

Another Look At Depression: An Alternative Perspective *By: Debbie L. Whittle*

What if depression was viewed not as an illness, but rather, a call; a call from your own soul? Is it possible there is a gift in depression? We are told that depression is an illness; one involving brain chemistry. Is it possible to view depression from another perspective? Is it possible that depression can be viewed as part of a larger life cycle? Is it possible to see beyond appearances and perceive a higher vision, a vision of meaning and purpose?

These are the questions I ponder as I look at my own cycles of life; cycles that include many periods of transition; periods of visiting places of longing, loneliness, isolation, and despair. There have been many periods in my life when I felt the weight of loss, the imprint of trauma, the torment of failure, and the hopelessness of dreams.

Yet, in the midst of it all, I keep asking the questions. Rainer Maria Rilke says in Letter to a young Poet:

“ Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and... Try to live the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to **Live** everything. **Live** the questions **now**. Perhaps you will gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answers.”

I have experienced trauma: sexual, emotional, physical, spiritual. I have experienced loss: relationships, jobs, home, possessions, and death of a child. I have accomplished some things I'm very proud of, and I have many regrets. There are many reasons that I've felt worthless, fatigued, hopeless, self critical, full of agony and despair.

These are some of the questions I live when I'm experiencing depression: “Why am I here?” “What is my purpose?” “Why can't I seem to get it right?” “Why can't I figure this out?” “What am I supposed to do?” “Why does this hurt so much?”

As I'm writing these words, I can feel the heaviness and pain in my body. What do you feel as you read the last paragraph? Someone once said to me, “You can never solve a problem on the level of the problem.” You must look at the problem from a different perspective. So to get some distance, come with me as we back away from depression.

Imagine that the movie camera has just backed up and is panning to a wider and higher perspective. Depression is lying down there on a couch, but we're perhaps sitting on a cloud viewing it from a much more detached perspective. What do you notice about depression?

Here is what I notice about depression in my life:

- I notice there are a lot of things about life in general, and my life in particular, that are depressing.
- I notice that depression really stops me.
- I notice that depression seems to be part of a cycle for me.
- I notice that as long as I judge and criticize myself and fight this experience, the experience of depression expands and my pain increases.
- I notice that my breathing is tight and shallow, like I'm holding my breath.
- I notice I'm really scared.
- I notice I'm trying to make myself do something and the words "I can't" keep coming up.
- I notice I feel really sad.
- I notice I feel really angry.
- I notice I feel really alone.
- I notice I feel really unacceptable.
- I notice I feel like a failure.
- I notice that I'm beating myself up because I should know better, and I should be able to just "choose" to be happy.
- I notice that as I watch myself, my heart opens and I feel compassion for the pain I'm in.
- I notice that as I begin to feel compassion for myself, my being eases up a little.
- I notice that as my being eases a little, my breath deepens.
- I notice that as I breathe in a deeper, slower rhythm, my body begins to relax and open a little.
- I notice that as I tell myself it's ok to be here and it's ok to do nothing, it's ok to just be who I am in this moment, begin to cry.
- I notice they are tears of release and acceptance.
- I notice there is a small voice inside saying, "Are you sure it's ok to just be like this. It doesn't feel ok. It hurts. And I feel so frustrated, and I feel so alone."
- I notice that I can respond to myself, "Yes, dear one, it is absolutely ok. I know it hurts, and I know you're scared, and I will sit here with you. I will be with you, as long as it takes."
- I notice that I can tell myself all the things I wish someone would say to me.
- I notice I can be with myself in a way I've always wanted someone to be.
- I notice that I feel loving toward myself even though I feel unlovable.
- I notice I feel calmer.

What we have witnessed here is the magic of perspective. We experienced moving to a different level from the problem. When we move to a different level or perspective, we move out of the experience. This gives us the ability to observe the experience rather than be caught in the emotion of the experience. When we become the observer, there is an opportunity to gain clarity and understanding.

With distance, it is also easier to access our own compassion. Whatever our experience, our ability to be compassionate with ourselves increases our ability to accept ourselves, wherever we are. I find this to be one of my greatest challenges: to accept myself as a fallible human being living in a world full of misery.

