

WE ARE REAL PEOPLE Our Voices

Mental Illness
and
Church Response

with marja bergen



WE ARE REAL PEOPLE Our Voices

Mental Illness
and
Church Response

with marja bergen

We Are Real People: Our Voices

Copyright © 2021 Marja Bergen

All rights reserved. Neither this publication nor any part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or any information storage and retrieval, without permission in writing from the author.

Cover photo by Marja Bergen

Stories courtesy of NAMI. More can be found at [NAMI.org](https://www.nami.org)

Marja Bergen

[www.marja bergen.com](https://www.marjabergen.com)

With gratitude to Grant McMahon, my therapist.
He listened to me and heard me with patience and
compassion in a way others were not able.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	Give us a Voice of Our Own
2	Our Need for Human Support
3	As Brothers and Sisters
5	Who Are We?
6	Types of Mental Health Issues and Illnesses
9	Myths and Facts
11	A Voice of One Calling
12	Peer Support
13	Advantages of Peer Support
14	Living Room
15	Where Can You Turn? – A Story
17	Our Human Rights
18	How Can I Explain How I Feel? – A Story
20	Life's Adventure – A Story
21	A Lesson from Terry Fox's Life
22	Nothing is Completely Bad
25	My Mother – A Story
26	Seeking Understanding
28	Frustrated with Bipolar Limitations – A Story
29	Why Don't You Believe Me?
31	Teach us to Love
33	Finding Comfort – A Story
34	Who Are We...Really?
36	Changing the Status Quo
38	Compassion Like Jesus

GIVE US A VOICE OF OUR OWN

*Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves;
ensure justice for those being crushed.
Yes, speak up for the poor and helpless,
and see that they get justice.*

Proverbs 31:8-9 NLT

“Speaking for the poor and helpless.” Is this what God really means? I think we need to be careful and think about that a little.

Not every oppressed or hurting person needs someone to speak for them all the time. Being voiceless should not be considered a permanent state. With support, the “poor and helpless” can grow—in health and in confidence. Perhaps we who live with mental health issues have too many people speaking for us, determining our needs, and not enough of them hearing our voices. Because we do have a voice of our own and we want to be heard.

Too often we’re not considered to have enough ability, credibility, and intellect to speak for ourselves. We’re not trusted enough to speak with wisdom. But we understand, better than anyone, what our needs are. We understand, better than anyone, what it’s like to be discriminated against, and we understand what pain that causes. We want to tell our stories. We want to be understood.

Is it our perceived lack of credibility that keeps us from being listened to? Some forget that for most of us our illnesses affect us episodically. The rest of the time, we're as capable as anyone else to speak our truths.

As Christians, instead of being another's voice, why don't we listen to their voices. Being a voice for another suggests an "I know better" attitude that can strip away a person's self-esteem. They lose the confidence to speak for themselves. And they lose an important part of what it means to be human.

We are real people, just like everyone else.

...and yet there are times we need our supporters. Just like any other person in the world, we need you when we're suffering. Will you be there?

OUR NEED FOR HUMAN SUPPORT – IS GOD ENOUGH?

I believe that those who say support from fellow human beings isn't necessary probably aren't aware of what it is to suffer or feel the deepest pain. Only those who think they're superhuman would think they don't need others.

Many, including me, wouldn't survive their emotional distresses without the support of friends, counselors, or the

crisis line. It often takes another person to help us look at our situation differently and more clearly. To show compassion.

Even Jesus had to have his disciples close to him at Gethsemane. He needed to know that his friends were there when he was in agony and prayed to his heavenly Father. Even Jesus required human support because he too was human.

Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Couldn't you men keep watch with me for one hour?" he asked Peter. (Matthew 26:40)

Even Jesus hungered for the love of his friends at this most critical time. Nothing else would do.

AS BROTHERS AND SISTERS

I've had a number of friends who helped me during difficult times. How good it was to be cared for when the struggle became hard to bear! Their support gave me the sense of security I needed.

The trouble was, when I recovered, I longed to be considered their equal. I longed to be considered more than just a "needy" person. Sometimes the fact that I could be perfectly well was forgotten. I have many strong periods when I can give—and I love to give. I want to give to my supporters in

the way they give to me. I don't only need support. I need friendship.

Lutheran philosopher and theologian Paul Tillich (1886-1956) eloquently expressed my feelings. He said: "We are not just our brothers' and sisters' keepers. We are our brothers' and sisters' brothers and sisters."

It took many years before some of my supporters would confide their own needs and feelings to me. I had to work hard to draw them out in the way they drew me out. Not being allowed into their lives in the way I allowed them into mine made for an unbalanced relationship. It made me feel less worthy. And yet, I doubt that this attitude towards me was intentional. Maybe this is all some people are able to be for me.

