ART GRECO

The Monster in My Closet

A STORY OF DEPRESSION

AS MY BLUE MAZDA 626 rolled to a stop at the light, I had no idea that a mental tornado was about to crash down in my head. All I was thinking of was the lunch that awaited me at home and the chance to watch the Cubs on cable while I ate.

The corner of Highway 99 and McDonald Street was one I'd seen hundreds of times. It had one of those lights that always seemed to be red—especially when I was on my way home from the office after a particularly tiring day of ministry or in a real hurry to get somewhere.

As I sat first in line at the signal, I noticed the Elmer's Restaurant on the left, a favorite "after worship" eatery for many families in our church, and the Union Gas Station that had served customers for years, occupying its place on the right. Everything around me looked familiar. And it should have. I lived only blocks from that corner and passed it many times each day, running errands and meeting people for appointments.

But that day something bizarre happened to me there. I arrived at the red light feeling fairly normal. I'd grown used to the sensation of stress, assuming it was just a necessary by-product of the ministry of a church planter. My chest felt like it was in a vice, my head felt pressured (but without the sharp pain of a headache), and I was a little dizzy—all vibrations I had grown accustomed to over the years.

Then that "bizarre something" came. Its onset was quick, as though my senses were a slide show and someone had just pushed the button that changed the picture. It was like that feeling you get when, in the middle of the night, exhausted during a road trip, you wake up in a half conscious, panicked fog. Your surroundings are strange and you can't remember where you are until, halfway to the bathroom, you realize that you've been sleeping in a generic hotel room, not in your bed back home. Only in this case, "clarity" wasn't coming. As suddenly as a person exhales a used breath and gathers a new one, nothing looked familiar. I didn't know where I was, where I was going, or where I'd been. I just sat there, dazed, until the sports car behind me honked and startled me into creeping through a now foreign light that had turned from red to green.

I recall motoring slowly down the highway and thinking, *I'll just keep driving until something looks familiar. I think I live close to here*. It was sort of like the sensation you get when you've driven somewhere obscure in a strange city just once, then, relying solely on memory, return years later to try to locate that same place. I turned left because it "felt" correct, then left again for the same reason, suspecting that one of the houses on that block was mine, but not sure which one.

I'll push the button on the garage door opener, I thought. *Wherever a garage door opens, that must be my house*. That maneuver having settled all doubt, I parked in the driveway of the house with the opening door and walked into the garage. Convinced my ministry was over because of some serious and debilitating disease, I sat on the freezer and just stared at the walls, waiting for my head to clear.

That happened in the spring of 1991 and it started a chain of struggles, errors, and lessons that have proven to be among the most significant in my life.

One of those errors happened right there in the garage. As I sat groping and pleading with God for mental clarity, my children trickled in from school. One of them found me and came out with a confused look on his face. What's

Art Greco is director of evangelism and prayer for the Department of Church Growth and Evangelism. Next month, he begins ministry as pastor of Marin Covenant Church in San Rafael, California.

wrong Dad? Why aren't you at work?" he asked.

I decided right there that this experience was something I'd keep to myself. How could the kids handle the fact that their invincible, "always laughing and clowning" dad was now unable to find his way home for lunch? How could my wife, Brenda, concentrate on her job or her children when she was worried about her husband? I would go and see my doctor because I wanted to know what the problem was. But, as if I didn't have the right to be sick, I was determined to deal with the whole thing alone.

After undergoing several medical tests, a diagnosis of stress-induced depression was put forward. Along with that diagnosis came the recommendation that I find another profession. As planned, I kept all of this to myself. Not even my wife was aware of what had happened or what the doctor had concluded. But regardless of how reasonable my desire to protect her from my pain might have seemed at the time, it was a foolish, unloving, selfish, even dangerous decision.

That choice represented the first of many destructive assumptions I was carrying about depression. What follows is an abbreviated list of some of the lessons I have learned and am learning through the ongoing struggle.

