depression and descent

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**Excerpt from chapter of book currently in pre-publication**

*When we feel depressed we fear something is terribly wrong. And yet …*

*… what if in our depression and sadness we are simply being invited to connect in deeper and deeper ways with all that we are?*

*And what if we ignore it?*

*Understanding and embracing depression and the movement of descent has been pivotal in my journey out of suffering.*

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**the meaning of depression**

There are times in our lives that define us. Or at least, set a course that seemingly for years and even decades, informs not only the path we take, but also the path we choose *not* to take.

One such time for me, was when I was suffering greatly and had just begun to look for help. I had no experience with the healing professions and so assumed that the best place to start was with the mainstream medical world of doctors and psychiatrists. In the chapter *Stories* I describe my first encounter with a psychiatrist and the sense of crushing invalidation when my suffering was reduced to a “chemical imbalance in the brain called depression” and the cure touted as anti-depressants.

Over the years, that diagnosis and its ‘cure’ was paraded out on many other occasions. Even if I went to my doctor for a quite unrelated health matter, the fact that I was “having therapy” or “wasn’t working full-time” or “seemed a bit down” was all the reason she needed to look at me with concern and ask, “Do you want to try the latest anti-depressants? They might help you live your life like everyone else.”

But the fact was, I didn’t want to live my life “like everyone else”. Even at that time, I found it bizarre and blindly superficial, that an always-smiling and always-active ‘normality’ was promoted as healthy, and depression, withdrawal, inactivity, contemplation or inquiry were relegated to the domain of aberration, abnormality and illness.

If depression was merely the result of a chemical imbalance in my brain, then what did that say about my humanity, my history and my suffering? Was my most human of responses merely the meaningless by-product of a chemical dysfunction? And could a ‘good life’ really be lived by trying to banish the difficult bits with a neat diagnosis and prescription for pills? Surely I was *so* much more than this.

Although there were times I doubted myself and acquiesced briefly to medical ‘treatments’, I knew that depression was *meaningful*, and that *all* suffering, including that of sadness, despair, and anguish, was *just* as much part of life and part of the Truth, as joy, freedom, contentment and peace. Truth would never leave out one whole side of human expression, and only embrace that which was deemed by the medical profession to be acceptable.

From that time forward, I began to search for a view of reality in which depression or sadness, and indeed *any* human expression, could not only be included, but could also be understood and wholeheartedly embraced.

In 2001 I was introduced to the writing of British independent philosophical thinker, Peter Wilberg. In it I found a deeper context for the suffering of depression.

The basic premise of Wilberg’s writing is that ‘depression’ is not a ‘disease’ or ‘illness’ of some sort, but rather a natural deepening process by which we sink beyond the surface of life and reconnect with the solidity of our inner being. It is from our inner being that we can truly heed, listen to and digest the stresses and questions posed to us by our everyday lives and then incubate new and deeper ways of thinking, acting and being in the world. Wilberg believed that chronic or acute depressive states result when we fight, flee or ‘freeze’ this depressive process.

Although the material on depression in this chapter has its foundation in Wilberg’s writing, in the years since, my understanding has departed from it in some ways. However, at that time it had a profound impact on me, on my movement into depth, and also on the course my life subsequently took, and for that I will always be very grateful.

In 2004, as Wilberg’s writing moved into other arenas, I published a website[[1]](#footnote-1) to showcase his writing on depression. My wish was that it inform the lives of others as it had mine. At that time, my understanding of spiritual processes was prior to awakening, and as such was limited, but I have since updated it. To this day, I continue to receive responses to it from around the world, most of which describe a lifetime of depression and the relief of knowing, that rather than a malfunction, it is a process that has profound meaning.

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**we call this depression**

We call this depression,

this lowering

this beckoning down

this deepening

this movement away.

Away from the world

and the mind

and the circling

and the frenzied grasping.

The grasping for more,

for better,

for bigger.

We call this depression.

And yet … and yet …

looking closer … sensing closer …

What is it that is here in my body?

There is a lowering

a beckoning down

a deepening.

To where? To where am I summoned?

Could it be to Myself?

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**the profound gift of sadness and depression**

We are beings of infinite vastness and depth. As I sit writing this now, I know myself as that depth. It is Truth. It is Peace. It is Home.

However, the spotlight of everyday life increasingly illuminates only the tiniest speck within that enormity; it focusses almost exclusively on the ‘ego’ or everyday self and its interaction with the material world. A ‘good life’ is equated with a busier and busier movement of this ‘self’ across the visible surfaces of life: a horizontal gathering of faster, bigger, more exciting, more entertaining and also more horrific experiences. We go shopping, we travel, we buy the latest mobile phone, we look for spiritual highs or we sit transfixed with fear as the latest global crisis plays out on our television screens.

This mainstream world does not value depth and indeed has very little understanding or languaging of depth. And so how is depth supposed to make its presence felt in these frantic surface lives?

If depression strikes us, inviting us to stop and move more deeply within, we recoil. We fear that something is dreadfully wrong. And so we try to get rid of depression. We go to the doctor, the psychiatrist, the psychologist. We take up jogging or positive thinking. We do anything to cling to our shiny surface norm.

But what if depression, as the bodily feeling of movement downwards and within, is simply showing us the way into depth? What if depression is an indication that the life we are living no longer holds sustenance or meaning for us? What if depression is pulling us into a depth from which we might be birthed into a new understanding, solidity or breadth? What if it is in these depths we will eventually find peace or even the Truth of what we *are*?

And what if the alarming increase in depressive illness around the world today is simply a reflection of the fact that we are living our lives cast adrift from our True Nature?

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Even in the simple feeling of sadness is the movement or process of ‘depression’.

