

# BLESSED are the crazy

breaking the silence about  
mental illness, family, and church

SARAH GRIFFITH LUND



CHALICE<sup>®</sup>  
P R E S S

ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI

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A six-session guide for groups interested in discussing *Blessed Are the Crazy* is available on the book's page on [ChalicePress.com](http://ChalicePress.com)

*To those who live with mental illness and their families*

# Definitions

## **cra \* zy (krazee)**

- 1) a slang word that describes a person with a brain disease
- 2) a description of a situation that is out of control

## **cra \* zy (krazee) in the blood (blud)**

- 1) a phrase that describes the genetic predisposition to suffering from a brain disease

“Bipolar tends to run in families and appears to have a genetic link. Like depression and other serious illnesses, bipolar disorder can also negatively affect spouses, partners, family members, friends and co-workers.” (From *BP Magazine*, summer 2014; [www.bphope.com](http://www.bphope.com).)

- 2) the reason why some families are more dysfunctional than others

## **bi \* po \* lar (bi poler)**

- 1) a brain disease that causes mood swings from the lows of depression to the highs of mania, sometimes referred to as “manic depression”
- 2) a term that describes having two poles that are extremes

## Author's Note

This is my story as I remember it and re-member it. It is a work of non-fiction with a few identifying details changed to protect privacy.

I acknowledge that the language we use to talk about mental illness can be controversial because of various ways it is understood. I use the language that most closely reflects my experiences.

## Foreword

It is a real privilege for me to write this foreword, especially as I know that there are others who, by virtue of their personal relationship to Sarah Griffith Lund and/or the role their writings have played in her own healing process, are far more qualified than I to write it.

As you will discover, Sarah has been deeply acquainted with mental illness since her early childhood. One might say that mental illness has been her constant companion, a companion one surely does not seek out or extend a welcoming hand. As she relates in her testimony, her father was mentally ill, her brother is mentally ill, her cousin was executed for a crime that revealed his own mental illness, and she herself has experienced “spiritual visions” that others might consider signs of mental illness.

And yet, hers is an inspiring testimony that reveals the healing powers of the very act of testifying to the brokenness that one has both witnessed and experienced vicariously. As she points out, “The power of our testimonies is the power to work through, heal, and eventually transform our suffering. Telling the stories about my crazy father, bipolar brother, executed cousin, and my own spiritual visions makes room for light and air, the things of God’s Spirit, to enter in.” Not to have testified as she has done here would have been the real tragedy, more tragic than the mental illnesses recounted in these pages. For, as she also notes, “Keeping these stories as secrets buried deep down in my soul gives them power to hold me captive, isolated by my own fear, shame, and pain: fear that I too, will be labeled crazy and, therefore, unlovable: shame that I am not good enough to be loved; pain because this suffering makes me feel alone in the world.”

For the past couple of decades, I have regularly taught a course on the minister and mental illness at Princeton Theological Seminary. This is where Sarah was a student, and, as she testifies, she was there at a time when her cousin Paul was executed for a crime he would not have committed had he been in his “right mind.” Because I encourage students to write their papers on the experiences that attracted them to the course in the first place, I have read many papers that, collectively, have taught me that many of our students have experienced the travails of mental illness in their lives, either because they themselves have a mental illness or because a family member or close friend does. Because I taught a course on shame several years prior to teaching the course on mental illness, I have also become aware of the fact that the theologies that have been promoted at the Seminary are overly biased toward guilt and neglectful of the role that shame plays in our sense of wrongness within ourselves and in our relations with others and with God.<sup>1</sup> I learned from students that the first step in the healing process is often the ability to overcome the need of our idealized self to critique—even condemn—our shameful self and to recognize, instead, that God identifies with our shameful self.

Given these experiences with students, I wholeheartedly agree with Sarah’s view, presented so eloquently here, that the fundamental key to the process of healing is to *testify* to the role that mental illness has played in our lives and thereby free ourselves from our prisons of fear, shame, and pain, and open the doors to liberated lives based on hope, healing, and love.

