

reflections on surviving a season of depression

FROZEN OUT

*The night is darkening round me,
The wild winds coldly blow;
But a tyrant spell has bound me,
And I cannot, cannot go.*

“The night is darkening round me”
—EMILY BRONTË

Someone once told me that if you sprinkle salt on a slug, in a matter of minutes, the salt will eat away the body of the slug and leave only a dead, jellied mess. During the fall of 1997, my brain was the slug and a combination of circumstances and genetics sprinkled the salt that began to eat away my rationality, my self-esteem, and my joy.

After a stressful summer, I started my second year at North Park University angry and tied in knots. I spent the fall semester in a practice room working on a difficult aria for an audition. The closer the audition came, the more I pushed myself. I told several friends that if I didn't make it into the school competition, my entire fall would be wasted.

I stepped on stage with shaky knees and a knot in my stomach. The room turned a funny color and I could hardly stand still. I could barely finish singing because of the urgent feeling that I had to get out of the room now. My body was drenched in sweat and I thought my heart would beat right out of my chest. Afterwards, I stayed outside the performance hall until everybody was finished. When the list of people who made it was posted, I wait-

ed for everyone else to leave, crept from my hiding place, and peered at the white sheet of paper. The storm exploded in my head when I saw that my name was not on the list.

The voice in my head began. “A soprano who can't get into a school competition is a failure. I must be stupid. Nobody wants to be friends with a stupid failure. I can't get out of bed. If I go to class I'll only fail the test. Nobody wants to see me at lunch anyway. They all hate me. If I wasn't so ugly...I can't walk across campus; everybody will know I failed. People might find out I'm crazy. Everybody's talking about the spiritual revival on campus. What's wrong with me? I don't feel revived—I'm dead inside. Am I losing my mind? Why can't someone see that I'm falling apart?”

For several months I skipped a lot of classes, sitting on the floor in a practice room, crying for hours at a time. I pushed my friends away and disappeared from the social scene. I didn't go to many meals or answer the phone. At night, I walked outside and pleaded with the statue of Jesus that stands on the campus. Why was he silent when I needed him so badly? Maybe I was better off dead.

The voice in my head grew louder until I couldn't hear anything else. I got failing grades and avoided more classes. After the holidays it was worse—no Christmas break to look forward to, just months of winter that felt as dead as I did.

One night I was on the phone with my mom. Before I could stop myself my desperation spilled out. The only word I heard her say was the one I dreaded most: psychiatrist. Did my parents think I was crazy too?

When I arrived in his office, Dr. Johnson took one look at me and gasped: “They sent you to see a shrink all by yourself?” Normally, his joke would have cracked me up, but I just nodded and sat on his beige couch. My eyes felt dead and frozen.

I told him about my glass box, where I huddled while the rest of the world passed me by—I couldn't get out and they couldn't get in. Not even God could get in. He just saw me wasting away and didn't do anything to help. God was laughing at me. I felt nothing but anger for a God who would leave me frozen in that box.

Dr. Johnson listened intently. Because I had been depressed for so long, he diagnosed a major depressive disorder. There was a chemical imbalance in my brain. The pressure I had put on myself had probably triggered the depression that was already in the genes on both sides of my family. I had a medical condition—and I wasn't crazy.

*The giant trees are bending
Their bare boughs weighed with snow;
The storm is fast descending,
And yet I cannot go.*

Over the next five months the depression remained like a blanket of



I felt nothing but anger for a God who would leave me frozen in that box.

snow on top of me, thawing for a day here and there, and then freezing back to a hard shell. I shuffled into my professors' offices, and tried to explain how an honor student could have such a poor attendance record and failing grades. They were merciful and supportive, letting me make up missed assignments at a slower rate.

I had to focus on survival and at times I was my own worst enemy. The

voice in my head lied to me. Even when I knew it was lying, I listened because the voice was all I could hear in an otherwise silent world: winter will last forever; everybody hates me; things will never get better; I'd be better off dead.

In the spring, Dr. Johnson added another antidepressant to my treatment. One May morning, I woke up and noticed that there was color in the world. It wasn't just Chicago in the

spring. It was like getting glasses for the first time and seeing the world in focus. I took steps back into the land of the living. Like a baby bird emerging from the egg, I was weak and tentative. As I broke through I saw the family and friends who loved me even

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when I was a selfish mess. I saw a pretty girl in the mirror. I raised my hand in class. I laughed. I saw that in my deepest moments of despair God had held on tightly. The isolation dissipated and spring had finally come.

*Clouds beyond clouds above me,
Wastes beyond wastes below;
But nothing drear can move me:
I will not, cannot go.*

About 1 in 20 Americans deal with major depression each year, and it seems like 18 out of the remaining 19 hand out advice like, “Cheer up. Snap out of it. Show us your pretty smile. You just need a change of scenery. You don’t need medicine.” A depressed person probably won’t argue and they may believe the false idea that the depression is somehow their fault.

Christians may even think that depression is a result of sin in the person’s life. But if God punished us for

our sins in that way nobody could sit on the throne of judgment because everybody would be depressed!

Depression is a physical condition with spiritual symptoms. A change of scenery doesn’t cure a diabetic. A pretty smile doesn’t fix advanced heart disease. Why do we view depression differently?

Whereas diabetes and heart disease cause an “explosion” if not treated, depression causes more of an “implosion.” It is contained in the person’s head, along with their thoughts, their emotions, their rationality, their understanding of the world, their very self.

Depression gets in the brain and turns the blender on high and soon every part of life has a chunk of depression eating away at it. That salted slug doesn’t stand much of a chance without some intervention. The proper diagnosis and treatment of depression

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Three things you can do to help.

