

MY Willing Heart, MY BISHOP, AND MY Schizophrenia

By Sarah P. Hancock

After graduating with my master's degree and starting full-time employment, my husband and I moved into a new ward to be closer to work. I relished the opportunity to start fresh with ward members unaware of my mental health diagnoses—schizoaffective disorder bipolar type with catatonia due to toxic encephalopathy.

I experience symptoms of schizophrenia (the brain plays tricks on all five of my senses), bipolar disorder (dynamic shifts in mood), and catatonia (a shutdown of my ability to interact with the world around me) when the toxic encephalopathy (toxins agitating the brain) is flared by my dietary choices or by infections.

Despite having worked hard to learn how to live with my symptoms, I'd grown tired of my

inability to shake the label of “schizophrenic.” Grateful to have a clean slate, I wanted people to get to know me before they learned of a diagnosis, because most people are too scared of the label to see through it. Some even naïvely and hurtfully talk about mental illness as though it denoted a lack of personal worthiness rather than a biological malady. I wanted members in my new ward to meet me as a compassionate, competent, testimony-filled, fun-loving sister.

A New Calling

Soon my husband and I were called to be leaders over the 11-year-old Scouts. I readily accepted the calling. Every talk and lesson I'd ever heard about being entitled to the Lord's help while serving on His errand reverberated



The bishop assured me that my willingness to serve, despite my illness, was like the widow's sacred mite, for I "cast in all that [I] had."

in my heart. I knew that “whom the Lord calls, the Lord qualifies.”¹ I reveled in having been considered able and worthy to serve. I’d lived for several years in remission and felt ready to move forward with life.

Arriving at church for our first night of Scouts fully prepared, I felt cautiously optimistic about enjoying an evening with just three boys. But within the first 10 minutes, my acquired sensory processing disorder (a high sensitivity to input from the senses) was so overstimulated that

it rendered me speechless. I was more focused on the rule requiring two leaders in the room than on the reality that if I didn’t get out of the room, I would become progressively worse. Consequently, surrounded by excited Scout chatter, I quickly deteriorated. By the end of 60 minutes, I found myself rocking in the corner with my fingers in my ears, humming to calm my brain.

Our bishop saw my husband helping me out of the room and came over to ask how our first night of Scouting went. I must have had a look of absolute terror in my tear-filled eyes. Scout noise echoed loudly in my head, even though they’d long since departed. I was nearly speechless, responding with only, “Dit. Dit. Dit.” I stared at the ground, embarrassed at my incessant rocking and finger snapping. I felt ashamed of the stigma attached to my diagnosis.

My husband briefly explained my sensory processing disorder and schizophrenia to our bishop while I silently questioned whether I’d done enough to allow the Lord to magnify my

ability. I forced myself to look up into my bishop’s eyes. To my surprise, they reflected compassion instead of pity or fear. He released me on the spot, apologizing for the calling and saying that the Lord called me to be a leader of 11-year-old Scouts expecting only a heart willing to serve. The bishop then let me go home, requesting to speak with me the following Sunday after I recovered. At home, while I sequestered myself in a completely dark room with earplugs, my brain calmed enough to weaken the aura-like sensory intensity associated with overstimulation. Two hours after Scouts, I regained my ability to communicate.

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A Learning Experience for Me and My Bishop

In our meeting the following Sunday, my bishop explained the revelatory experience of extending callings. He said he would think of all the well-qualified people in the ward, weighing everything he knew about them, and would pray about it. He then explained that he could only receive inspiration based on what he knew about an individual. When he didn't have all the information, he could call a person who was completely worthy of having that calling but physically incapable of fulfilling it.

He said part of his training process as a bishop was to learn how to better ask the right questions to gather more information before taking the matter to the Lord. My bishop humbly explained that the Lord was working on training him to better meet the individual needs of the ward members.

He went on to explain that because I knew of my illness and accepted the calling anyway, my sacrifice was akin to the sacred widow's mite, for "of [my] want [I] did cast in all that [I] had" (Mark 12:44). He said that my acceptance of the calling was more important than my actual ability to fulfill it, because the Lord understood my illness. He lovingly explained that part of the reason he'd been inspired to call me as a Scout leader was that the Lord wanted the bishop to understand how willing I was to serve.

He added that the Lord also wanted him to help me understand that I should never, ever put a calling before my health. He said that in the future, when any bishop extended a calling to me, I should tell him that my heart is ready and willing to serve but that my body's limitations are such that I may not be able to do as my heart desires.

It was a great learning experience for both of us.

Serving in a Different Way

Later I was called as an adviser for the Young Women—a calling to provide compassion and to support the leaders striving to better understand unique needs of several girls living with severe mental illnesses and behavioral disorders. I thrived in that calling. I'd like to think my sweet young women and those called to learn from us thrived as a result as well.

My health cycles through seasons of ability and incapacity. When I am well, I am entirely capable of serving in the unique capacities to which I am called. I recognize that the Lord gives me valuable lived experience that can be used (in appropriate situations) to help my leaders better understand not only me but also many others who have yet to find their voice to talk about difficult circumstances. When I share my experiences, I try to touch only briefly on how my symptoms impact my life, without going into the traumatic details, to avoid overwhelming or scaring those I attempt to teach.

The Lord has something each of us can learn from and teach our bishoprics and organization leaders so that together we can all become stronger instruments in His hands as we recognize one another not by our earthly labels but as divine children of loving heavenly parents. ■

The author lives in California, USA.

NOTE

1. Thomas S. Monson, "Duty Calls," *Ensign*, May 1996, 44.

