BEGAN MY BOOK, was written in the sixth century BCE while Ezekiel living with fellow Judeans in Babylonian exile. It is a hopeless time. The first half of the Book of Ezekiel is set before the fall of Jerusalem, but by the time we get to this passage Jerusalem has fallen and the temple has been destroyed. God says to Ezekiel, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel, who say our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; who say, we are cut off completely" (NRSV). In the original Hebrew this actually rhymes, which has the effect of making their despair ring longer in your ears. But in the original Hebrew that phrase "our hope is lost" can also be rendered "our hope has perished." The word here for "to cut off" when I read "we are cut off completely, it actually means "to be destroyed" and in some contexts the same verb can refer to one who has died and been

buried. This makes it so that the plaint is something like this: “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is perished; we have died and been buried.” It is not an exaggeration to read it this way.

Before I preached about this passage on April 2, 2017 at the Baptist church where I was a ministry intern, I read it to my mom over the phone. She lives in Sacramento and was in her kitchen making dinner with the phone on speaker. Pots rattled and metal spoons scraped. I finished reading and waited expectantly.

“And...?” I asked.

All she said, however, was that it was dark and depressing. All she saw in it were the bones and death. Indeed, it is a valley full of bones.

“But mom,” I said, “if we stop there it is kind of like stopping the Christian story on Good Friday and forgetting about the resurrection!”

She didn’t make the connection.

Maybe it was the way I read it to her that made only the bones stick out in her imagination. Or maybe it is because that image is the strongest in the passage. Really picture that. A whole *valley, filled* with bones. It stays with you. Her reaction made sense, I realized. On a deep level this fascinated me, a reminder that we all come at the Bible with different lenses.

We all have moments in life that have dried us up, down to the very bones. Life will do that to us sometimes. I once read about a woman named Faith, and about her valley of bones, the death of her young husband from appendicitis that was misdiagnosed. The man died young in spite of having been taken to the doctors. She told them something was wrong, and they sent him home anyway. She was beside herself, confident he was dying, and no one would listen,

and then he died.¹⁶

Now if that's not the valley of dry bones, I don't know what is.

She experienced panic attacks, suicidal thoughts, was prescribed psychiatric medications, had flashbacks, and was haunted by the constant question, "How could they have sent me home with a dying man?"

What Faith experienced on a personal level, and what those of us who suffer deeply experience, is akin to what Israel experienced collectively. Let me explain.

There is so much more at work in Ezekiel 37 than death and despair. This is a passage people have turned to for centuries for inspiration, actually.

Why would people turn to this passage in Ezekiel in years of darkness if it was so depressing? Is my mother even right that this is a dark and depressing passage? Because it's not a good idea to be in a negative environment when you're feeling negative yourself. It becomes an echo chamber and from there things only get worse. In fact, in Proverbs there is a line that sums it up, "A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a downcast spirit dries up the bones."

One might ask then, what hope is there then for the downcast spirit? If you're happy you have good medicine and if you are down you shall perish, that your bones will dry up? That's the conclusion the Israelites seem to draw when they say, "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is perished; we are cut off completely."

But God says no.

And we can see the very seeds of the resurrection in this moment in the Old Testament, when God commands Ezekiel to

¹⁶ This story comes from Zimbardo, Sword, and Sword, *The Time Cure*.

prophesy to Israel, “Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act.”

You see, this passage isn’t about the valley of bones. This passage is about what God does with the valley of bones. It’s about what God does with *our* valley of bones, our despair, when we feel like we have no hope, when we feel cut off, dead and buried. He doesn’t leave us where Proverbs leaves us, with good medicine if we’re happy already and with despair and death when we’re downtrodden and feel as though we have just died.

“No!” God says. God tells Ezekiel, “Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.” It is written, “Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord.”

Faith is lifted out of her valley of bones with faith, therapy and medication and the people who surround her over a long journey that spanned several years. I would be the last person to tell you that with enough faith we will be spared the valley of dry bones. We walk through the valley of the shadow of death in this life. What this passage is asking us to do is live into our bones, *even* in the valley. This is different than calling us to find beauty in the valley of dry

bones. Here God reminds us of his presence with us even in the valley, and reminds us that he will send his spirit to revive us even when we feel cut off from him completely. We're being asked to look at the experiences of PTSD, cancer, addiction, divorce, death, and the whole range of suffering that exists in our human lives, and to live into our bones. We're being asked to trust that we will find the spirit there. God has taken on our suffering and has conquered in the cross. May we keep Ezekiel's message in our hearts. May we *sit* in the valley of dry bones and to *live* into it, trusting that God sends the Spirit into the valleys of our lives and that our suffering will be redeemed. Indeed, that it already is redeemed.

But how to be assured that all shall be well when it is not well right now?

5. A Theology of Mental Illness in Two Letters

Correspondence with a Moral and Historical Theologian

I WANTED TO BOOKEND MY BOOK WITH THE WORDS of ordained clergy. If my pastor, whose sermon I opened with, was the one who helped me accept and even thrive within my limitations, to the extent where I ultimately realized that we all have them, Dr. Steele's worldview as a Wesleyan professor of moral and historical theology helped me find meaning and purpose even in the act of taking medicine. I had an early psychiatrist who recommended I consider taking my medicine to be like taking a vitamin. That was helpful. But getting a Christian vitamin through a Wesleyan lens has

been absolutely life-changing for my quality of life and my self-concept, and it has inspired my eagerness to learn more about Wesley and to be a faithful disciple in alignment with the Wesleyan tradition. In their book *Christian Ethics and Nursing Practice*, Drs. Steele and Monroe outline their whole worldview through a Biblical lens that features the four moral strands of Biblical discourse: law, holiness, wisdom, and prophecy. I especially recommend this book to anyone who is in the nursing profession or who is caring for a person with chronic illness, even mental illness. It provides wisdom and gives meaning to the task of caring for others as a way of living out our calling to Jesus Christ.

