

“This book is many things: a harrowingly frank, first-hand account of surviving debilitating mental illness; a thoughtful and complex effort to integrate and synthesize the languages of theology and psychiatry; an artful attempt to offer sympathy and spiritual sustenance to fellow sufferers. But it is, more than anything else, a hymn of love and longing for Jesus, the living Lord who will not break a bruised reed or snuff out a dimly burning wick.”

Wesley Hill,

associate professor of New Testament,
Western Theological Seminary, Holland, MI

“Our lives are not tidy nor are our personal stories always a cheery ‘upward and onward’ narrative. Instead, we often face deep valleys with frightening darkness and endless unknowns. John A. Bryant’s book is not ‘tidy’ either, but because of his experience with and honesty about mental illness and trauma, we can learn from him; more importantly, because he points us to Christ crucified, we have more than a story, we have hope.”

Kelly M. Kopic,

author of *You’re Only Human* and *Embodied Hope*

“Theology is often merely academic, done for its own sake in the hallowed halls of sacred academies. And struggles with mental illness are often kept hidden from the public, endured by the one suffering from it and shared only with family, friends and therapists. John Bryant has chosen to be both fully transparent about his struggles with mental illness and also address the challenges theologically in a way that is utterly transparent, in the open for all to see and with a sensitivity that will encourage all who read *A Quiet Mind to Suffer With*. This book will make you weep, enlarge your empathy, and, Lord willing, instill a compassion in you for the mentally ill. Please do not merely read this text but understand it as an invitation into the wounds of Christ that gives meaning to all suffering.”

Greg Peters,

Biola University and Nashotah House Theological Seminary;
author of *Monkhood of All Believers*

“This is a stunning book, so rare and so beautiful. I cannot recommend it highly enough. John Bryant does two things that are very hard to do at the same time. He represents the raw agony and disorientation of healing from OCD. And he puts this struggle within a hopeful theological frame. I cried a lot during this book. It will encourage those who suffer and help others to understand the struggle. The book is honest, vulnerable, gripping, and hopeful at the same time. Read this book.”

Matthew A. LaPine,

director of Christian education at Citylight Church in Omaha, NE;
author of *The Logic of the Body*

“It is perhaps one of the great ironies of our therapeutic age that our dependence upon said therapy from time to time does not free us but binds us all the more to our problems. With his Christocentric focus, John Bryant offers a much-needed corrective to our profound difficulties. Perhaps most importantly, he offers hope when our deepest problems are not ‘fixed’ and a reminder of our Lord’s promise that his grace is sufficient for us all (2 Corinthians 12:9).”

Philip Jamieson,

author of *The Face of Forgiveness:
A Pastoral Theology of Shame and Redemption*

“In these days when we are seeking thrills and ‘image is everything,’ John goes to a place where few dare to tread, into his, and our, soul. Setting aside the distractions of this world, John examines the reality of human suffering as he has experienced it. In so doing, the sand of his discomfort has produced a beautiful pearl in the form of his book. In truth, we all suffer from mental trauma to one degree or another. John’s book helps us to examine those traumas and find healing. Perhaps an irony of John’s inner analysis is that his contemplative nature makes him an excellent social activist. He understands people where they live, below the surface, behind the image. Church Army USA is blessed to have him working for us as he serves Christ and loves hurting people.”

Greg Miller,

executive director, Church Army USA

“John is an artist who builds for the reader an interior world with its own cast of characters and a logic all its own. He takes readers on a poetic journey through mental suffering, and he holds his experience up to the light, turning it over and over, so we get a glimpse of it from every angle, observing how the divine and mundane interact. We come away knowing that the divine is what’s

real after all. And while this story is deeply personal and utterly unique, he gives the reader enough so that they can say, ‘Me too,’ even as it inspires in the reader a compassion for someone struggling with darker demons. No matter what, the practice is the same: Christ, have mercy. It must all be an offering.”

Pamela Rossi-Keen, PhD, PMP,
executive director, The Genesis Collective

“In *A Quiet Mind to Suffer With*, John Bryant shows us his full self, and in turn we see our own reflections as ‘wounded selfish people ... uninterpretable to others and a deep mystery to ourselves.’ Like Bryant, we long to learn ‘to become a patient, quiet man who is headed somewhere.’ In our contemporary world, this longing can prove quite difficult, and perhaps can only be achieved—for some of us—through painful struggle. This book offers a way to find our own peculiar stance in this world, our own solid ground on which to stand, and ultimately, it offers us a quiet place of our own.”

