

DEPRESSION AND AUTHENTICITY: A VOICE FROM THE SOUL

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As far as we can discern, the sole purpose of human existence is to kindle a light in the darkness of mere being."

—Carl G. Jung

IFor many years I found myself intermittently consumed by an unexplainable, excruciatingly painful darkness called clinical depression. It has taken me many years to acknowledge it publicly because I believed that my inability to overcome despondency indicated weakness, inadequacy, and unspeakable shame. What I know now is this attitude toward my own mental illness actually fuelled the depression. But after I surfaced from the arduous journey into darkness and had several years to absorb its meaning, I have begun to understand how depression has been pivotal in sculpting me into the person I am meant to be.

This is my story of coming to grips with the hell of clinical depression and how I was able to find a way to eventually turn it into a gift. In telling my story of the depths of depression and the subsequent healing I have found, it is my hope that you might identify with what I am saying, be inspired by the opportunity of seeing your depression, or that of someone you care about, as both curse and blessing, and learn a few strategies for using depression as a way of discovering the path you are destined to live.

By publishing these reflections and insights, I would not want anyone to take the wrong counsel from my experience. No two people experience depression the same. Depressive disorders come in different forms, as do other illnesses, such as heart disease and diabetes. Some kinds of depression are primarily genetic or biochemical and will respond only to drugs; some are primarily situational and will benefit from inner work, self-awareness, a change in thinking, and new choices; while others, like mine, lie somewhere in between.

My life's work, for more than the past 25 years, has been in the field of personal and leadership development. During this time I have spoken to and consulted with hundreds of thousands of leaders across North America in a variety of corporations, public service agencies, community and family associations, education, and health care organizations. My purpose is to inspire and guide leaders to connect with their authentic self so that

they might in turn inspire and guide those they serve to find their authentic voice, thus enabling greatness. What I know today is that I simply could not do this work were it not for the depression that I have come to face in my life. I now understand that depression has actually become a gift in my life. I could not be helping others be authentic if I were not on this path. Depression brought me here.

I believe that I inherited, particularly from my father, a sensitive, unstable nervous system that, without structure in my life, leads to depression which wreaks havoc, destruction, and pain, both to myself and to those I care most about. Although my depression has some physical basis, it is predominately a mental and spiritual disease for me. As a result, I have learned to create rigorous structure, support, and accountability in my life to give me stability without medication — at least for today. There is no cure for the depression that lives in me. It is always with me, but I get a reprieve from its destructive capacity based on my daily physical, mental, and spiritual condition. If for any reason my current structure becomes insufficient to help me manage my life, then I would not hesitate to connect with my physician and turn to medication to help me. My first task with having a depressive constitution, is to make socially responsible decisions that support my recovery and protect those I love, whatever that treatment involves.

I will share my own experience of depression as far as I am able. However, I want to stress that what is true for me is not necessarily true for anyone else. I am not writing a prescription. I am simply telling my story, with the hope that my experience through the hell of clinical depression will inspire you to somehow discover the gift that lies within this horrifying darkness. If it helps you or someone you care about turn suffering into compassion, with a deeper respect for both the mystery of depression and the diversity of the human experience that is bringing us toward authentic growth, I will have accomplished my goal.

On several occasions, from the time I was a teenager until my late 30s, I spent endless days in the dungeon of depression. In high school, the despondency was subtle and far less articulated, expressing itself as long bouts of sadness, sleepless nights, and enormous self-doubt. I was able to function reasonably well between the episodes of despair, completing graduate

work in university and becoming a nationally ranked distance runner. However, my obsessive need for achievement and ambition was a mask to protect myself from the darker side of my nature that I was trying, at all costs, to avoid. I knew that my father had been diagnosed with manic depression (now known as bi-polar) and was hospitalized on more than one occasion, but I was determined not to be like my father.

Without the courage or awareness to stop and face what was going on inside of me, by the time I hit my 30s the depression had progressed to the point where I often could not find the strength to put my feet on the floor in the morning. I recall lying in bed for days at a time, completely immobilized, with blackness consuming and suffocating me. Though I was at one time seconds away from stepping in front of a speeding truck, there was still enough of a spark of life left in my soul that I could not extinguish. I just wanted to put an end to the exhaustive, interminable misery. Completely isolated from all forms of life, I rejected any attempt for support, especially from the person who meant the most to me — my wife. I was verbally abusive on these occasions, hating myself for the toxicity I spewed to anyone close to me.

