

*Cultivating
Deep Faith
amid Depression
and Despair*

CHRIST
in the
ABYSS

JEAN L. NEELY, PHD

Jean Neely is one of the most vulnerable and authentic voices I've ever read. Her book *Christ in the Abyss* offers a courageous and compassionate guide for those wrestling with doubt, depression, and despair—realities too often silenced in faith communities. I especially love how Jean provides practical advice for coping with life in the abyss—essential for our current world.

NANCY WANG YUEN, PHD, author of *Reel Inequality* and coeditor of *Power Women*

As the children of immigrants, many of us feel alone in our struggle with the abyss of unexplored and untreated emotional pain. I hope that many find this book. They will find that they are not alone and that God meets us in the abyss.

ROBERT CHAO ROMERO, professor of Chicana/o studies and Asian American studies at UCLA and author of *Brown Church*

With candor and courage, Jean Neely shows us what depression can look like when self-rejection takes a spiritual turn and when evangelical Christian expectations of piety combine with perfectionist pressures from immigrant church cultures. In this beautiful book, Neely guides readers on a journey into the abyss with her as she experiences anguish, peace, and wonder in her life across three countries. Readers will be uplifted as they see how a person of faith can work through childhood trauma, find grace in community, and even construct new language for God in the midst of healing and self-acceptance.

GRACE Y. KAO, professor of ethics at Claremont School of Theology

While addressing mental health as something to nurture and protect has gained acceptance, Jean Neely, PhD, offers readers something more. She invites readers into her lifelong journey of faith and mental illness. She writes with generosity, sharing deeply personal stories not to invite us as voyeurs but to help us see how medication; therapy;

hospitalization; supportive, educated communities; and faith help those of us who live with mental illness. Neely's journey of understanding and acceptance of her diagnosis challenges us all to a beautiful reorientation—mental health includes living with mental illness, and a faithful, spiritual life is a deep abiding with Jesus on the edge of or in the abyss of our own suffering and that of others.

KATHY KHANG, award-winning coauthor of *Loving Disagreement* living and writing with major depressive disorder

Neely offers a deeply vulnerable and courageous glimpse into her interior world, weaving her experiences of depression and bipolar diagnosis with reflections on God, church, and faith. This book is powerful and deeply moving and will resonate with anyone who has struggled or who loves someone navigating mental health challenges. Neely's words offer hope, compassion, and empowerment and remind us that even in our most difficult seasons, God remains merciful, accepting, and loving.

GRACE JI-SUN KIM, professor of theology at Earlham School of Religion and author of *When God Became White* and *Invisible*

Jean Neely courageously breaks the silence and shame surrounding chronic mental illness and suffering with the good news that God does not abandon us—even when we do not get better. Too often we only share stories of deep struggle after we have been healed or come out victorious. With brave vulnerability, Jean writes about finding God—and God's love pursuing her—in the abyss of bipolar disorder, a condition she has lived with for decades. Her story is a profound gift to all who suffer or love someone who suffers from mental illness, which is ultimately all of us. I urge you to receive this gift!

KATHY TUAN-MACLEAN, PHD, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship faculty ministry national director, certified spiritual director, and coauthor of *Moms at the Well* and *Moms on the Way*

Most of us in the church have little opportunity to truly understand what it's like to live with severe mental illness, let alone engage in meaningful conversation about it or receive spiritual gifts from those experiencing it. Neely graciously and courageously offers us the sacred gift of her own lived experience with bipolar disorder and depression. She challenges the assumptions and stigma that frame mental illness as only pain and suffering. While we bear witness to her heart-wrenching struggles, she invites us through them to attune ourselves to a fullness of life that only living in the abyss can offer—a deep wisdom born from earnest longing for evidence of God's faithfulness and love. What a gift to walk alongside her in this memoir—a beautiful tapestry of cultural, spiritual, and mental health intersections—woven from a rich array of spiritual voices, research, and insights from mental health experts.

JESSICA CHENFENG, PHD, LMFT, associate professor of marriage and family therapy at Fuller Theological Seminary

Dr. Neely transparently shares her own challenges with mental health, lovingly confronting the faith she grew up with that kept her from truly seeing God's heart. She shares profound insights, such as the need to be mindful that “facile evangelistic formulas can undo the very meaning of the gospel as ‘good news.’” For those whose lives are less than perfect—which includes all of us—Dr. Neely provides insights and counsel to live lives beyond our self-imposed standards that we think are required to “earn” God's blessing. This book also offers some of Dr. Neely's personal journaling that reminds us that God's healing is not a linear process but involves detours and setbacks. That's something completely relatable and, if we're honest, something we should all acknowledge.

ALAN Y. ODA, PHD, professor of psychology at Azusa Pacific University



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A NOTE TO THE READER

This book discusses themes of severe depression and suicidal ideation. While these topics are approached with honesty and care, we recognize they may be distressing to some readers.

If you are struggling, please know that you are not alone. There is hope, and help is available. We encourage you to reach out to a trusted pastor, counselor, or mental health professional.

