

CALLED NOT TO SERVE

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My brain is slightly broken. The natural lows and highs of life are amplified by chemical imbalance into deep emotional troughs and crazed manic waves that can strike anytime and for any reason. I also experience what are called “mixed states,” where I feel both depression and mania simultaneously. My brain will be on fire, setting off a horse race of depressing ideas and emotions. The worst thoughts I’ve ever had about myself all gallop to get a nose ahead of the others.

It’s impossible to feel the Spirit in these episodes. That may sound blasphemous, but it’s true. Most of my mixed-state experiences are channeled into a prayer to my Heavenly Father, to please send help, please take me out of this, please show me a sign that you still love me. But for that space of time, there’s a barrier that the Holy Ghost can’t or won’t penetrate. I feel entirely alone in a permanent night, blocked from sunlight by the wall of earth that is my chemical imbalance.

I feel forsaken.

You weren’t good enough. You weren’t stable enough. You weren’t worthy enough.

The others are.

That’s not what the stake president says when he releases you from the call to serve a mission. Not at all. But it’s what you tell yourself. Or what the devil says into your ear. It’s hard to tell the two apart when you’ve got bipolar disorder.

Eventually the thunder passes like a headache, and I wonder just why I was feeling so deranged. I wonder if those negative thoughts were whispered into my ear by the devil or merely my disorder. If the devil, why didn’t my supplication to God send him running? If the disorder, what on earth was the point of such useless, debilitating suffering?

For years as a young adult, I endured this condition because I was too prideful to ask for help. I wrote my experience into my first novel. It turned out in the end that I had no idea what I was doing as a novelist, and so, in denial of its fundamental flaws, I self-published it, eager to jumpstart my inevitable career. That I did not care to improve my craft before trying to announce myself to the world was the first of my failures and an example of my prideful tendencies, an obvious parallel to my mental health.

It was only by a miracle, a direct intervention from God, that I found the humility to seek help and the medication—Geodon—that saved my life. My mind cleared up, and soon my soul did, too. As the months went on, I increasingly felt the need to repay the Savior and serve a mission. It came to a head about six months later: I was writing in my journal and started the sentence: “I want to serve . . .”

Then I stopped. For a moment I pondered which words should follow. Did I want to serve a mission? Or did I want to serve God? Either would have been honest. But as an aspiring writer, I wanted to get it just right. I ended up scribbling, “I want to serve God and go on a mission.”

This word choice may seem inconsequential to most people, but for me it was significant. Later, reading Doctrine and Covenants section 4, the phrasing hit me hard: “Therefore, if ye have desires *to serve God* ye are called to the work.”¹

That was enough. Within a few months my wisdom teeth were out and my mission papers were in.

Three weeks passed but the call didn’t come. Months passed. My stake president inquired, and Salt Lake City told him what has become one of the greatest ironies of my life: the medication that I take for my bipolar disorder—the medication that literally saved my life and soul—had sent up a red flag. Geodon is technically an antipsychotic

1. Doctrine and Covenants 4:3, emphasis added.

medication. I wasn't psychotic; these just happened to be the pills that gave my brain breathing room, the space for me to take control of my life. But how could the Church offices know that?

"How do you feel about not going on a mission and moving on with your life?" my stake president said.

I was told I was on the cutting edge of this policy. They were keeping young missionaries home if there was even the slightest chance they'd break down in the field. I felt fortunate not to be one of the previous generation, who might go out and attempt to live the missionary lifestyle—just doing what the Church asked them to do—and fail for reasons they could not control, while others around them succeeded. I did not have to be surrounded by those successful missionaries and mentally bludgeon myself with comparisons. I didn't have to be "sent home early," the subject of myriad rumors and speculation. I didn't fail to live up to the call to serve.

No: I was called *not* to serve.

In the dark times there would still always be that unavoidable feeling that I couldn't be as useful to God as others were. I didn't possess the right kind of mind. I was broken, and they were whole. I lacked the talents and skills to be a proper soldier in the army of the Lord. I wasn't making the sacrifice that real missionaries made.

But when I received that answer from my stake president, I didn't feel any negativity. The Spirit had already prepared me for that answer. I was so accepting of it that when I told my parents, and later my bishop, I was somewhat surprised at their reactions. They just stared at me in silence, disbelieving. Not in judgment of me, but on my behalf. I felt loved then, but I didn't feel any sadness. In my mind, it was the normal chain of events; I had already started making plans for what I was going to do next in life.

