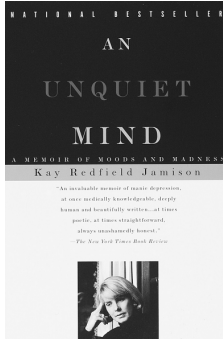


## The Thin Line Between Madness and Sanity

**Stephanie Valtierra\***

Department of Biology  
Lake Forest College  
Lake Forest, IL 60045



By K. R. Jamison  
Vintage Books (1996)

As we go about our daily lives we experience many emotions. We are annoyed by traffic, saddened by bad news and angered by delays. While most of us quickly get over what has angered us or saddened us and continue to go about our day, many others live a very different life. What would it feel like to go through rapid mood swings, where one can go from a debilitating depression to a time filled with invigorating highs? What would it feel like knowing that for *you*, there is a thin line between madness and sanity? Dr. Kay Redfield Jamison has had a life full of these highs and lows and was able to tell us her first-hand experience with disorder that affects millions.

Dr. Jamison tells us the story of her struggle with manic-depressive disorder, also known as bipolar disorder, in her memoir, *An Unquiet Mind: A Memoir of the Moods and Madness*. Jamison gives us the perspectives both of the patient and the healer. The author was born into a good, middle class American family and she was an intelligent, bright young woman with aspiration of going to medical school. Mood swings started plaguing her life as a teen. Jamison did not see these mood changes or the persistent depressions as serious problems. She believed that these mood changes were just another part of her, something by which she could be defined. The mood swings not only began to define her, but also connected her to her father and sister, who also suffered from these mood swings. The symptoms soon turned into advanced manias, depressions and suicide attempts. Medication was an option and could make her life "normal," but this meant that she would not experience the invigorating highs and the accompanying devastating lows. This highly educated doctor became just another patient.

The many highs and lows of manic depression did not only affect Jamison, but also affected those around her. A strong emphasis is placed of the affects that this disease has on those who live around and with the ill. The disease led to the destruction of her marriage, loss of friendships, and the

loss of countless relationships. As a patient, Jamison's story is one of a personal struggle to carry on, a personal struggle to love and to live.

As the doctor, part of Jamison's struggle was to keep her illness a secret from those whom she was supposed to treat, those who just like her, were ill. With this, several questions arise. Was she capable of helping others who were ill when she had been, up to that point, unable to help herself? Dr. Jamison faced struggles every day of her life, in many dimensions. As a woman in the field of psychiatry, she had to prove herself to others. As a manic-depressive she had to prove to herself that a life without invigorating highs was better than no life at all. Dr. Jamison had to convince herself to take the medications. She had to prove to herself that just as she was capable of helping others, she could also help herself.

Would others be understanding? Dr. Jamison was very conscious of the fact that this illness could have meant the revocation of her clinical license and the end of her career. Her illness represented a threat to everything she had accomplished until then. This meant that she would have to fight to stay at the top of her field and she was not willing to lose this fight.

Dr. Jamison had a daily battle just to live normally. She found her sense of normalcy professionally, by treating others with the disease that she dealt with, but also found her sense of normalcy in love. A strong emphasis is made on the need for acceptance and love. Love from her family, her husband and later her partners allowed Jamison to be able to value her life and gave her a reason to want to get better. Through her stories of love we get the message of acceptance and understanding that is needed by those ill.

Jamison describes to the reader her struggle with a disease which eventually affected her personal life, her relationships, her family, friends, and her professional life with coworkers and patients. This book gives us an insight as to how it *feels* to be on both sides of the desk, the healer and the healed. As the disease and its consequences are described in detail, one feels almost as if she is speaking directly to you. Jamison's story allows us to see the sick person as that, a human being. This captivating book is written in a way that anybody, even those with no scientific background, can pick it up, enjoy it and most importantly, be educated by it. Along with learning about the ups and downs of manic depression and becoming informed individuals, we begin to partially understand what manic depression is like. We begin to understand where the line between madness and sanity lies and why in some cases it gets blurred. With Dr. Jamison's story, our image of the mentally ill is changed from one of pity and fear to one of understanding.

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