

# Seeing angels

## Christianity and the bipolar experience

Grace Kang

In 2015, I experienced intense visions of God and God's host of celestial beings. These visions would strike me at any time of day, but most frequently during times of prayer. I would see God's glory and the great host of witnesses, and even become acquainted with individual saints and angels. During this time, my friends found me charismatic, energetic, and even prophetic as I bounded around praying for strangers. In coming years, my friends referred back to this time as a golden age, remembering it fondly. I, on the other hand, sank into a strange despair.

The following summer, I experienced a dramatic shift in temperament, becoming irritable, depressed, and lethargic. The visions and feelings of God dried up like the last of a deluge in the Sahara. I was left with nothing but proverbial sand running through my desperate fingers. My prayers caused me suffering, not joy. I did not hear a single word from God for three years. I cried out to God in agony daily. Why wouldn't God speak to me? What happened to the prophetic words and visions? Why do I sit in this terrible frightening darkness?



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Eventually I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. This diagnosis reduced my spiritual experiences to an imbalance of chemicals in my brain. The mystery and energy were gone. My experiences

were merely symptoms of a disease, one that casts a shadow over the rest of my life.

Since my initial diagnosis, I have pondered what it means to be a Christian with bipolar disorder, particularly in light of my dramatic spiritual experiences. True, my experiences of spiritual grandeur and ecstasy

were likely facilitated by a chemical imbalance in my brain; but remembering the positive impact they had on my community, I began to suspect that dismissing these entire experiences as mania may not be truthful. I began to wonder whether God could work through mania and depression to bring about spiritual experiences that are real, albeit in unconventional ways.

Working through my Master of Arts degree at Canadian Mennonite University, I stumbled across Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross. As I read their work, I recognized parallels between their lives and mine. On the one hand, Teresa experienced visions and supernatural happenings (even allegedly levitating during prayer!) throughout her life. On the other hand, John of the Cross experienced such spiritual darkness that nothing could bring him out of his suffering. Yet both these figures recognized that no matter what sufferings or joys they experienced in their souls, God



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was working in divine and lofty ways. If God could be seen in the dramatic experiences of these saints, perhaps God could be found in my own experiences as well.

God was most obvious in my mania because of the feelings of intimacy it procured with the divine. When I was diagnosed with bipolar, however, I began to doubt the legitimacy of these feelings. I once met with a therapist who was only interested in proving to me that all my

visions and feelings were constructs of my imagination, recalled and elevated by my brain chemistry. I began to think of this explanation as a delegitimization of my experiences; but as time went on, I saw that visions and feelings cannot exist apart from our grounded realities. Clearly, my visions came out of my experience. We are all bound and enabled by our physical bodies; they are the vehicles by which we interpret and engage with the world. Thus, my brain chemistry will certainly be different when I am receiving visions. Perhaps it looks like a manic brain. Perhaps I am manic during those times. But this does not erase the possibility that something truly divine is happening in those moments, even if it is bound up in the symptom of an illness like bipolar.

Depression was more difficult for me to navigate, but John of the Cross became my guide. John of the Cross is most known for the phrase

“dark night of the soul,” which describes periods of spiritual dryness, suffering, and obscurity. Yet John’s dark night is not a negative thing but the necessary sensory and spiritual purification on the path to knowing

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God more intimately. In sensory purification, the sensory graces that allow us to experience God (e.g., visions, feelings of intimacy) are taken away. In spiritual purification, the spiritual graces (e.g., intellectual revelations, the will to virtue) are taken away or diminished, leaving one barren in their pursuit of spiritual practices. It sounds unpleasant, but John attests that these purgations are *necessary*

to help the soul rely solely on God and not on anything within or outside of ourselves. I was shocked when I read this. It turns out that parts of my depression can lead to spiritual growth. John’s testimony reminded me that God is always working for our good, even in difficult and seemingly counterintuitive ways.

The greatest lesson I have learned from being a mentally ill Christian is not to count God out. God is there in the nurses, medications, brain chemistry, mood swings, and sleepless nights. God is with each of God’s beloved creatures every step of the way and is bringing together all things to work together for good. Today I find hope amid the unending doctor’s appointments, medicine changes, and mood swings because of the testimonies of people like Teresa and John, who declare that God is working even in the extreme highs and lows of human experience.

### **About the author**

Haeon Grace Kang is a master’s student at Canadian Mennonite University in Winnipeg, Manitoba, studying the relationship between bipolar and Christian spirituality. She enjoys creating art and spending time with her bird and dog.