



A JOURNAL OF ORTHODOX FAITH AND CULTURE

ROAD TO EMMAUS

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Two of Dr. Marina Busigina's patients from the Ekaterinburg mental hospital, 1980's

GEORGE, NADEZHDA, TATIANA, SERGEI, AND MICHAEL

At the suggestion of Inna Belova, our Russian co-editor, five Orthodox Muscovites generously agreed to talk about their struggle with mental illness. Later, Inna remarked, "As we spoke, I understood that the seeds of their illnesses are within each of us, and how thin the line is between mental health and illness."

George

I'm 32 and a hospital nurse. Since childhood, I've suffered from extreme depression, caused by a biochemical malfunction in the brain and aggravated by an improper upbringing. I do not blame my parents for this as they didn't know about mental illness as I was growing up. Sometimes, when things become very difficult, I ask my doctor to prescribe anti-depressants. If you want to imagine how I feel when I have to take medicine, just remember the last time you were in a bad mood with no obvious reason and multiply it by three or four times.

What is the most important thing for me in church? Of course, I force myself to go to services. I like church singing and icons and the sacraments, but what matters most are the people around me. Communicating with them is extremely important because I cannot stay alone for a long period; if I do, my psychological discomfort and anxiety increase greatly. I perceive God's love mostly through the love Christians have for one another. I'm in need of proof that God exists and loves me and the only real proof for me is that people in church love and care for one another. Services, prayer, and the holy atmosphere in church placate and console me. I've read a lot of

psychology and psychiatry, but speaking subjectively, I have only one major problem: I need to give and receive love and care. I'm happy when I'm doing this and extremely unhappy when I am not.

Also, I purposefully go to those churches where priests think of ways to bring their parishioners closer together, inventing ways people can know and communicate with one another. Yes, I'm aware that I want special attention and recognition; this is a strong inner need, to communicate on a deep, personal level.

At the same time, I find myself unsatisfied with deep relations with non-church people. I need the Lord — the Lord expressed in deep, true relations between His people. When I receive this, my disease doesn't bother me at all. Also, I go only to those priests who do not emphasize the idea of sin, which was insisted upon quite strongly in my youth, but speak instead of the joy people have when they live with God.

Nadezhda

I'm 31 this year, I work as a librarian, and I was in mental hospitals six times for long periods between the ages of 15 and 24. I haven't been to our local mental polyclinic now for almost seven years. At the age of 24, when *pere-stroika* began, the laws concerning mental patients became milder and I went through a psychiatric commission review which decided that my name could be taken off the list of psychiatric patients living in our district. My doctor said, though, that I could not consider myself completely cured and was welcome to come and ask for help any time I needed it.

As for my diagnosis, my first doctor thought it to be a form of schizophrenia, but later it was changed to obsessive neurosis. When I suffered acutely I had the following symptoms: if I saw or heard something unpleasant, I could not get rid of the bad impression for a long time, my mind was mired in morbid recollections, turning them around and about, over and over. In fact, they did not even need to be awful things. For example, when I was about fifteen, I met a woman who, for some reason, seemed so revolting to me that I could not stop my mind from imagining her all the time. I felt very bad indeed. She wasn't ugly or wicked — on the contrary, she was good-looking, the mother of two young daughters, and a good wife. (As a child I was always afraid of pregnant women and especially of women who looked too family-

like, if you see what I mean: stout, with almost professional skills in cooking and cleaning, rough and loud. They seemed unbearably vulgar to me.)

So, after I met this woman I could not get rid of the negative impression, and it poisoned my entire life. I never saw her again in reality but, by and by, I began to avoid everything that reminded me of her. For example, I turned away in terror at seeing a similar haircut as hers, and I stopped eating cucumbers because she had told me that she was fond of growing cucumbers at her dacha. I could not even hear the word 'cucumber' or 'dacha' without distress. Eventually, most of the objects and phenomena I saw became divided in my mind as 'safe' or 'dangerous'. Those not associated with the woman were safe, and the ones that could be associated with her, even remotely, were dangerous.

