

WITH SIGHS
TOO DEEP
FOR WORDS

GRACE AND DEPRESSION

A. ROBERT HIRSCHFELD



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To all the saints still striving,
and to all the saints at rest.

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CHAPTER ONE

DEPRESSION AND JOY

The stigma of having any kind of mental illness has made me, like countless others, do my best to hide the fact that I live with depression. I can't help but wonder how those I admire, respect, love, and serve as a bishop think of me when I tell them I need to visit a therapist and that I live with a propensity for depression. Will they ascribe decisions or statements or positions I have taken, or mistakes I have made in my leadership and pastoral care, to a compromised mental state? No doubt, that possibility always exists, though perhaps not as much as I often fear. More likely, people who disagree or take issue with the ways I have been an ordained minister and leader in the church have plenty of other reasons to complain. They may disagree with the way I approach scripture or how I exercise episcopal authority. Thus far,

at least, it has not been depression that might lead my sibling Christians to ask if the vocation I now inhabit is the right fit. Apart from me, it has only been Rocky, our black dog, who has questioned me openly about whether this bishop thing is of God or of someone or something else. And Rocky does that by staring intently at me with sighs too deep for words when I don't feel like throwing a stick in the backyard.

The truth is I am living with depression. And the emphasis is on the *living* with depression. Though almost every cell of my mind and body tells me not to share this truth with anyone, I have come to be convinced of the value of sharing this truth about myself with anyone who may find themselves in a similar state. We tell our stories because almost as soon as the words come out of our mouth we see a nod of the head, a softening of the eyes, a relaxing of the tension in the space between us. Our stories show others who we are, and virtually every time I have chosen to share something of my own struggle with someone who is herself burdened, it has been received as a lightening of that weight. For me, these liftings of the load of suffering are tangible evidence of the truth of the Gospel. John the Evangelist opens his gospel with:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . All things came into being through him, and without him not

one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

John 1:1-5

I interpret the original Greek, *logos*, in a more fulsome way than merely “word.” It could also be heard as “story” or “narrative.” When I hear your story, and receive it in my heart, a connection is established that inevitably changes me and, I believe, changes you. The en-flesh-ment of God is how God’s own story inhabits our own, and our own stories are brought back to God. When you and I share the narratives of our pains and struggles, our joys, accomplishments, and failures, we are, whether we acknowledge it or not, participating in the ongoing incarnating, suffering, resurrecting, and ascending work of God. In the telling of our stories, our own *logos*, God sends light upon us. Quite often, the light is just a flicker, a pinpoint, in the vast void. I have come to see in those meager piercings of the veil enough to hold on. They have been sufficient to teach me how *to live* with this disease.

Sometimes the light shining in the darkness takes the form of metaphor or images that catch the eye of my soul. Parables are literally disparate and unlike things “thrown together” to create new meaning. A treasure discovered in a field thrown together with the Realm of God. A mustard seed and the Realm of God. Who would think that those

“throwing together” of Jesus have such world-changing power? And yet, we tell those stories continually because we crave to have our imaginations shaped by them and to see this world with the same heart-sight of Jesus. The sheer volume of Jesus’s parables seems to me to give us permission to see our own parables. Here is one that I often see that gives me hope in God’s healing.

In the woods behind our home stands a row of sugar maples that grow along an abandoned knee-high stone wall. The wall and trees probably formed a boundary for a pasture now overrun with new-growth hardwoods and hemlock. There are also rusty vestiges of a string of barbed wire, now broken and detached from the rotted cedar fence posts.

I occasionally visit one particular sugar maple that has grown around the barbed wire that once rubbed against its bark, such that the wire is now embedded in the tree. Some farmer thought of the tree as a conveniently planted post; over time the maple incorporated the steel barb into its heartwood. The wire is broken and detached on each side of the tree, but the life force of the tree, flowing from root to leaf and back again, has proven more resilient than the wound of those rusted barbs.

The tree tells me, every time I pass by it, that it is possible to live, grow, and even flourish with the wounds of this life. When looking at this tree, I see also the Tree of Life on which our Lord was pierced. I see within me wounds that cause me such grief at times and that won’t leave me.

They rest within me, like barbed wire, forcing me at times to be still and silent so as to avoid further pain. The tree has learned to live with its dis-ease. I am called to do the same.

