



DEPRESSION

Looking Up
from the
Stubborn Darkness

EDWARD T. WELCH

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In loving memory of my father

W. EDWARD WELCH,
(1920–2006)

Who showed me that depression
And love can live together
In the same person

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Introduction

1

CHAPTER

The Path Ahead

In the middle of the journey of our life
I found myself in a dark wood,
For I had lost the right path.

Dante

When you are depressed, how can you take a step, let alone a journey?

When all vital energy is devoted to staying alive and just making it to the next hour, how can you add anything else—like hope—to your day?

These are the “how to” questions that, in the face of depression, seem almost impossible to answer. Pages of homework and practical suggestions could, indeed, fill many books, but they are unlikely to make you feel alive.

What you need must go deeper than practical advice. You don’t need a series of “how tos.” In fact, you could probably write a credible list of “how tos” yourself. You already know many things you *could* do, and you have probably done some of them.

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Depression, and the host of feelings and thoughts that get crammed into the word, plead for a “why.” First, why is this happening to me? Then, why love? Why work? Why worship? Why believe? Why live? Why bother? The depressive heart resonates more with “Vanity of vanity, all is vanity” than with “101 steps to combat depression.” A list of “how tos” can’t speak to issues of purpose, hope, and the fundamental questions of existence and belief that depression inevitably raises. It’s not surprising that while Prozac is being heralded as the cure, philosophers are also finding a niche in helping those who are depressed.

So, on the path ahead, look for a partnership between whys and how tos. When the why questions appear, they will be religious—as all why questions are. They will be about God. Depression, of course, does that—it takes you back to the basic questions of life. Ignore them to focus on the how questions and you might find a temporary shortcut to mental relief, but your heart will still be famished.

THE BASIC IDEA

Depression is a form of suffering that can’t be reduced to one universal cause. This means that family and friends can’t rush in armed with THE answer. Instead, they must be willing to postpone swearing allegiance to a particular theory, and take time to know the depressed person and work together with him or her. What we do know is that depression is painful and, if you have never experienced it, hard to understand. Like most forms of suffering, it feels private and isolating.

We also know that those who feel overwhelmed by depression share in a fundamental humanness. You will find in them the struggles and maladies that are common to us all. Don’t let the technical, scientific diagnosis keep you from seeing these ordinary problems. Instead, when in doubt, expect to find ordinary humanness just below the surface, in the form of fear, anger, guilt, shame, jealousy,

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wants, despair over loss, physical weaknesses, and other problems that are present in every person. Depression is not always caused by these things, but it is always an occasion to consider them.

ARE THERE “RIGHT” EMOTIONS?

It is common for spiritually mature men and women who feel depressed to think that they are doing something wrong. After all, Scripture is filled with words of joy and happy hearts. When they aren’t feeling happy, they feel that they must be missing something or that God is punishing them until they learn some hidden lesson.

On earth, however, God doesn’t prescribe a happy life. Look at some of the Psalms. They are written by people of great faith, yet they run the emotional gamut. One even ends with “darkness is my closest friend” (Ps. 88:18). When your emotions feel muted or always low, when you are unable to experience the highs and lows you once did, the important question is not “How can I figure out what I have done wrong?” but it is, “Where do I turn—or, to whom do I turn—when I am depressed?” Some turn toward their beds and isolation; others turn toward other people. Some turn away from God; others turn toward him.

A WAY TO PROCEED

If you are depressed, the chapters that follow are intended to be brief and, at times, provocative. If you want to help someone who is depressed, the chapters are intended to give you direction and to be used as actual readings you can share with the depressed person. My hope is that the book will encourage partnerships between depressed people and those who love them. Suffering is not a journey we should take alone. There are too many places where we are tempted to give up and too many times we can’t see clearly. So if you are depressed, read this book with a wise friend. If you want to help, ask the depressed person to read it with you, or select particular chapters to read together.

THE JOURNEY OF A PILGRIM

You will encounter a number of images in the coming chapters, such as darkness or light, numbness or vitality, and surrender or waging battle. Most prominent will be the journey of a pilgrim. Whether we sense it or not, we are walking a path that always confronts us with a choice. Each day we stand at a crossroads and make decisions of significant consequence.

