



No One
Taught Me
THE
HUMAN SIDE
of
ISLAM

The Muslim Hippie's Story of
Living with Bipolar Disorder

UMM ZAKIYYAH

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Hippie's Story of Living with Bipolar Disorder**

By Umm Zakiyyah

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Glossary of Arabic Terms

Allah: Arabic term for “God”

da’wah: educating others about Islam

deen: way of life, spiritual path, or religion

du’aa: prayerful supplication

fiqh: a scholarly explanation or understanding of an Islamic topic

haram: prohibited or forbidden

hifdh (sometimes spelled *hifz*): memorization of the Qur’an

khutbah: religious sermon

kibr: sinful pride

niqaab: face veil

qawwaam: protector, provider, and maintainer of women in their practical, spiritual, and emotional life

riyaa: desiring admiration, praise and recognition from people instead of or in addition to God’s pleasure

ruqyah: spiritual healing remedy

Salaah: formal obligatory prayer (performed five times each day)

shahaadah: spiritual testimony recited to mark one’s formal entry into the Islamic faith: “I bear witness that nothing has the right to be worshipped except God alone, and I bear witness that Muhammad is His servant and messenger.”

Shaytaan: Satan; the devil

Tawheed: Oneness of God; Islamic monotheism

ummah: universal community of Muslims

wudhoo’: ritual ablution performed before *Salaah*

zakaah: obligatory charity paid to the poor

Bipolar Disorder in Psychiatry and Islam



According to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), bipolar disorder (also known as manic-depressive illness) is a brain disorder that causes unusual shifts in mood, energy, activity levels, and the ability to carry out day-to-day tasks. NIMH further explains that people with bipolar disorder experience periods of unusually intense emotion, changes in sleep patterns and activity levels, and unusual behaviors. These distinct periods are called “mood episodes.” Mood episodes are drastically different from the moods and behaviors that are typical for the person. Extreme changes in energy, activity, and sleep go along with mood episodes.

A person living with bipolar who is experiencing a manic episode will exhibit one or more of the following symptoms:

- Feeling very “up,” “high,” or elated
- Having excessive of energy
- Increased activity levels and being more active than usual
- Feeling “jumpy” or “wired”
- Needing very little to no sleep for long periods of time while remaining active during this time (i.e. different from insomnia)
- Fast talking about a lot of different things (often without making sense)
- Agitation and irritability
- Racing thoughts
- Thinking they can do a lot of things at once
- Engaging in risky behavior, such as reckless sex, spending lots of money, and impetuous decision-making (which are regretted once the episode passes)
- Inability or extremely reduced ability to control any of the above behavior during the episode

A person living with bipolar who is experiencing a depressive episode will exhibit one or more of the following symptoms:

- Feeling extremely sad, down, empty, or hopeless
- Having very little to no energy
- Inability to complete daily tasks
- Extremely reduced self-care and hygiene

- Extremely decreased activity levels
- Sleeping too much or too little while feeling unmotivated to engage in normal activities
- Inability to enjoy anything, even what is normally enjoyable
- Excessive worry and stress
- Difficulty concentrating
- Excessive forgetfulness
- Eating too much or too little
- Feeling extremely tired or “slowed down”
- Thinking excessively about death
- Suicidality, suicidal thoughts, or suicide attempts
- Inability or extremely reduced ability to control any of the above behavior during the episode

Additionally, people with bipolar disorder may experience psychosis, substance abuse, and symptoms of ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder). According to the NIMH the term *psychosis* describes conditions that affect the mind, where there has been some loss of contact with reality. During a psychotic episode, a person’s thoughts and perceptions are disturbed and the individual may have difficulty understanding what is real and what is not. Symptoms of psychosis include delusions (false beliefs) and hallucinations (seeing or hearing things that others do not see or hear). Other symptoms include incoherent or nonsensical speech, and behavior that is inappropriate for the situation.

Bipolar Disorder in Islamic Jurisprudence

In Islam mental illness is a diagnosable condition that is traced back to the teachings of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Mental health is a condition of all Islamic contracts and is frequently referenced in all branches of *fiqh*. While some mental incapacitation results from the work of jinn, Islam recognizes that some mental conditions result from the chemistry and physiology of the brain. For this reason, experienced Muslim psychiatrists and scholars distinguish between mental conditions requiring *ruqyah* and those requiring medical treatment.

