

# RIDING *the* WINDHORSE



Manic-Depressive Disorder  
and the Quest for Wholeness



ROBERT S. CORRINGTON

In this moving account of his struggles with manic-depressive disorder, distinguished philosopher Robert S. Corrington, creator of the school of ecstatic naturalism, presents a compelling argument for rethinking the nature of this malady. Having inherited the disorder from his mother, a gifted actress, who struggled with her own form of it until her death, he early on developed crucial survival strategies that he here recommends to other sufferers. In this study Professor Corrington details the latest medical, psychological, and spiritual thinking about bipolar disease; a disorder characterized by extreme mood swings and that is responsible for many untimely deaths each year. However, manic-depression is also found in almost all forms of genius and Professor Corrington presents two detailed case studies showing this correlation: that of the English scientist Sir Isaac Newton and the Indian mystic Sri Ramakrishna. The book represents one person's eventual triumph over a potentially crippling disease and shows that creativity and the quest for wholeness can support the erratic flight of the windhorse of manic-depression.

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## PREFACE

Writing this book has been a great emotional and intellectual challenge, not least because I have been forced to confront a great deal about my own mental illness and about how it must look to others. No one likes peering into what C.G. Jung called the shadow side of the self, that side which always seems to intrude and overturn whatever hard won stability we may have at any given moment. In the case of an illness as severe as manic-depression, this intrusion can come with overwhelming force and shatter the boundaries of the psyche. This is an experience I have lived through over and over again and seen played out in my own extended family.

Yet at the same time, this most uncanny of psychic guests can propel the individual to acts of creativity and boundary transgression that are not available to those who do not have the disease. Part of my concern in writing this book is to make sense of this paradox and with finding some means for living with its moral ambiguities.

Manic-depressive disorder is far more common than many suspect, with one person out of a hundred having some form of the disease. Consequently, anyone reading this book is likely to either have the disorder or know someone who does. Its prevalence in the general population and its highly disruptive power are facts that force us to take a fresh look at what this uncanny disease is and how it has affected personal and collective history. I argue, following the important insights of Kay Redfield Jamison, D. Jablow Hershman, Julian Lieb and others, that manic-depressive disorder is profoundly embedded in the phenomenon of genius and may be a necessary condition for many forms of genius level productivity. Consequently, as I also argue, manic-depressive disorder, or bi-polar disorder as it is known in the medical world, has a value for the human species as a whole but may be destructive of its individual carrier.

I decided to write this book, my ninth, for deeply personal reasons. I needed to make sense of what has happened in my life and to that of close family members. Further, I wanted to find out everything I could about how to survive a major mental illness and about the positive aspects of a disorder that has such numbing depths and such searing heights. My research has taken me to many strange places and has intersected with the lives of courageous manic-depressive, both

living and long gone. In the latter category I have taken great comfort from the fact that such people as Virginia Wolf, Sir Isaac Newton, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William, Lord Byron, Charles Dickens, Vincent Van Gogh, Sri Ramakrishna, Ludwig Beethoven, Joan of Arc (perhaps), and Charles Sanders Peirce all suffered from their own deeply personal forms of manic-depressive disorder. As a way of honoring their lives and their suffering I have chosen two culturally diverse figures for detailed treatment: Newton and Sri Ramakrishna. Their contributions to physics and religious mysticism have greatly added to the stock of human wisdom and knowledge and neither of these individuals could have accomplished what they did without the disease that coursed through their lives.

The image I have chosen for the title of this book is taken from Tibetan Buddhism and refers to the psychic horse on which we ride in order to deal with the powerful emotional currents that surge through us. The late Buddhist philosopher Chögyam Trungpa developed it:

Windhorse is a translation of the Tibetan *lungta*. *Lung* means "wind" and *ta* means "horse." Invoking secret *drala* is the experience of raising Windhorse, raising a wind of delight and power and riding on, or conquering, that energy. Such wind can come with great force, like a typhoon that can blow down trees and buildings and create huge waves in the water. The personal experience of this wind comes as a feeling of being completely and powerfully in the present. The horse aspect is that, in spite of the power of this great wind, you also feel stability. You are never swayed by the confusion of life, never swayed by excitement or depression.<sup>1</sup>

The *drala* is the energy that seems to come from a source outside of the self and can decenter and confound the ego. Learning how to live with this energy, since it can never be completely destroyed or tamed, is part of the wisdom that is learned through riding the Windhorse. I have found no better image than that of this high-flying powerful steed that feels the surge of *drala* in the upward draft of mania, and yet also feels the plunging down drafts of those shattering depressions that seem to choke out all life from the soul.

Learning to ride the Windhorse through the currents of manic-depressive disorder is the route to wholeness. It is my strong belief that with proper medical care and a good therapeutic relationship it is possible to find some form of wholeness even with a disease that can produce psychotic features such as hallucinations, suicide attempts, psychic inflation, and uncontrolled forms of acting out (financially, sexually, socially). While there is currently no cure for manic-depression, and while it is a progressive disease, especially if left untreated, there are many available tools for restabilizing the self and for finding deeper meanings in the mood swings that will always be prevalent even with medication.

But in saying this I do not want to romanticize an illness that still claims many lives through suicide and that takes a terrible toll on families and friends. Any serious understanding of the concept of wholeness must also understand what it costs and what it takes to find it.

It is my hope that this book, the result of a number of years of research and reflection, will be of value to fellow sufferers as well as professionals who are called upon to treat manic-depression. At the same time I also hope that scholars will find something of value in my case studies of Newton and Sri Ramakrishna.

I study these paradigmatic individuals not in order to "pathologize" them but to show how their courage and deep suffering entwined to produce epoch making works and visions. They produced what they did not *in spite* of their manic-depressive disorder, but *with* and *through* it. From my perspective there is an uncanny form of grace in this process, one that should be of as much interest to theologians as to psychologists. Again I want to stress my conviction that they would not have accomplished what they did had they been "normal."

Finally, I want to say a word directly to those of you who know the demons and angels of manic-depressive disorder in a deeply personal way. I have seen lives ruined and I have seen lives transfigured by manic-depression. With you I have experienced those blinding moments of sheer lucidity in which the world seemed to open up its deepest and most closely guarded secrets. And with you I have experienced those moments when time froze in its tracks and the world turned to gray on gray and all meaning drained away into a psychic black hole. With you I have considered suicide, and with you I have

felt like a god incarnate.

And with many of you I live in mourning for a self that has been taken away by medication, a self that still beckons to me even though I know I cannot bring it back. And, in the end, with you I have struggled to find a wholeness that will not be eroded by the winds of this disease. This book is my response to what genetic fate has handed me. I hope that you, of all my readers, will find something empowering in what follows.