I could never have planned or designed a way out of the darkness I was in. Yet two pivotal moments began my journey back home. The first was profound and definitive. I will never forget lying on the floor in tears, at the age of 40, when my wife declared, “David, I love you so much, I am done trying to help you. I can no longer be around you when you are depressed.” With tears in her eyes and a baby in her arms, she walked out of the room, leaving me unaccompanied in my misery.

When I am in the midst of darkness and solitude, my way of creating some of resemblance of connection to life is to pull, unknowingly, everyone I can around me down with me. Depression does not just destroy the person inflicted with the illness. Depression affects everyone close to you. By making the decision to move toward her own self-care, my wife left me furious and more despondent. But as I lay on the floor alone, the realization began to emerge from within me that it was not my family that I needed. I had, after all, sucked all the energy out of everyone who cared about me. What I needed to do was reach beyond my family and friends to find a new lifeline. This decision was a turning point toward my recovery.

The second moment was when I decided to ask for assistance outside my immediate family. Seeking professional help was not easy, for I believed that going to a therapist was a sign of weakness. An ironic limiting belief, considering I had spent the previous 10 years as a psychotherapist! The insights and strategies I gleaned from my psychotherapy experience were life changing. Psychotherapy eventually led me to a Twelve-Step recovery program where I have found a rigorous spiritual program that has given me recovery from addiction, restored my integrity, healed relations in my family, and gained relief from depression.

Here is what I have learned about my own depression over these past 12-plus years. I emphasize again, that these insights are not meant to be prescriptive or true for anyone else. The list is intended to shed some light on your own experience with depression and to discover your own truth.

- Depression, in whatever form it takes, is not a weakness. It is an illness. The disease of depression originates from and is manifested in three areas: physical (biochemical), mental (thinking processes), and spiritual (care of the soul).
- Depression, when it surfaces, can feel all-encompassing and suffocating. It is vital to remember, that depression, no matter how consuming it can feel at the time, is never the totality of who you are. There may be a depressed part of you that seems to be running your life and destroying you. But there is much more to a person than their depressive nature. There is a healthy side to every depressed person. Remembering that when you face the dragon of depression will be life-saving.
- The illness of depression, like addiction, does not come with a cure. However, it can be arrested a day at a time by attending to your physical, mental, and spiritual life. I was told once by a physician, “the key to a long and happy life is to be diagnosed with a chronic, life-threatening illness and have to take care of it every day for the rest of your life.” Having come face-to-face with the illness of depression has forced me to pay attention to it and to structure my life in such a way that keeps my life manageable in each of these three areas, thus transforming the hell of

depression into a gift. Here are a few ways I attend to all three areas:

✚ **Physical:** I am relentless about getting adequate rest. Fatigue contributes to an unstable nervous system. I have learned that certain foods fuel depression, and that I have to abstain from these completely. Blood sugar stability is critical to stable moods. I also know that a climate with a lot of sunlight is helpful.

✚ **Mental:** Working on my attitude every day, including learning to think optimistically, has an effect on my moods. Also, it is important to toughen up mentally, learn to not be so sensitive, and understand the limits of my sensitivity. I have needed much support and guidance in this area. More importantly, learning to think carefully before making a promise, not compromising myself or pleasing others out of fear, and then being *accountable* — being a person who can be counted on to keep promises to myself and others, regardless of my level of personal comfort — has been critical in my recovery from depression.

✚ **Spiritual:** Depression always seems to indicate a lack of alignment between my authentic self and the choices I am making in my life. Discovering a personal higher power, where I can gain strength, support, and sustenance, has been very meaningful for me on my journey out of depression. Having a community that supports me and holds me accountable to live a life in alignment with my authentic voice has had a significant impact on countering depression.