Glenn Taylor,
author of *The Marrowbone Marble Company*

“John Bryant’s life is a powerful and fitting testament to the intricacy and fraught nature of our individual and shared humanity. He enters the chasm of mental illness with courage and remains there so that we all may experience the natural ways of healing once we journey together into vulnerability. I’m struck by the notion that whatever our ego speaks, we must not be afraid in the end to eat our own humiliation and prepare for what the divine mysteries of God may have waiting. There is a vessel of light in the abyss. We rise as if on angels’ wings, returning to greater human touch, love, and existence as we find ourselves, as John did, ‘welcomed back into the tenderness and frailty’ of life, ‘in awe’ not only because of the fear we’ve encountered but also due to a new vision of ‘thanksgiving and grace.’”

Shann Ray,
author of *American Masculine*, *American Copper*, *Atomic Theory 432*,
Balefire, *Sweetclover*, and *Forgiveness and Power in the Age of Atrocity*

“John has crafted a powerful, personal, and poignant account of intimacy with the real Jesus: a trusted friend who walks with weary transgressors through banal, bleak, and sorrowful landscapes. His writing offers a simple and steady life of worship as a spiritual balm for those with wounded minds.”

Jake Rozmus,
singer/songwriter in Burgettstown, PA

“Few things catalyze tears to fall freely from my eyes, but this book did that very thing. If you’ve wondered how dark, seemingly irredeemable pain can fit in Christ’s plan for your life, this book is for you. We all want to know what ‘getting better’ looks like, and John prayerfully gives a faithful answer to that question. I can attest that the framework being presented in this book is not just an esoteric brain exercise—John really depends on Christ, and that encourages me to become a little more needy also.”

Andrew Tyson,
singer/songwriter in Nashville, TN;
frontman of pop-punk band Real Face

“In these pages we meet a writer, a comedian, a victim of mental illness, a great sufferer, and, above all, one who has known the astounding mercy of Christ. John takes us through the doors of trauma and tragedy straight into the heart of this mercy, down to its bottomless depths. His story, so important for the church to hear, reminds us who Christ is: God with us, even in hell. And even in hell, our hope.”

Deanna Briody,
poet, writer, and postulant for Holy Orders in the Episcopal Church

“*A Quiet Mind to Suffer With* is nothing less than a deeply personal and relevant vindication of the gospel’s undying power to reach into our anxious and distracted age, to slow us down and show us mercy, and to so shepherd our memories that we might, all of us, begin to feel the warmth of hope once more.”

Clint Wilson,
community and care pastor of City Church Houston, Houston, TX

“Until Christ comes again, the Christian lives in the strange country between the inauguration of the kingdom of God and its perfect fulfillment. John’s memoir plots a course through this foreign landscape—complete with a strange, insightful new language—that provides resources for those brutal moments in which God chooses not to heal us in the way we would like, in order that He might make us whole by different means. John struggles with a mental illness, but his story offers hope to those struggling with doubt, with pain, and with Jesus in it all. It offers hope to me.”

Drew Miller,
assistant rector of St. John’s Church, Florence, SC

“*A Quiet Mind to Suffer With* is a theological exploration of what mental illness feels like from the inside. Written with the irreverent candor of Francis Spufford and the pastoral sensitivity of Henri Nouwen, it’s for those who don’t make sense to themselves and for those trying to walk alongside them. John is, by no means, alone in his experience, but I do believe he is alone in his ability to tell us about it. You will want to read it in one sitting and give it away to someone else.”

Austin Gohn,
author of *A Restless Age*;
lead pastor of Bellevue Christian Church, Bellevue, PA

“While I don’t have OCD, I do have a brain that is always struggling with figuring out, knowing for sure, defending myself, and trying to make things right. John Bryant’s *A Quiet Mind to Suffer With* is a gift to those, like me, that can’t turn off their thoughts and need a Word for the present time of suffering. What I love about John is that he has the credibility to proclaim the good news in the darkest of places and grace in the most mundane of habits. I am looking forward to sharing this with many of my parishioners, friends, and family that pray for a quiet mind.”

Luke Deman,
rector of St. Timothy’s Anglican Church, Summerville, SC

“This book is oxygen for those desperate for air. John’s ability to share his own pain and trauma in a way that reveals the Savior who bears our trauma is a much-needed witness for Christians who suffer in silence.”

Caleb Musselman,
pastor of Soma Church, Beaver Falls, PA

“Part essay, part sermon, part narrative poem, this book ministers to the clinically anxious. Bryant’s message is grounded in the Gospel and honed through daily practice of what he preaches.”