Sarah also perceives that we live in a new age as far as mental illness is concerned. She writes, “As a society we are just now beginning to tell our stories in public about mental illness,” and that “getting it out in the open—talking about it on the radio, television, in books, on blogs, in schools, and in churches—is progress.” For too long the churches have conspired against the telling of these stories. Traditionally, they have done very little to support the mentally ill and their families. However, this is not the time to condemn, but rather to seize the initiative and

to encourage the church's leaders to take fuller advantage of the trust that laity invest in them and of the prerogative that comes with being pastors. As I wrote in another foreword, this time for a book by Stewart D. Govig, whose son was diagnosed with schizophrenia in his early twenties:

Pastors may begin with a ministry of simple *presence*. From this basis, they may proceed to monitor their own—and others'—stigmatizing language. They may *educate* and do so, rather surprisingly, through curricula that is not trendy but traditional, beginning with biblical stories of Jesus' own affinity with the mentally ill. They may also become *advocates*, as Govig himself has become, discovering that the support of a local pastor makes a potent difference among the afflicted families and the wider community. Not least of all, they may become the *receivers*, as have grieving family members, of the witness the mentally ill themselves have to give to the strong who are lost in their own illusions of security. Did not Jesus preach about the man who gathered his grain into barns and assured himself that he had ample goods laid up for many years, only to discover that the things he had prepared were suddenly swept away, in the twinkling of an eye? The mentally ill testify to the folly of such complacency.<sup>2</sup>

For me, the most inspiring story that Sarah tells here is her account of her relationship with her brother Scott, who, like Govig's son John, began to exhibit psychotic behaviors in his senior year in high school. The power of her testimony here is, to me, the fact that her roles as pastor and sibling are interactive and mutually supportive. This is also the case with Govig and his son John. But, as I have noted, pastors are also *receivers* of what the mentally ill have to give to those who consider themselves normal, and Govig expresses this truth when he notes that "John is our teacher."<sup>3</sup> Also compelling to me are the associations that Sarah makes between her brother Scott and Jesus and her

suggestion that Jesus had personal knowledge of what it means to be susceptible to mental illness.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, I would like to make a claim for what Sarah has achieved so beautifully here that she—in her modesty—does not claim herself. This is the fact that testimonies like hers play a vitally important role in the *prevention* of mental illness. Her account of her father's irascible behavior and of its particular effects on her brother Scott point to the presence of some "crazy in the blood" in the family that gets passed down from generation to generation. On the other hand, this very testimony tells us that we need not adopt a fatalistic attitude toward mental illness, as if Scott was destined to become mentally ill and there was nothing that could have been done to change this destiny. We are witnessing a new day in the struggle against mental illness, one in which mental health professionals are making significant progress in the area of prevention by identifying persons—typically in their teenage years—who are at risk of serious mental illness (e.g., schizophrenia and bipolar disorder).<sup>5</sup> My prayer is that Sarah's book will fall into the hands of those, including the potentially mentally ill themselves, who will be able to change the predictable future, leaving the "crazy in the blood" behind.

As noted earlier, Sarah confesses that sharing her testimony has set her free from her own prison of fear, shame, and pain. I see her, therefore, as exemplifying the truth that the poet William Stafford expresses in his poem "A Message from the Wanderer": "...Prisoners, listen; / you have relatives outside. And there are / thousands of ways to escape."<sup>6</sup> In this poem, as the Wanderer now sees it, the problem had been that for years he colluded against himself by having chains smuggled to him in pies, or by shouting his plans for escape to the jailers. And yet, all through these years of confinement, "freedom always came nibbling my thought," and at last he noticed that the door was open and no one was there to stop him. As Sarah relates, this was not how it was for her cousin Paul, who was executed at the age of thirty after spending ten years on Death Row. For her,

however, it has been different, and all because she has exercised her right—and her gift—to testify to what she has experienced, thus making room for light and air, and for the things of God’s Spirit to enter in and enable her to venture forth.