In *Forensic Psychiatry in Islamic Jurisprudence*, author Kutaiba S. Chaleby, who is a board certified forensic psychiatrist and member of the American Academy of Psychiatry and Law, explains the Islamic perspective of people experiencing mental illness due to the abnormal chemistry and physiology of their brains:

“Islamic law...recognizes a particular mental condition called *safa-hah*, which literally means extreme folly. It is not insanity, nor the consistent want of foresight that would indicate lower intelligence. A *safih* person behaves in an irresponsible manner, for example squandering his money, and in certain conditions, may lose his civil rights...According to some schools of Islamic law, the *safih* may also forfeit other kinds of civil rights such as holding certain kinds of job or profession” (2001, p. 21).

Chaleby further explains the Islamic perspective on insanity, a condition that is often manifested in a psychotic episode for people with bipolar disorder:

“Islamic jurisprudence classifies insanity into three types: absolute (or continuous), intermittent, and partial...

In this condition [of absolute or continuous insanity], the individual is judged to be completely and continuously unable to use his reason properly...

[Intermittent insanity is] the state in which a person can sometimes communicate at a reasonable level of conception, perception and cognition, but at other times suffers complete loss of his mental faculties, moving between full or partial remission and normal function. Such a person will be considered insane and not culpable during the active state of his mental disorder. He will be fully responsible for all his actions when he is not in that state. When in partial remission, he will be culpable for things that he is able to conceive and appreciate.

[In partial insanity], the person will have the ability to appreciate the nature of some of his actions, and understand certain circumstances. However, in other areas of life and different circumstances, he lacks the same appreciation. He is able to conceive and recognize certain matters and is aware of the reality of his environment, but is unable to perform the same functions in relation to other matters. Periods of exacerbation and a state of absolute insanity can occur at certain times. The partially insane person is legally responsible for those actions he is able to conceive and perceive as they are in reality. At the same time, he is not culpable for other areas of his life which he is unable to appreciate.” (p. 22).

Though Islamic jurisprudence may or may not refer to bipolar disorder using the same terminology that is used in American psychiatry, both American psychiatry and Islam agree on the existence of the condition, which is defined by its presenting symptoms. Furthermore, Islam recognizes that these symptoms often manifest as a result of an abnormal physiological chemical reality in the brain. Thus, neither this brain abnormality nor its presenting symptoms is necessarily related to one's character, religious commitment, or contact with jinn.

Foreword



There are many issues involved in writing a book in the voice of someone else, and these issues are compounded when the experiences are being shared through the lens of mental illness. How do you know what is real and what is not? How do you authenticate each anecdote to ensure the greatest objectivity? How do you balance truthfulness with protecting the reputation and identity of others mentioned in the accounts? These are questions often asked by both writers and readers of true stories, and they are certainly valid concerns.

In responding to inquiries of this nature, particularly in the case of a story told from the perspective of someone with mental illness, I think it is important to note that mental illness is not synonymous with complete insanity. Yes, insanity is definitely a type of mental illness. However, the image of a “crazy person” living each day with absolutely no connection to reality or without any valid recollection of events is largely stereotypical. Just as there are different types of mental illness, there are different levels of mental illness.

In a 2014 report, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) estimated that “42.5 million American adults (or 18.2 percent of the total adult population in the United States) suffer from some mental illness” (Bekiempis, 2014). These illnesses include enduring conditions such as depression, bipolar disorder, and schizophrenia. Practically speaking, what this means is that approximately one out of every five Americans suffers from some form of mental illness, and for the vast majority of these Americans, these mental illnesses do not prevent them from fulfilling daily tasks such as socializing, going to school, or working a job. In other words, these are functioning human beings whose life experiences are no less authentic than our own.

Interestingly, one of the greatest barriers that exist in removing the stigma of mental illness in our society is our inability—or refusal—to view those diagnosed with mental illness as full human beings. Their sadness and frustration, as well as their happiness and accomplishments, are no less or more valid than our own. Yes, there are definitely extenuating circumstances that must be kept in mind when addressing the specifics of particular life events of those living with mental illness. However, it is unfair to view their personal stories as inherently suspect,

as if the processing of their own feelings, needs, and emotions are any less real because of their condition. In truth, *all* personal recollections of life events are inherently subjective, as they are confined to the limited and biased perception of the one recounting them.