* * *

June 16, 2016

Dear Professor Steele,

The role of choice in your worldview disturbs me to the core as a Christian because it makes me feel I have no free will if not on my medicine, because if off my medicine I'm running the risk of not perceiving things "accurately" enough to make logical choices in the first place. I can't help but wonder if this importance of agency in your worldview is the result of Enlightenment or historicist thinking or not, but at least from my disability's viewpoint, free will is not always exercisable. Does this mean that I am not able to cultivate virtues consistently enough to be worthy of the kingdom of heaven? Does this mean I am sometimes possessed by the devil? I have never

harmed anyone. I don't indulge in vices as much as the average American, but I'm surely committing some accidentally.

Best wishes,

Erin

Hi Erin,

I do not regard “free will” primarily as doing what you want, but as wanting what you ought. Of course, you aren't free if you can't do what you want, but you also aren't free if your wants are disordered. And there are many things that can disorder a person's desires: abusive upbringing, physical illness, insufficient education, a wide array of morally and intellectually corrosive social forces, and so on. And disordered desires are dehumanizing. Conversely, there are many things that can help a person to align his or her desires with human nature—that is, our nature as revealed, redeemed and healed by the Incarnate Son of God. To the extent that our desires and priorities are rightly ordered, we come closer and closer to being who we truly are, who we are truly “meant to be.” Of course, this presupposes that we have access to a normative account of human life (i.e., Christian Scripture and tradition, taken en bloc) and an array of elucidating examples (i.e., the lives of the saints).

Many years ago, a member of the congregation that Marilyn and I were then co-pastoring was committed to a psychiatric ward. I can't recall now what his diagnosis was, but I do remember that when I visited him, I was told by the nurses that his mental condition was deteriorating because he wasn't taking his meds. So, I met with him, and after the usual pleasantries I told him the nurses

had informed me that he was resisting taking his meds, and asked him why. He said that doing so would be a sin, because it would show his lack of faith in God's healing power. I asked him whether he believed that God works "in nature." Yes, he said, the Bible teaches that. Then I ask him whether he believes that God works "in human history." Again, he agrees that that claim was scriptural. So, then I ask, "Well, then, what's to keep God from working through medical science, which constitutes the sum total of human beings to cooperate with God's intention to help us flourish?" "I hadn't considered that," he said. "I guess you're right." That day he resumed his meds, and a week later he was discharged from the hospital and started rebuilding his life. The point here is that my friend wasn't truly free when he was refusing to take his meds, because something was impeding his ability to understand and receive the healing that God wills. True, he was exercising human agency of a sort by refusing his meds; but the act of refusing was itself a function of his disordered understanding of the life of faith and of a confused and self-destructive way of being in the world. Once he felt free to take his meds without injuring his conscience, he was freed by the meds from some of his confused thinking and disordered priorities and self-destructive illusions, to get back in the game of living.

Warm Regards,

RBS

2 years later: The friendship continues

May 30, 2018

Dear Rick,

I found an article that explains perfectly who I am. I experience chronic ego diffusion, don't have a sense of self, and instead have a series of as-if personalities as I take on the narratives of others. There's an article about it. I kind of wish I hadn't found it. Please read it and pray for me.

Erin

Hi Erin,

I'm not quite sure why you wish you hadn't found this article, unless it is that you find what looks like a "perfect explanation of who you are" very uncomfortable to read. If that is the reason, then let me remind you of three things:

First, medical diagnoses, and especially psychiatric diagnoses, are composite pictures of doctors' observations of many patients, which exist to help other doctors, who observe similar phenomena in their patients proceed therapeutically. That is, they are guides to asking good questions during therapy session and to prescribing helpful medications. For those purposes, they are very useful.

But second, no actual patient is ever "perfectly explained" by even the most accurate medical diagnosis. Clinically, human beings cannot be reduced—and ethically human beings *must* not be reduced—to "cases" of one or more medical conditions. The

“patient” is a person first, last and always, and a diagnosis provides his or her doctor with clinical strategies for minimizing the number of mistakes the doctor makes in treating that person.

And third, from the perspective of the patient, the medical diagnosis can also be useful in self-understanding. But complete self-understanding—assuming that is ever possible—is always more than the sum total of the diagnosable medical conditions from which one suffers. Which is a roundabout way of saying, keep working on your book. Your book may be all the better for illustrating the way in a condition called “schizophrenia” (or whatever) manifests itself in your behavior and relationships, shapes your personal and professional life. But the book I want to read is not a book about “schizophrenia.” It’s a book about Erin, who happens to have schizophrenia, but who also loves Russian novels, throws great parties, is married to a wonderful guy named Todd, is a staunch defender of LGBTQ folks, has a close personal relationship with Gautama Buddha¹⁷ and Jesus of Nazareth, etc., etc., I couldn’t deduce any of those other important things about my friend Erin from the fact that I know she struggles with schizophrenia. Nor would I properly know Erin if I knew only about her psychiatric condition, and knew nothing about her party-throwing skills, her literary tastes, her political and religious convictions, etc. And if I may riff a bit on something you yourself said so beautifully in your previous post, the only way to defeat the dehumanizing pictures of

¹⁷ This email exchange took place before a major recovery of my illness happened that actually allowed for me to become fully Christian. I no longer identify as Buddhist and Christian.

