

CHAPTER 1

The Path Ahead

In the middle of the journey of our life
I found myself in a dark wood,
For I had lost the right path.

Dante

When you are depressed, how can you take a step, let alone a journey?

When all vital energy is devoted to staying alive and just making it to the next hour, how can you add anything else – like hope – to your day?

These are the "how to" questions that, in the face of depression, seem almost impossible to answer. Pages of homework and practical suggestions could, indeed, fill many books, but they are unlikely to make you feel alive.

What you need must go deeper than practical advice. You don't need a series of "how tos." In fact, you could probably write a credible list of "how tos" yourself. You already know many things you *could* do and you have probably done some of them.

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Depression, and the host of feelings and thoughts that get crammed into the word, plead for a "why." First, why is this happening to me? Then, why love? Why work? Why worship? Why believe? Why live? Why bother? The depressive heart resonates more with "Vanity of vanity, all is vanity" than with "101 steps to combat depression." A list of "how tos" can't speak to issues of purpose, hope, and the fundamental questions of existence and belief that depression inevitably raises. It's not surprising that while Prozac is being heralded as the cure, philosophers are also finding a niche in helping those who are depressed.

So, on the path ahead, look for a partnership between whys and how tos. When the why questions appear, they will be religious – as all why questions are. They will be about God. Depression, of course, does that – it takes you back to the basic questions of life. Ignore them to focus on the how questions and you might find a temporary shortcut to mental relief, but your heart will still be famished.

The Basic Idea

Depression is a form of suffering that can't be reduced to one universal cause. This means that family and friends can't rush in armed with THE answer. Instead, they must be willing to postpone swearing allegiance to a particular theory, and take time to know the depressed person and work together with him or her. What we do know is that depression is painful and, if you have never experienced it, hard to understand. Like most forms of suffering, it feels private and isolating.

We also know that those who feel overwhelmed by depression share in a fundamental humanness. You will find in them the struggles and maladies that are common to us all.

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Don't let the technical, scientific diagnosis keep you from seeing these ordinary problems. Instead, when in doubt, expect to find ordinary humanness just below the surface, in the form of fear, anger, guilt, shame, jealousy, wants, despair over loss, physical weaknesses and other problems that are present in every person. Depression is not always caused by these things, but it is always an occasion to consider them.

Are There "Right" Emotions?

It is common for spiritually mature men and women who feel depressed to think that they are doing something wrong. After all, Scripture is filled with words of joy and happy hearts. When they aren't feeling happy, they feel that they must be missing something or that God is punishing them until they learn some hidden lesson.

On earth, however, God doesn't prescribe a happy life. He doesn't legislate emotions. Look at some of the Psalms. They are written by people of great faith, yet they run the emotional gamut. One even ends with "darkness is my closest friend" (Ps. 88:18). When your emotions feel muted or always low, when you are unable to experience the highs and lows you once did, the important question is, "Where do you turn – or, to whom do you turn – when you are depressed?"

A Way to Proceed

If you are depressed, the chapters that follow are intended to be brief and, at times, provocative. If you want to help someone who is depressed, the chapters are intended to give you direction and to be used as actual readings you can share with the depressed person. My hope is that the book will encourage partnerships between depressed people and those who love them. Suffering is not a journey we should take alone. There

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are too many places where we are tempted to give up and too many times we can't see clearly. So if you are depressed, read this book with a wise friend. If you want to help, ask the depressed person to read it with you, or select particular chapters to read together.

The Journey of a Pilgrim

You will encounter a number of images in the coming chapters, such as darkness or light, numbness or vitality, and surrender or waging battle. Most prominent will be the journey of a pilgrim. Whether we sense it or not, we are walking a path that always confronts us with a choice. Each day we stand at a crossroads and make decisions of significant consequence.

The idea of heading out on a trek is not a pleasing thought when you are depressed, but at least you are in good company, which should offer some comfort. Beginning with Abraham, God has called people to leave a familiar place, set out in a new direction, put the past behind, face unknown hazards, get to a point of desperation, call out for help, and look forward to something (or someone) better.

Origen, an old saint of the church, offered this encouragement.

"My soul has long been on pilgrimage" (Ps. 119:54).

Understand, then, if you can, what the pilgrimages of the soul are, especially when it laments with groaning and grief that it has been on pilgrimage so long. We understand these pilgrimages only dully and darkly so long as the pilgrimage still lasts. But when the soul has returned to its rest, that is, to the homeland of paradise, it will be taught more truly and will

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understand more truly the meaning of what the pilgrimage was.¹

He is right. On this side of heaven we walk by faith and don't have all the answers we would like. But there is reason to believe that you will find certain hopes fulfilled even on this side of paradise.

¹ Origen, Homily XXVII On Numbers, sec. 4, CWS, 250. Cited in Thomas Oden, *Classical Pastoral Care, Vol.4 Crisis Ministries* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994) p.6.