Austin Freeman,
author of *Tolkien Dogmatics:
Theology through Mythology with the Maker of Middle-Earth*

A QUIET MIND
TO SUFFER
WITH

*Mental Illness, Trauma,
and the Death of Christ*

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JOHN ANDREW BRYANT





A Quiet Mind to Suffer With: Mental Illness, Trauma, and the Death of Christ

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GLOSSARY OF TERMS

THE SIREN: the word for a mental illness, specifically obsessive-compulsive disorder. Also referred to as My Affliction, What's Wrong, the Bully, the Accuser, and What Should Happen. A word for the mind's painful, powerful intimidation.

THE REALM OF CEASELESS COGNITION: a term for excessive rumination, the network of compulsions that serve as a way to deal with the Siren. The four primary ones: figuring out, knowing for sure, defending myself, making things right. Also known as the Haunted House.

THE HARDNESS OF THE HEART: a term for my addiction to my dependence on myself. Also referred to as Sin and Life as I Would Have It and What I'll Do to Be Okay. A blindness we cannot seem to get rid of.

A BODY THAT EXPECTS THE WORLD TO END: another term for trauma. Also referred to as What Could Happen, the way the Past lives in the body. A word for the body's cringing, crying anticipation.

THE HOWLING BOY: a term for the soul's anguish, despair, and unbearable dissatisfaction. The Howling Boy is the soul that has suffered History and Affliction, OCD and trauma.

PATIENT, QUIET UNDERSTANDING: a term for humility, and the trust I have in Christ.

THE WILDERNESS OF HISTORY AND AFFLICTION: a term for the present time of Suffering. The world we live in. A world where anything can be seen, felt, done, or taken. Also known as What's Wrong and What Happened.

THE WORD: the gospel, the news that Christ has died and Christ has risen and Christ will come again, the forgiveness of sin.

THE RHYTHM: a simple life of hearing, prayer, and offering, where our trust is rescued, led, and fulfilled. Also known as an Ordinary Life of Regular Worship. The relationship everyday life has to Christ's death, resurrection, and return.

THE STRANGERS: the word for what body, mind, and soul become to us when we suffer. Also referred to as the John Who Feels This Way.

A PRAYER IN THE WILDERNESS OF A MENTAL ILLNESS

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Out of the deep have I called unto you, O LORD; *

Lord, hear my voice.

O let your ears consider well *

the voice of my supplications.

If you, LORD, were to mark what is done amiss, *

O Lord, who could abide it?

For there is mercy with you; *

therefore you shall be feared.

I wait for the LORD; my soul waits for him; *

in his word is my trust.

My soul waits for the Lord, *

more than watchmen for the morning,

more than watchmen for the morning.

O Israel, trust in the LORD, for with the LORD there is mercy, *

and with him is plenteous redemption;

And he shall redeem Israel *

from all their sins.

Psalm 130

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit; *
as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be,
world without end. Amen.

Lord, have mercy on us.

Christ, have mercy on us.

Lord, have mercy on us.

Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come.

Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our trespasses,

as we forgive those who trespass against us.

And lead us not into temptation,

but deliver us from evil.

Matthew 6:9-13

For thine is the kingdom and the glory and the power
forever and ever.

Amen.

FOREWORD

Kathryn Greene-McCreight

PEOPLE AFFLICTED WITH MENTAL ILLNESSES may experience the same symptoms but manage them differently. This is because, while symptoms are outwardly expressed, they are also inwardly experienced. The signs and symptoms themselves are identifiable: my son will not get out of bed; my daughter hears voices that others do not hear; my minister has fits of rage for no apparent reason. These symptoms are organized into discrete diagnoses of diseases, each appearing as a code in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* for insurance and medication purposes. But each person responds to symptoms and manages them in their own unique ways.

How we experience these symptoms inwardly also differs from person to person. Her symptoms cause her feelings of shame or self-hatred; his symptoms cause him anger and guilt; for another all of these are present at once, or not at all. How we react to these various feelings and experiences forms yet another layer of complication. One person cannot bear to be perceived as sick, so they expend a lot of energy trying to seem fine; another feels her church

must not know she is ill and retreats into silent absence. One person tries to shelter others from themselves; another wants to blame others.

Muddying matters further is the question of how other people (family and friends and colleagues) react to the individual's affliction. Does her sense of shame at her own symptoms appear to her family as a rejection of them? How do they react to this? Does his raging cause his parishioners to blame themselves? How do they take on this anger in their own interactions with him? Supporting others in times of mental affliction requires acknowledging all of these layers.