Ironically, for those who view themselves as mentally healthy, one of the side effects of this self-ascribed view is the blindness to (or denial of) one's own delusions. Tragically, the "mentally healthy" often mistake their emotional convictions for truthfulness and objectivity when they are often rooted in destructive human pride. In this vein, those living with mental illness arguably have more self-awareness and honesty than others, thereby making their recollections of events that much more trustworthy. At least those living with mental illness often know their limitations and thus do not assume themselves to possess complete objectivity and infallibility.

I reflect on the troubling phenomenon of self-proclaimed "objectivity" in my personal journal:

Of the most arrogant and self-deluding claims is one of complete objectivity. Only God holds the ability to see reality in its purest, truest sense, free of subjective human experience, emotion or bias. Excepting receiving direct revelation from the heavens in prophethood, no human can claim to speak and behave with flawless precision and correct action and perspectives. In fact, no prophet even claimed this.

Nevertheless, there is a positive side to humans' inherent lack of objectivity. I reflect on this positivity in my personal journal:

In truth, it is our subjective human experience that forms everything we do—on a personal, family, community and religious level—and this is what makes us beautiful and valuable in the world. We each hold a necessary human perspective that forms each part of the single ummah body and human family. And those amongst us who realize the inherent subjectivity in their most coveted convictions and perspectives come closest to understanding the limited objectivity a human can experience on earth.

Therefore, it is important that we do not confuse lack of objectivity with lack of validity. Subjectivity forms the very essence of human experience. Without our emotions and frustrations or our uncertainties and doubts, there is neither power nor authenticity to our "true stories." In fact, it is this inherent subjectivity that makes memoirs and anecdotes so much more enjoyable and relatable than rote "history" and scientific "facts." In other words, our human subjectivity gives our life stories a soul.

Even so, we must accept that subjectivity is inherently limiting and problematic where “factual accounts” are concerned. This problem is increased when these accounts include interactions with others, whose recollection of the “facts” may be significantly different from the one sharing the story. For this reason, wherever the identities of others are mentioned in this book, all names have been changed, and any personally identifying information has either been omitted or presented in as nonspecific a manner as possible.

Additionally, the focus of the book is on the personal struggles of Karen (who is known as Sakinah or “The Muslim Hippie” in her mental health advocacy work), particularly as it relates to being an American Muslim living with bipolar disorder in a newfound religious community. Thus, the details of others’ lives are largely irrelevant. The purpose of Karen sharing her story is not to cast blame but to inspire sensitivity and understanding for others living with mental illness, especially in religious communities.

As Karen herself has acknowledged on more than one occasion—and as she repeatedly emphasized to me as she recounted some of the more deeply hurtful events: No one in her religious community set out to purposefully hurt her or to make her life unbearable. Like so many communities in America, whether secular or religious, the Muslims in Karen’s community were genuinely ignorant more than they were heartless or malicious. Nevertheless, it is unfortunate that more often than not, both ignorance and maliciousness produce the same harmful result.

For this reason, Karen hopes that by sharing her story, the harms of ignorance will be lessened, especially in environments purporting to provide spiritual sanctuary to believers during their brief sojourn on earth. In this noble purpose, I pray that I have done her story justice while speaking in her voice and sharing glimpses of the heart and life of my dear friend and sister in faith.

Umm Zakīyyah

May 2017

Note to Readers



The story I'm about to tell has a lot of dark moments and a lot of pain. It's very raw and frank. It's my truth, my story of life with mental illness. It's not meant as a criticism or critique of what went wrong in my life. I share my story to illustrate how stigma, lack of information, and fear can shape thinking surrounding mental illness and mental health issues. And I share it in the hopes that others who struggle like me are encouraged to seek help for their issues and begin to live a full life in spite of their challenges.

Maybe if I had known someone like me when I had first gotten sick, I would have made better choices and learned how to manage my illness sooner. I pray that my message helps others live well with the test of mental illness.

Ameen.

Sakinah "The Muslim Hippie"

June 2017

For those struggling to figure it all out on their own. I hope this helps, even if only a little bit.

“I have had many concerns about writing a book that so explicitly describes my own attacks of mania, depression, and psychosis, as well as my problems acknowledging the need for ongoing medication...I have no idea what the long-term effects of discussing such issues so openly will be on my personal and professional life, but, whatever the consequences, they are bound to be better than continuing to be silent.”