“persons-with-mental-illness” that we get in the media is if those persons tell their own stories, in rich detail, and show that there is more to them...much more...than some diagnostic category.

Praying, as always, for you and Todd,
Rick

Rick – Thanks so much. I really cherish you. I am deeply moved by your response.

This will help me greatly with my faith and with my ability to believe more literally what the Bible says because now I know my tendency to explore and contradict comes from deep within my mind and is not a reflection of the truth of the gospel as humans are meant to experience it. All my qualifications are from a mind that lacks unity. But Paul says we are clay vessels and if I'm an empty one then the best thing to fill it with is the Bible and becoming a conduit of the spirit through the Bible's teaching, or more precisely, Jesus'. I let the spirit move through me and act selflessly most of the time, and I now see why it is easier for me to do this. I have a fragmented identity and very little instinct towards self-preservation (unless I'm protecting my fragile mind).

It is also depressing to realize from this description that I'm probably like this not only from seizures, which I think played a major role, but also because of other traumas I've encountered in life. This makes me sad. Thanks for being one of the best dads I know. I really needed these words.

6 . A p p e n d i x

Overview

THE APPENDIX FEATURES what readers have said have been my most helpful blog posts over the years. I want to remind you that I am writing from my own lived experience and am not claiming that my experience will be like yours or anyone else's. My own experience of my own illness varies by the year itself. Sometimes hearing one person's openness is healing to others, even if that other person's path will end up being different. In the following chapters, marked with a., b., c., etc., I offer breadcrumbs from my own path, which itself may change over the years. Never give up hope! I personally think we should always have our hearts open to remission if not a full recovery, but we should still always take at least some medicine.

a . H o w t o I n t e r a c t w i t h P e o p l e i n C r i s i s

A FRIEND OF MINE HAS BEEN DISTRESSED and so we've been talking more than usual lately. They asked me if I could talk to their family about how to treat them when they're having a hard time because I'm such a good listener and their family only freaks them out or makes them angry. To which I said: "First of all please tell my husband that you think I'm a good listener! He'll be amazed!"

I will share two things from people who supported me during my dark period in my late twenties that I channel when talking to my struggling friend on the phone:

First, to use an expression from teaching, I show them unconditional positive regard. This means that no matter what the friend says I continue to view them as fully human and worthy of love and respect and I don't take what they say personally if they get triggered by my reaction. I treat this, instead, as something to learn

from about how to interact with them in the future. *(Obviously there are some things that need reporting, like any ideas of causing harm to people or self – never keep this kind of thing confidential and never leave a person who is suicidal unattended. Obviously if they are violent or dangerous, leave).*

And second, I never push them to give me more information than they're sharing. I just repeat back with some variation what they've already said with genuine feeling and interest to show that I'm listening, that I care, and that I want to hear more if they want to share. *This is so important, especially if the person is experiencing paranoia, that you are not pushing them to share more than they want, which will just make them more anxious, paranoid and isolated.*

Honestly, I recommend taking classes or talking to a therapist about how you can help your loved one since every person with mental illness is mentally ill in their own way. I'm just sharing my experience here.

And know that things may not be this hard forever! The brain changes! Especially with medical help and therapy! And if you take some therapy to help yourself cope then it will greatly help your family unit.

b. The Dark Side: Overcoming It

EVERYONE HAS A DARK SIDE, but if you don't encounter difficulty, you don't usually know this about yourself. People who lack compassion, in my experience, either forget that they have a dark side, or they are living from this dark side and can't even begin to see the light that would be possible if they went into therapy, exercised and, perhaps, humbled themselves to the Lord.

If we think people think poorly of us, then typically we will either be defiant and consider ourselves "oppressed" (even if we're the ones being problematic), or... we may become the "bad" person people think we are. We will act out their expectations of us because we see ourselves only how they see us. This is very true if we don't have a strong sense of self. Which is why, if you're really struggling, it is important to surround yourself with loving, non-judgmental people.

Another thing can happen: we sometimes imagine that others

think poorly of us when really, they've already moved on! Don't forget that this might also be the case!

Christian faith illumines our way out like nothing else does:

If we continue to look outside of ourselves for approval and find rejection, we despair without Christ who reminds us that we are strongest when we learn from our weaknesses and lean on him. We must ask Christ to give us our identity and not our job; our goodness to our fellow humans in spite their rejection of us, and not our popularity.

We must stop looking horizontally, which means focusing on the people around us who we imagine judging us, and instead look vertically, upward to God and then, through him, go on to the work that we are called to do. I think a lot of school and workplace shootings happen when people look horizontally and obsess over where they stand in relationship to society rather than upward to their relationship to themselves, their God, and their consciences. We are to dig down deeper into God in our peril and forget the ways of the world, our reputations and what the world thinks of us. And act justly even, actually *especially*, when people expect otherwise.

Just because you're rejected doesn't make you like Christ. Being harmless in the face of oppression, rejection and harm posed by others, even our very friends, makes us like Christ.

c . W h a t i s P s y c h o s i s L i k e ?