We live in a world which conditions us to believe that we're all separate, that we have to find "our place" of belonging and worth, and that life is hard and full of pain. We are taught what to believe, how to act, and what to think in order to fit in. In order to fit in, we have come to believe that much of what we feel, think, and do is unacceptable and to deny what is original, spontaneous, and natural in us.

So we have an experience of being unacceptable, of being rejected, of not fitting in. What we want more than anything else is a place of belonging. Yet, we feel a supreme sense of unworthiness. We keep getting the message if we try hard enough we will be happy. So we try harder. We try to be acceptable. We try to do it right. We deny what we know, what we feel, what we believe, and what we want. Until we are so confused we have no idea who we are, or what we want. We just know we are miserable. Such is the cycle of despair. Does any of this sound familiar? Depressing isn't it?

And herein is the crux of depression, and all "mental illness." We are told the "truth" is one thing, and yet, we sense something very different is true. Somewhere deep inside, something is stirring. Something wants out. Something whispers to us at night, telling us there is something we are not seeing, something we are not remembering. We feel a vague something, unnamable, gnawing at us. We try covering it up with food, activity, work, sex, recreational drugs and alcohol, or pharmaceutical drugs. We think it is pain. And to be sure, there is pain there. But this is something even deeper that will not be denied. **This is the call of our very own soul.** That call is being denied all around us. And that drives us crazy!

And here is the gift of depression: depression stops us long enough to provide an opportunity to listen. Consider this: What would happen if instead of fighting depression we accepted the opportunity to stop awhile and listen beneath the pain? Is it possible that our own soul would begin to talk to us? Is it possible we would learn the truth of our essential being?

Is it possible that the death wish we feel, is about something more than desperately wanting the pain to end? Is it possible that the death wish we experience is the desire for the death of all that is false in us? Is it possible that the "job" of depression is to give us the opportunity to die and be reborn metaphorically?

In all of life there is a birth-death-rebirth cycle. We see that most clearly in the passage of the seasons through a calendar year. As humans, we are terrified of death because our only sense of rebirth is a vague religious notion of a life in the hereafter...if we earn it.

What if we began to honor the birth-death-rebirth cycle as it manifests through our many transitions during our lifetime? Depression is an opportunity to honor the death of who we have known ourselves to be. I wonder if this metaphor of birth- death- rebirth were honored, would we still have a strong desire to kill ourselves to relieve our suffering?

When we spend time trying to fit in, trying to do everything right, and trying to be acceptable, we create a false self. We project the image of who we think will be acceptable. And even if it works, we are miserable because we know it's not real. Our deepest pain is not that which has been done to us, even though most of us have experienced unspeakable trauma. Our deepest pain is the ways in which we deny our truth and leave ourselves. Is it possible that our soul is "dying" for us to wake up to that which is essential in ourselves, to stop pretending that we are less than we are?

Our deepest despair is that no matter how we try, we cannot run from ourselves. Depression is our opportunity to come face to face with ourselves.

All the metaphors of transformation: the Phoenix, the snake, the butterfly, all contain a period of darkness or death before the transformation. This period of darkness feels like the end. And therein lies the power. In order to experience the power of transformation, we must sink totally into the darkness and feel the power of the void. It is in this void that all life begins. All seeds germinate in the darkness.

Shakti Gwaine says that we all resist the experience of "hitting bottom", whatever that means for us. But as we finally allow ourselves to hit bottom, we fall through a trap door into the light. I find this to be true.

The birth-death-rebirth cycle is never easy. Even though I've experienced it many times, it always feels like I can't do it. Death is never easy. Yet after days, or weeks or months of struggle, I finally surrender. Even though I know better, surrender always feels like giving up. It always feels like failure.

As I let go into acceptance, acceptance of the depression, acceptance of my failures, acceptance of my inability to understand, figure it out, or fix this, something begins to shift. Most of the time I only notice the shift in hindsight. I call this shift magic. Some call it grace.

Depression is not a static event. It is part of a larger process, a process of life moving through us. Given the right support, it can move through us and bring a sense of rebirth. What is calling for your attention in your depression? What new life is germinating in the darkness? What wants to die? What is waiting to be reborn? I encourage you to find the support to use your depression as a process of transformation.

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