

Rachel Noel – Storyteller: Discovery, Discrimination, Discernment

I want to start my story by telling you that I was an ordinary child, growing up in a normal family. I'm no longer sure that ordinary or normal exist!

I grew up always feeling different, never quite fitting in. I was a shy, quiet, geeky, creative, maths kid. I tended to wear black or blue, trying to hide, trying not to be noticed.

I had significant health problems with severe asthma and allergies. As a teenager, it turned out that I was allergic to the floor polish at the Baptist Church where I grew up, *so the deeply theological reason of 'allergies' is how I first joined the Anglican church.*

But I count myself lucky. Because I had 'physical' health labels, it didn't really shift others expectations of what was possible for me.

As an adult, I found a spiritual director, helping me to encounter God within the reality of my life. One retreat I did a weaving, I picked different colours of yarn to weave my story, colours for God, for me. I was really pleased with the neat front.

But as I prayed with it, it was the back, the messy ends, frayed threads, the knots. I felt God's call to go deeper... to encounter the divine in the reality of the stuff I wanted to hide.

In 2011 I was ordained, in Winchester Cathedral.

2.5 years into my curacy... I was signed off work with depression and anxiety...

I decided to be open on social media about what was happening.

What we didn't know then, is that there are a small percentage of people that have an atypical reaction to anti-depressant medication. I am one of that small percentage.

This atypical reaction is mania.

But I don't even do 'atypical' 'normally'

My body went to sleep, but my brain went racing.

For me, in mania the filters go, I become a more intense version of me. All my quirks that I usually try and keep hidden, are all out there, for everyone to see....

For me to finally face up to.

And so I went googling... I'm sure I'm not the only one.

At 2am, one cold January morning in 2017, I stumbled across ADHD, and what ADHD looks like in bright girls.

There were tears rolling down my face.

This was me. This was who I had always been. I didn't even know this was a thing...

This all played out around my 42nd birthday, the answer to life, the universe and everything.
These were my answers to life, in the messy ends, the knots, the frayed bits...

The next day, I woke up and **for the first time ever, I smiled at myself in the mirror.**

I wanted to get to know the person looking back. The first time, of **accepting that this is who I am.** Even just the possibility, had unlocked a door for me.

I decided to write down what was going on. My sense of self, of understanding, was shifting so quickly. One of the gifts of ADHD is hyperfocus. Hyperfocus within mania is something special.

I wrote for 14 hours straight through the night, 30,000 words.. a sense of deep peace. I called it **write night.**

ADHD, me, at that moment the label seemed almost irrelevant, it was the insight, the understanding, the compassion, for the first time ever, I felt an inkling of really knowing who I am, a sense of belonging in my mind and body.

The next night, I took this into prayer and meditation.

I had such a deep sense of encounter with the divine, of peace and light. Accepting the connections, the body, the person that I am, connected within all creation. Being present, here, now. Deep joy, peace, radiant light. Present to God's presence. I call this **light night.**

The next day, I got up and went to our curate's training session, *perhaps not my best decision.* By the end of the day in the Diocesan Office I had shouted at one bishop, and another bishop drove me home. I asked him to help me to get help.

Later that night, he and my husband took me to hospital. On the way I asked them if they could help me find somewhere to be dark, quiet, and cool, to help me be as calm as possible...

But this is an A&E waiting room... bright, noisy, warm...

I was fortunate to be ill enough to get help, mania... psychosis...

I was sectioned and admitted to a secure psychiatric hospital. I continued to be open on social media, asking people to pray their sparkliest, pinkest prayers, as I was on my NHS sponsored retreat. The doctors trying out various medications and dosages, trying to find the 'right' one for me.

A few weeks later, I was diagnosed with bipolar, ADHD, and sensory processing disorder, and on a waiting list for autism assessment.

One week, one person - four new 'disorder' labels.

After such an enlightening experience, discovering who I am, I'm now told this is all **disorders...**

I find myself living within different paradigms – separate approaches to life and hope... each offering different paths forward.

In the medical paradigm, the conversation is around chemical imbalances, the need for medications to fix, the expectation that somehow 'normal' is possible, ... and if not normal, at least numbing, suppressing, reducing the extremes, of risk and control.