*Donald Capps*  
*William Harte Felmeth Professor of*  
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## Preface

In the sweltering end-of-summer heat of 2007, a couple dozen of us show up at the first-ever national gathering for The Young Clergy Women Project. For our time together we have a spirit-guide, a wise sister who is a few steps ahead of us on the journey. Anna Carter Florence speaks to us about the silenced legacy of women whose spirits didn't allow them to remain quiet about the amazing things God was up to in their lives. Despite being told to shut up, pretty up, or leave town, these women preachers blazed a trail into the earth that we are just now uncovering from decades of patriarchy. So, young female preachers are not doing a new thing, even though it is new to some. We are inheritors of an ancient craft, of tales spun by sisters long ago, woven into the fabric of ancient sacred communities. I take comfort in this circle of sisters because we do not need words to explain to one another why it is so good just to be in each other's presence.

Anna tells us that we are living testimonies, whether we like it or not, whether we know it or not. She encourages us to embrace this calling as observers and speakers of truth, and to claim our right to tell our stories in our own voices. We can preach our own testimonies. We can tell our own truths. God gives us permission and the church needs to hear it. We don't have to pretend that everything is okay, because it is not. By the end of the night we are empowered to unearth that God-story embedded within so that we can faithfully share our testimonies. It is in the offering and receiving of testimony that hope can be found. This is what we are born to do.

This is my testimony.

By the time you're done reading my testimony, I hope you will have formed some ideas about how to share your own. Nearly

every contour of my life and faith journey has been weathered and shaped by mental illness in my family. In these chapters I unfold my story and discover the surprising ways that God shows up: in a mentally ill father's love, in a suicidal brother's cry for help, in a cousin's dying eyes, and in my own discovery of God's power to heal. It is in the telling of this story that I've come to appreciate how God's blessing is meant for all of us, especially for people who are marginalized and suffering, including those of us with crazy in the blood.

In the conversations with friends, family members, pastors, mentors, spiritual advisors and mental health counselors, I have come to learn that my story is part of the greater story of millions of people whose loved ones suffer from mental illness. Over and over again, in the midst of suffering, God's love has caught me by surprise. I hope that readers of my testimony will encounter surprises too, perhaps in the unexpected ways our stories overlap. I wish it were not so, but chances are good that you (or a loved one) know all too well about the "crazy in the blood" of which I speak.

This testimony is for anybody who has ever wondered how God can use craziness to teach us about the depths of human and divine love. This testimony is for anyone who is afraid to admit that there is a problem with the stigma and shame surrounding mental illness in our churches and in our society, because then the next question is even more foreboding: What can be done about it? This testimony is for you with no faith and you with little faith, and you who run all the committees at your house of worship. And this testimony is even for those of you who are blessed to be free from any crazy in the family blood. This is for you who are both crazy and blessed. Thank you for taking the time to read my testimony. If you haven't already, I encourage you to begin telling your story, too. Write it down, blog it out, tweet it, poetry slam it, sing it, paint it, preach it, and share it. My prayer is that sharing our testimonies sheds some light on a path toward healing and greater peace.



## chapter 3

# Caring for My Brother—How Would Jesus Do It?

**A**s a minister of God’s word and sacrament, part of my job is to help people work through questions of theodicy—that is, “Where is God in the midst of suffering?” and, “Why do bad things happen to good people?” We all wonder this, and many of us ask the question readily when something bad happens. But what if the something bad is not an event—a car accident—but is instead something inextricable from our very being? “Why did God let me (or him, or her, or them) be born this way?” That’s a harder one to ask because, in doing so, we seem to doubt God’s appraisal of his own creation: “He saw that it was good.” We hesitate to question God’s goodness. Is God really good *all* the time, as the saying goes?

If we believe that God knits us together in our mother’s womb, do we therefore believe that God knits crazy into our being? If God is in all places and is present at all times, is God also in mental illness? If we are made in God’s image, then is God crazy too?

Or is mental illness one of those things Satan uses to undo us? When Jesus healed people who were mentally ill, he cast demons out of them. When Satan lured Jesus out to the edge of the cliff, he tried to make Jesus go crazy and jump. A case could be made that Satan, at the very least, has a knack for this kind of thing, regardless of whether he is actually at the root of it.

When I counsel people whose loved one has mental illness, I find that looking at it from a biochemical perspective helps. Brain chemistry influences our moods, emotions, and behavior. At its most basic, science has told us, mental illness is due to imbalances in brain chemistry. That is why drug treatment that alters brain chemistry is so often effective.