—Kay Redfield Jamison, *An Unquiet Mind: A Memoir of Moods and Madness*

*The following is a glimpse into the life of “The Muslim Hippie”
as shared with Umm Zakiyyah*

PART I

Becoming Muslim, Denying the Self

“I have felt at times that I didn’t have the right to even exist. Almost everything I was taught about being a ‘good Muslim’ meant living in denial of myself.”

—from the journal of Umm Zakiyyah

1

The Human Side of Islam



What is the human side of Islam? To me, it is taking into account the whole human being. It is putting Islam in the context of human struggle while not discounting the soul. And it is presenting the *deen* as its true self.

It is empathy over sympathy, compassion over cruelty, and patience over frustration.

It is treating every soul as flawed and in desperate need of Allah's mercy. And it is never giving up.

It is not the expectation of perfection, but the embracing of one's humanity—that state where perpetual imperfection knows its Lord. And it is meeting every person where he or she is, not where we expect them to be.

It is not about always being right. It is about remaining on the right path, that spiritual road where you always have permission to get back up after you fall. Over and over again.

It is encouraging, not shaming.

It is understanding, not blaming.

It is reminding, not condemning.

But more than anything, it is the life path treaded by the broken, the weak, and the needy—those souls who are ever mindful that the dirt from which they were created is part of them still. And it is knowing that spiritual purification is a continuous action, not a static state.

But no one taught me this. I had to learn it on my own. I would be lying if I said that there aren't parts of me that are still angry. It is frustrating to look back and realize that the Muslim community I was part of after converting to Islam put so much pressure on me to deny my humanity and fit into their narrow version of the faith. I cannot fathom why they were so repulsed by the small glimpse of Karen the human being, when she was the same human being in whom Allah saw so much good that He guided her to Islam.

I cannot understand why they punished me so severely for not living up to the standards of the saintly "Sakinah" they'd constructed in their minds. Why did they hate me so much for not playing the lead role in the

religious fantasy they created of me? Why did they resent me for not living up to that fantasy I played no voluntary part in creating? And why was I accused of betraying *them* when they stabbed *me* in the back when I needed them most?

Why am I still Muslim? Why do I even bother? These are questions that have haunted me in my weakest moments. The unrelenting cruelty, the constant backbiting, and the public spreading of my faults—by my very own Muslim brothers and sisters in faith—have created deep emotional wounds that I don't even know how to reach, let alone heal. And to think that their mistreatment of me was at its worst when I needed their patience and compassion the most—during a bipolar episode—enflames within me a rage that I can only ask Allah's help in quelling.

But in my heart, I know I remain Muslim because Allah is my Lord, not the people. Even as I have to protect my Islam—and my mental health—by staying away from most Muslims. Particularly the ones I was tested with being around after I became Muslim.

Besides, I didn't choose Islam. Allah decided that He wanted me to be Muslim. I wasn't looking for Islam. So no one's going to kick me out except Allah. When Allah is done with me, He will be done. And that's the end of it.

But I hope He's never done with me, even when I feel like giving up on myself.

2

Finding Direction



When I was in college, I didn't have a direction. I was struggling.

I remember sitting on my bed in my University of Maryland dormitory room and saying to myself, *God must be preparing me for something special*. And these words I got from a close friend who was Catholic, who had said to me some time earlier, "You know, when you're struggling in life, God is preparing you for something special."

Throughout high school and college, I would often seek comfort in the company of friends and partying. There, amidst laughter and bonding with fellow academics, alcohol became a constant companion for me. Having a few drinks (or more) allowed me to escape my problems and drift into a space of no worries, even if it didn't offer complete peace. But being in the company of others made it that much easier to escape the isolating solitude of my own company.

But that year, in 1996, I was in my third year of college, and I had lost all my friends. On top of that, I was facing so many trials that I didn't understand. I was feeling so confused and alone and had no idea why all these problems were happening to me. At the time, I didn't know that I was bipolar and living through the depressive side of the illness. So on top of everything else I was going through, I was spiraling deep into the dark feelings of emotional confusion and social abandonment. I was even fighting thoughts of suicide.