For immediate support, you can contact the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline by calling 988 or visiting [988lifeline.org](https://www.988lifeline.org). Trained counselors are available twenty-four seven to listen and help.

We pray that the words in this book will ultimately offer encouragement, hope, and a reminder of God's presence with you always.



INTRODUCTION

Facing the Abyss

The grace of God means something like: "Here is your life. You might never have been, but you are, because the party wouldn't have been complete without you. Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid. I am with you."

FREDERICK BUECHNER, *Beyond Words*

Such beautiful and terrible things. The beautiful parts deepen when shared, and the terrible things seem to shrink back in the company of friends. So it's tragic that we're not more open about the most harrowing things we face. Many of us never come to realize that we really *do* belong at the party.

Some of my most terrible things have been tied to living with chronic mental pain. When I was fifteen, I began to experience manic episodes and periods of severe depression, and I was diagnosed with what psychiatry currently calls bipolar disorder (bipolar I, to be specific).

For decades, in addition to wrestling with persistent, debilitating depression, which is often more difficult to treat than mania, I was constantly anxious over what my condition meant for my spiritual life. I felt I embodied the opposite of everything a person of faith was supposed to be, and so much around me seemed to confirm that view.

I grew up with no examples of faith accompanied by *unfixed* inner pain or faith that constantly floundered with doubt. For a long time, I couldn't find much helpful insight on depression from the church. I didn't personally know of anyone who followed Christ *and* had ongoing crises in faith or frequent chutes into despair or who was unwell as often as I was. People who stood out as models of Christian faith were those who had overcome their inner troubles, were well on their way to overcoming them, or were good at keeping them hidden.

These days there's more open conversation around mental health in the church, thanks partly to an emerging abundance of literature with nuanced perspectives on faith and mental suffering. I think of writers such as Monica Coleman, Alia Joy, J. S. Park, and Cole Arthur Riley, just to name a few. We have a more holistic understanding of mental health and the intertwinement of body and spirit.

Despite this growth in the church, however, moving through the abyss of depression and inner pain can still be one of the loneliest experiences for a person of faith. It's difficult to find company in navigating these depths even though so many of us spend drawn-out seasons here. We long for more company as we face the terrible and incomprehensible parts of our lives that don't fit neatly into dominant faith narratives.

THE DEPTHS OF FAITH

*If I go up to the heavens, you are there;
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.*

PSALM 139:8, NIV

Our faith communities often focus on life above the soul's sea level, as it were. We're reluctant to address the deeper, dimmer realities—the

ocean of shadowy unknowing in faith or the abyss inside each of us. But some of us go through long seasons where we feel stuck in anguish or lost “in the depths” (Psalm 139:8, NIV) and “the remotest part of the sea” (verse 9).

When I’m depressed, I dwell in the abyss, at the bottom of the ocean floor, far from the land of the living. I’ve wondered how to trust that “even there” (Psalm 139:10) God is with us. And why don’t we talk more about how the life of faith can run through these chasmic depths?

There are so many existential aches we don’t explore openly in the church—the unanswerable questions, apparent absurdities, and our *utter* groundlessness. Though the church focuses on the sunnier sides of faith, the reality is that sometimes our paths linger along deep ocean trenches. That’s where I live. Even when I’m not depressed, I feel I’m swimming in heavy, unnavigable waters. There are unseen dangers all around, and I’m full of restlessness, an abyssal longing.

Strangely, I feel God has met me in this bottomless deep. But it’s not the sort of thing that’s easy to describe or bring up with just anyone. People prefer tidy concepts and solid ground over irresolvable mysteries and the yawning void.

In our triumphalist faith cultures, it’s easy for those of us with persistently unresolved suffering and inner shadows to feel ignored by God or overlooked in our communities. Without more open conversations about inner anguish and the cruelly felt absence of God, our sometimes unavoidable pains can turn into unnecessarily magnified spiritual torment.

We need faith spaces expansive enough to welcome the tensions we feel between our afflicted minds and our devotion to Christ, spaces where people are less presumptuous about trying to fix us

and where they're not scandalized by the coexistence of our hope in God and our easily faltering faith. I think often of the importance of "narrative plenitude," a phrase coined by award-winning novelist and literary scholar Viet Thanh Nguyen.¹ Nguyen uses the term to describe our need for a creative imaginary that is richer with the singularity of stories and voices beyond our familiar, dominant forms of representation. The church is in desperate need of such plenitude, stories that tap into the diverse and unfathomably deep contours of real life. We suffer

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from "narrative scarcity," an erasure of so many different winding paths, unnamed ways, and unique embodiments of faith in Christ.

The diversity of our stories should include neurodiversity, emotional and cognitive diversity, and diversity of temperaments and spiritual leanings. Because our most common narratives about "great faith" are so limited in scope, and because those who wield these narratives have such amplified influence in the church, it's easy to believe that something is seriously wrong if none of the common narratives resonate with our own. It can be difficult to imagine the possibility of faith outside the recognizable molds or the reality of a Love greater than all the known stories.