Yet this scientific approach does not let God off the hook.

Maybe, then, we could get some answers by a less direct route—say, storytelling. That was Jesus' teaching tool of choice. We've all got stories. You've heard part of mine. But there is more. In addition to being the daughter of a father with bipolar, I am also the sister of a brother with bipolar. My family's story of mental illness runs deep. To tell the story, to give my own testimony as the daughter and sister of crazy blood, is to slowly patch together pieces of my heart torn apart by pain and sadness of living with mental illness.

### A Corruption of God's Law?

Some kids inherit natural good looks or a high IQ from their biological parents, and others get the crazy gene. Crazy in the blood runs thick in my family. The oldest boy, my brother Scott, seemed to get it the worst. The first-born son inherited, all right, just like in God's law, but instead of getting his father's blessing he got a curse.

As a young boy my brother Scott accepted Jesus as his Lord and Savior. He was a zealous child preacher, memorizing the Bible verses that promise salvation and blessing. He loved going to Sunday school and he reflected the love of Jesus back on the world like no other child or adult I knew. His white-blond hair was like the light of Christ illuminating his face. But at some point the light began to fade and was replaced with something darker.

Over time my brother's experience of going to church changed. The change was due to more than just the intellectual doubts about God that adolescents go through as they develop critical thinking skills. Scott's experience of church, and Sundays after church most particularly, became tainted with violence.

Dad's physical and emotional abuse, formerly reserved for times when kids were acting out, crept into Sundays, and seemed to focus in on Scott, as if part of a bigger plan. I imagine that, for Scott, our father's hand came to represent the hand of an angry God, casting down punishment and fear.

Was Dad jealous that his oldest son had appeared to garner God's favor? Or had Satan possessed my father, causing him to take the holiest day of week, the Sabbath day, and make it a special occasion for child abuse? After church, our dad would force my brother, no longer a child, to pull down his pants and underwear, whipping him with a belt in front of us. All the footage from Dad's camcorder of my brothers playing basketball in our driveway after church, boys wearing Sunday best, cannot tape over the truth.

It didn't take long for Scott to put the two together: church and abuse. My brother's love for Jesus, like the flame of a candle, was swiftly blown out by our father's actions. Now as I look back, I wonder how this story would read if it really was Satan who caused my family's problems with crazy. What if the scientists have got it all wrong and crazy isn't passed on through the genes, but instead through the curse of Satan?

If it was Satan, then without the inner light of our Savior to guide him, my brother soon became consumed by other motivations. At school he was the model student, but at home he grew horns and a forked tail. Family games of Monopoly always ended with the board crashing down onto the family room floor and the miniature iron, shoe, dog, etc., flying everywhere, getting lost in the green shag carpet. My brother stomped around, cursing each of us, ensuring that no one but him ever won a game.

My father believed that his son's behavior was caused by a malformed spirituality. He would explain such outbursts as demonic possession, and eventually claimed that my brother was not only possessed by demons, but was himself a Satan worshiper. Dad blamed Scott for tearing apart our family. Scott quit attending church. He painted anarchy symbols on his

bedroom walls, wore a spiked mohawk, and fiercely hated our father. I wondered whether Dad saw himself in Scott. Did he take any responsibility for the crazy in the blood that flowed in his offspring? Or was it easier to blame the devil?

During our first few months in Missouri after we left my father behind in California, my brother fell in love with a girl from school. He carved into the underbelly of his skateboard his beloved's name, along with a few other choice words: Kris is God. For my brother, this wasn't just some adolescent angst or poetic metaphor, as I first thought, but a profound truth that he discovered in her.

One day after school I made the mistake of answering the house phone and it was Kris. My brother wasn't home and I forgot to tell him she had called (this was the era before cell phones and text messaging). Later that night I was in my room trying on different outfits for the next day, trying to figure out which jeans made my butt look less fat. While looking in the mirror, all at once I heard a loud explosion and saw the mirror shake. My brother was at my door, kicking it with his steel-toed combat boot. "Why the f--- didn't you tell me she called?!!" The door was locked; he couldn't get in unless he kicked the door down. Safe for the moment at least, I fell to the floor crying.

