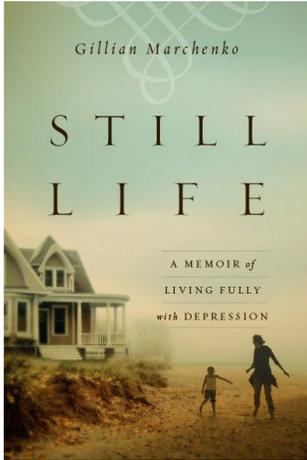




BOOK EXCERPT



Still Life: A Memoir of Living Fully with Depression

Available May 2016

\$16, 192 pages, paperback

978-0-8308-4324-4

Where is Jesus in depression?

“Yes, but what about Jesus?” friends ask later on. It is a valid question. If others look at my life, I hope they’ll see that faith is important. I believe in the story that some people let waft through their minds only at Christmas: that Christ was born of a virgin, lived a perfect life, died a death we all deserve, so that we can have a bridge to God. Sergei is a minister. I spent years as a missionary in a foreign country. The point of my faith is that God came to me so that I can be with him.

What about Jesus? I think. When depression takes over, everyone in my life falls away, including him. I can’t pray, or read, or talk. When I am not stuck in a pocket of depression, I pray for help and healing. “Take this away, or at least help me figure out how to handle it better,” I whisper, expectant. But a concrete response doesn’t come. All I get is silence. How does one keep faith in silence?

There is a story in the New Testament about a woman who hemorrhaged and bled for years. Jesus walked by her one day in a village, and she reached out and grabbed on to his robe. Feeling power leave him, he turned to her and said, “Take heart, daughter; your faith has healed you” (Matthew 9:22). I thrust my hands out in front of me. I am a little girl lost in a dark house alone. I need to find that robe. I want to be healed. But there is no robe. My faith, so far, has not made me well.

Why doesn’t Jesus respond to my cries for help? Does he care? Is he even there? Don’t I have enough faith?

A Christian counselor once commented on people hiding from God. “Think about it. The very first people in the history of the world, Adam and Eve, hid from God when they realized their nakedness after eating the forbidden fruit. Hiding is instinctual,” he said.

I’m in no way the first person in the history of the world to hide, but I feel like I am. I hid from my family and friends and from God. I was so ashamed of the depth of my depression, of my menacing thoughts and lack of interest in life, that I found it easier to turn up the volume on my television show than to bow my head and pray.

My friend Anne once said that being around people when you are depressed is like being asked to heal your broken leg by running a marathon. *Yes.* Friendships fell away. People cared, but after a while they got used to my being off limits. . . . I stopped returning phone calls and didn’t answer email. My cognition slipped. I could no longer carry on a decent conversation. If I did, it was the most asinine, one-sided conversation imaginable. “I just saw it,” my friend Amy said one time after church. “I saw your mood crash.”



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Writes Gillian: *"This book is not a how to overcome depression story. Instead, it is more true to life. Seldom do people completely heal from their issues and illnesses this side of glory because we live in a broken, messy, post-Eden world. Still Life is a snapshot of a Christian family's real lives that are affected every day by depression. It is distinctive because real struggle and real sin are part of the story, and it isn't tied up with a perfect bow at the end. It is about one mom doing what she can day by day to heal and be present for her family, and to attempt honor God in the struggle."*

Two of my friends had babies and I didn't congratulate them. I hid from my parents' and my sister's phone calls. My sister got the hint and stayed away. That's what we do when one of us isn't well. We give space and wait for the other person to get better, for them to come to us. My mom kept calling. I ignored her.

The girls watched me with wide eyes and stepped around me when they'd see me in the hallway or the kitchen. Sergei, now understanding the severity of my situation, started bringing my meals to my room. Sometimes I heard him on the phone with my mom and sister outside my bedroom door, talking about me. *Yes, she's in bed. We're doing okay but I'll let you know if you need to come.* It sounded like he was whispering about a loved one in hospice.

His opinion had changed since that day I told him about major depressive disorder, because the woman lying in bed was no longer his wife. He sat near me and rubbed my back.

"Gillian, we are here for you. Please try. Pray. Let's fix it. Talk to me." I'd turn away.

"Okay, then don't worry about the kids. Don't worry about anything. We're all right. If you can't get up, that's okay, I guess. Just rest."

Sergei had to wonder how we got here. I never imagined I would marry a pastor, and I don't think either us could have guessed that one day he would be married to a woman who succumbed to major depressive disorder. His eyes sadly looked me over, and he left the room, closing the door.

You are a terrible mom. You are losing your mind. You are ruining your family's life. You should swallow some pills and die.

My jaw grabbed hold of self-deprecating ideas, and in a sick way, they almost brought me comfort. Resignation. The ability to give up. The suspicion had existed inside me all along: my true identity looked more like this. This was who I should be.

When you are depressed, time becomes an enemy. You either have too much of it, like a sprawling Nebraska cornfield, or you've wasted it, your moments thrown into a heap and lit with a match. Burned up. Irretrievable. Each second holds an exorbitant amount of pain. It traps you. You feel each beat. Minutes are full and long as they crawl toward the new hour, and you do nothing but try to hold still and live through them. Time is wasted because you concentrate on living through each moment. You look back, you search your memory, but all you see is a heavy cloud of hurt, confusion and black. You don't know what to do. You don't know how to handle it. So you cower. You hide.

— Adapted from chapter three, "Major Depressive Disorder," and chapter five, "Help"



AUTHOR BIO



Author, Speaker, Advocate

Gillian Marchenko is an author, speaker, wife, mother of four daughters and advocate for individuals with special needs. Her memoir, *Sun Shine Down*, chronicles her experience having a baby with Down syndrome while serving as a missionary in Ukraine.

Gillian writes and speaks about faith, depression, imperfection, adoption and parenting kids with Down syndrome. With the Joni & Friends Chicago Teaching Team, she helped churches cultivate inclusive environments for individuals with disabilities and their families.

Gillian's latest book, *Still Life*, follows her through the raw and realistic journey of living with chronic depression. She continually asks herself the question: How can she care for her family when she can't even get out of bed? Through this journey, she learns that although there aren't quick fixes, you can find hope in a life of depression.

She writes, "I wrote *Still Life* as an observation, a look at something a lot of people don't know intimately, about something that those who do know about it hide: life with depression. I have depression and it has been hard on my family. I wanted to figure out a way to glorify God in the struggle and to use it for good. Hopefully, God willing, this book will do that. I wanted to show other Christian women who struggle with mental health that they are not alone."

Amy Simpson, speaker and author of *Troubled Minds* and *Anxious*, writes, "Gillian Marchenko generously lets us know her and walk her journey, and in the process we grow to love her. You won't find pat answers or bland reassurances here; you'll find a real and courageous woman, a serious fight with mental illness and faith-fueled hope. If you live with depression or care about someone who does, you must read this book."

In addition to being featured in numerous radio interviews and guest blogging on several websites, Gillian has written for publications such as *Chicago Parent*, *Thriving Family*, *Gifted for Leadership*, *Today's Christian Woman*, *Literary Mama*, *MomSense Magazine* and *EFCA Today*. She and her husband Sergei spent four years as church planters with the Evangelical Free Church of America in Kiev, Ukraine, and they now live with their four daughters in St. Louis, Missouri.

Gillian Marchenko, author of
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