This book is my small attempt to add to a growing narrative plenitude in our faith communities. It's not an authoritative guide on faith and mental health. There are no quick fixes for mental or

spiritual distress. To be clear, I have no schooling in psychology and no formal theological training. I'm simply offering stories from my own path with Christ and the personal challenges I've faced with depression and faith over the years.

THE MYSTERY OF GRACE

Depression is still a regular part of my life, but somehow, the abyss of excruciating inner pain and desolation of my teens, twenties, and early thirties has morphed ever so slowly into a different kind of abyss, one with a little more peace in Christ. I attribute it all to grace.

When I say all is grace, I don't mean that God is any less gracious to those who have no relief from depression or are caught in other horrific conditions. I don't know how grace works, but I don't believe God is withholding grace from people caught in unrelenting pain. It's all steeped in mystery.

We live in an imperfect world. Yet beauty and grace abound.

In the chapters ahead, I discuss grace-filled moments that helped with various liberating shifts in my personal perspectives over time. However, I don't think that mental health is a strictly individual endeavor or that merely adjusting our beliefs will heal complex conditions. Our pain might be rooted in our physiology and also shaped by historic wounds, our environments, and unjust systems. How we navigate our inner world does matter, but things don't depend solely on us. There's certainly work to do in changing the contexts that make us unwell.

The struggle is broad and multifaceted. We're multidimensional beings with multidimensional aches and pains. Labels like bipolar disorder are clumsy categories for broad spectrums of conditions and different ways of being. Yet even rough, provisional terms can

open paths to relief, and psychotropic medication can be lifesaving for some of us. I consider it a grace that I was diagnosed early and have had access to care that I've needed. I believe it's in part because I'm currently on medication that I'm able to write this book, and based on experience, I expect to need mood-stabilizing medication for the rest of my life.

While some of us might benefit from clinical treatment for mental health, that's not always what's needed, and even when it's helpful, it's not sufficient for our growth toward wholeness. It addresses just part of what ails us. We all need and long for so much more. We need each other. We need the wisdom of our elders and their ancient paths, assurance of the love that holds us, and the Spirit's gentle touch.

In this book, I share about how I've wrestled with faith in the abyss of depression and mental pain. I address certain beliefs that made my experiences of depression feel worse for many years, and I explore encounters that helped dislodge stubborn fears of God's rejection.

As much for my forgetful, depressed self as for other readers, I write to call attention to the merciful reality that even if we make our bed in the depths of the deepest sea, *God is there*.

The more we share about our sojourns in the shadowy realms of faith, the easier it becomes to hear the loving voice of the One who stays with us through the shadows, however long the night, however deep our abyss. My hope is that as we share our experiences of life in the deep we would find some shelter in each other's company and encounter more of the mystery and grace of Christ always *with* us in the abyss.

WHAT WE CARRY

Exploring Inheritances from Family and Culture

The LORD is the portion of my inheritance and my cup;

You support my lot.

The lines have fallen to me in pleasant places;

Indeed, my heritage is beautiful to me.

PSALM 16:5-6, NASB 1995

Before I learned any Mother Goose rhymes or read any classic Western fairy tales, I listened to my grandmother's versions of old Korean folktales. “옛날에, 옛날에 . . .” (“Once upon a time . . .”)

I heard the story about the tiger trying to trick a young brother and sister by dressing up as their mom (whom he had already devoured), and the one about the disobedient little frog, who always did the opposite of whatever his mother asked. (I enjoyed that one despite suspecting it was a commentary on my own naughty behavior.)

We never really know when our stories begin. But I think the different dimensions of our selves and our families' stories are deeply entangled and intertwined. Our families, ancestors, and wider communities have given us gifts beyond our understanding. They're at the root of all our beauty and intelligence.

In countless ways, “my heritage *is*,” indeed, “beautiful to me” (Psalm 16:6, emphasis added).

While my sister and I were growing up, my paternal grandmother lived with us, and she told us countless stories about life in Korea, stories of noble ancestry, of war and poverty, of escape and survival. We learned about our family roots, through our grandfather, in the royal line of the Yi dynasty. The first syllable of both my father’s and uncle’s names marks their placement in the number of generations from the Grand Prince Yangnyeong, the eldest son of King Taejong. Prince Yangnyeong was known for his scandalous behavior in court and for being more gifted in calligraphy and literature than in matters of state. (His younger brother eventually became King Sejong the Great and invented the Korean alphabet.)

My grandmother told us about how Japanese colonizers confiscated her family’s property when she was young, how they forbade the use of Korean and gave everyone Japanese names. We heard stories about life after the occupation when the communist government took over in the North, and she and my grandfather had to flee southward. Since he was wanted by the communist forces, my grandfather left ahead of the rest of the family, and their home was placed under surveillance with a live-in informant. Later my grandmother took my dad, who was four years old at the time, his older brother, his baby sister, and a basket of food to go on a “picnic.” They left everything behind in order to dodge suspicion of escape. That night the family embarked on a clandestine boat ride to join my grandfather in the South. During the voyage, my infant aunt’s cries heightened everyone’s fears of getting caught, and my grandmother sat huddled with her three children, terrified as the sailors repeatedly threatened to throw my aunt overboard if she wouldn’t be quiet.