Within five months I moved out of my childhood home. I started work on my third (unpublished) novel with plans for more. I was on my way back to school. I was even married less than a year from that

meeting. Everything fell into place so easily that it was clear to me that God never intended for me to serve full-time in the field. This was the path he wanted me to take.

On top of all of that, I felt I had received a different kind of call to serve. This was crystallized in a message my sister sent me at that time: “Dear Neal, you have been called to serve your mission throughout your entire life. You will be blessed for your service. Through your faith and prayers you will see much success. Keep up the hard work.”

If full-time missions are the law of tithing—two years of service out of twenty lived—what my sister wrote seemed to be about the law of consecration. It was my duty, I told myself, to give my whole life to Christ.

My talents were the opposite of the great orators of the Book of Mormon. Moroni bemoaned the Nephites’ lack of writing ability and feared mockery for it. I was a writer, or wanted to be one, or thought myself one. Even back in the dark times, when I dealt not only with emotional frailty but addiction and self-hate, I wanted to change the world by warning others not to go down my path. Now, as a worthy Melchizedek priesthood holder who’d been brought out of darkness and into light by God’s hand, I could broadcast God’s truth to the world with my writing ability. Or so I believed.

While many detrimental elements of my bipolar disorder were sanded down into almost nothing, the sense of grandiosity persisted. But now it felt healthy, even divinely ordained. And of course God would be there to shower me with the same kind of success he promised the sons of Mosiah after they experienced depression and were about to turn back from their desire to convert the Lamanites. This would be my divinely appointed mission, and in accomplishing that mission, I would be great. I would be God’s champion, sent down to change the world through my novels. In fact, my first name, Neal, actually means “champion,” and David, my middle name, means “beloved of God”! Clearly these clues were crucial to understanding my grand destiny. No,

I was never called to fight in trenches. Instead, I would be a general, fighting and inspiring and strategizing from a distance.

Indeed, perhaps I was called to serve a mission after all.



It's been eleven years since that meeting with my stake president. It is quarter past eleven—forty-five minutes to midnight. I am at the end of a long, unprofitable day, in the darkest of night, with several hours still to go. I can't sleep—my pills are necessary to turn off my brain, but I can't bear to take them yet. I am exhausted, but I must work. Grace might be as my day, but all I see is night. I have not yet seen a fullness, nor has the sunlight of success found my heart. I have not yet seen the Lord take the work from my hands, call me a good and faithful servant, and finish what I cannot. It is still in my hands; I am yet unprofitable; I can't yet stand still, with the utmost assurance, to see the salvation of God and for his arm to be revealed.

It's been eleven years since I got that request from my stake president. Eleven years and over a million words of fiction written, rewritten, submitted—and but for ten thousand of them, all unpublished.

Not a part of even a single new baptism.

If this lack of success is a hint from God, I haven't yet taken it to heart. As you can see, I'm still writing. But there's a reason for that: mania, the opposite pole from depression, can have an effect like a boomerang. After a bout of darkness, it can swing you around into an extra sense of zeal, whip you up you with a wind of energy and zest for life that, in the moment, feels completely natural. You can conquer the world, accomplish any mission, live up to any standard. Where before you were down in the depths, now you operate on a higher plane than all the rest of the world, and someday soon they will see it when the fruits of your labor will shine for all the world to admire.

We call these effects *delusions of grandeur*. I've mistaken them for the Spirit many, many times.

Here's an example: back during the darkest days of my untreated bipolar disorder, I developed a crush on a certain girl (we'll call her Summer) who was part of my circle of friends. Over time, my feelings for Summer grew into an attachment. My happiness revolved around the bits of attention she paid me via email. It became an obsession. There were multiple points where I revealed my feelings and, more emphatically each time, Summer said *no*. So we would just be friends, I rationalized after climbing back out of the Mariana Trench of despair. But the romantic desire only deepened, because something about my chemical imbalance made it impossible for me to live without hope. This would all blossom into marriage, I was sure of it. The Spirit told me! There was simply no other way to live life without that specific concrete hope for Summer. Without it I would prefer to be dead.

It took me a long, long time to finally recognize this pattern elsewhere in my life. Over the years of my repeated failures, my mania would inevitably drag me back up to the heights of hope and promise. It has been an endless cycle of accepting failure followed by the flip of some chemical switch and the delusions of grandeur pulling me right back up in its wake, leading me to try and try and try again, and never, no never, no never forsake the mission call I felt I received.

