

Finding a Spiritual Path Through a Bipolar Life

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Liguori

Imprimi Potest:

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Provincial, Denver Province
The Redemptorists

ISBN 978-0-7648-1830-1

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Cover design: Jodi Hendrickson

Cover image: Shutterstock

Printed in the United States of America

23 22 21 20 19 / 6 5 4 3 2

The Faces of Bipolar Disorder

Amy suffers from bipolar disorder. So does Julie. And Jack, too. There are common denominators related to the illness that they all share together. For instance, each has been battling this brain disorder to a greater or lesser degree for a lifetime, sometimes without even knowing it. But other facets of the illness are uniquely tailored to their personalities and life situations, as we will see in the following brief excerpts from their histories.

Amy

When Amy was growing up, she was always characterized as the smart kid with high energy. She got her assignments done so quickly that teachers were constantly being challenged to find something more for her to do. She was especially gifted artistically, and by the time she was a senior in high school, she was winning awards for her painting and sculpture.

When it came to art, her output was enormous. She produced so much art that after a while there was no place to store everything. Yet she continued on and on. During those times when she experienced high bursts of energy, she would paint all day and all night, sometimes for as long as a week, with virtually no sleep.

In college her surges of endless energy continued, but after a while she began to crash emotionally and physically and go through periods where she could barely get out of bed because of crippling depression. She began missing classes. Instead of succeeding academically as she had in the past, she found herself getting failing grades and was eventually placed on probation.

Yet even while her academic career was crashing and burning, Amy displayed a kind of grandiose attitude about her art and herself. She would tell those who admired her work, "Some day you will be reading about me in art history books, and my paintings will be worth a fortune. I am the best female painter of our generation." Those who listened to her would smile and roll

their eyes. Amy certainly was different, even eccentric, but then again, artists tend to be like that—a bit quirky.

No one, including her family doctor, made a connection between her so-called “oddness” and bipolar disorder. Amy’s odd behaviors were really manifestations of a serious illness that increasingly was putting her at risk. And because she received no treatment for this disorder, it progressed and got steadily worse.

“I’m lucky, or rather I should say blessed, to be alive today,” she said as she thought back on the things she did that put her life in jeopardy. She shook her head. “I can hardly believe it. Like the day I decided to hang one of my paintings from a bell tower on campus. I actually started to climb the bell tower with the painting around my neck. Someone called campus security, and they got me down. They dismissed it as a crazy student prank, and that was the end of it. I still got no treatment. Meanwhile, my terrible judgment, inappropriate behavior, and grandiosity went merrily onward.”

When did things change for Amy? She continued: “The turning point came when I felt I could walk on water, just like Christ himself. It was winter, and I actually began to walk on ice floes across a bay. One of the floes broke away from the rest, and before I knew it, I was floating out into Lake Ontario.”

She shook her head in disbelief as she remembered what happened next. “Somebody called the Coast Guard, and they quickly came in a boat and rescued me. And although I was acting crazy, something good came out of the whole incident, because I was taken to a psychiatric ward. There, for the very first time in my twenty-five years, a doctor told me I had bipolar disorder and that treatment for it would begin right away.”

What did the treatment consist of? “Mostly medication and psychotherapy.” Has it worked? Amy smiled. “That was fifteen years ago, and all things considered, I am doing well. I’ve had a couple of relapses, especially when I stopped taking my medication for a while, but my life is

good now.” She pointed to a picture of herself smiling alongside her husband and her three children. “All you have to do is ask them, and they will tell you that there is life after bipolar disorder—a life, thank God, that I’ve been blessed to spend with them.”

Julie

Julie is nearly sixty-five now. She was diagnosed with bipolar disorder when she was forty-five. Her story is typical of many persons’ experience with bipolar disorder.

“I belong to a bipolar disorder support group, and if you listen closely to the stories people tell there, you soon learn how common it is to be misdiagnosed or not diagnosed at all. It’s almost as though this illness is invisible. A physician or health professional looking at us knows something is wrong, but just doesn’t see the real problem—namely, a brain disorder. That is exactly what bipolar disorder is: sickness of the brain. It’s no one’s fault, certainly not the person who has it. Chances are someone else in

their family had it or has it, too. But because it is an illness, you can't ignore it or let it be and hope that it will go away on its own. You've got to have medical treatment, and the right kind."

She continued: "You wouldn't treat diabetes with a heart medication or high blood pressure with an antibiotic. You have to match the medication to the sickness, or you won't get the right results. I was depressed for years. My two favorite moods were hopelessness and helplessness. But then I would experience a normal mood, usually followed by great mood and a big burst of energy. We lived on a farm, and my high mood would almost always fall around the time that strawberry season was at its peak in the springtime. I could pick strawberries, can them, and put up preserves all day and all night.

"Then I'd get depressed all over again, and by the time the corn was ready to harvest in early fall, I could barely function. It was a living nightmare. My doctor told me I was in early menopause and gave me medications, but

nothing helped. He completely missed what was really wrong with me.”

What changed things? Julie smiled. “My daughter did. During college, she majored in psychology. One semester, she did a report on bipolar disorder, not just to meet a course requirement, but because she saw the symptoms in me and was also beginning to see them in herself. Eventually, we both went to the same psychiatrist, and both of us were diagnosed as being bipolar. In fact, now we both take the same medicine for it, and for the two of us, it’s the right one.”

Julie summed up her experience with bipolar disorder this way. “Take a good honest look at yourself—the ways you think and the ways you act. If you think there is even a remote chance you are bipolar, seek help. And the only way you will get the help you need is by finding a health professional who understands the sickness and can treat it properly. Keep looking until you find the right person who can tell you what’s wrong with you. Don’t give up. Ask God to send you to that person, and he will.”