

DUNGEONS of Despair

ONE COVENANT MINISTER'S JOURNEY BACK FROM DEPRESSION

*I know what it's like to have failed, baby
With the whole world lookin' on
I know what it's like to have been so sure
And to wake up and find it all gone.*

"All the Way Home"
BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN

I was thirty-nine, and every day I woke up excited to go to the best job I ever had—associate pastor of adult ministries at a Covenant church, working alongside two great pastors and a wonderful staff. I was living in a parsonage, which was one of the nicest houses I'd ever lived in—three stories with high ceilings and large rooms trimmed with mahogany. My young daughter's room had just received a new paint job and wallpaper. I was hoping my marriage, which had been stressed, was turning around.

But one day in December 2000, with my family elsewhere, I lay curled tight in a fetal position on the floor of my daughter's room, alternately sobbing and screaming to God, to nobody, to somebody, that I was so sorry for what I had done—and done especially to my family. I wished my body would split wide to release the pain I felt inside.

Events I never imagined possible had brought me to that floor. Because of a previously misdiagnosed bipolar disorder (formerly known as manic depression), I had over the course of several weeks engaged in activities that

were at times odd, erratic, and sometimes immoral.

When the church's Executive Board learned what I had done, they asked me to resign. I lost my job, my home, and subsequently my marriage. The episode and the aftermath were the last straw for my wife—she had spent years married to a person with behaviors that neither of us understood and that were incompatible with being a good husband. (Up to 75 percent of marriages involving people with bipolar and schizophrenia end in divorce.)

I now work with the Kansas affiliate National Alliance for the Mentally Ill. While on an airplane recently, the passenger in the seat next to mine, upon learning of my current job, said, "Mental illness—now that's not often the topic of everyday conversation."

Over the next hour, she told me of her and her family's struggles. That's a common occurrence. In every church where I have shared that I have a bipolar disorder, people have come to me in secret to say that they or their family member has a mental health condition. When I spoke to a small gathering of evangelical pastors about mental illness, four of the twelve in attendance told me of their own struggles, including one who had made a suicide attempt. Their experiences reminded me of the words of Charles Haddon Spurgeon, who frequently missed time in the pulpit because of his battle with depression: "There are dungeons be-

neath the castles of despair."

The stories I've heard from Christians sometimes break my heart. One woman who volunteers with our office tells how her parents took her to have demons exorcised. Others were told they had moved away from God and needed to pray more, read their Bibles more, and repent of the sins that were blamed for their mental illness.

I am thankful for the care and support I received from the pastors with whom I worked, the staff and others in the church. I also am thankful for the believers elsewhere who have supported me. Regrettably, others don't understand and even refuse to try.

While taking medication for physical illnesses is not seen as a sign of weakness, in many Christian circles taking medication for mental illness is. There is still a lack of understanding that mental illness is the manifestation of a physical disorder in the brain. People also fear that medication is dispensed too liberally, and that we have become a society seeking the quick spiritual fix.

I thank God for his gift of medication and for people like David T. Wong, a devout Christian who was instrumental in the development of Prozac. I have been fortunate through a long period of trial and error to obtain medications that are working.

The pills I swallow in the morning and evening bring me to and help keep me at a place where I can pursue a

healthy spirituality. They don't make me happy, high, or holy. They don't bring me closer to God; they make it *possible* for me to get closer to God.