It was my younger sister who suggested I join a local gym. I was an accomplished swimmer who had worked on and off as a lifeguard, so being physically active wasn't a completely novel idea for me. However, my sister felt that now was a good time to have a regular workout schedule through the formality of a gym membership. I liked the idea and agreed to join a small gym in Silver Spring, Maryland, where she herself was a member. I had no idea that this seemingly simple decision would change the course of my spiritual life forever.

While at the gym, I met an African-American fitness trainer who utilized the gym for his off-duty workouts, and we cliqued immediately. During the course of our conversations, I noticed that there was something distinctly different about him that I couldn't quite put my

finger on. He was different from any other man I'd met, and I wanted to know what it was.

"I'm Muslim," Karim told me one day when I'd asked about it. At the time, I didn't know much about Muslims or Islam. But I knew that this was indeed what made him so different from others.

We eventually started dating, and during our time together, Karim spent a lot of time talking about Islam. I didn't want to hear about his religion, but he wouldn't leave the topic alone no matter how much it annoyed me. It was obvious that he was trying to convert me, and I made it clear that I wasn't interested. But Karim didn't seem to care. It got to the point where I felt suffocated by his complete disregard for my feelings during the discussions. Why wouldn't he just let it go? I didn't want to be Muslim, and I certainly didn't appreciate him pushing his religion down my throat.

Even when I was a child, I didn't like being told what to do. I was a real spitfire. If someone came at me saying what I *had to* do, I'd respond indignantly saying what I *wouldn't* do. I didn't like adhering to other people's *do's* and *don'ts*, and I certainly wasn't about to accept it from the man I was dating.

Karim's tactics became so overbearing that I was convinced that he was crossing lines that his religion didn't condone. I was determined to call him on it, so I got a copy of the Qur'an. When I opened up the Muslim holy book for the first time, it was with the intention of proving that he shouldn't be talking so harshly to me. I was determined to find any quote that I could use against him the next time we talked. I was sure I could find at least one passage that would say his approach was wrong.

But as I read the Qur'an, my furor was slowly abated, and I found my heart deeply moved by the words. A calm settled over me, and I forgot the reason I'd opened the Qur'an in the first place. I kept reading and reading, and I found myself profoundly connected to the Book. From that moment on, I knew I had to learn more about Islam. But I was determined to do it on my own.

However, I did tell Karim about my interest in learning more about Islam because I wanted to know where I could learn more independently. He took me to a masjid in Washington, D.C., where I saw *Salaah*, the formal Muslim prayer, being performed for the first time. I was deeply moved and felt a connection to the Muslims there. It was through memorizing and practicing those prayer movements that I began teaching myself how to pray.

Shortly thereafter, I found a local masjid near the university and visited it whenever I could. However, I wouldn't interact with anyone while I was there. I would look at the posters and information pamphlets

posted in the halls, and whenever someone would walk up to me and ask if I needed help, I'd rush away saying "No thank you."

When I was alone, I read everything I could about praying properly, and I tried to imitate what I had seen at the D.C. masjid. But I didn't tell Karim that I was trying to learn the *Salaah*. I didn't want anyone's help. I needed this to be about me and me alone. I feared that interacting with Muslims during this early stage of learning would derail me somehow. I don't know if that was a correct assumption, but I was convinced of it nonetheless. I wanted this to be about only me and my Lord.

Despite my practice of the Muslim prayer and my continuous study of the Islamic faith, I didn't officially accept Islam, at least not yet. I continued my studies of the religion until the end of summer. It was during this time, on the day that my roommate and I shared a birthday, that I received the call that my grandfather had died. "This is a sign," my roommate told me as we reflected on the sad news. "You need to become Muslim."

Cheryl herself was Catholic, but she believed that God decreeing that my grandfather would pass away on the exact date of our shared birthday was His way of telling me I shouldn't delay my *shahaadah* any longer. I needed to convert to Islam right away. Personally, I knew deep inside that if I were to pass away without having accepted Islam, I would have no excuse in front of God. I had been asking God for guidance and deliverance from my problems, and I knew it was no coincidence that He had brought me to this point, where Islam was in front of me. The necessity of becoming Muslim weighed on my heart until I went to a masjid in Virginia that Friday and pronounced the *shahaadah*, the testimony of faith announcing my official entry into the religion of Islam.

I never saw Karim after that, but this did not disturb me. By then I knew that my meeting the Muslim fitness trainer was God's way of guiding me to Islam. Now that I was Muslim, the chapter in my life that included Karim was complete.

