

## **“Changing Light” Depression and Spirituality**

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This is going to be a “gimme a witness Sunday.” Some sermons have a lot of information in them. Some sermons have lots of quotes and words from other people. This Sunday is a witness Sunday, my witness to the power of healing, the power of telling your story, the power of this church.

Amazingly, if you go to the web, there are 1,380,000 sites about depression. It is estimated that 17 million Americans are diagnosed with depression every year. Debilitating, incapacitating, unbearably weakening depression. Within this depression realm, you can hear about borderline, bi-polar, manic depressive personalities, as well as people suffering from attention deficit, narcissistic personality, seasonal affective disorder, suicidal personality and schizophrenia. For many of us though, depression is more of feeling sad, blue or unhappy at times. Or feelings of being miserable, down in the dumps, a melancholy for short periods of time. Often we snap out it, often we don't.

But, whether short or long, depression can be serious, and is a mood disorder, a dis-ease we feel with life which can include anger, a feeling of loss, frustration, powerlessness, victimization, and it often interferes with being joyful in our everyday lives for an extended period of time.

“Anger turned inward,” was one definition I was given when I was going to counseling when my life seemed out of control. Incredibly, that was a very good time in my life, when I was in counseling, because I was so vulnerable, I learned a huge amount of stuff that has stayed with me until today. My counselor told me depression was loathing turned inward. But it was at that lowest time of my life; I had to leave my family of origin who were not ready or willing to love a lesbian or a Unitarian Universalist, my Mother was threatening to get a lawyer and take my children from me as I was unfit to care for them, the Lutheran church would not ordain me as an openly lesbian woman, the UU church was still a ways off, and I was as low as I could go, or so I thought.

So, I went to counseling for 5 years and it helped, it really did. And I knew I could really use it, because I come from 4 generations of alcoholics, manic depressives and suicides. I remember at one point in all this transition, that I went out into my backyard and laid down on the grass, arms and legs spread wide and there on an invisible crucifix I cried and cried and let my tears spill down my cheeks and into the earth.

And the earth held me, and absorbed my pain, and after I was spent, I was able to get up off that crucifix and feel a little more human. There is a real gift to be able to cry, weep, moan and wail for the things in life we cannot change. Don't ever underestimate the value and the holiness and the healing power of tears.

One afternoon about 15 years ago 2 of my 5 siblings and I were sitting together in a restaurant, after the 3<sup>rd</sup> of us children had been taken away to detox for alcoholism. And there we were, all sitting around this table quiet, scared, confused, enraged. And finally my older sister said, “I have to do something about this. I just can't sit here and let our heritage be one of abuse of alcohol or depression or suicide. I refuse to have this be the legacy I leave for my son.” And we started talking. We all had small children at that time and the three of us were agreed that something had to be done. So, we made a pact, a pact for health. We decided that we would each go and get help so that we would be the last generation to pass on these unhealthy behaviors. We went to personal counseling, we

went to Adult children of alcoholics and I did something that has changed my life...I found the UU church, and the UU church found me.

Everything was different for me after that. I learned a few things...and this is what I learned.

1. Depression in all its forms and abuses may have chosen me, in the family I was born into, but I didn't have to choose it back. As I became a more competent, confident -- spiritual person, as I found a religious foundation, loathing turned inward, which is what I was taught as a way of life from my first memory on, did not have to be the way I lived my life. The spiritual foundation I found in the UU church flew in the face of that thought as a way to live. We are the people of ultimate optimism!
2. I learned spiritual people have fewer symptoms of depression, because religion, in its oldest meaning, that of binding back that which has been broken, has helped people think of how their life is part of a larger life, a spiritual force that uses happiness, desire, promise, forgiveness and renewal as its basis, not despair, gloom, misery and desolation as a working daily vocabulary. As a young woman I had watched my Mother lay in bed for 7 years, hopeless, drinking constantly, crying, depressed, unaware that the God who she clung to so fiercely loved her, unaware that there was a world going on outside her bedroom. Unaware of 5 children who were so longing to have a relationship with her.

And as long as I was there, willing to sit by her bedside and commiserate with her in her despair, she was willing to lay there in a drunken stupor and not live her life. I got married a couple of months after I left the convent, partly because I was drowning in her sea of despair. On my wedding day as I was dressing in the next bedroom, she called out from her bedroom, from her bed, she hadn't decided if she was going to come to the wedding or not, "Well, Annie, if you find I died while you were gone on your honeymoon, you'll know who to blame for my death." I married anyway, and guess what, after I left, she got up out of bed and started to live.