I. Trying to handle depression alone is its own type of insanity.

One of the things I eventually learned is that recovering from depression requires lots of help from other people. In fact, my martyr-like approach to the problem, had I stayed with it, could have been disastrous. Settling the Middle East crisis would have been easier. But I didn't realize that at the time. Besides, I was afraid that people would see me as weak if they discovered that I struggled with it—that the stresses of planting a church and functioning as a pastor were too much for me. Actually, I struggle with appearing "weak" even *now*, with the writing of this article. I wasn't going to tell the church's leadership; I wasn't going to tell my wife; and I *sure* wasn't going to tell my superintendent. Pride had convinced me that I would be branded if anyone found out about this. But, thankfully, keeping my secret eventually turned out to be impossible.

In spite of my silence, Brenda knew very soon that something was wrong. There were evenings when I would just come home from work and go to bed. I didn't want to talk, I was irritable, and I began to isolate myself from people. I recall one night when she told me that a member of the church was on the phone with a question about a minor ministry detail. I became very angry and refused to take the call. Throwing up my arms and retreating to the bedroom, I screamed at her, "Why do people always call me? Why can't they just leave me alone? When do I get a life?"

My church leaders and close friends were also too bright for my maneuverings. I fooled them for a while, but I soon found that I was "blanking" during sermons and depending uncompromisingly on my notes, something I hated. In addition, I began to forget the names of folks I'd known for years. I was short with people at business meetings when before I had been playful. And I found that I would do anything to avoid a "get together" or chance to follow up on a guest to our church.

My church family—especially those with whom I worked closely—didn't say much at first. But eventually they began to ask probing questions. Wearied by that interrogative onslaught and noting that I was not getting better, I finally confided in our church chairperson, one of my closest friends, and explained what was happening. I told about my secret visit to the doctor and his diagnosis of stress-induced depression. I confessed that I often forgot what I was saying in the middle of a sermon and had to virtually read from my notes to get finished, also admitting that I was starting to resent people for calling me, sharing with me, or even just wanting to make small-talk. In his wisdom he insisted that I tell my wife, that the leaders be informed, that the church pay for a second opinion from a doctor they knew and trusted (where the original diagnosis was eventually confirmed), and that he and I sit down with our new superintendent to ask for help.

Letting others help was pivotal in my healing. To my surprise, most people actually felt closer to me, even energized by the opportunity to help their pastor. While this, I suspect, would not be the case in every congregation, I am confident that many pastors struggling with stress, depression, burn out, etc., would be encouraged by their church's ability and desire to serve them. Our leadership was very sensitive and understanding. They talked with the doctor they had sent me to and decided to give me several months off (with full pay and a good therapeutic strategy) to recuperate. I was ready to accept their offer, but not without first negotiating it down a bit. Six months away was just too much.

II. A pastor does a church no favors by refusing to accept help.

My seemingly "noble" decision to cut back on my church's offer to take six months off to get well was another mistake. I really didn't feel comfortable with so much paid time off, thinking it to be unfair to an already struggling church. But really, my primary discomfort was driven by pride. There I was, a man who could hardly make it through a day without going home to hide in his bedroom like a terrified mouse, too proud to accept a gift that would have been a great asset to recovery.

I never did agree to all of that time off. Instead, we settled on a month off, after which I'd work twenty hours per week, finally easing back to full time over the span of two to three months. My leaders and my physician all argued for the original option, but true to

prideful form, I persuaded them that the church couldn't afford it and I wouldn't need it. To this day I believe I was wrong and regret the decision. It would have been better for them and me if I had listened and humbly accepted their gift of love.

During that first full month away I was able to focus on some of the unbiblical views I had formed about success and consider their role in my struggle. I experienced wonderful talks with God as I worked in my garden and even took a full week alone to just drive south and be completely spontaneous as the Lord led me along. I made so much progress—laughing again, sensing hope and value, experiencing occasional peace and the virtual absence of stress—that I was convinced I should get back to work as soon as the month was up.