However, my experiences show how easy it is to make people feel looked down on when we try to help them. Even the most caring and well-meaning supporters can make this mistake.

In offering support there needs to be an attitude of humility. We are all equals in God's eyes. In the world we live in this sense of humility isn't always there. But Jesus shows his followers the kind of love he wants us to have for others, especially those who are too often stigmatized. We who want to help people with mental illness need to treat them as we ourselves would like to be treated.

What would a truly good attitude be? It would be quite different from what we might think and not the easiest to attain.

How good it would be if we who are suffering from a mental illness were looked up to—respected instead of felt sorry for! How good it would be if our supporters were to learn from us, to feel the pain along with us, and to join us in protest and prayer!

To pity us is condescending. To share in our suffering could be dignifying and life giving.

WHO ARE WE?

We are individuals who live with some kind of mental illness. This little book will tell you about some of our challenges and how we would like to be better understood.

Mental illness is a general term for a group of illnesses that may include symptoms that can affect a person's thinking, perceptions, mood, or behaviour. Mental illness can make it difficult for someone to cope with work, relationships, and other demands. The relationship between stress and mental illness is complex, but it is known that stress can worsen an episode of mental illness. Most people can manage their mental illness with medication, counselling, or both.

NAMI (The National Association for Mental Illness) reports that one in five individuals in the U.S. experience mental illness each year. Suicide is the 2nd leading cause of death among people aged 10-34. [1]

[1] <https://www.nami.org/mhstats>

TYPES OF MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES AND ILLNESSES

Source: Better Health Channel, <https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/servicesandsupport/>

Anxiety Disorder

Anxiety disorders is a group of mental health disorders that includes generalised anxiety disorders, social phobias, specific phobias (for example, agoraphobia and claustrophobia), panic disorders, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) and post-traumatic stress disorder. Untreated, anxiety disorders can lead to significant impairment on people's daily lives.

Bipolar Disorder

Bipolar affective disorder is a type of mood disorder, previously referred to as 'manic depression'. A person with bipolar disorder experiences episodes of mania (elation) and depression. The person may or may not experience psychotic symptoms. The exact cause is unknown, but a genetic predisposition has been clearly established. Environmental stressors can also trigger episodes of this mental illness.

Depression

Depression is a mood disorder characterised by lowering of mood, loss of interest and enjoyment, and reduced energy. It is not just feeling sad. There are different types and symptoms of depression. There are varying levels of severity and symptoms related to depression. Symptoms of depression can lead to increased risk of suicidal thoughts or behaviours.

Eating Disorders

Eating disorders include anorexia, bulimia nervosa and other binge eating disorders. Eating disorders affect females and males and can have serious psychological and physical consequences.

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder

Obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) is an anxiety disorder. Obsessions are recurrent thoughts, images or impulses that are intrusive and unwanted. Compulsions are time-consuming and distressing repetitive rituals. Treatments include cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT), and medications.

Paranoia

Paranoia is the irrational and persistent feeling that people are 'out to get you'. Paranoia may be a symptom of conditions including paranoid personality disorder, delusional (paranoid) disorder and schizophrenia. Treatment for paranoia include medications and psychological support.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a mental health condition that can develop as a response to people who have experienced any traumatic event. This can be a car or other serious accident, physical or sexual assault, war-related events or torture, or natural disasters such as bushfires or floods.

Psychosis

People affected by psychosis can experience delusions, hallucinations, and confused thinking.. Psychosis can occur in a number of mental illnesses, including drug-induced psychosis, schizophrenia, and mood disorders. Medication and psychological support can relieve, or even eliminate, psychotic symptoms.

Schizophrenia

Schizophrenia is a complex psychotic disorder characterised by disruptions to thinking and emotions, and a distorted perception of reality. Symptoms of schizophrenia vary widely but may include hallucinations, delusions, thought disorder, social withdrawal, lack of motivation and impaired thinking and memory. People with schizophrenia have a high risk of suicide. Schizophrenia is not a split personality.

MYTHS AND FACTS ABOUT MENTAL ILLNESS

Source: Government of South Australia, SA Health - <https://www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/>

What comes to mind when you think ‘mental illness’?

There are many myths, misunderstandings, stereotypes and attitudes that surround mental illness. These result in the judgement, discrimination, and isolation of people with mental illness, as well as their families and carers.

Myth: Mental illness is incurable and lifelong

Fact: With the right kind of help, treated appropriately and early, most people recover fully and have no further episodes of illness. For others, mental illness may recur throughout their lives and require ongoing treatment. This is the same as many physical illnesses, such as diabetes and heart disease. Like these other long-term health conditions, mental illness can be managed so that individuals live life to the fullest.