At the start of the Korean War, when he was nine, my dad was responsible for carrying the family's rucksack of rice on his back as they trekked for miles each day fleeing the war zones, walking along paths strewn with dead bodies. By the end of the war, my grandmother would learn that five of her six brothers were dead, killed by Northern forces. (At different times when we were growing up, my sister or I shared a room with her, and she would often have nightmares and cry out in the middle of the night.) My mom was only a year old at the time. Her family, also originally from the North, joined the masses in the chaotic flight southward.

Despite all the hardship after the war, my parents somehow managed to thrive. They did exceptionally well in school, attended Seoul National University, and eventually made their way to the US in the early seventies.

GOD SOUNDINGS

Faith and Korean church communities have played an important part in my family's life and story since my grandparents' generation. Both of my parents grew up in the church. When I was a child, my grandmother would often watch Korean sermons and sing her favorite hymns at home. Her father helped build the first church in their village in Korea.

My mom's father came to faith when Presbyterian missionaries offered him food and shelter as he traveled searching for work as a young man. Later, he became an elder in his church, and he and my grandmother were known in their community as people of prayer. They relied on grace for their family's survival in the rough aftermath of the Korean War, and all seven of their children inherited their legacy of faithfulness.

For most of my life, my dad was the head pastor of a couple of small Korean American churches we attended. Apart from family gatherings, church was the primary place where being Korean was a shared part of life and looking Asian didn't make me an odd-ball. At church we encountered the familiar tastes of home. Rather than just grabbing coffee and donuts after the Sunday service, we would usually sit down together for a full lunch. Things like 비빔밥 (bibimbap) and 김밥 (gimbap) were common fare, as well as 육개장 (yukgaejang) and steamed buns with meaty fillings. We celebrated traditions like having 떡국 (rice cake soup) on New Year's Day, and families aided each other and new immigrants in all areas of need, including finding housing and work, providing rides when needed, helping with translation, and getting kids registered in school.

I credit my family and the churches of my youth with embodying the love of God for me and being the first to nurture my love for Christ. They showed me—in word and deed—that God is essentially good and loving. It was partly because of their goodness that I was drawn to Jesus and had my earliest encounters with the One “full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

But not everything I learned at church or from the broader Christian culture was helpful. Elements of the culture mixed with my angsty, self-critical bent in problematic ways that affected my inner life.

During the nineties, evangelical Christians in the US often prioritized intense devotional experience, resolute certainty, and ever-zealous passion for God as norms for “great faith.” These tendencies seeped into and dominated many Korean American Christian circles. Like other Christians of my generation, I grew up with pressures toward total devotion that fostered an anxious spiritual striving.

When I was younger, I thought that being a good Christian and having strong faith meant that, in addition to praying and reading the Bible every day, we had to *constantly strive* with every cell, every fiber of our being, every thought, every minute of our God-given lives to love God more and do God's work in the world. It wasn't that we saw God as a tyrant—God is infinitely good and loving. It was just natural that we owed God everything for saving our sorry souls! Of course our very great God had very high standards. We were supposed to be like *Christ*, after all, the perfectly loving and sinless One. I was well aware that I fell far short of that mark.

Had I taken it all with a healthy dose of self-compassion or easygoing realism, I might have come out of it relatively unscathed. But I've never been easygoing about anything, and with my melancholy tendencies, I was already prone to self-rejection.

At home, although my parents weren't harsh with us, what they ended up modeling was that we owed God all our time and energy, primarily in the form of service to others. Their days and evenings were filled with Bible studies, hospital visits, home visits, phone calls, counseling sessions, church administration, and other forms of service, both in the church and in the wider community. Some seasons included sunrise prayer every morning. My mom accompanied my dad in nearly all his church duties, despite already working full-time as a nurse. It seemed they were both on call twenty-four seven for "God's work," and the congregations they served expected no less.

These roots and faith heritage laid some of the groundwork for the spiritually inflected turmoil that would arise with my mental health challenges.

I had a deep, growing love for Jesus by the time I reached middle school. Though my faith in Christ was a source of real joy and grounding hope, it was also infused with anxiety in trying to please

God. I fretted over everyone's eternal fate, had daily quiet times, and memorized chunks of Scripture—just in case I might end up persecuted and imprisoned or something someday without a Bible! At one point I resolved to learn the Gospel of John by heart. (I gave that up about halfway through chapter 1.) I journaled nightly and repeatedly asked forgiveness for being selfish and worldly, for caring too much about school and my own interests, for not being kinder at home, and for not being bold enough to tell more people about Jesus. Since I had many questions and doubts, I lamented the fact that I had such “weak faith” and so little trust in God.

While my connection to Jesus was a source of solace, my spiritual concerns also caused inner disquiet and stress. When I look back at my journals from those days, I see pages upon pages filled with anxiety and so many apologies just for being human.

UNCHARTED WATERS

I'm a woman in exile, that is to say, always at the very edge, at the frontier, unorthodox, in the margins, always at the border, on one side and the other, in permanent imbalance—an imbalance that today, after various crossings . . . makes me exist, causes me to write.