As my illness developed, there remained fewer and fewer safe things in the world for me, as almost everything gradually became a part of the system of bad associations. Going back to the example with cucumbers, not only cucumbers themselves were a problem, but also any other green oblong vegetable like zucchini or an unripe eggplant. Then, not only green vegetables, but green fruit as well, and on and on without end. Finally, out of the whole world there remained for me only a narrow space in which things existed that were not associated with that frightful woman. I felt as if I were drowning. Life seemed black to me. I took the medication that the doctors gave me, but the treatment made me stupid and unable to concentrate on any kind of normal activity — being young, I had to study and work. Still, after a few years of treatment, this system of morbid association lost most of its power over me, the colors faded, and I felt much better. But I was often depressed, life had no savor for me, and I went on taking the medicine.

In that state of mind I first entered a church. It struck me as being extremely beautiful — the images, the colors, the smells ... I did not remember having enjoyed a sight or a sound for a dozen years. My senses had been as if sealed, but in the church I looked at the icons intently, with my eyes really open, inhaled the smell of incense and listened to the quiet words of prayer. I was like the blind man in the Gospels whom Christ healed; the first thing he saw was His face. I was seeing the spiritual world for the first time, and with it, the whole natural world of objects and people. The Church filled the world with pleasant things for me to enjoy, bringing me back to life.

Then, a new life began for me. I received the sacraments, often went on pilgrimage, to confession, and finally, I realized that God doesn't just give us all

that we need, but wants us to give something in return as well. I understood that, ill as I was and probably still am, I also must serve God by serving my neighbor. It sounds natural, but it was a very difficult thing to come to.

I still have mental problems: I tire easily, and by the end of the day I'm exhausted and my nerves overstrained. I cannot communicate well because I don't know how to talk to people, to make them interested in our conversation. I am shy and I know that I look gloomy. But at work, where I am familiar with the daily routine, I am quite alright in doing my duties. I don't like parties. I feel lost there, particularly with young men. Nevertheless, my relatives say that I am too open with people, and this is true, although not so much as a few years ago. At first, I expected church people to be open and sincere with their brothers and sisters, like in a family, but now I understand that this is not always possible. However, if a church person pretends or behaves falsely, I feel unhappy and can never talk to that person again. My cousin, who is also mentally ill, but doesn't go to church or think about God, has spent all of his life sitting at home. He has never worked and never had friends, but I don't want to live like this, so I try to be in church, at work, and with people.

I would like to ask all the Christians who are mentally well: please look at us as your brothers and sisters in Christ. Most of us are not dangerous and very often we are quite intelligent. Please don't look down on us, because God Himself doesn't.

Tatiana

I'm 40, married, and I have a child. At the age of 14 I had a nervous breakdown. It began with my refusing to eat. My parents didn't know. They had to work very long hours and the school was far from home, so I used the money they gave me to buy meals for records, cassettes, and photos of my favorite rock groups. I also didn't want to put on weight, so I was always hungry. I weighed 44 kilos [97 pounds], with a height of 167 cm [5' 4"], and looked like a skeleton. I didn't care about anything, but in the last year of school, I decided that I wanted to enter Moscow State University. To successfully graduate and then pass the university entrance exams meant that I had to make up for many years lost in teenage dreaming and wandering around the huge city alone or with friends of the same type. I only had a short time to learn difficult subjects like mathematics, physics, and chem-

istry. Hungry and overworked, I developed insomnia and broke down. I went to a neurologist who said that to continue preparing for the exams would ruin my mental and physical health altogether. I began taking sleeping pills, but they made me sleep more than I wanted, even during the day. Still, I still kept studying.

My parents were very worried, of course, and someone told them that I would recover if they had me baptized. They took me to a church on a Saturday morning. I didn't feel anything during the baptism. I was just ashamed to be there with babies and small children and I immediately forgot about it, as it had no meaning for me. This was in May. To get into Moscow State University you had to have a perfect score, all 5's [the highest mark] on every entrance exam. In July I took the tests, and did much better than anyone expected, but the mark on one of the many exams was a 4, and with even one 4 I could only study in the evening department. I went to another institute and passed the exams there as a day student. In September our studies began. I became interested and gradually my problems with insomnia decreased. As for eating... well, I wish I ate less now as I weigh 74 kilos, that is, twice as much as then.