3. Marianne Williamson taught me that happiness is a day at a time kind of feeling. Do what you must, we are encouraged; give freely to others, love, pray, meditate, be kind, read spiritual books and practice being who you want to be. And I would add, ask yourself what is hardened in your heart. What do you toss aside in a mad dash to not become involved? What within you needs to melt, slip and slide away to make way for real feelings, deep spiritual growth and love? What is it, melt it, let it go, it, your life will be ok and better without whatever is hardening your heart. A hardened heart is an instrument of fear and fear leads to depression.
4. I learned through my UU church, to not move into my sadness with my suitcase. It does not have to be a place to live. It is an emotion, yes, for sure. But there is a balance possible between deep thoughts about life, allowing ourselves a chance to grieve and there is self discipline of deciding not to give credence to what from a spiritual perspective isn't real anyway. I was taught in my family of origin to look at life with an attitude that said, "you won't get what you want anyway, so why try." Both of my parents went to graduate school but neither of them graduated. There was such a sense of loss in both of them. So I had to learn...unlearn...relearn.
5. That sadness can be an emotional habit, and I learned that we can break that habit. I learned that being attracted to being sad can be an addiction, a depressive tendency. And that spirituality is about finding your essential, authentic self. The patterns we have picked up as children, young adults can be broken. That is called salvation, in a UU way. Saved from being a slave to the way you were raised.

6. I learned from my UU church that the body is not lower than the soul. I learned that there is really no separation between body and soul, sacred and secular. I learned that depression is about feeling severed, feeling alone, lost, and spirituality, religion, church is about being found. Depressed people, I learned, are people who have very high expectations of themselves, the world around them. I, we, they, are very easily let down, disappointed etc. Maybe part of this expectation is a seeking for answers and how the world works, that isn't always mature. Spirituality is about coping, realizing that emotional sadness can be a habit that can be unlearned. But how? By knowing you are connected to others who think like you, struggle like you and have found out a few things. By knowing what you have control over and what you don't. By knowing there are good and worthy purposes to life that I can be a part of. That is connection in its most powerful mode.
7. I learned to spend some time each day on prayer, meditation, physical exercise and forgiveness; oh my aching heart, forgiveness -- of my parents, my 4 generations of unhealthy ancestors, of myself and way to move on. I heard, in my first experiences with the UU church, so many beautiful phrases that I give to you today; let go and let the holy do for you in your life, put your heart in a holy place and it will always be safe, do what you can in a situation and know when to let go, you know within your own heart the right thing for you to do, listen to that inner voice and you will never go wrong, be happy with the way things are and you can be happy in any situation in your life. These were not ways of living I learned sitting on my Mother's bed all those years watching her go deeper and deeper into her depression. No, these are things that have literally saved me, and I learned them in church!

My Father was a quiet man, an inner man, a man who for most of my growing up literally did not talk to his five children. Consequently, I learned that I was invisible. I would play a game as a young child, I believed I could walk through walls, and be in the presence of people and they couldn't see me. I learned that what I had to say was not of worth or much value. And to make matters worse, the way our family communicated was to talk over the top of each other, so why try to make yourself heard? Sadness, depression, a depressed way of dealing with the world may have chosen you, but you don't have to choose it back. And then, as I sat in my first UU church experience I realized I had to unlearn all that I had learned. To unlearn it all. Did permission to learn a new way happen in school? Doubt it. Did that happen in seminary? Nope. Did the unlearning happen while I was working in the business world, far from it, in fact, that is where I learned I was once again invisible.

No, I learned what I have learned that has helped me move from my Mother's bedside of codependence and the futility of life, to this person you see here today, an ordained minister, a mother, a partner, a spiritual counselor, a person who can get up each morning and meet each new day with a smile, I learned how to be me in a happy way, in church. And, in this church particularly. The UU church gave me the gift of finding my own spirituality that allowed me to be ready with whatever comes my way.

As a Lutheran I used to say each and every Sunday for 14 years, "I am sinful and unclean and cannot heal myself." How those words stuck in my throat. How that caused a bile of real anger, because even without the words I have known, even without all the benefits I have been given since being a UU, I knew in my heart of hearts that I was not sinful and unclean, and that I could indeed heal, save, release, be myself.

8. I learned to get enough sleep was a religious practice. That to follow a healthy, nutritious diet was holy. To exercise regularly was of the gods. To get involved in activities that made me happy, even if I didn't feel like it, was the path to righteousness. That if I used light therapy in the winter, I could be considered an angel of heaven. I was told in no uncertain terms, in my UU church, that I was a child of the Universe, no less than the trees or the stars. I was much more than the child of parents who felt they were failures. I had love within me, that once given permission, started coming out all over the place.