Myth: People are born with a mental illness

Fact: A vulnerability to some mental illnesses, such as bipolar mood disorder, can run in families. But other people develop mental illness with no family history. Many factors contribute to the onset of a mental illness. These may include stress, bereavement, relationship breakdown, unemployment, social isolation, a major physical illness, physical and sexual abuse, or disability. Our understanding of the causes of mental illness is growing.

Myth: Only certain types of people develop a mental illness

Fact: As many as one in five Australians may develop a mental illness at some stage in their lives. Everyone is vulnerable to mental health problems. It affects people regardless of age, education, income or culture.

Myth: Mental illness is caused by a personal weakness

Fact: A mental illness is not a character flaw. It is caused by a complex interplay of genetic, biological, social and environmental factors. Seeking and accepting help is a sign of resilience and strength.

Myth: People with a mental illness are dangerous

Fact: This false perception underlies some of the most damaging stereotypes for people with mental illness. People with a mental illness are seldom dangerous. Even people with the most severe mental illness, whose symptoms may cause them to act in bizarre or unusual ways, are rarely dangerous.

Myth: Mental illness is a form of intellectual disability or brain damage

Fact: They are illnesses just like any other, such as heart disease, diabetes, and asthma. Yet the traditions of sympathy, support, and flowers given to people with physical illnesses are often denied to those with a mental illness.

Myth: People with a mental illness can ‘pull themselves out of it’

Fact: A mental illness is not caused by personal weakness and is not ‘cured’ by personal strength.

Myth: People with a mental illness should be isolated from the community

Fact: Most people with a mental illness recover quickly and do not need hospital care. Others may have short admissions to hospital for treatment. Only a very small number of people with mental illness (less than 1 in 1000) need hospital care. Improvements in treatment over recent decades mean that most people live in their communities, and there is no need for the confinement and isolation that was commonly used in the past.

A VOICE OF ONE CALLING

When Jewish leaders approached John the Baptist to ask who he was, *John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'"* (John 1:23)

Obviously, I'm not John the Baptist and we're not talking about Jesus. But I have been thinking for a long time how we need a voice for the many of us who have none. For those who have mental health issues. For those who are not being heard or understood. Those who are considered too different to be taken seriously.

Like John the Baptist we are calling into a wilderness where ears are shut and eyes are blind. They have been far too long. We too need to be listened to and heard. Because what we have to say is important.

*Who will hear?
Who will listen to God's truth
as seen through the eyes of those
living with mental illness?
Who will hear us, children of God,
people not unlike you?
Who will hear our voice?*

- We cry out to show we can't help the way we are.
- We cry to show how we've been hurt.
- We cry out to show that discrimination is wrong.

Because, yes, we are discriminated against, though many fail to see it. They don't know how it feels to always be looked down on.

PEER SUPPORT

Peer support groups are an important element in the needs of those living with mental health issues. Support by peers has been shown to be more effective than support from healthy individuals.

Phyllis Solomon, PhD from the University of Pennsylvania, has done much research on the topic. She believes that peer support “is viewed as a more active approach to coping with illness, promoting choice and self-determination that enhance empowerment, as opposed to the passivity engendered by “participation in services with a hierarchical structure.”

Those who struggle with their mental health have a great need for God. Being part of a faith-based group helps participants in several ways. They receive social support, help coping with their mental health, and enrichment of their faith life.

Christian peer support groups are vitally important. Where else can a group of individuals with mental illness gather to talk about both—their emotional struggles and their trust in God? Where else can they share with others who understand their pain? Those who don’t have lived experience can’t hope to empathize in the way peers can empathize.

ADVANTAGES OF PEER SUPPORT

What kind of support can a Christian peer support group offer that isn’t available elsewhere?

- Those who have suffered with mental illness can best testify to how God helped them.
- They can have more compassion than those who don’t

know what mental ill health feels like.

- They can encourage each other's faith through sharing experiences.
- Members can encourage each other to see themselves as people like others, not to be looked down on.
- They could learn to be a stronger person: a victor of their disease rather than a victim.
- They can learn how to do more than just receive support; they can give it too.
- Members are reminded that their illness is not who they are. It's what they deal with.
- Members can freely discuss their struggles without feelings of guilt or shame.
- They can help each other overcome the effects of stigma.
- They can pray for each other.
- They will know they're not alone.

LIVING ROOM

In Canada, Christian peer support groups were first established by Marja Bergen in 2006 under the name of Living Room. Their meetings helped many shed the shame they had been living under, having been made to feel like they were bad Christians because of their mental illness. In those days, churches had a long way to go to learn the truth—that mental health problems are illnesses. Having depression or another mental health problem did not mean your relationship with God was to blame.