About a year after the baptism I began thinking about God. Not in the church way, though, as I had a sort of mild aversion to church life. Finally, I understood that I couldn't go on without the Church's centuries-long tradition and experience, so I became Orthodox. Now, I think that if in my teenage wanderings someone had brought me into a church and said, "Look, this is Jesus Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane and He is deciding if He should die for people who don't really understand Him or care for Him," I would have felt that He was close to me. There are many episodes in the Gospels that are close to a teenager's heart; one just has to put a proper accent on them.

Sergei

Yes, I go to church, but not from childhood. They didn't take me. Mother was with me until her last days, but there was no father. We never talked about it in the family and I was ashamed of it. I always had problems with my behavior. Sometimes I have fits of aggression. I didn't do badly at school but was never on the list of good students. I used to fight. Zarubin, my classmate. He doesn't want to talk to me now. As if he doesn't recognize me.

After I finished school it was bad at home. Mother was often angry. It wasn't only myself that my aggression tortured. It was hard for her too.

I entered the Music Conservatory in St. Petersburg. It was a great event for me, a great joy. My studies there weren't difficult. I have a musical ear. I wanted to sing, it meant a lot to me. I went to Germany several times through a student exchange program. It was better there. There, I still have friends. They write to me — postcards, letters, e-mail. I cannot go there now, though. I work as a guard.

When I studied at the conservatory, I felt well only in St. Alexander Nevsky Lavra. I would stand a bit, sit a bit, and feel better. Once, I fought with a neighbor and was taken to the crazy house. I felt bad there. Their medicines made me lose the correlation between my ear and my voice. When mother heard, she came from Moscow. She wasn't any great church-goer, but some people took pity on her. Told her what to do. She ran to St. Xenia at Smolensk Cemetery for help. An hour later I was sitting with her on a park bench. They let me go — no one knows why.

I'm going to Peter [St. Petersburg] to St. Xenia on Feb. 6 for her feast. I wonder if anyone can paint an icon of St. Xenia of Rome for me? Her day is the same as St. Xenia of Peter. Peter's St. Xenia appeared to my mother before she died, saying she would die soon. Mother didn't tell me, though. She told our neighbor and the neighbor told me afterwards.

In Petersburg, I sang in a German church, in German. I like poetry and linguistics and I speak German. Then in Moscow, I sang in an Orthodox church. Those were hard times. I often fought with the choir director and the singers. Then, I just happened to beat the guard. I was very sorry to have done so afterwards. They made me leave.

Maybe I will sing in church again. Mother would be glad. Now I teach private singing lessons. Strange ones. To a seventy year-old lady. Her singing goes well. But it is difficult for me. Once she sang badly and I hit her. I couldn't restrain myself. I'm sorry to have done so. Now she has learned how to master her voice. But these classes are difficult for me psychologically.

Mother died. My phone was switched off for non-payment. Then I found another church. Made friends with the priest. He became my spiritual father. I began taking Communion regularly. But again my character was causing me problems. I'm crazy, you know. They forbade me to sing in that church or even come there after I hit someone. My spiritual father left for Germany and he writes to me on e-mail. He gives me advice. It helps.

Now I go to a Catholic Church. On Christmas I sang with the Lutherans, but I am still Orthodox. I like saints who lived before the schism. I try to find their lives and icons. I also like old European saints; for example, St. Edward the Confessor.

Michael

(as told by his granddaughter, Sonia)

In my Siberian family there have been many long-lived generations. My great-grandfather lived to 105, and his son, my grandfather, was determined to live longer than his father. He was baptized because he was born in 1902 or 1903 and, although he went to church and had Holy Communion as a child, I don't believe he ever went to church after the Revolution. He did not practice Orthodoxy; he may have even thought of himself as an atheist, but he loved life and wanted to extend it by any possible means.

He was very educated, an engineer and the head of several different companies. He went on pension at about sixty, and after that, began his research to find a panacea or elixir to make him live longer. I remember as a child, when he was about seventy years old he made a water filter with some pure silver components and an electric charge to ionize the water as it passed through the filter. He and my grandmother drank the water every day for months.