Quite recently I felt sad for a few days.

A dear friend had recently moved overseas. I had come to terms with her physical absence, but after a couple of conversations on Skype I could sense she was also moving away internally. I had sought to meet her in depth as I had always done, but she was not there to meet me in return.

I understood my friend’s need to engage with her new country, new people and new life. I understood that friendships, people and circumstances, fluctuate and change, even from moment to moment. I understood that she probably doesn’t have the energy for our friendship at the moment. I knew all this and accepted all this.

And yet I was sad. I missed my friend very much. I missed our laughter and I missed our connection.

We generally accept that there will be times in our lives when we feel sad. We don’t *like* feeling sad, we even avoid sadness if we can, but we know that sadness is a normal response when there is a loss or an unforeseen and unwelcome change in our lives. We feel sad when we lose friends, sad when a beloved pet dies, sad when we are sick, sad when someone is unkind to us, sad when we look at the state of the world around us.

Understandably we see these occurrences as upsetting and as such, the cause of our sadness.

But what actually *is* sadness? What is actually happening to me when I use the words, “I am sad”? What am I ***actually feeling* in my body**? What is the raw experience in my body before I interpret or judge it?

The first thing I feel is a movement down inside myself. I feel my awareness retreating a little. I feel a contraction away from the everyday world and away from that part of me that is upbeat, energetic, sociable and busy, and it feels uncomfortable. I feel at a loss. At odds. It feels as though I don’t quite know what to do with myself any more. I don’t quite know what to think, how to act, what to say. My customary way of being in the world has quite literally been ‘upset’. It is as though am now literally weighed down or burdened by the questions that life has presented me with. It is as though my life as it was, is being brought into question by the absence of my friend.

This movement within, both in the case of sadness and depression, is not in any way mediated by the mind. It is nothing I control, contrive or think about. It is nothing I plan. It is not a technique I impose on my life as an exercise or practice. Nor is it something that I simply undergo once or twice and then *recover* from. Just like tiredness or the desire to sneeze, it is a natural response to life, but in this case one that takes the *whole* human being into account.

We don’t ‘do’ depression, rather depression ‘does’ us. All we can do is *allow.*

And so I allow myself to stay down, down, down in my sadness. I allow the waves of sadness as they come and go. I do the shopping with that sadness. I sit quietly in the garden with that sadness. I have a cup a tea. I go to bed for a little while in the afternoon. I cry a little. Reminisce. Cook dinner.

And as I am doing so, I know that I am being pulled into a depth that is alive, intelligent, and very real. And it is within the holding of that innate intelligence that a process of transformation and growth is literally *done* tome. I move into the very place in which I can incubate a new way of being in the world. It is as though in my depths, in the womb of my soul, an alchemy of sorts, a metamorphosis, takes place that will eventually allow me to walk with solidity and meaning in a life that no longer includes my friend.

And then after a time, a few days in this instance, I am out driving in my car, when suddenly I realize that the sadness has lifted. I am no longer sad. I have somehow been reborn. I sense a new strength within, a new opening, a new clarity, a connection to a new depth, a new bearing in my soul.

And even though I have undergone such a process countless times before, I am surprised by what has happened. I am astonished that unwilled I am smiling as I catch a glimpse of the sunlight shining through the rain clouds. I check inside, feeling for the absence of my friend, and where previously there was sadness and emptiness, there is now acceptance, a new solidity and a love for life as it has now become.

My sadness has at the same time been both the response and the solution to losing touch with my friend.

Although sadness does not carry the intensity, charge or associations of depression, in a very basic way the process I have outlined above is *identical* to the process that takes place when we are depressed.

However, the depth to which we descend is often directly proportional to the ‘weightiness’ or intensity of the feelings or life questions by which we feel questioned or burdened.

In the case of sadness, we may descend only a short distance and in a few hours or days quickly grow into a new bearing or new solidity. However, when we feel questioned by our lives in very deep and powerful ways, such as by the death of a loved one, the loss of our livelihood, the loss of our health or a lack of deep meaning, we can often feel *profoundly* depressed. And it is in the intensity of those feelings that we are then swept a long long way down, often into the most remote and hidden valleys of our being.

Such a process of descent can often be very lengthy and intense, but I have found that this intensity, although extraordinarily difficult to live, often attests to the fact that there is a significant belief system or indeed an entire perspective or orientation to life that is being radically shifted or transformed.

When we fall in the physical world, we know we will hurt ourselves: scrape our knee, break an arm. In our internal world too, we fear that when we fall, there will surely be injury or death; we cringe and splutter with fear at the tenuous hold we feel we have on life. And in a certain sense that fear is completely warranted: there will indeed be a death, but it is a death of all that is stagnant, crumbling, worn out or no longer of use.

It is in moving through these most difficult of times that I have come out the other side and opened into profound spiritual understanding, expanded consciousness, deeper insights into my True Nature, or new and different ways of living or understanding my life. Although this process is never ever comfortable I do know that the more I have befriended it, understood it, and embraced it in the gaze of Truth, Love and adulthood, the easier it has become.

I now understand that *all* movements of descent, whether associated with depression or not, have allowed me to connect on deeper and deeper, vaster and vaster levels with all that I am. It is in opening to that ever-deepening movement that I have been brought to the realization of the extraordinary and overflowing immensity of what we truly are.

It is when we fight the natural movement of descent and label it as an illness or as ‘something that shouldn’t be happening’, that we stay locked into an interminable battle with ourselves and as such, deny ourselves the very opening into the depths that will bring about the very healing we so crave.

God was never born through the will or maneuverings of the mind.

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1. www.meaningofdepression.com [↑](#footnote-ref-1)