For years, Living Room became like Church to these people who had been feeling alienated from their church families. Through discussion they studied lessons from Scripture that helped them find encouragement for their struggles.

PDF's of some of the interactive devotionals for group use are available by emailing Marja at marja@marjabergen.com. They are a good resource for anyone who would like to get together with others for Christian guidance to help them through their struggles.

Unfortunately, due to a lack of an organizational body, there is no one to establish and support Living Room groups right now. As a result, few groups remain.

WHERE CAN YOU TURN? – A STORY

My roller coaster ride wouldn't stop. I didn't feel badly depressed. I was still able to do things. But I did feel an overwhelming sense of sadness.

Trouble with me is that I feel a need to reach out and draw comfort from others. Yet that kind of comfort is hard to come by. No one wants to hear another's complaints. What can they possibly do? My husband has compassion and that's so good. I thank God for him.

What puzzles me is this: When a person feels so down that they become suicidal they are told that they should reach out. They're told they should let others know how they're feeling. But how many people really want to be told how crummy a person feels? How many people truly know how to feel compassion? Depression is a lonely state to be in. It's hard to find the kind of support we need.

My prayer is that I will not focus on my own needs so much that I become self-centered. My prayer is that I will be other-centered—to love as I wish to be loved. There's comfort in love, whether we give or receive.

For several years, depression had tempted me to take my life. My medical team had me keep a Safety Plan to remind me of what I should do if I didn't feel safe. I made a list of people I could talk to if things got bad. Although I had friends there wasn't one I felt I could go to in crisis. The crisis line was the best places for me to go. The operators were good listeners and were well-trained to handle crisis situations.

The most important item on my plan was the reminder I wrote to myself. "I don't live for myself alone." Remembering why God had made me and that God had given me a reason to live helped me more than anything.

OUR HUMAN RIGHTS

Many in society have stereotyped views about mental illness. Some believe that people with mental health problems are dangerous, when in fact they are at a higher risk of being attacked or harming themselves than hurting other people.

As a result of such fears and misunderstandings, our equal rights as people with mental illness have not had the attention they should have. And yet, there is much wrong with how we are generally looked on and treated.

One person experienced the following violations of her rights. Put yourself in her shoes.

- When claims of mistreatment were made, she was not considered a credible witness and not given a fair hearing.
- She was not considered believable, even though illness was not always present.
- When in conflict with a person in authority she, like many others with mental illness didn't stand a chance. She was considered guilty.
- She was not treated as one of equal worth. She was looked down on and treated with disrespect. For many, low self-esteem and poor confidence follow such treatment.
- She was excluded from groups and activities.

When people have rights like these denied, they feel powerless. Without hope of having the wrongs done to them

addressed, they feel like they're considered less than human. It's at this point that many don't want to live anymore.

We are real people in the same way everyone else is a real person. Trouble is that we're not always thought of that way. It's true. In many respects we do differ from the norm. But we're not nearly as different as people assume we are.

HOW CAN I EXPLAIN HOW I FEEL? – A STORY by Terri Phoenix

I am a survivor of a suicide attempt. I am also someone who, at times, feels the pull for the peace of death due to the pain, nightmares, and memories that I live with.

How can I explain the experience of heavy-heartedness, weariness, depression, and anxiety that I experience even as I have built a life full of friends, loved ones, family, meaningful work, and moments of extreme happiness?

How can I explain the feeling of going to sleep at night hoping that the next day won't come and waking up in the morning feeling overwhelmed by the awaiting demands of the day?

How can I explain the times when a regular length lifespan feels like it might not be doable? That I feel I may not be able

to fulfill all the expectations of life while simultaneously experiencing ongoing nightmares, flashbacks and intrusive thoughts from a childhood filled with repeated sexual, physical, and emotional abuse at the hands of multiple perpetrators and family members?

Through therapy and sobriety, I have developed coping tools that help and that have allowed me to build a wonderful life. I am grateful for the treatment team and friends and family that I have. They are amazing. Yet I still worry sometimes that they may not want to hear about these difficult feelings.

I need reminders that I am not alone. I need reminders that those who love me want to hear how I feel, that they don't believe I should "be over that now" or "focus only on the good things in life." My focus on gratitude for the good things and people in my life is what keeps me from another suicide attempt. But there are days I need understanding and support for how difficult life feels in my skin. Please don't get tired of offering that support, because feeling isolated and alone with a sense of unabated pain and weariness is the most dangerous place for me to be.