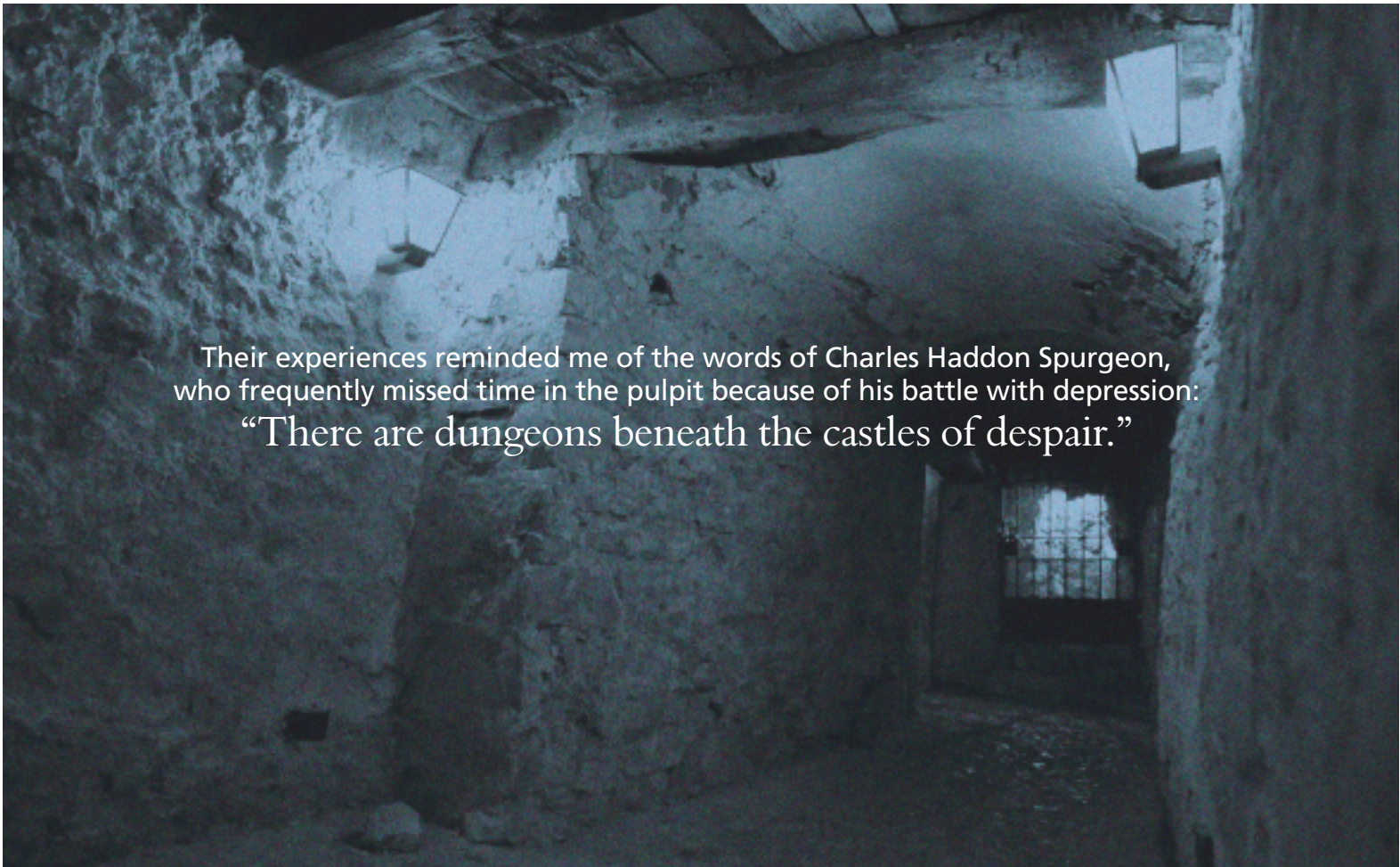
Mania often brings with it a decreased need for sleep, increased irritability, wild spending sprees, reckless hypersexuality, and feelings of grandeur accompanied by intense highs. Devastating lows follow and take on a life of

sum of chemical processes. We are a mystery, and no one can claim to know for sure how the physical and spiritual are intertwined.

I fully believe that therapy and supportive community are vital to the continuing health of a person with a mental illness. I still must participate in the various spiritual disciplines, including confession, to keep a healthy relation-

where), nausea, and lethargy. Nearly everyone tries to go off their medications at least once because they miss the highs of mania, are sick of the side effects, or mistakenly believe themselves cured. The results are always disastrous.

I don't dare risk it. I know where I have been, what I have done, and what I have lost. I also know how hard I've



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their own. It is a horrible existence to know that God has so much for you and to feel imprisoned in those “dungeons beneath the castles of despair.”

You can't have a healthy relationship with God when your body feels drained of all strength, your spirit of all desire, and your will of all intent. You can't have a healthy relationship with Jesus, when as one friend of mine experienced, you believe you *are* Jesus.

Advocating the use of medications does not mean that I have adopted a completely materialistic view of the universe, in which we are simply the

ship with God. After leaving the church where I had served, I attended another Covenant congregation, where I became the lay leader of its twelve-step and support group ministry.

I don't like taking medicine, nor does anyone I know. The trial-and-error experience of finding the right treatment is frustrating, to put it mildly. Many drugs have unpleasant side effects—in my case, these side effects have included weight gain, hand tremors (I avoided taking the juice during communion for a time because my shakes were so bad that I spilled every-

worked to get where I am—to do what I do and what I know I have the opportunity to accomplish—in part due to medication.

Today I am forty-three, living in an apartment two hours from my teenagers, who I see nearly every week. Every day I wake up and go to work at a job I enjoy, one that helps people. Whether I ever return to full-time ministry is up to God, superintendents, and search committees and that's all right with me. □

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