If we take seriously these complex layers of mental illness, mental health is how we live our lives oriented toward the good. John Bryant points to this. The problem is not so much the thoughts and the feelings created by his disease, but how he tries to manage them, what he does with them. He learns to offer up these thoughts and feelings to Christ and to depend on His Mercy—rather than himself—to be enough to sustain and lead him.

John confronts his reader with important questions: “But who is Christ? And who am I? Where am I going? And what am I supposed to be doing?” He shows how these questions, key for any Christian, can become cruel taunts for those who are afflicted by mental illnesses. Depression, anxiety, schizoaffective disorder (to name but a few) muffle the questions and block healthy responses to them. Shame, dread, fear, emptiness, and isolation threaten to veil the Lord's presence from the believer.

The term “recovery” seems a chimera, a mocking insult. There is no recovery, and all of life is reduced to a Sisyphean attempt to bear the crushing weight of the cross, with no sign of hope or hint of the empty tomb. John speaks with courageous vulnerability into this tangle of issues as one who trusts Christ even in the misery of affliction.

How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

How long must I take counsel in my soul
and have sorrow in my heart all the day?

How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

But I have trusted in your steadfast love;
my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.

I will sing to the LORD,

because he has dealt bountifully with me.

Psalm 13:1-2, 5-6

WE PROCLAIM
THE MYSTERY
OF OUR FAITH

*The Word,
the Way,
and the Amen*



PART I

WORD AND

UNDERSTANDING

MY THOUGHTS ARE GEMS AND BASTARDS, but it's a stretch to say they're mine. With thoughts this vivid, uncontrolled, and catastrophic, I am rather, it seems, at their mercy. If they are mine, they are only mine in this way: that I am the one they are happening to. I am the one who has to see them.

I live like a lot of people. I see people, I do things. I eat cereal, I drive a truck, and I try to be kind. But with a brain that sends me nightmares during the day—thoughts parading down the hall of my mind, vivid images both bizarre and impossible, at various turns random, sexual, violent—I've had to come to terms with the fact that I have a brain that says what I don't mean and shows me what I don't want to see: horrible things to look at while I'm trying to work and eat and live.

In the psychiatric community they are called intrusive thoughts.

I have also had to come to terms with the fact that I have a brain that—along with saying what I don't mean, and showing

me what I don't want to see—makes me feel what I don't understand. Incredible and overwhelming verdicts of shame, fear, and dread—dark and horrible feelings so shattering and conclusive they could only be overturned by the death of the Son of God.

By my brain I have been made to see and feel horrors, have lived, in particular, under the vicious regime of three dark and horrible feelings my whole life, with a brain that says

Something is wrong (shame).

Something is intolerable (dread).

Something bad is going to happen (fear).

In light of those bizarre thoughts and those awful feelings that it has created, my brain then tells me *What Should Happen*, handing out its two commands:

You need to do something to be okay.

You have to have something to be okay.

I have learned to refer to those bizarre and awful thoughts, those three powerful feelings, and those two bizarre commands, collectively, as the Siren. I also know it, affectionately, as *My Affliction* and *What's Wrong With My Brain*.

In the psychiatric community, it is known as obsessive-compulsive disorder.

The Siren is my word for the intensity and pull of a mental illness. For me it has a double meaning: the Siren refers both to a car alarm going off and the creatures that tried to pull Odysseus into the rocks by singing to him. It is both urgency and urge, both warning and command, both scream and pull, both obsession and compulsion.

The Siren is my word for the fact that the world is not what my brain says it is. It is a word that has helped me live with the fact that my brain is not my friend. It is a word that has helped me not be devoured by the symptoms of a mental illness.

Those dark and awful thoughts and feelings are, the brain scans have shown, just chemicals in the brain misfiring. I have a brain unlike other brains. It consistently and persuasively misinforms. It is always telling me things that are not true.

Those dark and awful thoughts and feelings, however, are not received as data or information, or even misinformation, but are consistently experienced as gods, as omens, as verdicts, and as dark prophetic utterances. They make their appearance in my life as the Final Word and the End of the World. The final Word on life, the final Word on others, the final Word on myself.

And so I have also learned to call the Siren not only My Affliction or What's Wrong but also the Bully and the Accuser.

People with obsessive-compulsive disorder, when met with the horrible things their brain can show them, and just how bad their brain can make them feel, do things to make their brain stop screaming at them. They obey its command so it will leave them alone.

That is, faced with those obsessions (those distressing thoughts and feelings, what their brain says is wrong, or intolerable, or about to happen), they give in to compulsions (what the brain says has to happen) so they will feel okay.

