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The Mind in Pain

When depression takes hold, why does even God seem to fall silent?

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The PloughCast

The PloughRead: The Mind in Pa...

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I AM A CHRISTIAN. I suffer from depression. The relationship between those two realities is hard to write about because I often feel they have no relationship at all. In fact, and I feel a mixture of guilt and queasiness about saying this, the two seem to stand in contradiction. Christianity speaks of the presence of a loving God: one who is close to us, cares for and consoles us even in our darkest hours. But during the most relentless episodes of depression, I don't "feel his presence" in a consolatory way. Instead, I identify with the question posed by the late-nineteenth-century priest, poet, and depressive, Gerard Manley Hopkins: "Comforter, where, where is your comforting?"

I feel both sheepish and disconcerted by this since I have sometimes expected to experience God in some clear and distinct way when in difficulties. But instead, only silence. I haven't had an encounter like Saint Paul's on the road to Damascus: "Suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven ..." Or even one like Elijah's on Mount Horeb: "And after the fire a still small voice ..." Which leads me to wonder: Is there a fault with my faith? Is my faith too weak? Are my convictions half-hearted? Or is my sin too great? Does it block my access to God? Here, as

elsewhere, depression provides no answers, only questions.

It's hard to make sense of depression as a Christian because it's hard to make sense of depression, full stop. No one can tell you what it is "really like" to be profoundly depressed. Writing about depression is necessarily retrospective: recording the experience in medias res is impossible. Depression is too paralyzing. It precludes anything as constructive as writing. If you have lost *all* your mirth, you languish in corners, you mope, and cry (and shout and scream). But you don't finesse prose. There's something about depression that defies communication.

Certainly, I can after the fact recall some of the *symptoms* for you. I can bore you with the age it takes to pee. Or why being alone is dreadful while being with other people worse (intolerable for *them*, too, of course). Or I could speak of the aversion to the very thing which might help a little – exercise. Or the way depression makes me *dither*, makes me chronically indecisive regarding the most mundane tasks I normally take for granted – whether to get up or lie down or get dressed, whether to wash. ¹ And then there is the "tormenting restlessness" of depression, the "failure of mental focus and lapse of memory," the mind's domination by "anarchic disconnections." ² But the totalizing vision within which depression traps you, the seemingly inalterable and outstandingly bleak picture of the world overlaid on everything you see and do, *that is* what is incommunicable.

Put it this way: some people say depression is like looking at the world through a pair of dark glasses, and, in my experience, that's true. When depressed I'm unresponsive to pleasure, unmoved by beauty, unamused by life. The landscape loses its luster. (Plus, I globalize my outlook, project my own feelings and suffering onto everyone I encounter – "this waiter *must* find his job futile"). Nevertheless, to compare depression to tinted vision is still not to say what it is that you *do* see through those glasses. The vistas remain, necessarily, undescribed.

I find literature captures this difficulty better than psychology can. In Joseph Conrad's masterpiece, *Heart of Darkness*, we're never told what precisely Kurtz – the corrupted, megalomaniacal ivory-trader Marlowe travels into the Congo to meet – sees in the death-bed vision he's reported to receive. Marlowe, Conrad's narrator, doesn't tell us, because Kurtz doesn't tell him. All Marlowe conveys is the *effect* of that chilling vision on Kurtz.

Anything approaching the change that came over [Kurtz's] features I have never seen before, and hope never to see again. Oh, I wasn't touched ... I saw on that ivory face the expression of sombre pride, of ruthless power, of craven terror – of an intense and hopeless despair. Did he live his life again in every detail of desire, temptation and surrender during that supreme moment of complete knowledge? He cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision – he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath.

"The horror! The horror!"

Conrad, then, has the humility and wisdom not to try to put into words – words which will only fall flat, only prove sadly bathetic – what it is that so horrifies Kurtz about the world. Kurtz’s conclusion is reached but without the supporting evidence, because language will not support the evidence.

Philosophy is also instructive here. Consider Elaine Scarry’s contention that it’s *physical* pain which is incommunicable and “unshareable.” In her complex and riveting book, *The Body in Pain*, Scarry asserts:

Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned.

That vivid description is then followed by an astute observation. Whereas states of consciousness “are regularly accompanied by objects in the external world” (so, we don’t typically just “have feelings” but we have feelings for a *particular* person), physical pain has “no referential content.”



Unknown Byzantine artist, Thessalonica, *Prophet Elijah in the Wilderness*, late fourteenth–fifteenth century, tempera on panel, the State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg.

Now that, I'm told, is a brilliant take on what life is like for those who suffer from chronic physical pain. But it's also an apt appraisal of my own experience of chronic *mental* pain. For

some people, of course, depression is bound up with all sorts of objective, external factors: a genetic disposition, a sensitivity to the seasons, long-term hardships or short-term shocks. But for me, one of the hallmarks of depression is the absence of “referential content.” Unlike grief, in depression I often can’t trace the cause. I lack an “inciting incident.” I have triggers, of course: unwanted breakups and failed interviews and unsold books. But the way that one of those disappointments comes to feel like *The End of the Fucking World* is what seems unique to depression. The sheer excess of feeling. The destruction of all proportion. The way life stops being liveable, even comprehensible. “No worst, there is none,” as Gerard Manley Hopkins put it over a century ago; “Pitched past pitch of grief.”