But thinking you can go back to ministry "part time" when you've been a full time pastor for so many years is pretty unreasonable. And assuming that parishioners, no matter how well intentioned or sensitive, can allow you to work part time when they are used to you working six very full days and most evenings is naive—even unfair to them. It wasn't long before I found myself slipping back into the dark hole that had previously consumed me. Once again, I began closing my blinds and locking my office door just in case someone decided to come for a visit or prayer, letting the answering machine take calls I would have otherwise picked up myself. I was retreating again. And I was in constant fear that a full-blown depression was again on the way.

Partly because I was learning to talk about my struggles and partly because I was being assisted by new medications, these "signs that I hadn't yet recovered" proved to be only temporary setbacks. But they most likely wouldn't have occurred at all had I heeded my doctor's advice and stayed away longer. I eventually *did* find that I could function again as a pastor, but I went back too soon and the "recovery" was much more painful than it needed to be.

III. Assuming that all I need is the Bible is tempting but dangerous.

Another one of the lessons I learned had to do with the value of therapy. Some pastors struggle with the appropriateness of receiving help that isn't exclusively theological or specifically scriptural in approach. Others are so used to being the ones giving help that they find it difficult to receive any. And of course, some question the ministry of Christian therapy altogether. I was a member of the second and third groups—especially the third. "The Scriptures are my therapist," I would say, "and they don't charge me $100 per hour for the service."

Certainly the Bible contributed much to my recovery. Its comforts were amazing, its instructions and insights incredible. But being forced by my circumstances to ask for help from an able counselor changed my entire outlook. Without that wonderful man's prayer, honest questioning, and practical help, I don't know how long it would have taken me to heal, or if I ever *would* have. I continue to find strength and guidance from the word of God. But in it I read about the importance of Christian community in discerning the deep things of the Spirit. In my experience with depression, the Bible was good, even excellent. But it was the Bible in partnership with a gifted, discerning therapist that God used to loose me from the hands of this unrelenting monster called "depression."

IV. In some ways, depression has been almost a "friend" to me.

Anyone reading this while struggling with the things I've mentioned is probably ready to tear it out and toss it right about now. I certainly would have been fourteen years ago. I'll never forget the well-meaning but exquisitely painful platitudes offered by uninformed friends during those gloomiest days of depression. Perhaps the most well-rehearsed of all was, "Well God must love you very much and want to do something wonderful in your life to allow you to go through all of this." It was true, of course, that God loved me. And he had at least *allowed* what I was experiencing. But those "platitudes" always hurt much more than they helped. In fact, they *never* helped! So I apologize to anyone who is shaken by the assertion that God might want to use things as painful as depression to do good, or that depression could be a "companion" that enriches or helps us in any way. But, speaking from the other side of the despair yet aware that another episode could be right around the corner, I can say that God did do good things in me through this potentially destructive tool—this uninvited friend.

In some ways, parts of me died through that trial—some parts of me that I really liked. For instance, I am off the charts in my "E" (extrovert) score on the Meyers/Briggs typology test. Until this stress/depression experience, I could never get enough of people. Even on our honeymoon I said to my new bride, "Okay, it's been great to be alone for a couple of days. Now what do you say we go home early, get a bunch of our friends together, and have a big party?" (By the way, I recommend that you not say this on your

CONTINUED ON PAGE 21

I FOUND THAT DEPRESSION WAS LIKE A MONSTER HIDING IN MY CLOSET. IT SEEMED AS THOUGH IT WAS THE KING OF MY EMOTIONAL WORLD, HAVING FREEDOM TO COME OUT WHENEVER IT PLEASED AND STAY AS LONG AS IT WANTED.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 9

honeymoon—or on a romantic excursion of any kind.)

During this intense struggle with depression, I found that I didn't want to be with folks so much, if at all. The thought of answering the phone or entertaining a group brought on a sort of "headache in my chest." Even now, I find it easier to go home before everyone else has left an event. And now I consider it as something precious to be alone and quiet for extended periods of time. I still love gatherings and thrive on encounters, but not as much as I used to. Part of that died, and part of it *needed* to.