UNFORTUNATELY, THE NATURE OF PSYCHOSIS is such that people by definition do not have insight into what is happening to them. Insight is a clinical term. It means that you can see that you are suffering. A person with OCD, for example, will often *know* that what they are doing is not “normal” or desirable. Not so for psychosis. A story comes to mind just now to illustrate the point:

My grandfather, Ross, played polo competitively as a young man. One game he was struck by a mallet and lost his eye. Being in shock, he didn't know this had happened to him initially, and he wondered why the men around him were fainting off of their horses when they looked at him. He felt fine. What was the big deal?!? Fast forward to me in graduate school: I'm doing fine!!! Why are people so suspicious of me and not willing to hang out with me? Why are they being compassionate?!? Why does it seem like they pity me?!?

People experience psychosis and have fully functioning families and careers all the time. No one talks about it! But the first time... – even if we do sense that something is amiss, no one wants to admit it might be happening to *them*. And the vast majority of people do not know that it is treatable. It took years for me to find the right medicine and mindset. But I never gave up and neither should you.

This denial about becoming ill is just natural human behavior. For example, some people also experience shock at a cancer diagnosis, or disbelief when they are in a serious car crash. This is a natural, universal aspect of getting a devastating diagnosis or of surviving horrific events. It is so natural and we must be compassionate with ourselves and with others when we are struck with bad news and know that it is natural to be taken aback and be incredulous that horrible things can happen to us.

It is natural human behavior to deny what is going on and, in the case of mental health, to not want to accept help, realize that you can, or trust that it will work out if you do. But we must never give up hope, and we must not be afraid to seek help. Medicine made me well and made it so I could keep up my career and stay in my relationships. So did therapy. So did ending toxic relationships and finding God and putting him in place of the idols of career and popularity.

d . C h a n g e t o H e a l

ASK YOURSELF:

Am I committed to getting better?

Is there something I am getting from being ill?

What steps am I willing to take to improve?

There is always a chance we have an investment in staying ill...
and often we hide this from ourselves.

Ask yourself:

Am I taking responsibility for myself?

Am I thinking of others?

Am I committed to my treatment?

Am I praying for others?

Am I being humble?

Never forget that no matter what, we must love ourselves as we *are* to get better, but we also must be willing and open to *change*.

EMERGENT GRACE

“The Lord is a refuge for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble.” – Psalm 9:9-10

e . F e e l i n g F e e l i n g s a n d N o t F i g h t i n g T h e m

JESUS IS CARRYING US WHEN WE SUFFER MOST. This is hard to remember because often, when we are struggling, people urge us forward. Get up! Go on with your day! Let's move!

Yes, I say. And yet... sometimes when we allow ourselves to feel, to really feel our feelings rather than fight through them, peace follows.

Knock and the door will be opened to you... Ask and it will be granted...

Yes, I say. And yet... sometimes we don't get what we want. How can we be grateful for our pain and disappointment?

What always helped me when I was having a hard time was to look at myself as if from above, as a loving person would look at

their beloved child. As God would look at one of his creations that was struggling... With pity and concern is how he looks at us when we are struggling.

And out of the valley of bones, a place of despair, comes the message that Jesus carrying us in our suffering. That he is carrying us. And that we are not forgotten. If you are being carried by God, that means that you are his beloved child, and that all shall be well, if not in this life then the next one.

Jesus is carrying us when we suffer most.

f. What are Antipsychotics Like?

In two parts...

“BE JOYFUL IN HOPE, PATIENT IN AFFLICTION, FAITHFUL IN PRAYER.” –
ROMANS 12:12

Part 1: Masked Life – What I lost...

WHAT DO I TELL MYSELF WHEN MY FACE IS A MASK?

I tell myself that I am still me and that my soul still shines from within my body, even if its center is now the heart and not the eyes. Even if my eyes cannot sparkle and the wrinkles around my eyes do not respond immediately to the interactions I have on a day to day basis, I remind myself that I am still me, that my heart is full of love and compassion and I that I still matter to God.

Being on antipsychotics is hard. Everyone is different and so I merely share my own experience:

It changes your whole personality and you only very slowly learn how to accept the fact that you cannot command the room the way you did when you were hyper, sparky and sparkly. Your feet drag, your face doesn't move except with great effort. Conversations lose their immediacy and you feel less persuasive. You flex your jaw, even when you're not chewing. Your tongue moves. You are in a fog.

"You look over-medicated, Erin," an abrasive colleague once shouted across the office at the school where I was working. I had confided in a different colleague that I was on medication and this was how I learned that everyone now knew this about me.

But I was numb from my medicine and so this didn't even sting.

I lost my glimmer as a motivational speaker and high-impact teacher. My relationships with my students became strained. And eventually, I had to leave the teaching profession because I had lost the love and effortlessness of teaching groups.

Part 2: Thriving Anyway – What I gained...

TRUST OF OTHERS, BECAUSE I WAS NOT VOLATILE.

Confidence, because I was perceiving reality accurately.

Community, because I had the ability to make appointments because I could trust that I would keep them and that I would be well for them.

Safety. Because I felt safe and was safe.

The ability to trust myself. Self-reliance.

Employment. I found my calling helping others.

The relief of my husband who could finally relax.

Continuity. My life narrative.

My parents, with whom I had stopped talking because I had imagined all sorts of things that hadn't really happened in my childhood and was angry at them.