I learned, with time and patience that my own grief and loss at saving my Mother from a suicide attempt, or disappointment, how no one in the family except my sister would even believe that the event had happened, how no one talked about it, or seemed to think we could have all learned from it, so that grief at my Mother feeling so badly about her life she wished to kill herself, and the disappointment that no one else would or could share the experience or the after shock of it, I learned could help me be more open and understanding toward others and that this was a holy and spiritual event, a new event for me. No more loathing turned inward, now there was love turned inward and able to be spread outward. I know very surely, my friends, that I was on a collision course with a mental hospital if it hadn't been for the UU church and all the healthy lessons I have learned about honoring all that is human.

9. Who made you? God made me. Why did God make you? To praise him for all eternity. What is a person's purpose, was always on my lips as I learned the Baltimore catechism growing up in the 5<sup>th</sup> generation of German/Polish Catholic family. And did their faith, those 4 generations before me, did their faith lift them out of their depression, their alcoholism, their feelings of failure and despair? No. What was passed on from generation to generation, in my DNA at birth, was more of the Calvinist doctrine of you are unclean, sinful, unworthy and cannot heal or save yourself. You sinner. You worthless piece of cow dung. And believe me, I felt that. How could I be lesbian? How could I be myself? I should die, or at least die trying as my Mother tried. My life was an abomination against God the Bible supposedly told me.

My parents told me they would have rather I was killed in a car crash than knowingly walk into a mortal sin where I will be damned to hell forever. How could I be who I was indeed? You bet I was depressed! And thought about death rather than have everyone I loved despise me. And there were those voices for sure. But there was another voice and I heard it and I answered. This voice said... "Come, come whoever you are. Wonderer, worshipper, lover of leaving. Ours is no caravan of despair, come, yet again come. Though you've broken your vows a thousand times." Now that was a salvific voice.

And I could have said, "No, no, it sounds good, but I don't believe you, you are not a Catholic voice, or a Lutheran voice, or a parental voice, or even a religious voice." But, I didn't say no, instead I said, "Tell me more, oh please, oh please tell me more." And then the UUs told me about the people who had preached in the 1700 and 1800's that everyone was saved, everyone, because their God was just that loving. And about those who said if a religious principle did not make sense to them in their rational mind, they believed they had the right and the responsibility to not believe it. Incredible I said. Tell me more. So they did.

They said, "We will band together and fight for you, for your children and your partner, we will make a place for you to be together and we will hug you on your lesbian anniversary, and when you have a holy union we will come with flowers and songs and wine and food. We will embrace you in your seeking to be a Taoist. We

will not laugh at you when you are learning all the new phrases and can't seem to say them correctly, no little one, we will sit down with you and give you classes and teach you until you, you who have been so abused, so hurt, so beaten, you who have been so sad, will find your voice and say I want to be ordained, I want to teach, I want to preach, I want to lead, and then we will help you find a church and be there with you as you celebrate your 18<sup>th</sup> year of ministry with us." That is what is they said, and that is what they did. And you see before you the product of that kind of church related love. Out of depression, out of despair, into wisdom and light.

10. Don't move into your sadness with your suitcase. Being attracted to being sad can be an addiction, a depressive tendency. Happiness, feeling wonderful and new and great and ready for your life is a day at a time kind of feeling. Do what you must; give freely, pray, meditate, be kind, read spiritual books, practice being who you want to be.
11. The person who sat hopelessly on my Mother's bed all those years and cried with her because she so wished she had cancer, or a brain tumor because then people would understand her pain, that Annie is still in me, with me and a part of me. But she doesn't own me. She is not the dominate force any longer. She was for a very long time. And I made immature commitments and did things I would never do now, because now I know. I know I am wonderful, I am beautiful, I am love so I can love, and I will love, and will never go back. And neither can you. You and I will stumble and fall at times, but we belong to a church where someone, someone is there to pick you up, someone like; Jim Pratt, Lorrie Agost, Pat Zemlin, Lucy Harrington, Jacie Pratt, Lucille Alfred, Sheila Lawrence, Mel and Sandy Watts, Doris Heyman, Diane Catlin, Larry Flanagan and Judy Robertson and many, many more will be there to help you up. And more than that, they will dust you off and help you pick up what you may have dropped, and ask, "Are you all right, and will you be there if the same thing happens to me." That's church, that's spirituality in its finest form. That is salvation, that my friends is the way from depression to peace.