Many of us feel guilty to always be going to friends for support. It would be good if they could realize how important it is to feel compassion from another when we are hurting. But sometimes we need a human being to bring love to us in a tangible way. Those who have God's love inside them, can be his hands for others.

LIFE'S ADVENTURE – A STORY

I always just wanted to be normal. And beyond that, to be “cool.” As far as my childhood was concerned, I reached that goal: I had lots of friends, I was popular, everything seemed to be going great. But there was something looming in the background it seemed.

In 8th grade, I developed anorexia nervosa. When I was 14 I had fallen in love with a girl, and we’d text back and forth, but she stopped all of a sudden and I figured it was because she thought I was overweight. That started the rollercoaster.

Jump to now, essentially free from anorexia, but a new battle on the front: schizoaffective. I was diagnosed almost 2 years ago but I could see it in the works all of my life. The paranoia from thinking I was overweight; the distrust of family and friends and their reassuring words; the isolation because it seems like the world is such an unforgiving place.

Even now it’s tough to accept my mental diagnoses, but faith in God has led me to have faith in others. No, it doesn’t and won’t happen in a day, but all good things take some patience, don’t they? Having the Church, a loyal family and friends, and the belief that God will get you through anything and will love you unconditionally makes for good therapy. I’m not too open about my mental health journey, but I’m hoping next year can bring with it the courage to share, bond, and grow with my brothers and sisters.

A LESSON FROM TERRY FOX'S LIFE

In 1977, at the age of nineteen, Terry was diagnosed with osteogenic sarcoma, a bone cancer that necessitated amputation of his right leg. After the amputation, he went through 16 months of chemotherapy.

At the clinic, it was hard for him to see the pain and suffering of the young children who had little or no chance of recovery. He learned that research to find cures for the various forms of cancer was underfunded. A lot more was needed.

Terry was determined to do something to make a difference, however hard it might seem. He decided to run across Canada to raise money for cancer research. "I'm not a dreamer, and I'm not saying this will initiate any kind of definitive answer or cure to cancer, but I believe in miracles. I have to."

Accompanied by his friend Doug Alward, Fox started his Marathon of Hope on April 12, 1980, in St. John's, Newfoundland. Conditions were difficult. He had to deal with unpredictable weather that included high winds and falling snow causing slippery roads. Fox endured painful blisters, falling toenails, a bleeding and aching stump, and mechanical issues with his artificial leg, which was not made to withstand the stress he was exerting on it. But he didn't let anything stand in his way. His determination never failed.

On September 1, after enduring intense pain in his chest, he saw a doctor. Tests determined that the cancer had spread to his lungs. He would need chemotherapy. On June 28, 1981, at the age of 22, Terry died. His death received worldwide coverage.

Terry Fox once said, “I guess one of the most important things I’ve learned is that nothing is ever completely bad. Even cancer. It has made me a better person. It has given me courage and a sense of purpose I never had before. But you don’t have to do like I did, wait until you lose a leg or get some awful disease before you take the time to find out what kind of stuff you’re really made of. You can start now. Anybody can.”

“Nothing is completely bad,” Terry said. And many of us would have found that to be true in our lives. The Bible says, *“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”* (Romans 8:28)

“NOTHING IS COMPLETELY BAD”

Terry also said, “It took cancer to realize that being self-centered is not the way to live. The answer is to try and help others.”

God made us all for a purpose, and he can use everything that happens to us—whether good or bad—to accomplish that purpose.

Is that possible when we live with mental illness? How can we help others when we can barely move off the couch to do the smallest thing?

Many consider people with depression to be a self-centered lot. That's a cruel criticism to make about a person who is having a hard time. "But it's an illness," we tell them. "We can't help being this way." It's true. Focusing on our own pain is a natural part of depression.

And yet, we pray, "Is it possible, Lord? Could you help me find it in me to break free from my self-focused inner life and to help others like Terry Fox did? Would it help me feel better?"

Let these words from Isaiah inspire you:

*...and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the oppressed,
then your light will rise in the darkness,
and your night will become like the noonday.*

Isaiah 58:10

In the dialectical behavioral therapy (DBT) designed by Marsha Linehan, we are taught to distract ourselves when things are not going well. We try to find an activity that will take away our troubled thoughts and feelings. [1]

[1] Behavioral Tech - <https://behavioraltech.org/about-us/founded-by-marsha/>

How much better it would be if we could go a step further, by employing something I call “other-centeredness.”

What if we were to distract ourselves by turning our attention to others’ needs? Are there people in your life who have a need you could help with? There are many ways in which we could help others. It doesn’t have to be a big thing. You might take them for a walk, bring them some soup, or give them a call if they are lonely.