I imagine that the sugar maple tree recognizes me when I visit. I often recognize similar pain in the faces of many I encounter in the church and in the world. I deeply hope that the sharing of my story offers a hint of recognition and compassion for those who are suffering. My prayer is that in these pages they can find some comfort in being recognized and then have more hope to keep walking.

Though this book will be about depression, specifically my own depression, I hope it is as much a book about joy. I have come to the knotty truth that my depression arises of the deep gloom that gathers when joy seems utterly absent. For me, joy and depression are closely tied. How would I feel the absence of joy unless I have experienced or have implanted within me a pining for gloom's opposite? Joy, even in my most dilapidated moments, has left its footprints, its aftertaste, its fragrance in the same way that a church sanctuary on Sunday evening—the loneliest hour of the week for those who live alone—still holds the linger of the morning's incense and the atmospheric evidence of morning prayers in the shafts of the setting sun through stained glass windows. Joy and melancholy seem to be mysteriously, even brutally, entwined.

The Romantic poet John Keats suggested in the “Ode on Melancholy” that those who experience melancholy are

those who recognize and treasure beauty and joy, especially in their departure.

She dwells with Beauty—Beauty that must die;
And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips
Bidding adieu; and aching Pleasure nigh,
Turning to poison while the bee-mouth sips:
Ay, in the very temple of Delight
Veil'd Melancholy has her sovran shrine,
Though seen of none save him whose
strenuous tongue
Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine . . .

Though there is not a direct correspondence between the now mostly obsolete usage of “melancholy” and what we name as clinical depression, it seems fitting to say that depression lives in the debris of the desertions of joy and beauty.

Though what I share in this book is my own experience, I have worked hard not to universalize my history with mental illness; however, poets, writers, theologians, and commentators more gifted than I have left hints that those of us fighting in the trenches of depression share some of the same shape, stench, and muck. I am convinced that the cord that entwines both joy and suffering is the same tether that binds me to God. Some may read that statement as a naive leap. I get that. For many, the pain of depression is

unmitigated hell, an inferno of destruction with no golden thread or silver lining.

Still, my depression continues to teach me about God's love and grace. I write, therefore, in the shaky hope that my experience might resonate with others who bear similar pain and struggle. My intent is to offer some hope to those who experience depression, especially those who have swallowed the dangerous myth that mental illness is somehow a moral flaw, or a sign of God's judgment, a myth that is tempting to believe—or at least has been for me.

As a bishop in the Episcopal Church, I have noticed more attention being paid to the “teaching office” of the episcopate: not only the expectation that bishops provide for the administration of the sacraments, stir the conscience of our people, and take part in the councils of the church, but also that we teach, which implies sharing what we have learned. My depression has forced me to learn things about myself, about the fragility of being human; about cruelty, forgiveness, compassion, resiliency, the power of prayer; about the Bible, about God and God's fierce tenderness; and about paradox and oxymorons such as fierce tenderness, invulnerable vulnerability, and the fear of God, which is the beginning of wisdom.

As both a parish priest and a bishop, I have been startled by the liberating power of sharing stories. When I have shared my own accounts of depression in small clergy gatherings, or in table conversation with my colleague bishops,

there is almost universal resonance. People are given permission to share their own stories, however tentatively at first. With that sharing comes some shifting, some lightening, some easing of a burden that had been carried alone, convincing proof of some of Jesus's comforting words:

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

Matthew 11:28–30

A yoke is a double-looped device that allows two oxen or beasts of burden to share a load, making it easier on both of them. When I have shared my burden, and heard others share their pain from carrying the iron load of depression, I have felt the *comfort*—literally, the “with or together strength”—of God in Christ whose love is stronger than all our afflictions, even death itself.

FOR REFLECTION AND CONVERSATION

1. What keeps you from sharing your story—your pain—with others?
2. What are the primary parables or metaphors that are helpful to you?

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3. Who can you talk to about your pain and struggle?
4. Who needs you to listen?

PRAYER

Our God and Source of all that is, in You we live, move, have our being: help me know you are close, even closer than I know myself. In our sighs, in our yearnings, in our pain, and in our confusion, hold me so that I can hold on when I feel lost, overwhelmed, and unable to find words. May my search for words find its end in You, the Word made flesh, through our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.