I waited until I heard him stomping away, cursing me. Opening my bedroom door I saw at the bottom a big splintery hole just the size and shape of my brother's boot. My door. Broken apart. Like everything else. I found a piece of red cloth among my Girl Scout supplies. I got the scissors and cut from the cloth a larger-than-life heart. With wood glue from the garage I carefully arranged the red heart over the gaping hole in the door. *There. Now no one can tell how much it hurts. It is all covered up.* Covering up crazy and any signs of it became second nature for me, using whatever was handy.

## We Thought He Would be Dead

Scott has made it to his fortieth birthday. By this time in his life, he thought he would be still married to his high school sweetheart. We thought he would be dead.

My brother experienced his first psychotic break and hospitalization during his senior year in high school. We guessed it was triggered by his girlfriend moving away to a university dorm across town. Scott did a series of bizarre things over a period of a couple of weeks, finally catching the attention of his school administrators the day he handed out large sums of his own hard-earned cash to other students on campus. Since Mom was teaching across town, Grandma picked Scott up from the principal's office that day, took him to her house and washed off the black paint he had smeared onto his own face before giving away all of his money.

It was the Monday before Christmas. I remember my brother in the kitchen screaming and crying. The police were there putting him in handcuffs. My mom was afraid he would kill himself. I don't know how she knew this, if he threatened or actually attempted it; but I do know that she did what she thought was best by calling the cops. And for decades afterward, Scott resented her for it.

Scott began the hard work of recovery and began to manage his bipolar through a combination of medication and psychotherapy. For a philosophy class senior project he posited the question, "If there was a happy pill that would make you happy forever, would you take it?" This question wasn't hypothetical for him, as it would be for most of the other students who had never spent the night in the hospital, let alone the psychiatric ward. No, for my brother, this was an issue of reversing the curse, the curse of crazy in the blood.

But in the absence of a happy pill, Scott had to struggle fiercely to face his demons. Along the way he married his beautiful and brilliant high school sweetheart Kris. He won full scholarships for his undergraduate and graduate education, earned his PhD in biochemistry from a top university, and got a college teaching position after his post-doctoral fellowship.

But by the end of Scott's time in graduate school, he suffered most days from major depression. Even though he and his wife lived just a short walk from one of the best surf spots on the West Coast, he couldn't get out of bed, let alone make the walk

down the hill with his surfboard. That, he later told me, was his biggest regret: not surfing enough when he lived at the beach. Depression sucked any pleasure in life right out of him.

Scott's graduation was the highlight of his career. Once he got the teaching job, his medications were not working well and he couldn't really function. It was difficult for him to get to class in the mornings. He called in sick, and students complained that he was unfair in his grading, giving half the class a failing grade halfway through the semester. By the end of his first year he was fired. My brother tried suing the school for character defamation, but eventually that got dropped. Without a career he felt ashamed and lost, lacking any purpose or identity.

His marriage couldn't hold the weight of depression much longer. To confound things even more, Kris wanted a child, but she and Scott never agreed on the right time to start a family or whether it was even a good idea considering his health issues. He knew that there was crazy in his blood and he didn't want to risk passing the crazy on to another generation. Following the collapse of his career at the college, in 2005, Scott applied for federal disability benefits. When my mom and I first heard that Scott was considering applying to be on disability we thought it was a sign that he was giving up. In reality, we were in denial that Scott had a disability that was severe enough for him to qualify. We wanted to believe that if Scott only tried harder, he would be healthy again. Qualifying for disability, in our eyes, was like a death sentence, his life would be over. Yet for Scott, applying for disability was an act of courage. Scott told me later that the man who interviewed him to see if Scott would qualify said, "I commend you for being a strong person with an invisible disability. Everyone can see that I am disabled because I am in a wheelchair. But people can't see your disability." We were not as enlightened. The stigma of Scott's disability weighed heavily on us. We would now be the mother and the sister of someone who was mentally disabled. Now it was official. It seemed to be a turning point for all of us. My brother was legitimately crazy.

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