Resolve. I read Elyn Saks' *The Center Will Not Hold* about her persistence in the face of a severe case of schizophrenia and took heart that she had survived and that that meant that I could, too. And through this, too, I found ... community. A more authentic community than I had ever known. The knowledge that many are on antipsychotics and live fully functioning lives, and the pride in knowing that some of us even have prestigious careers.

g . S n a p p i n g O u t o f I t i s B a d

“SNAP OUT OF IT!”

I’ve been well for several years now, but I didn’t just “snap out of it.” In this post I talk about why it would be bad to snap out of suffering and how we can help people who are suffering see the bright side. Hint: it’s not what you think!

Know this: it is impossible to “snap out” of serious mental illness. And actually, even people who suffer from less officially “serious” mental health issues cannot just “snap out” of them; many do well to seek professional attention. But that’s not what this post is about.

Did you know that telling someone to snap out of their woes is terrible, terrible advice, let alone whether this is even possible or not?

People should not just stay in a pit, suffer and wait until they

suddenly feel better and can act independently again! Usually this is not even possible.

But I'm saying that even if they could, I would stop them from snapping out of it completely. Because by "snapping out of it" we miss the valleys that helps us grow.

"No pain no gain" is a horrible expression, – never use it! And yet this phrase wouldn't be around if there wasn't some truth behind it.

We must treat pain as our teacher.

In my own case, pain has taught me what matters in life. To me, what matters is helping people who are suffering.

St. Paul teaches us in 2 Corinthians 4:16-18 about the importance of our dying to our outermost self – the bragging self – the *what's my resume look like?* self. Because what is inside is being transformed when this happens into something glorious. And that wouldn't happen if we could just "snap out of it":

"Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal."

I would add to St. Paul's assertion that just as things which are seen are temporary, that things which are felt are also temporary. We must always remind ourselves that we are not our feelings and we are bigger than how we feel. Always!

How might we help loved ones who are suffering to see this very real bright side to their suffering? How can we frame this for the person so that they can see how they could grow from this?!? How lucky they are?!? How exciting to find something positive! The silver lining!!!!

Alas, we can't make anyone see it. We can only hold space for them to find it out for themselves.

Unfortunately, it is easy to provide encouragement by forcing collective wisdom like “no pain no gain” or “every cloud has a silver lining” on people who are suffering. I say unfortunately because it's not long after we have done this that we have alienated the person we had meant to help. They probably won't trust us with their pain again! And they'll be still more isolated for it!

I will conclude with an example from my own experience.

I remember how, while stuck in the bleakest despair, my grandma once gave me a gratitude journal and told me to find something to be grateful for everyday and write it down. It's not so bad! Indeed, from the outside things looked great still. To HER!

The practice of looking for the good could not have been further from my mind. The thought of it repulsed me and I threw the journal in the trash, determined not fit into the stereotype of the shallow Californian superficially pretending that all was well when I felt like crap. Life went on. (By the way, it's not only Californians who do this...)

Several months later my mom bought me a gratitude jar. Mom instructed me to write on a piece of paper something to be grateful for every day and then to put it in the jar. And then she backed away

and left.

Hmmm.... This felt different....

....

...Because she did not press me on it, and because she did not lecture me on how important it was to be grateful... because she did not “should” on me and say, “you should be grateful!” ...Because she did not ask me again, let alone daily, if I was doing what she had recommended..., or remind me that so-and-so had it worse because they had problem X...

Because of all of this, I did not throw it away. No – while I did not use the jar, – I’m too much of a contrarian for that – still I did not throw it away. And then something amazing happened.

Somehow, over the course of a few months, I began to feel, and eventually to know, that that empty jar was waiting for me for when I would be ready to fill it. It became my space for hope. This was completely unconscious.

And with time I visualized myself being able to put notes in it. And eventually I did just that.

Remember, as St. Paul wrote, “the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen [or felt] are eternal.” You won’t always feel the way you do now and don’t give up hope. Amen.

h. Accepting Your Diagnosis, Maintaining Hope for Recovery

“WHAT A RELIEF TO FINALLY HAVE A NAME for my suffering!”

Few who receive a stigmatizing mental health diagnosis utter these words. A bad diagnosis can make what seemed like just a really bad summer a never-ending life-long sentence of despair. If this applies to you, take heart! This does not have to be the case! Diagnoses, though helpful, cause harm unless you frame them differently than most doctors will. Read on to hear what I did to bring healing and hope back to my life in spite of my diagnosis.

It has been said that the body achieves what the mind believes. Our minds are incredibly powerful and they shape our reality and our futures, sometimes even down to what illnesses we get. We don't just think our way into mental illness, of course, but don't

forget that people can make dramatic improvements in their daily functioning and quality of life just by changing their thought patterns. And so, we could also say that the mind achieves what it believes about itself.

Clearing harmful religious structures from my life in favor of a hope-filled Christianity healed me partially. The other essential change was ignoring books and scholarship describing my illness and what this meant about myself and my life trajectory. This was transformational.

Labels are permanent, and mental illness is sometimes, though by no means always, permanent. Research is not bad and reading scholarship is not bad, perhaps, so long as one takes it with a grain of salt. In general, I don't recommend it.

What makes mental illness permanent? Not staying in treatment. Abusing drugs and alcohol. The first step is to acknowledge that you are greatly reducing your likelihood of a good life by being reckless and wishy-washy about treatment. Assuming you're being careful, what else makes serious mental illness permanent?