Reading Hopkins, I encounter someone who, like me, struggles with the inexpressible weight of depression. And someone who, like me, looks to God for consolation – and meets only with silence. Hopkins had experienced the love of God in an intense, intimate way earlier in life; it makes his later feelings of abandonment that much harder to bear. He worries, as I do, that those feelings point to his own spiritual failings. But recently I’ve found solace in another Christian tradition, one that finds in such places of abandonment a source of strength: an echo, even, of Christ’s own forsakenness on Calvary hill.

I start with scripture. The Epistle to the Hebrews assures us that in Christ “we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize ...” Now, Christ *is* able to sympathize with “our weaknesses” – what Hebrews has in view, precisely because he knew temptation. But, as theologians have long maintained, Christ is also able to sympathize with our *suffering*. Jesus knew what it was to experience both the body in pain (“Then they spat in his face and struck him with their fists, and they slapped him”) and the mind in pain (“And, being in anguish ... his sweat became like drops of blood falling to the earth”). He knew betrayal too. As Bono sings of Judas, “In the garden I was playing the tart. I kissed your lips and broke your heart.” While from Peter, a devastating disavowal: “Woman, I do not know him.”

Even that, though, is not the worst of it. Dying on the cross, Christ famously cries out, quoting Psalm 22, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Christ doesn’t even question whether he has been forsaken by his Father. He assumes he has been abandoned, and simply asks why. Because it’s not just that, as the crowd at the crucifixion taunts him, angels don’t rescue Jesus from the cross. The fact is the angels who “ministered unto him” in the wilderness after his temptation don’t come anywhere near him now. Calvary is a lonely place. The Son of God does not experience the closeness of the Father. His cry is not met by a still small voice. It is met by silence.

Both Protestant and Catholic thinkers have reflected at length on that moment. “No abyss,” writes John Calvin in the *Institutes*, “can be imagined more dreadful than to feel that you are abandoned and forsaken of God, *and not heard when you invoke him*, just as if he had conspired your destruction” (italics my own). But Calvin is clear: the silence of God is not a sign of the believer’s faltering faith. Why? Because, Calvin continues, there is a precedent: “To such a degree was Christ dejected, that in the depth of his agony he was forced to exclaim, ‘My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?’” Similarly, Saint John of the Cross concludes that at the moment of his death “Christ was likewise annihilated in his soul, and was deprived of any relief and

consolation, since his Father left him in the most intense aridity.” While, finally, in *The Everlasting Man*, G. K. Chesterton reflects – and it is worth quoting at length – upon the “stark and single-minded” words which Saint Mark and Saint Matthew, in their “naked narratives,” attribute to Christ on the cross:

Endless expositions have not come to the end of it, or even to the beginning. And if there be any sound that can produce a silence, we may surely be silent about the end and the extremity; when a cry was driven out of that darkness in words dreadfully distinct and dreadfully unintelligible, which man shall never understand in all the eternity they have purchased for him; and for one annihilating instant an abyss that is not for our thoughts had opened even in the unity of the absolute; and God had been forsaken of God.

Paradoxically, I find that reading about the abandonment of Christ can be profoundly reassuring. Why? Because here, as Calvin highlights, is a precedent. Clearly, there is an utterly unique phenomenon at play in the Passion narrative: the Son of God who takes away the sin of the world, who carries the curse, and therefore upon whom the Father cannot look. Nevertheless, at the level of *experience*, it is profoundly comforting to learn that Christ has been to a place “pitched past pitch of grief.” He too has suffered the darkest possible night.

In a similar vein, Julian of Norwich – the fourteenth-century English theologian whose near-death experience is recorded in her extraordinary text, *Revelations of Divine Love* – observes that it is our fate “sometimes to be comforted, and sometimes to feel failure and to be left to oneself.” But she then writes, movingly:

God wants us to know that he keeps us equally safe in joy and in sorrow, and loves us as much in joy as in sorrow ... a man is sometimes left to himself, *although sin is not always the cause ...*

In other words, the silence of God in episodes of depression is *not* always due to my defiance, does *not* always owe to my faltering faith.

What is even more reassuring is that Jesus’s dereliction at Calvary demonstrates decisively that the episodic silence of God does not imply the ultimate absence of God. Nor does the fact of religious non-experience imply that I will be forever bereft of his presence. I am a Christian, I suffer from depression – two realities only reconciled in the resurrection. God doesn’t always console those of us who suffer from depression. But he does provide – the promise of resurrection life tomorrow and always.

Footnotes

- 1 This sentence is influenced by Iain McGilchrist's haunting essay, "Depression Is Not Like Anything On Earth."
- 2 William Styron, *Darkness Visible*.

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