

Faithful but Still Creative with Bipolar Disorder

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I still remember meeting Maria, waiting in the lobby of our daughters' preschool ballet class. She was vivacious and outgoing, full of ideas and fun and we soon became friends. Our daughters ended up in the same kindergarten class that fall, and Maria was the best homeroom mom, planning parties, baking cookies, and decorating everything with a flair. In fact, she was the most capable person I knew. If I asked Maria to do something, it was as good as done.

Walking into a psychiatric ward visiting Maria months later was heartbreaking. I had seen her fracture in front of me over a period of days. She had frantically waved me down in the carpool line, jumping out of her minivan wearing her nightgown. She later called after midnight, talking at a rapid-fire stream-of-consciousness pace, feverishly melding events of the past and present, cycling through inner thoughts and feelings. I listened and watched bewildered, unable to understand what was happening to my friend.

I went over to their house to pray with her husband after a few days of this erratic behavior, wondering if this was a Satanic attack. None of us knew what to make of it. After another sleepless night filled with mounting agitation, her husband and brother decided to admit her to a mental health facility. They didn't know what else to do.

In the hospital, Maria was told she had bipolar disorder. She had been diagnosed with bipolar eight years earlier, after a period of debilitating depression, and had been on lithium for a while. But she was taken off lithium because it had dangerously elevated her liver levels. Maria had hoped that was a one-time episode and being symptom-free for years seemed to confirm that. Growing up with a mother with bipolar, she knew what recurrence might mean.

As I entered Maria's room on the psych ward, I felt helpless. I didn't know what to do or say. I had just memorized Psalm 139, so I plopped down on the chair by her bed and slowly read the psalm to Maria, inserting her name throughout the passage.

You have searched Maria, Lord,
and you know her.
You know when she sits and when she rises;
you perceive her thoughts from afar.
You discern her going out and her lying down;
you are familiar with all Maria's ways.
Before a word is on Maria's tongue
you, Lord, know it completely.

...

Where can Maria go from your Spirit?
Where can she flee from your presence?

...

For you created Maria's inmost being;
you knit her together in her mother's womb.
We praise you because she is fearfully and wonderfully made;
your works are wonderful,
she knows that full well.

all the days ordained for Maria were written in your book
before one of them came to be.

...

Maria later told me hearing Psalm 139 personalized brought her hope when she felt hopeless. God was in the psych ward with her, knew her intimately, and would never leave her. He ordained all her days. He fearfully and wonderfully made her.

I realized then how much more powerful God's words are than mine to comfort hurting people.

After she was treated and released, days dragged by as Maria struggled to get out of bed, let alone care for her family. Maria and I would talk on the phone and once she asked me how to heat up her lunch because she couldn't figure out what to do so I told her step-by-step how to microwave her food. She'd say, "I know I used to be able to do that, but I just can't right now," as she worked to relearn everything.

Maria went to counseling with a Christian therapist, Paula, who told Maria that William Cowper, a friend of John Newton, was also believed to have bipolar disorder. Cowper wrote numerous hymns and poems and was one of the most popular poets of his time. Paula asked Maria, "What do you think would have happened if William Cowper had access to medication for his bipolar disorder?"

Maria responded, "He probably wouldn't have written all those hymns and poems. Medication would have dulled his creativity."

Paula said, "No. I don't think so. I think he still would have written them all, but they would have come out in a much more calm and orderly way, not in a manic fit. *Medication can help you keep your creativity while managing the way your brain processes.*"

That day was pivotal to Maria as she understood that with medication, she could be her fun creative self, continue to be a good wife and mother, and have a vibrant walk with God. She had seen non-medicated people with bipolar shred their friends and support systems with their unpredictable and dramatic personality shifts and Maria had been nervous that would happen to her. She was grateful that her psychiatrist found an effective medicine, and Maria promised to remain on it, even after she felt "back to normal."

Maria asked others to pray for her and was open about what had happened, wanting to help remove the stigma of mental illness. She knew that this would be a lifetime struggle and was willing to do whatever the doctors and counselors suggested so she could be there for her family, realizing this disease would require prayer, sacrifice, and discipline. We prayed, read Scripture, and sought God together.

Maria felt like a burden to her husband, who had extra work to do because of her illness. But her mother-in-law wisely reassured Maria saying, "You never know what God is doing in this. This might be the making of him."

Maria's words have stuck with me as I was diagnosed with post-polio soon after Maria's bipolar diagnosis and I too felt like a burden. ***It's common for those of us with physical or mental illnesses to feel guilty about the increased weight on our loved ones. It is undoubtedly extra work, but it's encouraging to know that God is using our illness to shape them as well.***

Maria has helped me understand bipolar disorder and I am indebted to her for her honesty and transparent faith. She is an amazing wife and mother. And she is just as creative and capable as she was before. But she lives with invisible scars and knows that she will be on medicine for the rest of her life. That one "break" was not the only one that Maria has had, despite being faithful to her medication. Problems came up after unexpected change and she had to reset in different ways than many of us do. But she was confident that the Lord would help her as he had before. And he did.

I love watching the Lord work in Maria's life. She is a shining example of leaning into God and trusting him when she couldn't even trust herself. With prayer, therapy and the right combination of medicine, God has helped Maria thrive. **The Lord has many ways to heal people, sometimes through medicine and sometimes through supernatural intervention, but always tailor-made for each of us. Healing hasn't typically come in the ways we asked or expected, but Maria and I both trust God's plan for our lives, confident knowing it is for our good and for his glory.**