Reducing yourself to a label and seeing yourself as nothing more than a label and a set of symptoms that will always be there until you die.

Mental illnesses can last a life time, and in bad cases we probably need to stay on medicine, but we cannot leave it at that. As soon as we frame mental illness as permanent, we're doomed to stagnate, or get worse!

As people, we read books or watch movies about life all the

time. Eventually we can't tell if we are experiencing life the way we are because the book we've read changed us, or because the movie was so accurate that it captured us perfectly! Diagnoses are like books about ourselves. Once we have them, it means we have found something that describes a part of us perfectly. But unfortunately, we then may let them define us completely. And our mind achieves what it believes about itself. The illness becomes permanent.

Once we have a mental health diagnosis and agree with it, then we know what we are to move away from. It is not that we have a container to hold us permanently. No! Instead think of it this way: we have a direction. A goal: lasting stability. Maybe even a full recovery! A diagnosis is a sign that we must do things that move us out of this symptom cluster. In other words, a motion away from our illness.

Above all, never give up hope that you will get better!

If you have a doctor who says you're only going to get worse, and who doesn't listen to you when you say you want to keep things positive, get a different doctor! Negativity is poison for your brain. Obviously if you're trying to get off of a mood-stabilizer (like Lithium or Lamictal) and you are bipolar, you probably shouldn't go off of it. I would not trust a doctor if they told me I did not need the medicine I take because I know that this is what keeps me high-functioning. But if a doctor paints an overarching doom and gloom picture, get a second opinion.

I will conclude with an example of my own experience:

I once had a doctor who said in my first visit that I was on a low dose of what I was on and that, even though I was doing great, I

could expect to double it within the next year! And then continue to go up on it. This is a bad sign! Turns out she had been an emergency room doctor and was used to people in absolute crisis. It was her first year in private practice. She gave me the right medicine change, but I quickly got a different doctor. I will always take my medicine and avoid stress and clear my calendar when it needs to happen.

We must find doctors who have realism – who don't just tell us to go off our meds – paired with hope and optimism. Labels and diagnoses frequently take away our ability to see that our suffering might not be permanent. And therefore, labels can make the mind achieve the doom that doctors tell us about and that we most fear.

i. On Praying for Suffering People

WHEN I THINK BACK TO HOW I FELT IN MY LATE TWENTIES, with career caving in, and marriage struggling, and a whole host of other problems I have not shared with anyone, – an image comes into my mind. It is of my head, filled with sharp objects and utensils that cause pain when touched and when they touch each other. Stray objects jumbled in my mind that are exquisitely sensitive to my touch, professional intervention, and even prayer.

I don't know how I prayed for myself. I don't think I had the strength to do so. I can remember praying at the beginning of my illness – but I don't think I remembered to pray during the years when I was in the darkest part of it. And I don't blame myself for this. It is just how things were.

But I did ask others to pray on my behalf. And I believe that it helped a great deal.

Here's how I pray for people in absolute crisis and despair:

First, I imagine the person in their fullness and with their ailment and see the ailment as a blockage of energy that is preventing them right now from seeing themselves as the child of God that they are and all that they are meant to be. It is painful to see the kink that is blocking them from their potential and I remind myself how much stronger they will be for this ordeal once we get grace flowing through the system again. Once they're ready and able to ask for grace.

At first the person, when I begin my prayer, is my size – it's as though they are sitting right next to me. But then I shrink them down smaller into the size of the palm of my hand in my mind's eye... they become a little person in my palm that is swollen with pain and suffering. I then imagine a golden ball of God's grace surrounding them and then around that I envision a bright white orb of protection and divine benevolence that will promote their healing.

The soul sufferer lies in this womb of golden grace and ethereal love and I start imagining this grace and love surrounding the individual, watching as it permeates their skin, and then flows down into the lungs, and the heart, and the whole body and their entire being and all the surrounding energy of the room they are in. The glow because of the shocking love of it all, and I imagine this in my mind's eye.

I imagine their mind being made new in Christ and the hands of Jesus, with holes from the nails, cradling their head and massaging their temples and the holy space between the eyebrows as he brings them living water. I pray that God would purify and cleanse the mind gradually, and thoroughly, and with care. I visualize this

happening and the process by which they come to allow this to happen to themselves.

Prayers for people who are suffering in their soul need to be filled with hope. Imagine golden grace filling the top of the head and radiating throughout the body, clearing any blockages and erasing the shame that keeps the illness intact. Pray in a way that makes space for their future wellness. I am largely 100% recovered, I have decided to keep these writings online to show the journey I traveled and to help others find their way. But if I hadn't approached recovery with a growth mindset, I know I would still be back where I was.

j . O n S h a r i n g

SOME PEOPLE, JUST BECAUSE THEY HAVE BEEN diagnosed with schizophrenia or bi-polar disorder, kill themselves for the stigma. Because they hate themselves for it and can't come to grips fast enough with a rapidly transformed self-image.

How did I avoid such a fate?

Even in my earliest period of intense struggle a diary entry shows I made the following commitment: that if I got through it, I was to help others like me. I learned this from AA. I had a friend in AA and in AA they talk about service. That as soon as we are out of the emergency mode, we should be focused on giving back to others in the earlier stages of recovery. People become greeters, sponsors, or help run the meetings. And it is beautiful.

How did I avoid such a fate?

I met with a pastor who assured me that mental illness is not the devil.

How did I avoid such a fate?

