

THERE, BUT FOR THE GRACE OF GOD, GO I...

Ann Hall

ANN HALL SHARES HER STORY OF HOW POST-NATAL PSYCHOSIS TAUGHT HER EMPATHY AND ACCEPTANCE AND TURNED OUT TO BE HER BEST QUALIFICATION FOR BECOMING A MINISTER.

Part of my candidating process for presbyteral ministry involved a meeting with a District Assessor exploring my psychological profile, childhood and life experiences, self-identity and sexuality. As a baby boomer coming of age in the swinging sixties, my story provided 'rich pickings'! At the end of two hours, he asked me, 'is there anything else you would like to share?' His face was a picture when I replied: 'Yes - I was sectioned in a Psychiatric Unit with post-natal psychosis after the birth of my first child!' He was clearly not expecting this kind of admission and he asked why I felt I needed to tell him. I replied that I knew this was in my medical records and had no wish to hide it. Above all, I said it is my most important qualification for ministry, for through this I learned so much about God's grace and humility and grew in empathy and acceptance of vulnerable people. I truly learned that 'there but for the grace of God go I'. I thought I knew this beforehand, but I did not.

At the time I was a real 'Yuppie', highly qualified academically and fulfilled in a well-paid prestigious career as a Management Consultant, whilst pursuing a PhD researching the Self-

concept and its impact on handling poor performance and conflict in industry. I had married at thirty-five and inherited a share in Tim's two children from his first marriage. We were on fire for God and involved in a vibrant church and charismatic renewal movements. We had witnessed God do amazing stuff and our lives had been transformed. Tim had a senior management role whilst studying as a Local Preacher and for an MBSc at Manchester Business School. Having our baby was the icing on the cake, or so we dreamed!

MY JOURNEY TO THE ROCK AT THE BOTTOM

None of that qualified me for an incredibly complex birth after which I became sleep-deprived and delusional. Nothing in life had qualified me for being put in a straight-jacket, having three men sit on me and pump me with tranquilisers. Faithful attendance at antenatal classes didn't prepare me for waking up the following day to see my two-week old son being bottle fed by a stranger whilst my breasts were swollen and sore from having tried to learn to feed. My MSc in Psychology didn't qualify me for being powerless, dehumanised and being obliged to queue for medicines and food with disturbed patients.

I had felt so exhilarated and close to God when I was manic, now he felt absent and I felt despair. I never felt, 'why me?' - I could see the pain in those around me. No one deserves to suffer. I did however ask,

'why?' Why does God allow such suffering in body, mind and spirit? How can you trust hearing God's voice again when you have been delusional - what's real?

There were of course some funny moments! My Mum said to Tim: there isn't any madness in our side of the family (ie. it was his fault!). It is amazing how few people came to visit me and some people gave me a wide berth and treated me suspiciously subsequently, as if mental illness were catching. Oh and of course there were some who felt I needed deliverance ministry or had clearly not forgiven someone from my past... Argh!

I thank God that I was only hospitalised a short time, as I have since ministered to many women who have never recovered from this dreadful experience; some have had ECT, spent months in hospital and need inner healing for the disappointment and broken dreams. The horrible memories, guilt, anger and hurt have destroyed their family as well as them.

I thank God for the tender, unconditional healing love of my precious husband and the Christian community at Knutsford Methodist Church and their practical and pastoral support. However, for a few months, God felt very far away; I really questioned my faith and that was the most isolating and scariest part of all. I knelt down one cold morning and said, 'Lord I do believe, help thou my unbelief'. Then I noticed the snowdrops in our garden and slowly and imperceptibly

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faith, hope and courage were restored. I thank God I had two more babies and was perfectly sound in mind and have been well for the thirty-four years since, even in the sheer pain of grief when Tim died suddenly in South Africa in 2015. I thank God that Jesus walked through the desert of mental illness with me and carried me when I couldn't walk. When I hit rock bottom, I encountered THE ROCK at the bottom!