LEÏLA SEBBAR, *Lettres parisiennes*

Unlike my parents and grandparents, I've never lost my home or had to trek through war-torn lands, but often, just being in my body has felt like a constant battle and a kind of exile.¹

My bipolar episodes started when I was fifteen, before I'd ever heard of anything called bipolar disorder or manic depression, the term more often used back in the nineties.

At the beginning of high school, my days were full with common teen activities—marching band, piano, private crushes, and the tennis

team. Being on the nerdy side, I often stayed up late to study or finish homework. I remember I was *always* tired. I had friends but was finding it difficult to connect with my peers. None of my friends seemed to share my devotion to Jesus or my budding passions for literature, French, and history. I turned inward and felt increasingly isolated.

By the time I started my sophomore year, I was exhausted and often felt down, but I assumed I was just going through a spiritual slump.

Then one day, all the dreariness I'd been feeling lifted abruptly.

During a lunch pep assembly one October afternoon at school, I happened to hear someone make a passing comment about his faith—Christ had helped him through a difficult time of grief. It felt like consoling reassurance from God that I wasn't alone.

That's how it started—unremarkably enough, with a little word that came as comfort. As the assembly came to a close and students started filing out of the auditorium, I just sat there on the bleachers, taking in what I had heard. I felt seen and warmly embraced.

And then with a rushing flood of joy, so many sparks inside, and unstoppable tears of relief, I sort of floated into the upper spheres.

It was as if my senses suddenly switched on to take in entirely new shades and dimensions, as if everything turned from bleak, muted grays into brilliant, glossy technicolor. Our campus, which had felt so drab before, simply *radiated* spiritual energy, and I felt swept up in the overwhelming nearness of Christ. I alternately wept—with joy—and raved about Jesus through the rest of my classes that day, after school, and into the evening with marching band friends at the football game that night.

When I got home after the game, I was still in an elated and rapturous state. I announced to my family that I was experiencing a spiritual revival and rattled on about how clueless I had been

before. I reassured them of how *present* and *loving* God was, how we just weren't aware of it!

To my utter surprise, my family was neither glad for me nor merely amused, as my friends at school had been. They seemed spooked for some reason I couldn't understand.

My parents sent my sister to her room and told me to slow down (as I was talking a mile a minute) and explain everything again. As I recounted my day, they listened with growing alarm and asked if I had taken any pills or smoked anything while I was out with my friends.

Baffled and indignant—because I thought they should know me better than that—I shouted, “Why are you getting so upset?! I'm on a *spiritual* high. This is all because of *God!*”

(Their reaction annoyed me so much at the time, but in retrospect it's understandable. Years later when I asked a friend to describe my behavior during those first manic episodes, he told me I was “exactly like someone on speed.”)

After more agitated attempts to explain on my part, mounting confusion on the part of my parents, and yelling on both sides, I finally broke down in tears and retreated to my room.

In the days that followed, I ate little, hardly slept, and was both abuzz with spiritual excitement and emotionally on edge, frustrated by how troubled and strict my parents were. I alternated between gushing with a warm sense of God's love for everyone and breaking out into irritated protests whenever my parents objected to anything I felt like doing—like visiting friends late at night, when I wasn't the least bit tired! Since I couldn't sleep and kept being told to get off the phone, I stayed up and wrote long treatises on how unfathomably loving God was, how all we had to do was *trust* that love. If only we knew the *immensity* of Jesus' love for us!

I continued to see my experience as thoroughly spiritual and was annoyed by my family's confusion and concern.

Over a month later—after many adrenaline-fueled days, long bouts of sleepless nights, notable weight loss, confounding crashes into depression, some days off from school, visits to a psychologist, then a psychiatrist, and more conflicts with my family—my parents and I had an argument that crescendoed into my running away from home one evening.

I *literally ran*—charged out of our house in fury and jogged two miles to a friend's house. I spent the night there, though not sleeping. I cried and ranted to my friend and his family for a while about how insufferable my parents were. After everyone else went to bed, I fretted and paced and wished it weren't too late to play piano and tried to keep the promise I made to my friend's mom that I wouldn't start calling people at ungodly hours. At some point, I must have phoned one of my former youth pastors. He was kind enough to pick me up (before dawn!), drive me around, and listen to all my grumbling and heartache. He finally convinced me it'd be a good idea to talk to my family.

That was how I found myself in an adolescent psychiatric ward one morning, which is where my parents took me after I returned home. I thought I'd be staying a few days, for some tests, as the nurse explained. It was just before Thanksgiving. I might not have agreed so easily to be admitted had I known that I'd be kept at the hospital through Christmas and the start of the new year.

DIAGNOSIS, DEFIANCE, AND DEFEAT

My stay turned out to be on the long side because my condition was up in the air. I went along with the system at first, attending

the meetings and therapy sessions and following my doctor's orders. But I got impatient when I kept having adverse reactions to different meds they had me try, and the staff kept telling me that I wasn't allowed to leave until the doctors could figure out my diagnosis and treatment.

