



Mental Health Awareness Week 2018

Bursting out in praise: Faith and mental health

Gavin T. Murphy

Gavin T. Murphy tells his faith-filled story of living with bipolar disorder and describes how he learned to burst out in praise in the midst of great pain, with a little help from Ignatian Spirituality.

My former novice master once said to me, 'It's better to be ridiculously early as opposed to being ridiculously late'. For me, this meant not always running out the door at the last minute with my heart pumping and my mind racing. It meant not being the one that others had to make excuses for, such as 'Gavin's on his way' or 'he will catch up'. There was a moment during my Jesuit novitiate in 2011 when I started to be on time. Something clicked: when it did, I almost felt as if I was standing at attention with the other novices. It is in this context that I ponder what I want to say for Mental Health Awareness Week because I am more likely to be calm, confident and compassionate when I am engaged in meditation; I am more likely to be productive at work when I make it to the office at the same time as everyone else; and I am more likely to write articles like this one when I dedicate the time to do so.

Timing was also important when I started my mental health blog, [ilovebipolar](http://ilovebipolar.com), in 2016. I found my 'voice' through this platform as I wrote on the upsides and downsides of bipolar disorder – a mental illness known for its severe changes and challenges in mood, such as depression, low mood, dysphoria (intense unease and agitation), hypomania (elation and overactivity) and mania. Relationship difficulties are particularly common and challenging, due to a lack of clarity in processing emotions. I find myself writing often about balance, with regard to thinking, energy, lifestyle, and so on. What you see now in my blog



posts is a person who is quite healthy mentally, but this was certainly not always the case.

An important development in my mental health journey came when I made contact on social media with a Jesuit spiritual accompanier a few years ago, after I had left the novitiate. I bounced personal concerns off him from time to time. He always had a kind word to say and his gentle support prompted me to continue my

journey with bipolar. Eventually, a lady from the Jesuit young adult ministry helped organise for us to meet, and so began the process of spiritual accompaniment. I was a little nervous as I opened up to him but I soon began to relax in his quiet, unassuming presence, and my confusing mood experiences were quickly understood and even cherished.

We met at mutually convenient spaces until we finally decided to meet at my accompanier's community house. I continued to open up, and at one point I disclosed a particular weakness that I had found prolonged my unstable moods. This was an important step in my recovery as he could then better guide me in his Ignatian tradition. He was able to suggest psycho-spiritual concepts that suited my situation and that led me towards a more fulfilling and meaningful way of living. Han F. de Wit, author of *Contemplative Psychology*, notes that the strength of a contemplative tradition lies in its capacity for individual guidance, and I find Ignatian Spirituality to be very strong in this regard.

For example, the Latin term *agere contra* meaning to ‘act against’ or ‘go against self’ was a concept that perfectly applied to me. It is a form of training that helped me go against my natural inclinations, as I was often pulled in unhelpful directions. So when I was in a ‘high’ state with a want for more buzz and excitement, I practised slowing down by going for a walk, turning off the internet and focusing on deep breathing. On the other hand, I pushed onwards during a ‘low’ state when I felt like collapsing, by keeping to my appointments, spending time with my family and friends, and continuing to pray. I also became more aware of the Ignatian concepts of consolation (being oriented towards God) and desolation (away from God), and in the words of psychoanalyst Dan Merkur I came, ‘to know and to want what God wants’. I began to nip unhealthy distractions in the bud by recognising, for instance, when ‘the devil comes cloaked as an angel of light’.

I continue to attend spiritual accompaniment on a monthly basis and I see it as an essential part of the recovery process. My accompanier gives me individualised scripture to pray with and I also ‘empty my mind’ through the practice of *centring prayer*. I find the training of Ignatian Spirituality challenging at times, but I feel the Spirit nudging me onwards. I trust that often my accompanier sees my life more clearly than I see it myself, and this leaves me with a willingness to open my hands to God.

The metaphor of a traveller on a long-distance flight comes to the surface as I further ponder what Mental Health Awareness Week is about. The traveller experiences many events, bumps and people from the start of their journey until their final destination. Similarly, those tuned into this week’s initiative come with their own experiences, challenges and relationships, and they hope to arrive at a place where they can settle. We also learn to accept uncertainty on this journey and it takes courage to go through every step of the way.

Bow down, then, before the power of God now (1 Peter 5:6)...

All that being said, a person’s mental health journey still has a somewhat mysterious dimension. I have tried to cooperate with the health services since a troublesome bipolar episode in 2012. I had moved on from the Jesuit novitiate in England to find my place

as a lay person in Ireland. And this finding of place required a radical openness to God. I wasn’t a fan of medication back then; in fact I rarely turned even to paracetamol. Even when I broke my leg as a 19-year-old and I was given painkillers after the operation, I wasn’t interested in taking them.

When, at 29 years old, I showed up at the door of a psychiatrist, flanked by two of my brothers, I was initially resistant to treatment. The doctor ordered a battery of blood tests that displayed hormone and vitamin deficiencies. It was thought that these negative results were possibly related to my symptoms of mania and depression, and so I was treated accordingly. However, there was no significant improvement in my mood so the doctor suggested mental health medication.