Through another mentor I realized that God gives us doctors and medicine so that we can better meet his purposes and serve him in this life.

And I reminded myself that illness teaches us that we are not God. I am currently reading a book called *Blessed by Illness*.¹⁸ While I think that that is taking it too far, and that it was probably written by someone who hadn't had a debilitating illness, I DO think that people who are ill do well to try to learn something through their suffering.

I have noticed that it hurts to share my story with people who are not used to pain. Or with people who are embarrassed by their pain and who feel that they are a lesser human for it.

When I share with people sometimes, the look I get back from them is pity. They do not realize that I'm proud of what I've been through, to have survived and to be able to share. And so even though it hurts to share when people feel like to understand me is to pity me, it heals me. It heals me because I am a success story in a world where only the negative stories reach the news media and grape vine. And I am encouraged to weather their condescension until I find a listener who needs my words. And now that I am largely 100% recovered, I have decided to keep these writings online to show the journey I traveled and to help others find their way.

¹⁸ Mees, *Blessed by Illness*.

k . W h a t t h e
S c h i z o p h r e n i a
S p e c t r u m T e a c h e s A l l
o f U s A b o u t
B e i n g C h r i s t i a n

MANY CHRISTIANS WORRY ABOUT the varieties of Christianity that are emerging all over the globe... Christians often declare opposing Christianities “un-Christian.” And this is to our detriment and to the detriment of would-be fellow believers seeking Christ in a crisis. In this essay I talk about how my unique world view as a former sufferer of schizoaffective disorder has allowed me to see the typically warring sides of Christianity with compassion and I advocate for an unconventional approach to our political and spiritual differences by drawing on a story from my husband Todd’s and my life.

So Many Churches, So Many Values

ONE CHURCH BELIEVES X, THE OTHER BELIEVES Y. Which one is right? Meanwhile, I'm suffering! I need a pastor! Where do I go if I'm gay? Where do I go if I'm having an affair? Where do I go if I'm being abused? The questions abound...and having worshiped at multiple churches of radically different perspectives on all of these topics regularly several days a week for the past several years, I can tell you that churches can have radically different answers to these questions... and generally they will think that they are the only one offering the right answer.

One church would never allow divorce, even in the face of the gravest abuse, while the other will marry gay couple or happily advise a divorce in the face of "mere" irreconcilable differences. One church cares about social justice, and the other cares about building a personal relationship with Jesus as their Savior. My favorite book ever is by Douglas Strong at Seattle Pacific University on how people can be Evangelical and invested in social justice at the same time.¹⁹ It is a little old, but it provides examples of people who have done this. You should read it.

Meanwhile, a hurting individual has just walked into a church, your church. What do we do? They don't know anything about Christianity. They read a blog (like this one) that suggested they give it a try...

¹⁹ Strong, *They Walked in the Spirit*.

Where's the Compassion?: A Trick Question

I'M GOING TO DRAW A PARALLEL THAT WILL shed further light on the situation. I'm reminded of a recent conversation that I had with my husband Todd about what we would do when the time came for our dog, Addie (10), to be put down. Now I'll preface this by saying that if you are reading this in a country other than the US, feel free to laugh at this example – Americans are ridiculous about their dogs; they are our children. Anyway, Todd had just read a recent article in the New York Times about hospice for dogs. He earnestly texted me the link during the day and then brought it up at dinner expectantly that night, seeking my blessing that when our girl gets near the end, we would do hospice.

I, on the other hand, thought that that would be completely unnecessary. My grandpa was a horse veterinarian who put down one family dog merely because it was peeing on the furniture. But I knew it was important to him and was determined not to belittle the tender idea that was beginning to take hold. I said that I would support hospice up until I thought it would be unethical to keep her alive. At which point I would merely leave town to leave him with Addie since I wouldn't dream of putting her down before Todd was ready.

This seemed like the perfect American boundaries, just like what I had studied as a psychology student. It was even allowing my dear girl to suffer longer just to please my husband. What a sacrifice on my part! Can you imagine the anguish...?

The impact of this comment, however, was unexpected.

“So then you would leave me to shoulder the loss all by myself?” Todd asked, crestfallen. “How could you do such a thing? Where’s the compassion?”

I couldn’t hold back my frustration at this unexpected turn. You see I was thinking that I had already thrown Todd a bone – forgive the expression – by even saying hospice would be okay. And now even by honoring traditional boundaries and deciding remove myself from the situation to honor Todd’s feelings, I was wrong.

“How would I be uncompassionate,” which isn’t a word, by the way, – “by leaving you with her so she could die the way you wanted?” I told Todd. “You’d be winning! Why would you lack compassion and prolong her suffering in the first place?”

Addie was sitting there, meanwhile, in perfect health, watching the argument take off.

“You think that putting her down is compassionate?” Todd said. “Americans only put down their animals to make their lives easier!”

Which Church is Modelling Christ?

THE ULTIMATE QUESTION WAS WHAT COMPASSION looked like, but we didn’t frame it that way. It was more personal: it was which of us was compassionate. It could not be both. The parallels with the state of American Christianity may already be clear to those who remember that the litmus test of any Christianity is this: are we modeling Christ? Modelling Christ is the top value. And what it looks like is different for each side.

Broken Church, we must ask ourselves if we are looking beyond ourselves and seeking the mind of Christ.

And yet, already a new argument arises. Whose version of the mind of Christ is the right version? Round and round we go...