They scrub floors; they check things. They create magic numbers or habits to dampen or avoid the verdict their brain has

provided, the verdict that says life is intolerable and unbearable, that something is absolutely, excruciatingly wrong, that something absolutely must be done, that something must be fixed. They do this to console themselves. They do this so they'll be okay.

My compulsion, my urge, is to go into my head and do four things: figure out, know for sure, defend myself, and make things right. My compulsion is excessive rumination. Over the last thirty years, this compulsion has formed into an immense, labyrinthine, tangled, trapdoor mansion located only in my head: a tangled nest of circuits, a constant and looping embroidery of thoughts to mitigate, satisfy, outrun, and overturn the verdicts handed down by the Siren, the horrors I can be made to see and feel if I don't think better and think more. I have learned to call this constant, looping embroidery of thoughts, this vast network of compulsions, the Realm of Ceaseless Cognition. I will also call it the Haunted House. That is what it felt like over the years. This tangled network of compulsions has felt like a Haunted House.

The Realm of Ceaseless Cognition is the place I go to check and make sure, the place I go to defend myself against cataclysm and defamation, the place I go to figure things out and make things right when the Siren says something is wrong (and something is always wrong). It is the place where I go to know for sure nothing bad will happen when the Siren tells me something bad is about to happen. The Haunted House is where I go to hide from all the things the Siren says cannot be tolerated, where I go to hide from what I can be made to see and what I can be made to feel.

The Realm of Ceaseless Cognition has been the country I have lived in all my life, the world I've been in instead of being in the world. The Haunted House is the place where I have learned to go and depend on myself. It is where my dependence on myself has taken root, where it has been deepened, honored, cultivated, satisfied, and become its own stronghold, its own place. This vast network of cognition and self-deception is my place of enslavement. It is where I am misshapen. And it has made my life lonely in ways I do not know how to explain to the people I love most.

THIS MEMOIR IS ABOUT HOW I learned to leave that place, the Haunted House, the Realm of Ceaseless Cognition, that immense, tangled mass of hypervigilant rumination that I once thought was the same thing as myself. It is how I learned to leave my own shadow. And how I learned to move in the opposite direction of the greatest perceived needs of my life: the need to figure things out so I will be okay, the need to know for sure so I will be okay, the need to defend myself so I will be okay, the need to go into my head and make things right so I will be okay.

It's the story of how I left the Realm of Ceaseless Cognition and began to be quietly changed by heading somewhere else.

But it is not the story of how I got rid of a mental illness by believing in Jesus.

I have not, in getting better, removed this illness or its symptoms. The Siren I've stopped worshipping is still there. The

warnings and commands still go off like missiles and fireworks, and savagely strike both mind and heart. And recovery has not meant making that go away, has not meant policing the appearance of those dark and awful thoughts, or mitigating the intensity and pull of those dark and awful feelings. They are still very real and very painful to me. They are still the experience provided by my brain.

It has been important for me over the years to not understand a mental illness as a character flaw or a lack of faith when it is simply an Affliction, a kind of Suffering among other kinds of Suffering. I simply have a brain that provides horrors to be seen and felt. I have a brain that provides great anguish and distress without any warning and without my volition. A mental illness, of course, is affected by and related to many other things in life, but it is most simply just that: an experience provided by the brain.

I love Jesus and am still very much mentally ill. My love for Jesus has not fixed that. And Jesus' love for me has not fixed it either. I love Jesus very, very much. And I've still been made to see and feel horrors.

The Siren is still there, wailing, lying, bullying, intimidating. Still there, still so swaggering and urgent and full of itself, pumping my body with dumbstruck, awe-filled dread, always coming up with something dark and horrible for me to be afraid of or look at. The only difference now is that those symptoms are a Wilderness I walk through rather than a god I worship.

The Siren has not gone. It is only our relationship that has changed. It is only that I have learned to stop worshipping It.

I have not, as of yet, been rescued either by therapy or medication from the intensity and appearance of those thoughts and feelings, that scream and pull, those warnings and commands, but only from the trust I had in them. And I have spent the last three years learning that it is only the thoughts and feelings we trust that get to kill us, that the saddest thing in the world isn't to have bad thoughts or feelings. The saddest thing in the world is to believe things that are not true.

That is what recovery has meant for me.

And it looks like this: to walk down the street, or drive my car, or be sitting with my wife, and

To think that something is wrong.

And to feel like something is wrong.

And to understand nothing is wrong.

This may not be what other people mean by recovery. But that is what I mean. For as long as I can remember, my life has been a stalemate between how I feel, what I think, and what I understand. And now I know that what I understand will always mean more than what I can be made to think and feel by the faulty wiring in my brain. That understanding has, and will, determine more of the course of my life than this bewildering Affliction.