The idea of heading out on a trek is not a pleasing thought when you are depressed, but at least you are in good company, which should offer some comfort. Beginning with Abraham, God has called people to leave a familiar place, set out in a new direction, put the past behind, face unknown hazards, get to a point of desperation, call out for help, and look forward to something (or someone) better.

Origen, an old saint of the church, offered this encouragement.

“My soul has long been on pilgrimage” (Ps. 119:54). Understand, then, if you can, what the pilgrimages of the soul are, especially when it laments with groaning and grief that it has been on pilgrimage so long. We understand these pilgrimages only dully and darkly so long as the pilgrimage still lasts. But when the soul has returned to its rest, that is, to the homeland of paradise, it will be taught more truly and will understand more truly the meaning of what the pilgrimage was.¹

He is right. On this side of heaven we walk by faith and don’t have all the answers we would like. But there is reason to believe that you will find certain hopes fulfilled even on this side of paradise.

1. Origen, Homily XXVII on Numbers, sec. 4, CWS, 250; cited in Thomas Oden, *Classical Pastoral Care, Crisis Ministries*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 6.

2

CHAPTER

How Depression Feels

“Hell” comes up often. “Hell came to pay me a surprise visit.” “If there is a hell upon earth, it is to be found in a melancholy heart,” observed Robert Burton in the 1600s. The poet Robert Lowell wrote, “I myself am hell.” A mother describes her child’s experience as “Danny’s Descent into Hell.” “A Room in Hell.” “A lonely, private hell.” John of the Cross called it “the dark night of the soul.” “Hellish torments,” recounted J. B. Phillips. “Hell’s black depths,” said William Styron, author of *Sophie’s Choice* and other popular but sometimes dark novels.¹ As Dante understood, there is an intimate connection between hell and the hopelessness of depression. The entrance to Dante’s version of hell read, “Abandon all hope, ye who enter here.”

1. Quotes in this paragraph are from the following sources: Andrew Solomon, “Anatomy of Melancholy,” *The New Yorker*, January 12, 1998, 61. Robert Burton cited in John Green and James Jefferson, *Depression and Its Treatment* (New York: Warner, 1992), 4. Robert Lowell, “Skunk Hour.” Sandra McCoy, “Danny’s Descent into Hell,” *A Reader’s Digest* reprint. Martha Manning, *Undercurrents: A Therapist’s Reckoning with Depression* (New York: Harper, 1995), 10. Lillian V. Grissen, *A Path through the Sea* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 9. J. B. Phillips, *The Price of Success* (New York: Shaw, 1985), 201. William Styron, *Darkness Visible* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 84. Unattributed quotes throughout this chapter are from conversations with individuals.

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Depressive speech is poetic. Prose does not capture the experience, so it is either poetry or silence. Depressed people are eloquent, even when they feel empty at their emotional core, devoid of personhood.

When the doctor came to my room, he said, "I am going to ask you a question. If you don't feel ready to answer it, please don't." Then he asked, "Who are you?"

I panicked. "What do you mean?"

"When you look inside, who do you see?"

It was horrible. When I looked inside I couldn't see anyone. All I saw was a black hole.

"I am no one," I said.

The images are dark and evocative. Desperately alone, doom, black holes, deep wells, emptiness. "I felt like I was walking through a field of dead flowers and found one beautiful rose, but when I bent down to smell it I fell into an invisible hole." "I heard my silent scream echo through and pierce my empty soul." "There is nothing I hate more than nothing."² "My heart is empty. All the fountains that should run with longing, are in me dried up."³ "It is entirely natural to think ceaselessly of oblivion." "I feel as though I died a few weeks ago and my body hasn't found out yet."⁴

Depression . . . involves a complete absence: absence of affect, absence of feeling, absence of response, absence of interest. The pain you feel in the course of a major clinical depression is an attempt on nature's part . . . to fill up the empty space. But for all intents and purposes, the deeply depressed are just the walking, waking dead.⁵