When you find yourself hurting, try looking outside yourself to others. Spend some time with them. Connect. Instead of focusing on your own pain, consider what is happening with them.

Then, as Isaiah said, “*your light will rise in the darkness and your night will become like the noonday.*”

Is that possible? Why not try it and find out?

MY MOTHER – A STORY

It was never about how dirty the house was or how many newspapers you had saved overtime or the amount of magnets you had on both fridges. It was the draining effect of what your mental illness would bring.

What mom was I going to see today? Will she be nice and funny? Will she be mean and hurtful? Will she be sad and keep to herself? Every day was different. Each had a little twist to it. From bipolar to manic to depression, the things that are forbidden to be talked about. Yet they take so much away from people.

I never hated you I just hated your illness. I hated that you became mean in a blink of an eye or you get sad within seconds and I did love when you were funny because we could crack jokes but all it took was for one little thing and you'd switch. I never wanted this for you. All I wanted was my mom. Your illness took over and it was so hard to love you. When you knew how to take the wound you opened and twist and dig it deeper.

I know one day I'll look back and be thankful for all the lessons learned and maybe help others one day, but for now I just want to help you.

One mentally ill person in the family can affect the whole household. And it's not uncommon for a daughter

to have to help her mother stay well. As this person says, she's probably learning much from living with her mother. Lessons she'll be able to use to help others one day. I sense her tears because I also had to help my mother long ago. I think it helped make me more human.

SEEKING UNDERSTANDING

*You have searched me, Lord,
and you know me.
You know when I sit and when I rise;
you perceive my thoughts from afar.*

Psalm 139:1-2

Have you ever been totally misunderstood by a person who you thought knew you well? How discouraging when you try and tell them about something bad you experienced and then to have the significance of what it meant to you disregarded! Or—worse still—having what happened to you considered your own fault. Sometimes we are blamed for something beyond our control. Although we try to explain, we're not listened to. Not understood.

Just yesterday this happened to me and I was left feeling frustrated and upset. Only this morning, in my time with God, did I find solace in my journaling and reading.

I went to the Psalms looking for the comfort I can always count on finding there. My Bible fell open to Psalm 139. What joy and encouragement to find the very first lines of King David's prayer say exactly what I needed to hear—exactly what I myself needed to say to God too:

You know me, Lord. You know everything about me. You know what is in my heart, though my words do not always express it well. Your spirit is always with me, no matter where I go.

Thank you, Lord, for always being there. Always available. Always understanding.

Such comfort to know that the author of this Psalm, a man named David, living long ago, had the same feelings and the same needs we do. He has much to share with us, writing from a heart filled with love for his Lord. He presents a great example to us of what trust in God looks like. He also shares much about his battles with emotional pain, making him a brother to the many of us who also deal with such pain.

Through King David's writings we feel understood. Through David, God speaks to us and tells us that he understands. How God looks on us and sees us is all that really matters.

FRUSTRATED WITH BIPOLAR LIMITATIONS - A STORY

I am 51 years old. At this point in my life I expected to be a successful professional, whether that be a small business owner, an executive, or an author/artist. Bipolar kept me from reaching my goals. I am fully disabled due to my mental illness and have not been able to hold down a job since my early thirties.

I fear what will happen to me and my family as I cannot work. I have tried so many different combinations of psych meds and nothing has helped me to be stable enough to work. I get so angry! I am smart, artistic, a good leader, and a creative innovator. I have been working on writing a book to self publish and hopefully make some money that way, yet bipolar stops me and I have days where I can't do a thing.

I want to be independent and a contributing citizen but this horrible disorder prevents me. I keep fighting against it and strive to be who I want to be. I may have lost jobs, friends, and opportunities but I won't give up.

Keep Fighting!

It's common for a person with mental illness to be unable to make a living. He might be gifted in many ways but perhaps he suffers too many episodes to be a reliable employee. Or he might become stressed within the

constraints of a workplace. Sometimes, he won't even be hired when it's learned that he has a mental illness.

We are fortunate if we have an employed spouse or some other way to financially support the household. Then we would be free to find volunteer positions, giving us a sense of worth. We would be able to have a full life.

The writer of this story sound creative. He is even writing a book. If he could only shut out the annoying feelings of guilt he carries and apply himself instead to his creative pursuits. There's much joy to be had in making beautiful things happen.

But he needs God's help to make it possible.

WHY DON'T YOU BELIEVE ME?

If I am telling the truth, why don't you believe me?" John 8:46

Can you "hear" the frustration in Jesus' voice? He is speaking to the Jews who had for too long been tricked by believing the lies that appealed to their pride and ego. They were no longer capable of understanding and recognizing truth when Jesus spoke it.