Even at 95, he was very active. He would get up every morning at six, do his morning exercises, take a cold shower, go for a walk and then continue his work. He not only read works of philosophy and science, but wrote extensive notes and commentaries in the margins, and kept a daily diary. Even after he was ninety, he set himself the task of memorizing long passages of verse. Even so, he was afraid that someday he might lose his mind. The possibility of becoming mentally ill hung over him like a specter.

Then, quite unexpectedly, one day it happened. He woke up and could not remember that he was a grown-up man. He spoke of himself as if he were a little boy. He called his wife, "Mother" and was afraid that she would punish him for doing something wrong. He didn't recognize anyone. As you can imagine, this was very difficult for my relatives because they were used to seeing him as such a clever, vital, sober man. From one moment to the next, he had become absolutely helpless, like a little boy.

Shortly before his illness, my mother, who is Orthodox, asked him if he wanted her to invite a priest to talk or confess and perhaps receive the sacraments. He said that he had nothing to repent of — this wasn't out of pride, but the usual thing a non-Christian would say, and he was honest about it. After his mind broke, my mother went to ask the priest what to do. The priest said that it wasn't time yet to give him Holy Communion, but to start by trying to give him holy water, two or three times a day. Earlier, my grandfather had always refused to drink holy water, although grandmother always had it in the house, so, without telling him, she and my mother decided to give him holy water. The next time he asked for a drink, my mother gave him a glassful, and he grabbed it out of her hands and drank it as if he was extremely thirsty, then asked for more.

From time to time that day he said to his wife, "Can I have some of that silver water?" She didn't understand at first what he was referring to, because he had built the water filter thirty years before and she'd forgotten all about it — so when he first began asking, she brought him regular drinking water. He tried this water and said, "No, no, this is not the right water, I need silver water." Although both our drinking water and the water that was taken to church to be blessed were from the same water source, he could tell by taste that the water he was drinking was not what he wanted. Finally, my grandmother understood and whenever he asked for "silver water," she gave him holy water and he was content.

In the meantime, the doctors who examined him said that although he was otherwise in very good shape, he had had something like a major stroke and the effects couldn't be reversed. His condition was permanent. But a week after my grandmother began giving him holy water, his mind returned! It was unbelievable — the doctors themselves couldn't believe it. He understood completely who and where he was and recognized everyone around him, but he had become much softer and kinder. When my mother tried to talk to him again about church, the sacraments and inviting a priest, he looked at her, not with his old direct authoritarian gaze, but with tears in his eyes and said, "I'm sorry, I'm not ready yet. I'm not enough of a believer."

Of course, anyone can feel that they aren't good enough and this might be pride, but I think he was still trying to be honest. So, my mother didn't invite a priest for him, but he kept drinking holy water and for six months was completely normal, only much more gentle. He was always a very good man, he never hurt anyone, but now he was very tender in his relationships.

Half a year passed and he had another stroke. Overnight, he turned again mentally into a little boy. Of course, it was difficult to see, but this time my relatives were not so upset. They understood that perhaps this was the only way my grandfather could come close to God. He had been such a powerful, authoritative, educated man, who was as self-sufficient, as anyone can be. But now his heart had become like a little child's, and although he did not receive the sacraments, he was open to God with the simplicity of a child, without the weight of his long, experienced life.

As he grew weaker, we all felt that he was going to die, and he did during Holy Week, a few days before Pascha. The night that he passed on, my grandmother was sitting next to him holding his hand in hers. It was obvious he was weakening and his breathing became lighter and lighter. Finally, he opened his eyes and said, "Please, give me some of this silver water." He drank it, then laid back peacefully, and died.

Of course, we can't compare taking holy water to receiving the sacraments — it isn't Holy Communion — but perhaps for my grandfather, who had lived such a long life without church, it was a step towards God before he died. I think God gave him as much as he was able to receive. He had a church funeral because he had been baptized as a young child.

I would like to ask those of you reading this, if it won't be too difficult for you, or a burden, to please pray for him sometimes. His name is Michael. ✚