- Depression, though at the time may seem disabling and terrorizing, is not your enemy. It is your friend. Depression is a gift, a voice from your soul. When I attempt to search for the message it is attempting to send me in its awkward, painful way, I eventually learn that depression is a force that is trying to move me toward growth, wholeness, and completeness. Years ago, I learned from my father the importance of developing a relationship with the depressive part of

myself. Writing can be a tool in this regard. Dad taught me to sit and write a letter to my depression when it was manifesting itself. Say anything you want to it, including outrage, fears, and areas of confusion. Ask it for advice. Then “become” your depressive side while you return the letter, responding to any emotions or inquiries. You can take the time to write back and forth until you feel a sense of completion. When you take the time to do this you may find that your depressive side has much to teach you and help you with in your life.

- It’s not depression, per se, that kills. It is the *meaning* and *choices* that we make in response to the depression. After all, circumstances do not determine a person; they *reveal* them. In a society hell-bent on happiness, this gets very confusing. We are told that happy is good and sad is bad. Sad has to be “fixed.” This leads us to see it as an inherent flaw and subsequently blame our sadness on something outside ourselves. We then reach for something — medically prescribed or otherwise — to give us immediate gratification and comfort. What we don’t realize is how *healing* sadness and dark nights of the soul can be. We tend to think in terms of progress and personal growth. The western idea of enlightenment is understood in terms of this progress. It is thought to be a state of being we reach where nothing can bother us any more. But that’s not what enlightenment is about. There is a Buddhist saying, “Before enlightenment, depression. After enlightenment, depression.” Enlightenment doesn’t “cure” our emotions; rather, it gives us a different perspective on them. It allows us to understand that dark nights are instructive and that sadness isn’t something to fear. It is every bit as “good” as happiness. What dark nights do is help us to become who we are.
- As a family member or loved one who is dealing with depression, your most vital responsibility is to take care of yourself. Your strength will enable you to set necessary boundaries with courage and clarity. Depression has the capacity to drain all the life-giving energy out of you. Depression, unintentionally, can be abusive and destructive to anyone within its wake.

No matter what your good intentions may be, you can't "fix" any one else's depression or prevent anyone's suicide. Although you can guide people to resources and support that may be of assistance, depression and the ensuing choices it entails, ultimately lies in the hands of the person engulfed by the depression.

- Whenever depression begins to surface, there is inevitably a lesson waiting. Reviewing this checklist has been useful to me to clarify what gift the depression is bringing:
 - Where have I drifted from my authentic voice? Am I being true to myself?
 - Where I am not attending to my core values, what matters most to me?
 - Am I angry? Do I compromise myself too much for others, and as a result have unresolved resentments?
 - Where have I neglected getting nourishing exercise?
 - Am I getting adequate rest?
 - How is my nutrition? I am using certain foods to comfort myself that end up actually *fueling* the depression? Do I need to get help with this?
 - How is my alcohol consumption? To bring me comfort, am I turning to drugs, which fuel the depression and make my life unmanageable? Do I have an addiction problem that I need to be honest about and seek help with?
 - How is my spiritual connection? Am I taking time to connect with nature, to meditate, to pray? How is my inner life? Am I relaxed and at peace?
 - Have I been neglecting time with important friends, meaningful community and connections?
 - Am I feeling fulfilled in my life?
 - Am I expressing my unique gifts fully, being all I am meant to be?
 - Am I finding passion in my life?
 - What am I seeking in my life? Am I listening and responding to my inner, authentic voice? Am I getting the needed support to find this voice?

- Independent of all these insights, the most important task when faced with depression is to make a decision to deal with it in a socially responsible way. Depression, unexamined and untreated, has the capacity to kill. When faced with depression, have the courage and compassion to do whatever needs doing in order to protect yourself and others.

Summary

One of the most encouraging facts of life is that your weakness can become your greatest asset. Kites and airplanes rise against the wind. In climbing a high mountain, you need the stony crags and rough places to aid you in your climb. Your weakness can become an asset when you face it, examine it, and trace it to its source.

Depression, either in yourself or someone you care about, has the potential to be both a blessing and a curse to those engulfed by its ravenous darkness. My hope is that you will somehow find the courage to appreciate the blessing, if not immediately, then later, and that you will take the curse and, like an oyster irritated by a grain of sand, over time use it as a catalyst to build layers of character and understanding — thus producing a pearl.

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