Then there's the psychological paradigm, the possibilities of understanding, of strengths and challenges, of learning different strategies, of seeing the gifts within these things.

And there's the spiritual paradigm... **Rachel, fearfully and wonderfully made....** Fully known and loved by God, as I am... with all these things... the call to each of us into God's glorious light, to be transformed, becoming more Christlike

Labels open up access to support. Noise cancelling headphones, weighted blankets, medication. They also give me deeper confidence to continue with things I'd already found... home made clothes with no labels, heavy boots so I know where my feet are, crochet to help me concentrate on spoken words.

Understanding better how I work, my body no longer has to stop breathing with asthma before I will recognise sensory overwhelm and anxiety.

People's reaction to labels are fascinating, stigma and stereotypes alive and well! Autism has suddenly become 'trendy', many telling me everyone is on the spectrum, and I don't look like I have traits.

ADHD, many think is made up, just grow up and pull yourself together. ADHD medication... surely that's just smart drugs or cheating.

Depression & anxiety are more familiar to people, everyone seems to have their favourite 'quick fix' that I 'should' try, that would solve everything.

And then there's bipolar... no-one associates with bipolar... that one is 'other'. Those same people who see everyone on a spectrum with autism... **bipolar is the other side of an invisible line.**

Psychiatric hospital, psychosis... they're still very much taboo.

And if you start a conversation about bipolar medications, then clearly you should be having them, and at a strong dose, to suppress any indication of difference... even if it suppresses gifts...

Bipolar is seen almost **exclusively through the lens of risk and other.**

And Christians often accidentally add a deeper level of challenge with their questions.

Assumptions that you can't be a priest with any of these labels, let alone all of them.

People praying for demons to be released. People praying for healing. Telling me that in eternal life, there will be me without all of these labels.

Well meaning people, completely silencing and discounting me, unwilling to recognise God's presence within diversity.

Fortunately, there were a few, close to me, willing and able to recognise God at work in all that was happening, discerning the peace and light within it. Helping me to deepen this newfound connection with who I have always been, the understanding of neurodiversity, of the breadth of experience of being human, and that God works in the midst of our real humanity.

I am grateful for my Diocese, for my bishops and archdeacon, for HR, who were able and willing to recognise that my life story, my CV, the same one they used to select me for ordination, is the one that was also used to diagnose all these conditions.

Although the labels were new, they were willing to be open to see the gifts within this, as well as to work more knowledgably with the challenges.

The same bishop that took me to A&E, last year licensed me as parish priest. We laughed together that my curacy had definitely delivered on being 'formational'. He encouraged me to continue to find ways to live well, with my gifts and challenges, in this place, at this time.

I'm learning to be gentle on myself, to remember that despite all the labels, there is just one of me, and I am called to encounter God's presence within this one life, with all its messy, frayed threads.

I recently wrote a poem prayer, I hope it encourages you as you discover God's presence within your own story too.

(Poem will be handout rather than read as part of talk. Also possibly part of the weekend elsewhere)

Living lightly to labels.

Rachel Noël

What does it mean to be present to your presence?

Here now.

To accept life, in all its fullness.

Am I willing to sit lightly to the labels?

Labels from others.

Labels from myself.

There has been so much life in labels,
routes to health and wellbeing,
gifts of breath,
opening doors of insight and realisation,
of acceptance and light.

And yet, there are limits
and limitations too.

Lenses that can blinker and blind,
threads that hold me back,
that restrict what I am even willing to consider possible.

I long for the familiar,
for others to give me the labels,
the structure,
the sense of achievement and acceptance,
for them to tell me who I am.

And yet, here, now
present to Your presence.

Accepting Your light.

Am I brave enough to live wholeheartedly present?

Present to myself,
present to Your presence.

To accept the gifts of passion and creativity,

of insight and connection,
of enthusiasm and energy.
To allow those gifts to flourish, unfettered, unrestrained.

What would it mean to live lightly to my labels?
To let go of their power,
to discover more of who You have made me to be?

Grant me the courage to accept the fullness of the life You have given to
me,

To accept the gift of who I am,
to live wholeheartedly,
here, now.
Present to Your presence,
I am.