Days after becoming Muslim, I attended the wedding of a close family friend. Though I had been praying *Salaah* regularly in the privacy of my dorm room, no one other than my roommate knew that I had accepted Islam. I hadn't yet begun to wear hijab, so to my family and friends, I was the same Karen they had always known.

While at the wedding, some of the guests were whispering negatively about one of my cousins who wasn't present. "Did you hear about Shonda?" they were saying, disapproval in their tone. "She's Muslim now."

From the hushed conversations about Shonda, I knew that the news of my own conversion to Islam wouldn't be taken positively. But I was

undeterred. I knew that becoming Muslim was the right choice for me. Days later, I told my family that I had accepted Islam.

3

Family and Religion



I was raised in a Christian home. Before my father met my mother, he spent time in a monastery. Nearly everyone in my family was connected to religion in some way. My mother was Southern Methodist, my father was Catholic, and my mother's father was a Methodist minister.

Growing up, I would listen to my grandfather's fiery sermons and marvel at how spirituality seemed to exude from him. I wanted to have passion for God like that. But beyond believing that He existed, I didn't feel connected to God in any significant way. I had a relatively religious upbringing, so I knew that we were supposed to pray to God for whatever we wanted or needed. However, the spiritual connection that I imagined my grandfather had with God, I didn't feel it within myself.

My mother got her spirituality from her father, and they were both pretty dedicated Christians. But I never believed in the Trinity. Fortunately, my parents didn't push their understanding of religion on me. What they believed about Jesus being God, the son, and the Holy Spirit just never made any sense to me. I'd always thought of God and Jesus as separate, and I couldn't understand how Jesus could be God's "son." So I just didn't believe it. But I don't think I was fully cognizant of my lack of belief in these concepts until I was in the church's Confirmation class, which was supposed to prepare me and the other Christian youth to formally dedicate our lives to Christ.

From childhood, I understood the concepts of right, wrong, and human sin, but in a simplistic way. You were supposed to do what was right and stay away from wrong. What I understood from this was that humans should try their best to stay away from anything that would displease God. But if you slipped up, being "saved" by Jesus acted somewhat like a buffer between you and God's displeasure. As a child, I understood the need to please God, but I didn't fully understand how Jesus could save me.

When I was in high school, I identified as a Methodist Christian because that's how my family described themselves. We went to a United Methodist church even though my father was Catholic. Because he went to church with us, I never learned much about Catholicism.

Though I wouldn't formally learn about Islam until college, my first introduction to Islam was through two classmates when I was sixteen. They went to a masjid in Silver Spring, and whenever they prayed, I remember being unable to understand anything they were saying. In retrospect, I feel like God was using them to introduce me to the idea of Islam before I formally studied the religion years later.

When I was in high school, I remember casually asking my Muslim friends about Islam and how it was different from Christianity and the Nation of Islam. They would answer my questions, but I didn't fully understand their explanations. I imagine that my lack of understanding had more to do with my lack of interest than their lack of clarity. I wasn't really interested in learning about their religion, but my questions gave us something to talk about. At the time, I considered myself Christian, and the idea of converting to another religion never occurred to me.

I do recall that one of my Muslim friends wanted me to become Muslim though. One day she told me about a young African-American woman at her masjid who had converted to Islam. My friend herself, like my other Muslim friend, was not indigenous American, so I suppose she imagined that connecting me with a fellow African-American would make me feel more inclined to convert. My friend suggested that I talk to the African-American convert about Islam, but I declined the offer and made sure to avoid the subject of religion from thereon. I didn't like the idea of anyone making suggestions about how I should live my life. Despite my own personal disconnect from Christian spirituality, in my mind, I was fine as a Christian.

But I wasn't fine. I wouldn't say my unrest was due to any spiritual turmoil though. I was drowning in sadness. Despite my generally lively, carefree exterior, the melancholy would hit me in waves. Sometimes I was so overcome with exhaustion that I would sleep for hours and hours, utterly incapable of doing much else. While my friends were out partying, socializing and enjoying themselves, I would be climbing into bed at seven o'clock in the evening and sleeping until it was time for school or church the next morning.

