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reflection

Bipolarity, creativity, stigma and authenticity in the work of Kay Redfield Jamison

John Cookson

For many years, Kay Jamison has been the author I go to when advising patients diagnosed with bipolar disorder. *Touched with Fire: Manic-depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament* (1993) is the first book I recommend. 'Touched' refers to mental imbalance and inspiration, and 'fire' refers to mania and passion. The book tells of numerous well-known figures who have been successful and outstanding despite (and possibly because of) their bipolar condition. Jamison has done as much as anyone to reduce the stigma of severe mental illness. I recommend her reflective accounts of her development as an academic clinical psychologist, struggling to come to terms with her own bipolar illness and need for treatment with a high dose of lithium, and with handling her career, marriages and bereavements (*An Unquiet Mind: A Memoir of Moods and Madness* (1996) and *Nothing Was The Same: A Memoir* (2009)).

Jamison is the co-writer, with Frederick Goodwin, of the definitive monograph on bipolar disorder, *Manic-Depressive Illness: Bipolar Disorders and Recurrent Depression* (1990 and 2007), a book of such scholarship, comprehensive understanding and enlightenment that it is unlikely to ever again be matched by two authors, considering the subsequent expansion in research.

Jamison has a zest for life and exuberance, but is also well acquainted with depression and suicidality, having begun to experience bipolar cycles at the age of 16. She did not acknowledge these as symptoms of pathology, despite 3 years of graduate studies in clinical psychology, to include a final year at the Maudsley. She was diagnosed with psychotic mania when she was 17 years old, and again aged 29. If a patient with bipolar disorder declares that, after being told their diagnosis, they sought with a colleague to read everything they could find that had been written on the illness and its treatment, one might react with scepticism. To react so with Jamison would be wrong. She is a prolific reader ('three books a week') and her academic works are accompanied by appendices with fascinating expositions and references to other authors.

Touched with Fire presents evidence for the occurrence of manic and depressive periods in the lives of hundreds of famous people, notably poets, writers, composers and painters, and their relatives. It argues that the instability of mood in their illness, and their temperament, are integral to their productivity and originality. The argument is based partly on historical accounts of mood or temperament, and partly on detailed life charts and family trees. They include Robert Shuman, Alfred Lord Tennyson, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Virginia Woolf, Henry James, Ernest Hemingway, Vincent van Gogh, and a sketch of that most complete of manic-depressive creatives, with all the comorbidities, who gave his name to a temperament, George Gordon, Lord Byron. This connection needs to be documented because the stigma of mental illness prevents many individuals and their families from acknowledging it, whether they be successful, famous or not. Jamison's study on British artists, conducted during a sabbatical in Oxford and at St George's Hospital in 1982, contributed evidence for this association, which had also been explored by Nancy Andreasen in American writers. Jamison implies that the association might apply in other fields of artistic performance and leadership more broadly. Her own life is testament to this.

Before diagnosis, Jamison had 16 publications in the literature of personality types. Following her appointment in the Department of Psychiatry at the University of California, Los Angeles in 1974, she began publishing on bipolar disorder, and among her first publications were those with Frederick Goodwin in 1979 describing attitudes to lithium, and in 1980 on positive experiences reported by patients after affective episodes; by that time, she could draw on her own experiences for both topics. In 1983 she began work on *Manic-Depressive Illness*, especially the sections on psychosocial aspects. By pointing to positive aspects of affective illness, Jamison's books help to dispel stigma and encourage people to speak about their experiences of it. They place the illness firmly in the domain of medical science.

Her achievement has not been easy. She received many exceedingly hostile letters from people with different views on the causes of mental illness, as well as from clinicians who encountered career blocks from stigma. However, she remains inspired by the sentiment of her most recent subject, Robert Lowell – 'Yet why not say what happened?'

Jamison discusses the ingredients of bipolarity that contribute to leadership, productivity and creativity. In her own case, the most impressive quality of her writing besides her extraordinary fluency and intelligence is its authenticity, born of personal experience and emotional courage.

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