2. Edie Bricknell, "Nothing."

3. C. S. Lewis, "The Naked Seed," *Poems by C. S. Lewis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 117.

4. Solomon, "Anatomy of Melancholy," 54.

5. Elizabeth Wurtzel, *Prozac Nation* (New York: Riverhead), 22.

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The mental pain seems unbearable. Time stands still. “I can’t go on,” said a twelve-year-old girl. “I could weep by the hour like a child, and yet I knew not what I wept for,” recounted Spurgeon of one of his many episodes.⁶ “A veritable howling tempest in the brain.”⁷ “Malignant sadness.”⁸ “My bones wasted away through my groaning all day long.”⁹ “The unhappiness was like dust that infiltrated everything.” “I am now a man of despair, rejected, abandoned, shut up in this iron cage from which there is no escape.”¹⁰ “The iron bolt . . . mysteriously fastens the door of hope and holds our spirits in gloomy prison.”¹¹

Profound melancholia is a day-in day-out, night-in night-out, almost arterial level of agony. It is a pitiless, unrelenting pain that affords no window of hope, no alternative to a grim and brackish existence, and no respite from the cold undercurrents of thought and feeling that dominate the horribly restless nights of despair.¹²

But it is not just pain. It feels like meaningless pain. “That is all I want in life: for this pain to seem purposeful.”¹³ If pain leads to childbirth, it is tolerable, but if it just leads to blackness or nothing, then it threatens to destroy.

Abraham Lincoln thought the pain would lead to death; the body couldn’t tolerate it.

I am now the most miserable man living. If what I feel were equally distributed to the whole human family, there

6. Darrel Amundsen, “The Anguish and Agonies of Charles Spurgeon,” *Christian History* 10 (1991), 64.

7. Styron, *Darkness Visible*, 38.

8. “Spirit of the Age,” *The Economist*, December 19, 1998, 113.

9. Ps. 32:3.

10. J. Bunyan, *Pilgrim’s Progress* (Chicago: Moody, 1964), 33.

11. Charles Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972), 24.

12. Kay Redfield Jamison, *An Unquiet Mind* (New York: Random House, 1995), 114.

13. Wurtzel, *Prozac Nation*, 50.

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would not be one cheerful face on earth. Whether I shall ever be better, I cannot tell; I awfully forbode I shall not. To remain as I am is impossible. I must die or be better, it appears to me.¹⁴

What tortures many people is the fact that they *don't* die. "Exhaustion combined with sleeplessness is a rare torture." "The pain seeps into everything." The thought that they might remain in this horrible state is too much to consider. "No one knows how badly I want to die." But death has its own horrors. It feels like a vanishing point where they cease to exist at all. And what about the uncertainty of life after death? Is there annihilation? Will divine judgment crush and destroy? You are without peer in fearing the worst.

"There was no control on my mind—thoughts ravaged me, brutally harsh ideas, thoroughly crushed ideals, incomprehensible feelings." The mind is stuck. How can people think about anything else when *it* is there? "I'm in a straitjacket." "I'm completely bound and tied up—there is a gag in my mouth." Without one's normal mental resources, the world is frightening. Panic. Left unchecked, hallucinations and delusions can seize the imagination with such force that they are indistinguishable from reality itself. Self-reliance seems impossible. Infantile dependence is the only way to survive. Being alone is terrifying. Abandonment is a constant fear. "I fear everyone and everything."

I tried to sleep but couldn't. Part of it was that I was scared to wake up with a feeling of panic in the pit of my stomach. Anxiety was always present, and for no good reason it just got worse. I wanted to be out of the house, but I was scared to be alone. No matter what I did, I couldn't concentrate except on questions such as "Am

14. Cited in John H. Greist and James W. Jefferson, *Depression and Its Treatment* (New York: Warner, 1992), 8.

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I going insane? What have I done to deserve this? What sort of punishment is this?”

You would think that if your circumstances were better, you would be too. But depression has a logic of its own. Once it settles in, it can’t distinguish between a loving embrace, the death of a close friend, and the news that a neighbor’s grass is growing.

Decisions? Impossible. The mind is locked. How can you choose? Nothing is working; the engine of your mind is barely turning over. And aren’t most decisions emotional preferences? How can you decode when you *have* no emotional preferences?