Eventually, after an endless battery of psychological tests and trials of different medications, I began to feel like some of the other kids in the unit who complained they were there only because their parents were "stupid" and couldn't handle them. I concluded, too, that there was nothing wrong with me and that everyone had overreacted.

So one morning I refused to take my medication. I told my psychiatrist that everyone had made a big deal over nothing—I'd just been a little hyper and excited about Jesus!

I also announced to my doctor that I found him thoroughly incompetent and no longer wanted to work with him.

"You clearly have no idea what you're doing!" I shouted at him, and I insisted that I be released immediately.

When he didn't see it my way, I said I'd refuse further treatment because I was *fine*.

They had a system for that. My protest cost me my accumulated privileges and further delayed my release.

It wasn't quite how I'd planned for things to go.

A few days into my resistance campaign, one of the ward nurses asked if he could speak with me and pulled me aside. He opened a pamphlet with various photos, apparently from the seventies, of some white people standing around, in seemingly thoughtful conversation. He told me they had figured out I had "a mental illness called manic depression" caused by a "chemical imbalance" in my brain, and he went on to explain the illness.

But the rest of what he was saying faded into the background as his first words reverberated in my mind: *Mental illness? Me? Mentally ill?!*

I figured he must be mistaken. *I* couldn't have a mental illness! My mind conjured up pictures I'd seen of old insane asylums with people chained up in darkened, solitary cells.

The nurse told me not to worry—as if it wasn't a big deal—and reassured me that the condition was treatable. He said there was this mood stabilizer, lithium, that was pretty effective.

When I insisted there was nothing wrong with me, he explained there was a whole team of doctors considering my case, and they were finally sure that this was what we were dealing with. He said if I'd try taking the lithium, I could see for myself that I'd feel better.

It all sounded preposterous!

So I stood my ground.

From that moment on, the entire staff and my family launched into Operation Get-Jean-to-Take-Her-Meds—my parents, the nurses, the group counselors, my individual therapist, and my newly assigned doctor. Everyone!

It didn't seem like a fair fight.

My parents accepted the diagnosis right away, which made me furious. I thought they just didn't know me well enough and were too used to my quieter side. They didn't realize that the kind of behavior they found so alarming—talking nonstop, being loud and effusively expressive, wanting to spend every waking minute with friends, chattering on the phone at all hours, and rejecting authority—was completely *normal* for *American* kids!

During one visit, my dad tried to reason with me, begging me to just try the medication. I blew up at him, stormed out of the

room where we'd been talking, and yelled to the nurses to "please escort this man *OUT* of the unit!"—as if I ran the whole place.

I was particularly hurt by the fact that even the youth pastor who regularly visited the ward was on their side. He of all people, I thought, should understand how natural it was to go through spiritual highs and lows!

One afternoon another nurse, a big blond fellow, asked if we could talk about the medication situation. Having lost my privilege to go outside, I told him *only* if we could have our talk out in the courtyard reserved for the staff. We got permission and went to sit at one of the little tables on the patio.

He asked me about my concerns and talked for a bit about chemical imbalances and how lithium worked. I mostly ignored him as I sat and soaked up the fresh air, noticing the daisies, listening to the susurrous breeze. I made vague attempts to prolong the conversation, but when he realized I wasn't changing my mind, he said we had to go back inside.

I asked for just a little more time, but he said he had to get back to work. So I dismissed him: "Oh, go ahead! I promise I'll stay right here."

That didn't fly.

After some back-and-forth, when I refused to budge and sat planted in my chair, he finally said that if I didn't comply he'd have to call a code-something-or-other, which I knew would involve several nurses rushing over to forcibly restrain and remove me. (I'd seen it happen once when one of the young guys in rehab had gotten violent.) "You don't want us to go to all that fuss, do you?"

I rolled my eyes in exasperation and replied, "Well, *that* would be absolutely *ridiculous*, wouldn't it?! I've lost more than ten pounds

since I've been here, and I'm totally weak! You know you could just pick me up by yourself if you wanted to!"

"So come on," he urged.

I sighed and followed him back into the ward.

In the middle of another sleepless night about a week into my protest, exhausted in my lone stand against the united front of Team Lithium, my resolve began to waver. I started to wonder if their case might be stronger than mine. If I was honest with myself, I wasn't entirely certain that everyone was wrong.

I became increasingly troubled by the fact that the symptoms listed in the pamphlet on manic depression coincided with so many parts of my experience, with uncanny accuracy.

I had to admit that it wasn't just that I'd been "a little hyper" that fall. I had also lost my appetite and need for sleep for days on end. Why was my whole body affected that way? I was usually shy and doubted myself a lot, but my confidence and delight in myself had exploded to astronomical proportions at times. Where had all that come from?

And it wasn't just that I had felt closer to God—I was often fit to *burst* with a celestial-feeling euphoria I had never experienced in my life, and I was so confident that I had special, urgent messages about God's love for the world.

Plus, it wasn't only my parents who had been alarmed. At school, some of my teachers had expressed concern over my unusual behavior. I'd interrupted my teacher in French class several times with outbursts of "Attends, —qu'est-ce qui se passe?!" (Wait, —what's going on?!) when I snapped out of my own reveries and wanted to be sure I didn't miss anything. During math class, in which I had zero interest, I had to be asked repeatedly to quiet

down when I chattered to friends sitting near me. Other times, I went limp like a deflated balloon and could barely muster the energy to drag myself from class to class.