I don't need to have the right thoughts and the right feelings to be okay. That is what I understand now. And while those thoughts and feelings can riot and rage, while they can fluctuate in intensity and fling out their own provocative new content, the patient, quiet understanding that I am already okay can still deepen. I can understand I'm okay when I don't feel okay. And

with that understanding I can walk through the Wilderness of those bewildering symptoms and have myself a little life. With that understanding I can patiently endure what can be seen and felt. I can patiently endure these horrors I've been made to see and feel.

It turns out that patient, quiet understanding is the only thing I need to be okay. And it turns out the world changes shape around what I understand. It can turn a terrifying god into a simple Wilderness. It can turn a bully into symptoms. This understanding has been the chief Mercy of my life. And Mercy, I've learned, is not a feeling that must be felt, or thought that we must think, but a Reality that is understood.

For the longest time I thought I was the symptoms of my illness, that I was as dark and horrible as they were. That I was the same as what my brain did, the same as what it showed me. But now I know those thoughts and feelings are mine only in the sense that I am the one they're happening to, the one in the Wilderness of what I can be made to see and feel. I'm just the one making my way through what my mind can show me.

When my mind became a terrifying, threatening Stranger, when all normal thoughts and feelings were taken from me, it seemed all I had was that understanding. The understanding that I was okay. And since that understanding was all I had, I decided that understanding was who I was.

Rather than those thoughts, or my feelings, I seem to have become that patient, quiet understanding. I have become, instead of my thoughts and feelings, a hard kernel of patient, quiet trust.

A patient, quiet understanding that is simply my ability to trust. An understanding of the heart.

And I count that patient, quiet understanding—that hard kernel of patient quiet trust—as more dearly bought and more vigilantly guarded than anything else in my life. It has been more precious to me than better thoughts, and better feelings. I make my way through the Wilderness of what can be thought and what can be felt as that patient, quiet understanding, a sojourner in the Wilderness of the experiences created by my mind.

It has also, at times, felt like being a small, unsinkable boat in a great storm. A storm no one else can see because it is, as they say, all in your head.

That understanding, that small boat, that hard kernel of patient, quiet trust has a uniquely religious valence. It is the patient, quiet trust I have in Christ. It is the patient, quiet understanding of who Christ is. A capacity to quietly hand myself over to who I know Christ to be and to know I am okay.

This is not, of course, what I wanted. What I wanted was better thoughts and better feelings. The absence of Suffering. I wanted my brain to provide better experiences. And what I got was a better understanding of who Christ is and who I am; where I'm headed and what I'm supposed to be doing.

The word “understanding” may be tricky. It may take some time to know what I mean by it, but what I mean by it is what Scripture means by humility, reverence, and the fear of the Lord. An understanding of the heart. A posture, a way to live by faith. A humility that is not a command or a feeling but a gift and an

inheritance, the condition of knowing who Christ is so that I know who we are, so that we know where we're going, and what we're supposed to be doing.

The heart is not a thought or feeling but our capacity to trust, to hand ourselves over to what is trusted. We cannot see or even really feel this "heart." But it is the heart that consecrates everything we can see and feel.

What do I need to be okay? The Siren would say the only thing I need to be okay is to obey its warnings and commands. But it turns out the only thing I need to be okay is to know who Christ is and who I am, where I'm going and what I'm supposed to be doing. That humility, that understanding, is all I need to leave the Haunted House of compulsions and make my way through the Wilderness of bewildering symptoms.

But who is Christ? And who am I? Where am I going? And what am I supposed to be doing?

It is something I ask myself and I have learned to tell myself simply, that Christ is the Mercy that has been offered, that I am servant and guest of the Mercy that has been offered, that I am headed into the future provided by the Mercy that has been offered, and that, until it arrives, the only thing I can really do is behold, be patient, and bear witness to the Mercy that has been offered.

I am not the Mercy that has been offered. I have not died for the sins of the world. Neither have you. But I can understand that Mercy has been offered. And I can become that understanding. It has been an agony to have to become something so simple. It

is like being winnowed down to a single hot coal that cannot be put out. It is like falling down a mountain until you find a single place to put your foot and stand. Because it is felt so simply it is felt more deeply and more powerfully. And the deeper the understanding, the quieter I have become. Especially in turmoil, and even in great anguish and distress.

None of the horrors I have been made to think or feel have been able to destroy that understanding, that quiet boat, that hard kernel, that single hot coal. And since that understanding has not been destroyed, I have not been destroyed. I have not been swallowed up by the symptoms of my mental illness.