Certainty? The only certainty is that misery will persist. If certainty of any good thing ever existed—and you can’t remember when it did—it is replaced by constant doubt. You doubt that you are loved by anyone. You doubt your spouse’s intentions. You doubt your spouse’s fidelity. If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, you doubt the presence of Christ. You doubt the very foundation of your faith. “God have mercy on the man/Who doubts what he’s sure of.”¹⁵

The only thing you know is that you are guilty, shameful, and worthless. It is not that you have made mistakes in your life or sinned or reaped futility. It is that you *are* a mistake; you *are* sin; you *are* futility. “In this regard, depression can be a form of self-punishment, however subconsciously or involuntarily administered.”¹⁶ God has turned his back. Why bother going on in such a state? You might as well join God and turn your back on yourself too.

If forced to make distinctions, you might say that there are times that are worse than others, but who is able to measure different degrees of hell? Let’s just say that there can be a rhythm to it. Asleep at 11:00 p.m., up at 2:00 a.m. Anguish, fears, and a torrent of pain lay hold of you while you try to live through the morning. It settles into

15. Bruce Springsteen, “Brilliant Disguise.”

16. W. Hulme and L. Hulme, *Wrestling with Depression: A Spiritual Guide to Reclaiming Life* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1995), 22.

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the normal deep sadness and paralysis until mid-afternoon and is followed by a steady drizzle of fear, pain, guilt, panic, deadness, and fatigue until evening. Sometimes you might even reach the peaks of general malaise. It is true: the body can't take the pounding pain for too long. So you get some occasional breaks from the worst of it.

It can be quieter for some people. Instead of a bottomless abyss and howling in the brain, life is flat, gray, and cold. Nothing holds any interest. You are a barely walking zombie. Everything is drab, lifeless, and tired. Why work? Why get out of bed? Why do anything? Why commit suicide? Nothing seems to matter. You are afraid that if one of your children died, you *still* wouldn't feel anything.

Yet pain does break through in this more lifeless, numb state. It comes especially when you remember that you were once alive. Was it another person? Another lifetime? No, it must have been you. You remember that you actually wanted to have a sexual relationship with your spouse. A book on the shelf once kept you up all night; you couldn't put it down. That music would make you want to get up and dance. But you try to forget those times because the contrast between then and now is almost unbearable. You prefer numbness.

It feels like you are always sick. In past generations or places less psychologically minded, they describe it solely in physical terms. For example, in China they call it *shenjing shuairou*, an alleged physical problem characterized by dizziness, fatigue, and headaches. Your body doesn't feel right. You are always tired. Doctors are consulted more than pastors or counselors.

In the early 1900s, a businessman reported these symptoms to his doctor.

It's not just my body that's tired but my brain. I constantly feel as though an iron vise were tightening on my cranium. My head feels empty. My mind won't work. My ideas are confused and I can no longer concentrate. My

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memory is shot. When I read, I can't remember at the bottom of the page what I've read at the top. . . . As for my will, my energy is gone. I no longer know what I want, what I'm supposed to do. I doubt, I hesitate, I don't dare make a decision. Moreover, I've no appetite and I sleep badly. I have no sexual desire.¹⁷

How could this be all in my mind? he thinks.

You are waiting for a medical doctor to say that he made a mistake.

"The good news is that it's not all in your mind after all. I apologize for the misdiagnosis. The bad news is that the cancer will kill you in about a week and a half."

You are confident that everyone would be better off without you. Is it any wonder that suicidal thoughts are always close?

RESPONSE

These descriptions might not sound hopeful, but they demonstrate that many others have gone through similar experiences. You are not alone.

Also, many of these quotes are excerpts from larger stories of hope and change. They are by people who have gone through depression and are no longer deadened by it. They are telling what *was* rather than what *is*. Most of them even had the energy and clarity to write moving and helpful literature.

What words would you choose? How would you describe the indescribable?

17. Cited in Edward Shorter, *From the Mind to the Body: The Cultural Origins of Psychosomatic Symptoms* (New York: Free Press, 1994), 135.