I did get one book published, in which I take stories from pop culture and use them as religious parables. It might have sold better had I not moved away from Utah two months after it was published (my wife, the primary breadwinner, got a job offer in another state), effectively abandoning my target demographic. A freelance food critic reviewed it in the *Deseret News*, giving it a lukewarm appraisal, and it was quickly forgotten. The only royalty check I ever received from sales was instantly drowned in the sea of bills that awaited my family after the big move. If its message reached anyone but the one or two readers who contacted me personally, I didn't know it. The book left no dramatic imprint on my life at all.

All these years of profitless work—for what, exactly? For a mere ungraspable dream? For the project of greatness in the eyes of both

God and the world? Wasn't this, my true mission—writing—meant for success? Didn't God want me to be his beloved champion before the world?

It's only recently that a certain vexing suspicion has wormed its way into my consciousness: what if failure as a writer is my calling?

For so long I've been so puffed up by thoughts of my own great potential, that perhaps this is the ultimate lifelong mission God has set for me: a literal call not to serve. Indeed, perhaps it is no longer my stake president, but God himself asking, "Neal, how would you feel about not serving that mission and moving on with your life?"

I wonder if I could ever accept such a thing, even from God. The thought is earth-shattering, like a body rejecting a soul transplant. I think I would rather live a lifetime of trying to write, and failing, than accept this particular mission.

True, God has asked better men and women for more, and they've given it to him. I wouldn't be the first man to be asked to sacrifice his ego, the worldly trappings that artificially define his worth. Maybe this is what *consecration* really means. I give him what I've worked on all these years, and it's utterly up to him how to use it. I need to have the faith to accept it—even if he throws it in the trash.

It might seem a simple principle with an easy answer in Sunday School. The rich young man must sell all he possesses and give the money to the poor. For someone who had inherited wealth, or simply grown up in it, that might not be as demanding a prospect.

But I see how and why that rich young man was disappointed. It wasn't just luxuries he would be giving up. It would be the entire labor of his life, his very worth to the world, every daily goal achieved, every dream met, every skill honed. All that he had worked for over the course of his life, every talent God had gifted him that he had invested and doubled, every tear he'd shed and drop of sweat he'd bled—to let it be washed away to others with nothing palpable to replace it?

If I sacrificed my writing, what would remain, really? A naked soul, same as all the others. The trappings, the romance, the philosophy, it

would all be gone. Maybe that's what I'm most afraid of: being just like everybody else.

Just the ward cubmaster.

But maybe that's how God wants us to see ourselves. We may think the height of Mount Everest to be nigh unconquerable, but when you look at the curvature of the whole earth, it's hardly a bump. That's likely how God looks at his best, most spiritually perfect children here in this world—the Joseph Smiths, the Russell Nelsons—even they are so far away from God's level that it's pitiable. We all have work to do; we're all ordinary souls with growth to achieve far past this mortal life.

On the other hand, God could be sending a different message entirely. "Your worth is not found in your works," he's telling me. "It's inherent inside you as a son of God." Maybe God's trying to get that across and for some reason it cannot penetrate my mind. I accept that idea rationally and intellectually, but I've never felt it deep in my heart. Perhaps if I gave up the writing project entirely, I might feel it more clearly. Take a step into the dark corridor first, and only then feel God's light bathing my path in clarity.

But—what if the success I dream of lies just around the next corner? Just at the end of this latest corridor? The latest draft? It's like a big government stimulus to jumpstart the economy. If the economy doesn't actually improve, is it the fault of the idea itself or should the stimulus just have been more potent?

The questions swirl and vex. But they can't be waved away like smoke. I wish all the entreaties could be reduced to a simple request for personal revelation. I've asked for such answers many, many times, and I feel certain God wants me to continue. He wants me to be his champion and refuse to give up!

But this is another pitfall for the mentally unwell: how can I know for sure that I didn't just convince myself of the answer I wanted so desperately to hear? My manic state has misled me before. And I have no evidence outside of myself of the path I'm trying to tread. Nevertheless,

I know that God is still on the other side. I've seen too much of his hand in my life, in small moments and in its overarching course. I've seen the progress I've made as a writer, as a husband, as a father. And I've seen myself humbled in ways I never thought necessary, both spiritually and mentally.

I want the desires of my heart to be pure. And so, I consider this essay a prayer to the God I know is there, a confession to my best, my heavenly friend, who, through thorny ways, leads to a joyful end. Whether my compulsive hopefulness is a weakness or a strength, an emblem of ungodly pride or an article of faith in the long game of God's promises—or somehow both at once—it is an essential part of my life and my soul.

I'm listening, Heavenly Father. I'm listening.

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