But there are new things that God birthed in me as a direct result of this nightmare too. Let me offer just one as an example. I found that depression was like a monster hiding in my closet. It seemed as though it was the king of my emotional world, having freedom to come out whenever it pleased and stay as long as it wanted. I was humbled by my "neediness" and even more humbled by my inability to face down and subdue that monster. However, the embarrassment and subsequent humiliation that resulted from the defeat made me much more approachable to people. One neighbor who had recently begun to follow Christ and attend our worship services said to me after my return to work, "I've noticed that something has changed in you. You're not nearly so threatening as you used to be. I think I'm ready to get more involved in the church now."

While I'm certainly not claiming amazing humility, I can sure say that I'm a softer, more broken person than I used to be. That was God's gift to me and our church—one that resulted from being temporarily defeated by depression.

V. Sometimes the objective isn't defeating the depression but staying solvent today in order to have an opportunity to chip away at it again tomorrow.

I wasn't able to articulate this point very well until after things had settled down and life had rediscovered some semblance of normalcy. But even before I really understood how what I was saying fit in with a strategy for addressing debilitating depression, I was reciting to myself, as though it were a mantra I was trying to memorize, "My objective today is just to stay alive in order to have another shot tomorrow." That depression monster was so strong that I never even considered the possibility that he could be fully defeated. Yet, the thought that I would have to live with his poisonous suffocation for the next twenty years only added to his strength over me. Before I even knew that it was a good and reasonable tactic, I was practicing the discipline of being concerned only for the day I was actually *in*, with no assumptions about how dark it might be on the days that would follow.

The script played out as follows: Mornings usually served to remind me that nothing had really changed. I was still choking emotionally and my soul still couldn't breathe. I was still under siege by something well beyond despair or discouragement. Despair and discouragement were at least "*somethings*." This monster was more easily aligned with "nothingness" and/or "purposelessness." And he hadn't left during the night.

Next I would need to consider three reasons to stay alive today. The longer this battle raged, the more I fantasized about how nice it would have been to die. So I would think about the three children I loved so much and the scars they would deal with for the rest of their lives if I ended mine. Reason number two might be my parents. Wouldn't they be haunted by guilt, wondering what they could have done to save me or, worse, whether they might have contributed to the depression in some way? They were too good to suffer all of that. Most powerfully, I would think of my wife. How could I possibly consider suicide a fair payment for the sweet, selfless loyalty she had offered me for thirteen years?

On other days I would consider different reasons, like the kids in our church who looked up to their pastor but would have to face the possibility that Christianity was invalid and Christ impotent every time they remembered me if I were to quit struggling. Sometimes those "reasons" were as superficial as wanting to watch the Dodgers game ESPN was carrying that weekend or that I still hadn't finished the lasagna in the fridge and my wife, Brenda, made great lasagna.

The point is that it was too big a leap to think about rubbing out depression in one stroke. That kind of thinking only tightened its grip on me. Some days the objective was just to find a way to stay alive until I could fall asleep, saying to myself, "Tomorrow might be better and I will never know unless I make sure it is available to me." The objective was just staying alive today in order to have a chance to chip away at the monster again tomorrow.

A friend of mine, quoting an African American pastor, once said, "If you ain't got no need, your prayers ain't got no suction." I wish I could say that I no longer experience bouts with depression. I can't say that. But I *can* say that the monster doesn't roam the halls of my life with the arrogance and "lordship" it once did. I *can* say that I've learned that there's calm on the other side of those bouts—that I'm no longer as afraid of them. And I can *definitely* say that depression has often been the only thing that could pin my nose to the carpet in search of the Lord's feet. In reminding me of my need, it "gives my prayers suction."

I speak only for myself, of course, but this painful ride was a rather strange one. I would never want to go through it again. It was as close to hell as I would ever care to wander. Yet this misery has proven to be so strategic in my life as a Christian and a pastor that I would never want to erase it from my history either. So much pain was experienced in the heat of that fire, but still, so much good has been found in the stain of its ashes. What a crazy deal—to have something serve as curse and grace—at the same time. ❑