There are some relatively simple things you can do to help if someone you know is depressed. Remember—you don’t have to have all the answers!

1) **Listen to them.** Understand that you can’t fix them but assure them of your love and support.

2) **Help them get help.** Most general physicians can recognize depression well enough to either diagnose it or recommend a psychiatrist. Help your friend make the appointment, even offer to accompany them.

3) **Be supportive, even if they push you away.** But when the depression subsides, don’t be offended if they need to take back their emotional privacy. It’s hard to heal when people expect you to be sick. □

This October, relive the life and martyrdom of Covenant missionary Dr. Paul Carlson.

Monganga Paul tells the stirring story of Covenant missionary martyr Dr. Paul Carlson and his death at the hands of Congo rebels in 1964, an event that shocked the world and galvanized the Congo Church. This October, Covenant Publications is proud to release an expanded reprint of *Monganga Paul* on the 40th anniversary of Carlson’s death.

Monganga Paul will be available for purchase at Covenant Bookstore and online at www.covchurch.org. Net proceeds from book sales will support projects sponsored by the Paul Carlson Partnership to improve medical care and living conditions in areas of Congo served by the Covenant Church of Congo and the Evangelical Covenant church.

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The non Amish participants on the show include a “party girl” fashion stylist, a gay “club promoter,” and a vegan who states that cows are extraterrestrial beings. “I believe their DNA comes from, like, somewhere else,” she said.

But those striking contrasts might have made the Amish look better rather than worse. The Center for Rural Strategies, which spearheaded a campaign to keep the show off the air, received some sixty emails the morning after the show’s first episode aired. “They tended to agree . . . that the kids of Amish heritage were the smarter, more likable ones,” says Vice-President Marty Newell. □

Suit Filed in Church Van Accident

The estates of five young people killed when their church van rolled over last year have sued Ford Motor Company and Enterprise Rent-A-Car, claiming Ford was negligent in manufacturing its Econoline E-350 fifteen-passenger van, and that Enterprise knew the vans are dangerous. The young people were on their way to a church retreat.

Calling the 2002 Econoline E-350 “a death trap waiting to happen,” plaintiff’s attorney Brian Panish said inexperienced drivers and full loads increase chances such vans will roll over.

Ford has made changes to its 2006 model vans, which provide more stability when sensors detect unusual side-to-side movement, but the company said in a statement, “We remain confident that this is a very safe vehicle.”

Earlier this year, Ford reached a confidential settlement with the families of three young American missionaries who died in a rollover crash near Monterrey, Mexico in June 2002.

The National Transportation Safety Board said in 2002 that the center of gravity of fifteen-passenger vehicles rises when the van carries more than ten passengers, making rollovers more likely. The NTSB recommended in July 2003 that Ford strengthen the roofs

of its fifteen-passenger vans and provide more safety belts. The NTSB also called for training van drivers to better maneuver in emergency situations.

The current suit, filed in Alameda Superior Court in California, stems from an accident in Yermo, California, nearly halfway between Los Angeles and Las Vegas. Early on the morning of March 29, 2003, a van carrying fourteen young adults to a religious retreat rolled over on Interstate 15, killing five passengers.

The group had gathered at St. Antonius Coptic Church in northern California the previous day and set out on the 400-mile trek south, crashing onto the median only twenty minutes away from their destination. □

Poll: Most Americans Support Public Displays of Religion

The vast majority of Americans oppose the removal of the Ten Commandments from public buildings and “In God We Trust” from U.S. currency.

Researchers learned that 79 percent reject the idea of “removing signs that list the Ten Commandments from government buildings” while 18 percent would approve of such a policy. Thirteen percent of Americans think the phrase “In God We Trust” should be removed from currency but 84 percent oppose that idea. Removal of the phrase “one nation, under God” from the Pledge of Allegiance also has little support. Eighty-four percent of adults surveyed dismiss such a change while 15 percent favor it. On teaching creationism in public schools, 59 percent of adults were in favor, and 38 percent against.

Opinion on permitting the “F-word” on broadcast television was less divided. Fifteen percent of adults surveyed said it was acceptable to allow that word on television while 83 percent said it was inappropriate. □

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is vital: there were nearly 30,000 suicides in the United States in 1999; 90 percent of those suicides were associated with mental illness, mostly depression, according to the National Institute of Mental Health (www.nimh.nih.gov).

It’s time to start talking.

Sometimes it’s hard to know what to say to a person who is depressed. A little education makes a big difference.

Depression is *not* just sadness. Other symptoms are lack of sleep or too much sleep, changes in appetite, feelings of worthlessness, lack of energy, restlessness or irritability, loss of pleasure in previously enjoyed activities, inability to concentrate, poor self image, inability to make decisions, pessimistic outlook, physical complaints that don’t respond to treatment, and thoughts of death or suicide.

My winter of depression showed me that I am completely dependent on the grace of God. God used my heartbreak to reveal the many layers of his love for me. He planted in my life friends and family members who knew how to help me when I was ready to give up.

Six years later I still deal with depression. It’s not an old friend I invite to dinner but a relative that invites itself periodically. God has the power, but for whatever reason he has chosen not to heal me. Medication helps me stay emotionally healthy, but at times I am blasted by another winter storm.

And I am not alone. Since my diagnosis, I have met other people who deal with depression and it always surprises me because they are the people I would least suspect. They are the smart, vivacious ones: the people who are the life of the party, the people who seem to have everything together, the people you would never suspect are frozen out in the cold. □

EDITOR’S NOTE: The excerpts from “The night is darkening round me” by Emily Brontë, are from the *Oxford Book of English Verse*, edited by Christopher Ricks.