But I still have a mental illness. There really is something wrong with my brain. And that's okay.

I have only been rescued from the compulsions, from the worship of the Siren. But I am still in the Wilderness of it. The understanding has not removed this Affliction. One does not get rid of the other. They occupy the same space.

Understanding who Christ is, who you are, and where you're going and what you're supposed to be doing does not make you suffer less, it only changes what Suffering appears to you as: as simple Wilderness rather than god. As symptoms rather than omens.

This Affliction, the thing I call What's Wrong With My Brain lives in me as What Has to Happen. This simple indicative lives in me as an imperative, as an intimidation. But that patient, quiet understanding can turn What Has to Happen back into What's Wrong, can turn a god back into a simple Affliction.

An Affliction Christ bears with me. A Wilderness I walk with Christ.

And this helps you to bear it all quietly. You can have that patient, quiet understanding and still be upset. You can have that patient, quiet understanding and still be miserable. You can have that understanding and still be tempted by despair. You can have that understanding and still be in anguish and distress. This patient, quiet understanding can even be deepened in anguish and distress. It can be deepened in torment and misery. You can have that understanding and still have these Afflictions. You can be made to see and feel horrors, be made to very powerfully feel you are not okay and still understand that you are okay.

Calling this illness What's Wrong may sound like a harsh way of putting it. But calling it that has been a tenderness toward myself. When the Siren is a god, then I'm afraid of it. When it is a Bully, I have to fight it. But when it's What's Wrong, then it's just a vulnerability I take care of. I go from being mad at my brain to wanting to take care of it because it's sick and because it's mine. I go from fighting and hiding it to quietly, patiently leading it. I can offer myself to the brain that I have rather than hate my brain for not being what I wanted.

BECAUSE THIS AFFLICTION CAN OCCUPY the same space as that understanding, I am able both to be profoundly vulnerable and to know that I am profoundly vulnerable, vulnerable to the

machinations of my own mind and vulnerable, more importantly, to the anguish of the soul and the Hardness of Heart awakened by this Affliction.

Maybe it can be hard to know what I mean by hardness of heart. The heart, again, is not about what attracts or repels us. It is not about what is thought or felt or haunts or tempts. It is not even, really, about what we long and ache for. It is not even about what pains us or gives us sorrow. The heart is about what is given and what is taken. The heart is about what is offered and what is withheld. The heart is about what is trusted, what is depended on.

As hard as the shame and fear and dread brought on by this Affliction are, by this patient, quiet understanding I know there is something worse than shame and fear and dread it torments me with. This is even something worse than my soul's great anguish over having to live with this illness. Terrible and annihilating forces that they are, there is something worse. In and through that patient, quiet understanding I know that no shame or fear or dread or thought or feeling has disfigured me as profoundly as my dependence on myself, the Hardness of the Heart that is our dependence on ourselves. By the Siren I have only been grieved and wounded terribly. But I have been misshapen by knowing for sure, figuring out, defending myself, and making right. I have only been misshapen by depending on myself. It is by my dependence on myself that I have become disfigured. God and Stranger in my own life.

And the Realm of Ceaseless Cognition has always been the place I've gone to depend on myself, where I go in my head to

make sure, figure out, defend myself, and make things right. All those compulsions, bobbing and weaving in a vast, biting, tangled, thrashing nest. Those vast, intoxicating tendrils of thought. Of course, it was only as I was leaving it that I understood it as a Realm, this Haunted House as haunted and as a house, a place I should leave and a place I could leave. For the longest time I simply understood that Realm as who I was. I thought I was that ornate, circuitous, tangled hypervigilance. I thought I was the clinging, dark, shadowy embroidery that fell between me and the world I lived in.

What I know now is that it is a Realm, a Haunted House, the place I am misshapen, my compulsion to depend on myself. And I understand I am too vulnerable to go in there. I am too vulnerable to go into my head, too vulnerable to go in there and figure things out, or make things right, or defend myself, or know for sure. Too vulnerable to go into the Realm of Ceaseless Cognition. Too vulnerable to depend on myself. I will have to depend on Christ instead. There has been nothing in my life more beautiful and harrowing than having to become that patient, quiet understanding.

The Bully, the Accuser, the Siren, What's Wrong, this Affliction has been for me only a kind of terrible Suffering. The only thing it can do is threaten and wound and terrify me. I have only been disfigured by what I'll do to feel okay. I have been most disfigured by what I'll do to not have to feel what the Siren makes me feel: that droning mechanical cry of shame, fear, and dread. I have been most disfigured by what I'll do to not have to

see what it makes me see: those horrible intrusive thoughts. I've been most disfigured by where I'll go and what I'll do to avoid the Siren. What I'll do to not feel shame, fear, and dread.