I have learned that focusing on our own healing or the possibility of a cure for ourselves is not how we heal ourselves. It is also not how we heal the world. Stop asking how the church can heal. It can't. It's a part of the fallen creation. The more we try to convert everyone to our sides the more contentious matters will become and the church will fracture as permanently as when veil of the temple was torn in two.

Until 2018, I lived on the schizophrenia spectrum. I had schizoaffective disorder. Part of being on the schizophrenia spectrum – when it's untreated, mine was treated – means that you're living in multiple realities at once. I have been able to immerse myself in different worldviews entirely, while others do this merely as a thought experiment with a charitable perspective of “humoring” the opposition before invalidating them. I really occupied multiple world views fully and at once.

I have learned that God works through us even when we're at our most broken when we look outside of ourselves. At my lowest point I asked God, as Jesus did, “Why have you forsaken me?” This is an act of utter humility. Maybe that's what we need to do before the Church finds new life, is die to ourselves and to our egos which are ripping it apart to the detriment of those who need to be healed.

An Unconventional Solution

WE MUST EACH FOLLOW THE HOLY SPIRIT'S CALL to what our church, or our institution is meant to be. As Christians of a broken 21st century Christianity the trap lies in our trying to be everything to everyone. Let some churches be conservative. Let some be liberal. Try to persuade others to your side. But don't dehumanize people or dismiss them and their Christianity as if that makes them unworthy of Christ's kingdom. Don't say someone is oppressing you just because they have a different worldview. People should be allowed to have differing callings. Who even knows what those labels mean in the first place? They mean a different thing to every person.

It is true that the cross is suffering. But the body of Christ is called to be a light to the world. What it is doing in the United States is hurting the hurting Jesus would heal.

7 . A f t e r w o r d

Schools and Mental Health

THERE IS SOMETHING AMISS IN SCHOOLS NOWADAYS: they aren't helping people to learn and grow with tentativeness and humility. We have made teachers into gods and they disciple our children without a Christian worldview. And those in the church can also be lacking in a Christian worldview. It's not integrated. It's not holistic.

We lack humility if we are fundamentalist for the same reason that we lack humility if we are liberals, or that we lack humility as conservatives: it is exceptionalist thinking. We have always been trying to reconcile science and religion as liberals and Evangelicals, and this is what quantum physics attempted to do as well. Pauli with psychoanalysis and archetypes and Qabalah; Bohr with the Tao and Chinese philosophy; Schrödinger with Hindu philosophy; Heisenberg with the Platonic theory of ancient Greece. Lynn McTaggart makes this point in her book *The Field* and goes on to

say that these thinkers remained unsatisfied and posits a theory of the Field that is common in New Age thought. That the "field" is the missing link. But it is not so simple. The concept of the field denies the reality of Christ as King.

The Wesleyan concept of combining knowledge with vital piety addressed a need during his time (the 18th century) that continues to this day. It is something that we would do well to remember, given the Wesleyan strain still prevalent in American thought. The idea of political correctness, itself, is a sort of social sanctification whereby holiness is attained through words. I completely get why people sneer at political correctness for the sake of political correctness. Deprived of the religious undertones, it leads to egomania. But political correctness, when thoughtfully used, is a sign of respect and is no longer political.

We forget, when outside of the Christian frame but still striving for perfection, that we are not God. To say what is right or "politically correct," is not always to think what is right and believe what is right. And therefore, it is not right action. There is not alignment with what in theology we talk about as the "horizontal" and the "vertical" aspects of existence. There is not alignment, in other words, with "community" and "submission" to something more powerful than us. In other words, to God. Religion is what teaches us such alignment. And secularism will never get there. But neither will fundamentalism, for the very same reason.

John Wesley, the founder of what later came to be the Methodist strain of Christianity, dealt with science and religion debate as well as with political and religious in-fighting in a sermon

called "The Catholic Spirit" that finds its embodiment today in Wesleyan schools. While they're not perfect, it's a start. Wesleyan Christian education is precisely what is needed in the U.S. It is not esoteric. It is not Waldorf. It mixes knowledge and vital piety, and also social action. Social engagement, not reclusivity. Schools that disciple students, and that unite piety and knowledge in a way that destabilizes the dominance of whiteness in higher education today, over time could allow us as a culture to mature past liberal and conservative/scientific and religious, fundamentalisms.

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A b o u t t h e A u t h o r

HI! I'M ERIN. I AM FOCUSING NOW ON BEING a full-time writer and editor. I live in Seattle with my amazing husband Todd – a rocket scientist! – at home. Check me out online!

- My mental health website (erinmichaelgrimm.com) shares my story to empower others, and filters books through my eyes and the eyes of experienced scholars, whose work I review.

I am a former Fulbright scholar who has taught 5 languages and graduated summa cum laude from UC Berkeley with the departmental citation for undergraduate research for my honors thesis on scandal and the theatrical in the works of Dostoevsky. Indeed, much of my life pre-medication featured theatrical elements. My MA thesis at UC Davis analyzed theological and moral aspects of 18th and 19th century European poetry, philosophy, and short fiction, many aspects of which I bring to bear in the book. I served as a ministry intern at a Baptist church (2016-2017) where I preached and administered the ordinances (communion), and was a lay crisis counselor (2011-2015), i.e. a Stephen Minister, and a hospice volunteer (2016) as well.

A c k n o w l e d g m e n t s

To my husband Todd, my wonderful parents and siblings and in-laws: thank you.

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