Because of the doctor’s concern and knowledge, I took the medication, which very gradually improved my symptoms. I regularly repeated a mantra: ‘Every day in every way I am getting a little bit better and better,’ and I found consolation in Teilhard de Chardin’s prayer [Patient Trust](#), which I often read. Today, I have found a medication script that more or less works for me, whereby two types of medication help tackle racing thoughts and mood instability. What’s more, I have found that 35 sessions of psychotherapy over 15 months have really helped me to be more assertive. It has also enabled me to experience emotional intimacy in my relationships.

Another reality that dawns upon me is that the pain I experienced in my mental health has become a source of grace and fruitfulness. If I look back again to my novitiate experience, I see many moments of great struggle and anguish. Finding myself withdrawing from my colleagues was not easy, and believing in thoughts as if they were real voices was almost unbearable. My fellow novices tried to reach out to me, but I was unaware of what was happening inside. However, I learned something from these experiences. In my struggle, it felt like God wasn’t listening, but now I think God was reaching out to me in a manner that led me into a different way of being.

...so that God may raise you up in due time (1 Pt 5:6)...

As mentioned, it was upon my return to Ireland that I finally sought out the mental health services. But what was God trying to say through my pain? Was

there any meaning to it? Well, one way to look at it is to imagine what my life would be like if I didn't experience pain, high and low moods, racing thoughts, psychosis. Just like my old self. And, one word that presents itself is 'humility'. When speaking of humility I mean having a true appreciation of myself. I would probably not be as humble as I am right now (if I can be humble enough to say it!) without my experience of great pain, and without my willingness to let God transform it.

Today, I see that my humility enables me to accept the bad days and to look beyond myself when I begin to get stuck in the 'poor me' victim state. When I encounter pain, I now call out for the grace that wants to touch my heart. If I embrace the grace, I glorify God and become more fully alive. Sometimes I kick and scream out of anger and frustration, but ultimately I accept the reality of the situation, as [Walter Ciszek SJ](#) recommended in the midst of being imprisoned for his faith in the Soviet Union. Grace also brings a clarity to my words and deeds.

Recently I meditated on the absence of Christ during Holy Saturday as part of my Lenten journey. I imagined that I was Nicodemus who helped cover the body of Jesus in linen cloths and spices. I prayed by his body and noticed a sense of loss and nothingness. I left the tomb and in my imagination I prayed with my family. My Saviour's felt absence during that day reminded me of times of depression where God's presence seemed ever so distant. There was pain in those times, but the grace I received urged me to rejoice when my mood lifted like the rising sun, a reminder of God's glorious presence.

...unload all your burden on to God, since God is concerned about you (1 Pt 5:7)

Saying what I have said about accepting my mental health condition does not for the slightest moment mean that I need to do it on my own. I believe that God is lovingly present and yearns to shower love on me. I have sensed God's concern for me over the years through the care of fellow novices, mental health professionals and my spiritual accompanier. I have felt God's compassion through the care of my family and friends who have journeyed with me for better and for worse. To contemplate God's love enables me to dig deep and to do the most loving and truthful thing in the midst of the many challenging symptoms

of bipolar. As Yahweh listened to Samuel, God listens to me: 'Samuel grew up. Yahweh was with him and did not let a single word fall to the ground of all that he had told him' (1 Samuel 3: 19).

To sum up, I believe God is deeply concerned with everyone's mental health. God wants us to live a healthy life of eustress ('good stress'), rest, nourishment and all that promotes a real integrated person. Although God does not want us to get caught up with unnecessary anxiety and desolation, I believe God desires us to bring our struggles to the table so that we will be brought to a deeper spiritual reality.

Saint Francis of Assisi, the great lover of the natural world, was almost blind and in a lot of pain when he burst out in praise for all that had been given to him. 'All praise is Yours,' he acclaimed. In gratitude, he created the song '[Canticle of Brother Sun](#)' (or 'Canticle of Creatures'), which refers to the sun, wind, air and fire as his brothers, and to the moon, stars, water, earth and death as his sisters. I further look to The Magnificat in the Gospel of Luke, where Mary proclaimed the ultimate 'Yes' to being the mother of God. She inspires me to say 'Yes' to God, just as I say 'Yes' to mental illness. I call this personal prayer of mine 'The Magnificent Magnificat':

Yes to your promptings, your movement within,
Yes to your inner light, your sunny sensualities.
Yes to her hands filled with openness,
Sing Hallelujah to her magnificent lowliness.

Yes to your gaze, your soft sensitivities,
Yes to your blissfulness, your heavenly mindfulness.
Yes to her eyes filled with pureness,
Sing Hallelujah to her magnificent blessedness.

Yes to your open road, your warm invitations,
Yes to your genuineness, your grounded worldliness.
Yes to her embrace filled with wholeness,
Sing Hallelujah to her magnificent fruitfulness.

Yes to your lion-heart, your brave inspirations,
Yes to your expansiveness, your meditative
spaciousness.

Oh Yes, Forever Yes, My Goodness!

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