And there is nothing that argues more persuasively, promises more insistently, or demands more savagely to be the clothing of our shame, the casting out of our fear, and the overturning of our dread than our dependence on ourselves. The Realm where I've gone to clothe my own shame, cast out my own fear, overturn my own dread. The Haunted House is where I've hidden from the Siren and made a shrine to myself. It's where I've tried to get away from the symptoms of my illness.

The psychiatric community would say it like this: it's not the obsessions that kill us, it's the compulsions.

In the Christian community, it is called original sin.

The Realm of Ceaseless Cognition is a vast, tangled, tendriled, and tortured landscape with its own terrifying pull.

But that patient, quiet understanding is also a kind of place. It is only that it is a smaller, simpler, sparer, more harrowing, more painful place to be. The Realm is a vast country, and this patient, quiet understanding is only a place to stand, naked, terrified, seemingly alone. What I have in Christ is the simple, painful renunciation of the urges created by my brain, the ability to say no to desires and compulsions that will not just go away. I wish it was more. But that is all it's been: a foothold in the storm of thought and feelings. A Thread in the Wilderness. A boat in the storm. A kernel. A single, hot, burning coal in the wind and rain.

That foothold, that boat, that kernel, is not a place where I do something to be okay. It is a place where I don't. That patient, quiet understanding is the place where I stand with Christ and don't do anything to make things right or win or be okay. It is the place where I don't fix, the place where I don't defend myself, the place where I don't figure things out, and the place where I don't know for sure. The place where it is somehow possible to not engage those compulsions. The place I stand with Christ and endure what it feels like to not do those things. The place where I've learned to stand with Christ by being quiet.

The Realm is the place where I have been disfigured by a dependence on myself, all that constant tangled rumination. But patient, quiet understanding is the place where I am transfigured by my patient, quiet dependence on Christ, by my ability to not think, the place where I stand transfigured with Christ even as I am seemingly disfigured by the Wilderness of what I can be made to think and feel.

It turns out even the horrors I can be made to see and feel can be turned into a time of patient waiting on the Mercy offered in the gospel, with the promise we will not be most changed by the horrors we've been made to see and feel, but by the Mercy we've waited on. And this patient, quiet understanding, though it cannot remove those symptoms, can make every intrusive thought, every grotesque feeling, a time of patient waiting on the Mercy that has been offered. Every horrible thing can become a prayer.

That understanding has been a great gift. It has been a quiet mind to suffer with.

I wish my language could be more precise. More technical. There is no actual realm. My compulsions are not actually a Haunted House. There is no real Wilderness. I am not in a literal boat. I am not a small kernel. You cannot look inside me and find a single, hot, burning coal. A patient, quiet understanding is not really a place. Humility is not actually an inheritance or a foothold. But this is as close as language can get. This is as close as I can get to explaining what having this mental illness feels like, and some kind of way of talking about what it is like to get better.

So, instead of saying that understanding is a foothold, or a place to stand, I will say this understanding has been

My honor in shame.

My courage in fear.

My obedience in dread.

My victory in defeat.

My endurance in Affliction.

My composure in distress.

My shield in accusation.

My deliverance from the hardness of my own heart.

Armed with that patient, quiet understanding—knowing that these warnings and commands are not *What Should Happen* but only *What's Wrong* with my brain, and knowing the *Realm of Ceaseless Cognition* certainly isn't me and isn't

even a helpful place to be but is only the place I need to leave and the place I am destroyed—I have been able to do something I count miraculous.

I have been able to stare down the Siren, even as it screams at me. I have been able to leave the Realm of Ceaseless Cognition, even as it pulls on me. Armed with that patient, quiet understanding, I have been able to head somewhere else. Knowing that thoughts and feelings are not gods, I head into the Wilderness of what can be thought and what can be felt. Those thoughts and feelings, this anguish and distress, that scream and pull, are not going anywhere. And yet, I am.

I am passing through them, passing them by. I am headed somewhere else.

And where?

Out of the Realm of Ceaseless Cognition,

Out of my dependence on myself,

Into my dependence on Christ,

Into a future provided by Mercy,

Into the ability to pay attention.

WHERE DOES THAT PATIENT, QUIET trust come from? How do you get into that small boat, find that foothold, become that single, hot coal, that small kernel? How do you become that patient, quiet understanding? Where do you get honor in shame, obedience in dread, courage in fear, endurance in Affliction,