MY JOURNEY ALONGSIDE OTHERS

Over the years I have come alongside so many people whose lives are chaotic and are dis-eased by mental health problems. So many people suffer from anxiety and depression and have unresolved issues. Even when they are born again and get a new heart and a new spirit, they are still dogged by that battle for the mind of which Paul speaks in Romans 12. Sometimes being filled with the Holy Spirit means immediate freedom from these oppressions, but for most it is a continuous process of daily choosing to trust that God hasn't given us a spirit of fear but of a sound mind, of love and of self-control (2 Timothy 1:7).

Now I am a supernumerary minister and a widow (that's a qualification I would prefer not to have). I have facilitated NHS Loss and Bereavement Courses and I run a weekly mindfulness group in an acute psychiatric inpatient unit. I listen and pray and share Holy Communion. Sometimes I just sit silently with a suicidal person and maybe massage healing oil into arms and wrists covered with a tapestry of self-harm scars. It is not my earthly qualifications which equip me for this, it is that God has broken my heart for what breaks his and gifted me to see even the most unlovable with the Father's eyes. It is incarnational ministry, humbling and challenging. To be equipped, I need my own stillness to be a channel of Jesus' peace which defies human understanding in a volatile context.

I have a real concern about the increased frequency with which young adults are diagnosed with Borderline Personality Disorder these days. I am certain that this stems from two generations of children, growing up without healthy boundaries, without faith or moral compass. Many lack a sense of responsibility for their choices or behaviour and feel powerless victims of a system which they see as malevolent. Conspiracy theories seem more plausible than the truth. To most, the name of Jesus is just an expletive, they have never heard of his love or encountered his presence.

Jesus said 'I am the Truth, the Way and the Life' and he came to bind up the broken hearted and set the captives free.

This morning I baptised a one-day old baby in a Neonatal Unit. She looks perfect but suffered lack of oxygen for eight minutes in a traumatic birth. Just now her survival is uncertain and her future bleak. I pray that her Mum will recover from this traumatic birth and not suffer post-natal illness. I pray that God will work in and through the skill of the neonatal team and the miracle of modern medicine. I believe he can and does work miracles but it won't be my lack of faith or of the family if it doesn't happen. As I anointed her with oil and prayed for her and her young parents whose dreams have been shattered, I am yet again confronted with the question of why does God allow suffering? I cannot answer why, only trust this precious family into God's hands. I cannot and never will say that 'everything happens for a reason' because some things are not reasonable! Nor will I ever say that this is God's will, because saying that God is sovereign or 'in control' doesn't mean that he wants a baby to have a traumatic birth or an innocent child to be abused or a young mum to have breast cancer or a brilliant teenager to develop



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schizophrenia at university or a bomb to go off in Manchester - what kind of model of God is that!

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I thank God that Jesus walked through the desert of mental illness with me and carried me when I couldn't walk. When I hit rock bottom, I encountered the rock at the bottom!

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For me, Jesus is there sharing the suffering and mental torment; Jesus has not promised us we will not suffer and he holds and heals our broken hearts and ravaged minds. In the midst of the pain he can and does bring good things into our lives and we are enabled to grow in grace and faith and in the understanding and knowledge of the love of God. Then we too can become better qualified and equipped to fulfil our calling as wounded healers in our world of need:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.

2 Corinthians 1:3

Please pray for your local mental health unit and the staff, patients and their families and friends and for hospital chaplains.

The Revd Ann Hall is a Supernumerary Minister in the Southport Circuit and is still very active as a preacher. Ann is a Bank Chaplain at an NHS Trust and a voluntary member of the Chaplaincy Team at a Mental Health Trust. Ann serves as a Spiritual Director with the Liverpool Anglican Diocese. Her late husband Tim was Superintendent of the Southport Circuit. Their lives changed dramatically when they became committed Christians together through Marriage Preparation at Knutsford Methodist Church in 1982. They have five children and two grandchildren. Ann is a keen photographer and loves to dance!



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