As I considered all this and how stuck I was in a losing struggle that prolonged my hospital stay, I began to realize—with horror—that my behavior fit the descriptions in the manic depression pamphlet, as if I were following a playbook. A sense of total defeat settled in as I resigned myself to the diagnosis.

A heavy shroud of shame fell over me: I had a *mental illness*.
Well, there goes my life, I thought.

SWIMMING THROUGH OUR ENTANGLEMENTS

I believe we all fluctuate on a broad spectrum of mental wellness and unwellness over the course of our lives. You don't have to have an official diagnosis to experience mental pain (or cause others pain), and even the sturdiest of us can be pushed to the edge by rough circumstances.

But at the time of my diagnosis, I felt like I'd been cast out from the realm of "normal" folks—a belonging which I had up to that point taken for granted—into the realm of the specially accursed.

Mental health was not a significant part of public conversation in the nineties. It was before so many celebrities disclosed mental health issues, before ads for antidepressants became common, and before many churches began to discuss mental health openly.

Back then I believed I might be the *only* person on campus who had a mental illness, first at my high school and then at my university. I felt *singularly defective*.

Even apart from the serious symptoms, the notion of the diagnosis itself was a major blow to my sense of identity and confidence.

I had formerly thought of myself as one of “the smart kids.” I began to think of myself as the “sick” and “crazy” one. The shame surrounding mental illness exacerbated the severity of my depression for years.

We’ve gotten better about discussing mental health these days, but we still need to talk more openly about our emotional and spiritual distress. I started writing this book because I want to contribute to more nurturing conversations around faith and mental health in the church, and to further normalize what so many of us struggle with but often have little support for in our faith communities.

All kinds of personal, biological, familial, and historical factors are enmeshed with our mental health. Before I left the hospital, I learned that a variety of factors can play a triggering role in bipolar disorder, including genetics, stress, and trauma.

Stress

Stress was a normal part of my life in high school. I was determined to do well academically, and while I was hospitalized I worried intensely about my grades and all the school I was missing.

I remember how surprised my parents were when, in one of our family counseling sessions, I said that I had to do well enough to get into a top university, like they had, and how shocked I was to learn they *didn’t* expect that of me. I’d just assumed, even though there was no pressure at home.

This kind of self-sustained pressure can stem from temperament but is also a common factor in mental health among Asian Americans. In *Identity, Youth, and Gender in the Korean American Church*, Christine J. Hong notes that internalized academic pressure is among the top stressors affecting the mental health of Asian

American youth, along with questions of identity, intergenerational conflict, and experiences of racism.² In her work, scholar Mimi Khúc points out the notably high rates of suicide and suicide attempts among Asian American young people and explains how our collective unwellness is directly tied to capitalist structures, racialized subject formation, and the systems of higher education in the US.³

Our individual conditions are inseparable from the societies and systems we inhabit.

Trauma

In another of our family sessions while I was in the hospital, my therapist asked us whether I had any significant trauma in my past. I said no, that I couldn't think of anything, but my parents both immediately responded that I had gone through a year-long separation from them when I was little.

My parents had recently immigrated and were struggling with the demands of full-time work and graduate studies when I was born, so when I was ten months old, I was sent to Korea to live with an aunt and her family for a year. I was surprised that my parents brought this up. Though I knew about that time away, I had no memory of it and didn't consider it relevant.

But my therapist and doctor agreed that the separation at such a formative age was a likely trigger for bipolar, and since then, all the therapists and doctors I've worked with over the years have agreed that the separation amounted to a significant enough trauma to consider seriously. Later I would work on processing some of that trauma, as I'll discuss further in chapter 4. But back then I didn't feel able to connect to the experience and knowing about it didn't seem to help.

Comparative Suffering

There seemed to be a complex web of factors tied to my condition. However it worked, even if it was partly physiological (as people kept telling me), I couldn't help feeling ashamed of being unwell. I felt awful for causing so much fuss—especially because there was no *real* crisis in my life. My life was too comfortable for me to be struggling like this! Since stress was a known trigger, I thought it was my fault for being too fragile. I was obviously too sensitive, too emotional, not spiritually strong enough, or not smart enough to handle pressures that everyone else managed fine. It wasn't as if I was going through any *real* suffering!

I've noticed that many of us who are children of immigrants tend to dismiss our pains as insignificant compared to what our elders have endured. Clinical psychologist Jenny Wang notes that tendencies to compare our suffering to that of our parents are widespread among Asian Americans in particular. Knowing what our families have gone through, it's tough to give ourselves permission to acknowledge just how harrowing our own heartaches are.⁴ But when you're struggling to manage serious mental health challenges, every single day can feel like you've been thrown into a raging war or flung into the sea without a life jacket.