I'm speaking as a person who has mental health challenges. I know many of you also live with such challenges. And—most probably—the rest of you who read here will know someone who fits this description as well.

It could be said that we're not unlike Jesus in some ways. We're different like he was different—not like regular people. Frequently we don't receive the same respect as others do. What we say is often suspect.

Too often our truth is not heard, not taken seriously. We're ignored, especially when it matters most.

Is it thought that we are not able to think like others do, unable to see reality? That what we say is untrustworthy?

But doesn't lack of truth come just as easily from the mouths of mentally healthy individuals?

Too often not heard. Too often not believed. This is the way it is for many of us. It's one of the greatest forms of stigma, taking away our self-respect and making us feel we're less of a person.

When you are badly treated, where can you go for justice? No one would believe you. You have no recourse. You're saddled with pain and feelings of helplessness.

Jesus understands. He too felt the frustration. Like you, he too asked, "*If I am telling the truth, why don't you believe me?*"

When you think about how things were for our Lord and Savior, we don't feel so alone.

TEACH US TO LOVE

Dishonest tax collectors and other notorious sinners often came to listen to Jesus' sermons; but this caused complaints from the Jewish religious leaders and the experts on Jewish law because he was associating with such despicable people—even eating with them!

Luke 15:1-2 (TLB)

Jesus was a radical in the way he treated social outcasts like prostitutes, the poor, the sick, lepers and others. He treated them in a way that was completely contrary to social conventions of the day. Christ's love brought a sense of dignity and value to those on the margins. Being his followers, we are called to love as he did.

Something we clearly see in Jesus' life and teachings is the way he included people that everyone else left out. Everyone was welcome at his table. Can we offer the same?

As Christians we must adopt the kind of humility Jesus modeled, our hearts open as his was when he approached people in need. He understood them and had empathy. Jesus was able to walk with them—as one with them. If we could only do that!

Could you take us with you, Jesus? Teach us to walk with those who need your love.

If we could only love the way our Lord does! If we could only see beyond the walls society has put up against those who are thought to be different! If we could only see beyond what they appear to be and look into their hearts, recognizing what they truly are—people not unlike us.

Can we break down those walls, Lord? Help us to accept those who are stigmatized.

In Mark 5:1-20 we read how Jesus healed a demon-possessed man living in a cemetery—a person most would stay clear of. Jesus showed how even a man like this deserves mercy, respect, and kindness. No matter how far beyond hope they seem to be, we are called to love such people.

Love may not always heal the body or mind, but it will heal the heart. Too often we regard people with severe problems as worthless. But from Christ's perspective every human being is of infinite value.

Oh Lord, help us treat the outcasts in our midst with respect and kindness, in the way you modeled.

Jesus was motivated by compassion and love. To follow Jesus, we could help those in need with many things: our time, food, clothing, shelter, transportation. Even more important would be the friendship, love, and encouragement we can

offer. Being there for a person needing care when he is sick or lonely is one of the most loving things we can do.

Lord, help us find ways to be your presence for those who need you. Fill us with your love and help us share that love with others.

FINDING COMFORT - A STORY

I have lived with depression my whole adult life. I believe I inherited it from my father, who now, in retrospect, I believe lived with bipolar depression and was an alcoholic. Being dealt this hand in life has given me many challenges.

I didn't know what was wrong with me, I just knew something was wrong, when as a young adult, I felt life closing in on me instead of seeing what opportunities would lie ahead. I was smart enough, though, to understand something was deeply wrong and so I sought the help of a psychiatrist and counselor when I was 25 years old. With the help of medications and counseling, I have been able to have a successful life despite my illness. But that isn't to say that I haven't had relapses and that I haven't had to struggle with my illness.

But what I would like to say, is that there is hope. And part of that hope for me has been my Christian faith, which has led me through my darkest hours. I find my faith in Jesus Christ and my church family has helped me to see that we are not alone in our suffering, and that there is a loving and merciful God who understands our suffering.

I am now 63 years old and for now I have found my peace. I have been married for 9 years and have family and friends who support me. To me, miracles do not have to be spontaneous, but they can happen as small steps we make each day to take care of ourselves and then one day, you realize that you have your stability and strength, and your faith has led you through to that moment. That moment, that we all long for, peace of mind.

WHO ARE WE...REALLY?

Some of us are far too sensitive. And because of that we don't always feel very good about who we are. About what others think of us. Sometimes we feel downright rejected. And that's painful.

One day when I told a good friend how I felt, he pointed out how God never rejects anyone. And God matters more than people. Such reassurance that gave me! It was as though I'd never known such a thing before!

And yet, the pain of rejection stubbornly comes back. Every so often it comes back and I feel there must be something wrong with me and I'm probably not very likeable.

