

Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education

Volume 54

Article 10

September 2018

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Recommended Citation

Rowntree, Stephen C. S.J. (2018) "Up or Down - Both God's Gifts," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 54 , Article 10.
Available at: <https://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol54/iss1/10>

Up or Down—Both God's Gifts

By Stephen C. Rowntree, S.J.

Inspired by the stories of several others in the current issue of *Conversations*, I was encouraged to share some of my own psychological/spiritual struggles in the effort to continue to break the bonds of stigma. I am bipolar. I cycle between feeling good about myself before God and man, energetic, productive, engaging enthusiastically with people – and the exact opposite. In the down cycle I am assailed by an endless stream of self-critical thoughts. I struggle to write and deliver a 7-minute homily. And I dread walking into a room filled with people.

My dead accurate indicator of which mood I am is the *New York Times*. I'm up if I enjoy reading it, and down if I have no interest in it whatever. I have been taking antidepressants for many years. Only recently did it become clear to my doctor that I regularly cycle between mild to moderate depression, and mild to moderate mania, and so I now take a generic form of Seroquel to moderate the up cycle.

I was up this past summer and had a delightful vacation visiting family and friends. Later I responded eagerly when prodded to write a brief statement on my understanding of priestly ministry for a supplement to the archdiocesan paper. I found this rather easy to do. I confessed in print for the first time that I was "mildly bipolar."

My favorite piece of spiritual reading is and has been for many years Fr. Michael Buckley, S.J.'s 1974 "Letter to the Berkeley Ordinands." (<http://www.womenpriests.org/classic/buckley.asp>) Fr. Buckley, the rector of the Jesuit School of Theology community writing to the Jesuit seminarians to be ordained that year, reminded them that, however well-educated and well-formed they might have thought themselves, "weakness" is necessary for a priest. The essential question was: "Are you weak enough to be a priest?" He referred to 1 Cor. 1:27: "God has chosen the weak to confound the strong," 2 Cor. 4:7: "We hold this treasure in earthen vessels," Heb. 5:1: "Every high

priest...is able to deal gently with the ignorant since he himself is subject to weakness."

A couple of weeks after I had written of weakness as essential for a priest, I awoke after about nine hours of sleep feeling very groggy and yawning away. I was depressed from this day in early October, through Christmas, New Year's, until mid-March. When I'm depressed, I pray what I have come to call "terror psalms" (I can list 26, including Jesus' Ps. 22: "My God, why have you forsaken me?"). I cry out, "Jesus, Son of David have pity on me." When my negative thoughts intensify, I think of the Gerasene demoniac. "Put down the stones and stop gashing yourself." In these moments, I seem helpless to quiet the self put-downs in spite of what I learned from cognitive therapy: write down the negative thought, identify the distortion, that is, "overgeneralization," "should statements," and rephrase the initial thought without the distortion.

I find myself praying to accept God's acceptance of me as I am, weak, inadequate, and fragile. I recall Ignatius' words about discernment of spirits in the Second Week of the Exercises: If one is facing in the right direction, that is, facing toward God, moving however slowly, the good spirit's action is like water falling on a sponge: very gentle, very encouraging. The "enemy of our human nature" is aptly named "the accuser." I try to see the down mood as a grace and gift from God: that my eloquence and wit are gifts that I don't control. Recalling "The Principle and Foundation," I am reminded that moods are creatures and that I need to be indifferent to being down or to being up, realizing that the down mood can be and often is a gift which draws me closer to God. Also that the up moods, when they come, are also God's gifts. God is in all things and, therefore, can be found in all things. It also seems good advice to recall when I am up, "at the top of my game," what the down mood feels like. As well as the reverse: in the down mood



Medieval illumination of Jesus exorcizing the Gerasene demoniac from the Ottheinrich Folio

My current provincial, Fr. Ron Mercier, hearing, during my annual manifestation, of my depressed mood, insisted that when we finished I was immediately to call my doctor to see about changing my medications. It was after this that she increased my dose of the Seroquel generic. She also took me through an integrated program for coping with depression when it came. As noted, it had come big time. Essential features of the program were exercising regularly, engaging with people rather than withdrawing (simply listening with no need to speak), spiritual direction (which I had neglected for many years), and learning all I could about bipolar disease. Certainly a half-hour set of exercises I had learned when rehabbing my

to recall the good times, and that they have always recurred/returned. Again Ignatius' advice.

I am thankful for the *cura personalis* of superiors, which made them sensitive to my mental condition even before I was. It was Fr. John Armstrong, superior of the first studies community while I was the director of academic formation, who after hearing my self-report in community faith sharing suggested I see a therapist. This was in the late 1980s and Prozac was achieving success in relieving depression with minimum side effects and minimal need for monitoring, such as the previous class of antidepressant had required. I was greatly helped by it. My therapist, hearing of my over dedication to work, and my general perfectionism, recommended that I needed to do "something completely useless." I had not realized the importance of my regular playing Free Cell until then. Sometimes when I am down about the only mental activity I can manage is to play Free Cell, a version of Solitaire in which every game can be won.

knee did relax me. I did try to sit and listen to people (compared to when I am up I had almost nothing to say in reply). I did finally begin spiritual direction, not that I have never tried. I haven't done much research on bipolar disease. I am thankful to my current superior for regularly inquiring about how I'm feeling, and for reminding me that bipolar disease, like diabetes, needs to be directly addressed. I am also the beneficiary of an increasing acceptance of mental illness as nothing to be ashamed of. And as a number of articles in this issue of *Conversations* show, more people are speaking out about their own mental illnesses. It seems a "me too" moment for mental illnesses. And thanks be to God for this gift.

Fr. Rowntree taught philosophy for 29 years from 1976 to 2012, most of the time at Loyola University New Orleans, except for a seven-year period when he taught at Arrupe College in Harare, Zimbabwe. Since 2013 he has been parochial vicar at Holy Name of Jesus parish in New Orleans.