I suppose this dark feeling is what I'd imagined my grandfather's deep spirituality would save me from. But eventually the melancholic feeling would pass, and I would be back to the lively, bubbly Karen that my friends and family loved. When I was feeling happy, I was extremely energetic and personable, so I would go out with my friends and cousins and have a good time. But I did a lot of social drinking during these occasions, so much so that drinking became a habit for me.

At the time, I didn't think of my drinking as a problem because I wasn't hanging out with a "bad crowd." The parties and social events I

attended were with fellow academics and accomplished athletes like myself, and I was generally with friends and families that my parents trusted and approved of. Though underage drinking was technically illegal, it was an accepted culture amongst American youth, though I can't say my parents would have approved if had they known.

My parents didn't tell me much about right and wrong during my youth, but I learned a lot by watching them. They talked to me about life and the things they'd learned, and these lessons stayed with me through adulthood. However, I sometimes wonder if I wouldn't have become such a habitual drinker had I been taught that drinking alcohol was wrong. I wonder the same about a lot of the questionable things that I was exposed to during that time.

Despite my personal struggles, I found tremendous enjoyment in sports. Both my sister and I loved sports, and our parents supported our athletic activities. I was on a swim team from age five to eighteen, and my mother was definitely a "swim mom." She was a referee and representative for the team for most of my swimming career. My father was also a referee at my meets. I often thought of us as a swim-team family.

Looking back, I would say I had a relatively normal American childhood and youth. For all appearances, my parents were a happy couple, and they made sure that my sister and I were happy too. We went to church every Sunday, and I sang in the choir. We visited all our grandparents regularly and went on family vacations whenever we could. When we took family vacations, it was usually at a resort near water. Deep Creek Lake, Ocean City, Rehobeth Beach. These are the memories of my vacations during childhood and youth, and I recall these trips as very relaxing and enjoyable.

4

What's Wrong With Me?



The first time I saw a mental health professional was when I was in college. The waves of sadness would hit me in ways I had difficulty coping with now that I no longer lived at home. In high school, my family's busy schedule and socializing had distracted me somewhat from the depths of what I was feeling inside.

When I lived at home, there was always someone dropping by, someone we needed to visit, and somewhere we had to go. My aunts and their children were constantly at our house, and we were constantly at theirs. Even for family day trips, my aunts were usually there. I was around my cousins so much that they became like siblings to me. On Saturday nights, we would go out to dinner, and almost any day of the week, we would have sleepovers.

The laughter is what I remember most about that time. My family laughed together all the time. My dad was hilarious, and my mom had a great sense of humor too. We really loved to laugh. Even when I was sad, there was always laughter.

So what happened to me? Why did I get sick? When I think back on these fun times with family, it's really difficult to accept that I have a mental illness. I know now that my illness is genetic and that many in my family are living with a mental health issue. But bipolar disorder is difficult to wrap my mind around.

When I was in middle and high school, I was popular and had loads of friends, and I'm still in touch with many of them on social media. Sometimes when I'm chatting with them or scrolling through my feed, I wonder, *Why me? Why am I the one who got sick?*

But I'd quickly stop myself and remind myself that this is a test from God. There doesn't have to be a discernable reason for what is happening. It is what it is. In any case, God is in charge of everything, and knowing this helps get me through.

When I was in college and made an appointment with a mental health professional for the first time, I didn't know that I had bipolar disorder. All I knew was that my sadness was becoming increasingly unbearable and I was having difficulty managing it alone. I'd imagined

that I might be depressed, but even that possibility didn't make sense to me. Everything in my life was going well. I came from a good family. I was an excellent student. So what was wrong with me?

I told the psychiatrist about my symptoms, and he diagnosed me with depression and prescribed Prozac for me. He also suggested that I join a gym and get on a vitamin regimen because he said it would help the medication be more effective. He also sent me to a therapist who he felt could better help me through my depression. I left his office having no idea that this was not something that I would eventually "get through."

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About the Author

Umm Zakiyyah is the bestselling author of the *If I Should Speak* trilogy, *Muslim Girl*, *His Other Wife*, and the self-help books *The Abuse of Forgiveness* and *Reverencing the Wombs That Broke You*, written for religious survivors of family abuse. Her novel *His Other Wife* is now a short film.

She writes about the interfaith struggles of Muslims and Christians and the intercultural, spiritual, and moral struggles of Muslims in America. Her work has earned praise from writers, professors, and filmmakers and has been translated into multiple languages.

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