Writer and radio producer Stephanie Foo details her journey through complex PTSD after a childhood of abuse in her stunning memoir, *What My Bones Know*. In speaking with many other Asian American children of immigrants, she found that our communities are full of “unexplored pain” and “untreated anguish.”⁵ Many of us don't allow ourselves to even acknowledge, much less properly address, our pain and thus live in the shadows of buried and unprocessed traumas, which inevitably seep into the rest of our lives.

There were other entanglements as well. I wasn't sure how to view my diagnosis in light of my faith.

Shame and Spiritual Perfectionism

In some of our faith spaces, spiritual perfectionism or a kind of “spiritual model minority” tendency has seeped into the church. It can feel especially heavy when devotional expectations from Western evangelical Christian paradigms intersect with elements of Asian American cultural dynamics. On top of pressure to excel in other areas of life, we might also feel we're supposed to be spiritually exceptional. A sense of duty and indebtedness we already have toward our family can be compounded by feelings of duty and indebtedness toward God, and vice versa. The pressure to live up to both parental and divine expectations can be overwhelming!

Growing up, I didn't feel pressure from my parents, but I did have a strong sense of owing God *everything* and having to live up to a very, *very* high calling as a Christian.

Some Christian spaces and subcultures convey messages that can have damaging impact on mental health, especially for those of us with highly sensitive or melancholic leanings. Given certain nudges from our environment, it's easy to become stuck in toxic readings of Scripture and diseased notions of God. For many years, even as I believed in grace, I worried that I was a disappointment to God and an embarrassment to Christ.

Understandably, movements toward healing can be very slow in coming.

While it's not possible to completely extricate ourselves from our entanglements, mindfully exploring our stories and the contours of our abysses can help lighten our inner loads. Sifting through

our multilayered depths and inheritances can be a fruitful way to start some of the inner work, especially when baggage from our youth makes it difficult to see our mental health challenges as anything other than personal deficiencies.

Swimming at these inner depths is not for the faint of heart, and sometimes we have to wait to grow into the capacity to navigate these waters. We might have to go through more of life or build up more resilience or more communal support before we can work through our core wounds.

Our healing is something we participate in but not something we can fully control. As a young adult, I was intent on quickly getting past all my trouble, but I didn't begin to see significant inner movement until my late thirties. It took time and long, slow struggle with God.

Sifting through our multilayered depths and inheritances can be a fruitful way to start some of the inner work, especially when baggage from our youth makes it difficult to see our mental health challenges as anything other than personal deficiencies.

MERCY IN THE DEEP

As I've worked toward wholeness, it has been particularly helpful to pay attention to the crucial question of what I believe deep down in my *gut* (not just in my head) about God and how God views me.

Over the years, I've found that the single most difficult thing to believe when I'm depressed—and perhaps the single most comforting thing in the midst of depression when I *can* trust it—is the reality that I am God's beloved, that God's affection for me is unshaken no matter how depressed or unwell I might be.

Trust in that weird, impossible Love doesn't come easily. It's only with a lot of help from fellow wayfarers in faith over several decades that I've grown to more readily trust that Love.

Even now, I don't presume that my trust is steadfast. Given my track record, I have little confidence that my infinitesimal dot of faith will hold steady. I know not what dangers await in the abyss.

But for today, or rather, in *this particular moment*—because who knows what the rest of the day holds—I trust that the Christ of all compassion is the unshakable constant, that things are not dependent on the strength of my faith or the steadiness of my sanity or swayed by my chutes into despair.

Throughout this book, I try to amplify the voice that was so difficult for me to trust for so many years, the one that says God loves me and stays with me even when I feel lost, even when I'm sunk in abyssal mental pain, and *even* when I'm caught in the hellish-feeling depths that completely extinguish faith. I've come to believe that even there God is my Sustainer.

In the chapters ahead, I share some experiences that have helped me keep hoping and seeking in the depths. These aren't stories of decisive victory. Although I've grown more emotionally stable than when I was younger, I still experience some measure of depression and anxiety on most days. Chasmic trenches of sadness, fear, and existential angst still run permanently through my inner landscape. Though I've had brief seasons on land, I've come to accept that my usual dwelling place is in the cavernous blue.

For now, my home is in the abyss. The challenges continue, and some days I have to strain, hour by hour, from breath to breath, to resist all the impulses in me that say Christ is too good to be true and to not give in to the weight of crushing waters.

Perhaps as we share our stories those of us who find ourselves dwelling in the deep can help each other awaken to the steady undercurrent of mercy here.

I hope these stories will offer you encouragement to trust in unfathomable grace more readily than I've been able to in my life. I hope that together we can grow to be more gracious to ourselves, experience mercy that exceeds our reason, and rest as we're held by Love deeper than the shadowy depths of our unknowing.



REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What are some significant parts of your parents' and grandparents' lives? What stories and inheritances have they passed down to you? What do you appreciate about your heritage?
2. What kind of faith stories and religious cultures did you inherit from your family?
3. In what specific ways have inheritances from your family and community felt like emotional or spiritual entanglements?
4. What surprising challenges or particular illnesses have you and your family had to face?
5. How did these particular challenges shape your sense of self? How did they influence your faith? How did you navigate them in light of your faith?