But, as my friend wisely pointed out, what people think doesn't matter. What matters is what our heavenly Father thinks. God loves us more than any earthly person possibly could.

Are we satisfied with God's love, or do we need people's love more? Well...I'm not so sure. After all, it's so much easier to "experience" the love of people. God seems so far away.

Yet we could never find security in people's love. We could never be sure they wouldn't reject us. In painful ways I've learned I can never trust people. And that's sad, because friends are good to have and I would like to know I can count on them.

But I'm learning more and more that God has a love I can trust. His love will always be there—all day, every day.

Someone once said:

"Be who you are, who God made you to be, and know who you are in His eyes. You are a person of great value and worth to God. Ultimately what matters most is not what I think, or even what you think or others, but what God thinks. His first and continual and last thoughts of us are overflowing with love and grace."

CHANGING THE STATUS QUO

When Martin Luther King, Jr. was a student at Morehouse College, his spiritual development was influenced by the college president, Benjamin E. Mays. Mays was a strong advocate for racial equality and encouraged King to see Christianity as a force for social change.

Christianity has been such a force, ever since Christ's ministry. Jesus turned the world upside down, changing the status quo, showing what social justice should look like. If we believe in him and follow him, it's natural that we will want to continue what he started.

King said, "The soft-minded man always fears change, He feels security in the status quo, and he has an almost morbid fear of the new. For him, the greatest pain is the pain of a new idea."

For many, it would be a new idea to treat people with mental health issues in the way they treat others. It might feel uncomfortable. But those they fear are not unlike themselves. People with mental health issues deserve to be listened to, in the way others are listened to. Welcomed as equals to the community. Cared for when they need care. Befriended.

In his *I Have a Dream* speech in August 1963, King said, "I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."

I have a similar dream. I have a dream that people with mental health issues will one day be judged by who they are inside. The symptoms of their illness are not what makes up their personhood. Beneath their exterior is a real person with character traits that could belong to anyone. Inside, we all have a heart and soul, regardless of the presence or absence of mental illness. I have a dream that people with mental illness will one day be accepted as equal brothers and sisters in our churches.

Nelson Mandela once said, “A winner is a dreamer who never gives up.” Do you dare to dream? Do you dare to become a winner?

It will take an undying faith in the Lord our God, through whom all good is possible. Jesus himself said, “*With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.*” (Matt 19:26)

We must believe that it's God's will to work towards such dreams. Through him we can make things right. Our role is to walk where he leads, speak what he tells us to speak, write what he gives us to write. He gives us the feet, and the voice, and the pen.

Marja

COMPASSION LIKE JESUS'

Soon afterward, Jesus went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went along with him. As he approached the town gate, a dead person was being carried out—the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. And a large crowd from the town was with her.

When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, “Don’t cry.”

Luke 7:11-13

A devotional planner I once used had this definition for love: It is "an intense feeling of tender affection and compassion for someone." The comment:

“People are longing to be accepted. When we show care and concern for them they will find their deepest emotional needs being met.”

And don't we all hunger for this kind of love? Unfortunately, there is a lot of misunderstanding of those living with mental illness. And so we often don't feel loved. And how painful that is! It increases our suffering. I'm praying that people will try to put themselves in our shoes and understand the pain we feel.

But it's we who live with mental health issues who are the best equipped to show this kind of love to others who, like

us, might be struggling emotionally. We would bless others if we could give them the kind of unconditional love we ourselves long for. As we bless others, we ourselves will also be blessed.

Jesus' heart went out to the woman who had lost her only son. "Don't cry," he said. Can you feel that compassion?

Marja Bergen is a 75-year-old mental health advocate living with bipolar disorder since 1965. In 2015 she developed symptoms similar to borderline personality disorder. She is the founder of the Living Room faith based support ministry, from 2006 to 2015 leading a large group of her own. She has been raising awareness about mental health in the Church since the year 2000.

Something we clearly see in Jesus' life and teachings is the way he included people that everyone else left out. Everyone was welcome at his table. Can we offer the same?

If we could only love the way our Lord does! If we could only see beyond the walls society has put up against those who are thought to be different! If we could only see beyond what they appear to be and look into their hearts, recognizing what they truly are—people not unlike us.

Can we break down those walls, Lord? Help us to accept those who are stigmatized.

Jesus was motivated by compassion and love. To follow Jesus, we could help those in need with many things: our time, food, clothing, shelter, transportation. Even more important would be the friendship, love, and encouragement we can offer. Being there for a person needing care when he is sick or lonely is one of the most loving things we can do.

Lord, help us find ways to be your presence for those who need you.