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*It's terrible to think that all I've suffered,  
and all the suffering I've caused,  
might have arisen from the lack of a little salt in my brain.*

—ROBERT LOWELL, OF HIS MANIC DEPRESSION

“At the first-order level of experiential description,” Denys Turner notes in *The Darkness of God*, “John of the Cross’s accounts of the sufferings of the ‘dark nights of the soul’ are uncannily similar to what a person will give from the inside of depression.” The truth of this is indisputable. The American Psychological Association lists nine diagnostic criteria for a major depressive episode, at least five of which must be present during the same two-week period, representing “a change from previous functioning.” These range from “depressed mood, most of the day, nearly every day” through anhedonia to fatigue, feelings of worthlessness, and suicidal ideation. Even a cursory

glance through John's vivid symptomatology of dryness, devastation, and despair will confirm that we are in the same country here.

The congruity may seem potentially devastating in our reductionistic age. It is terrible enough to fall into the hands of a living God without the torment of trying to decide whether one is in a "true" dark night or whether it is "just depression." To a vulnerable self suffering a crisis of such depth, the thought that all the agony is just the wasted motion of biochemical atoms may itself be enough to bring on thoughts of suicide. It is pointlessness that we fear most.

Yet there is no way around the mortifying consideration. Humility dictates that we not ignore psychological and biological factors, and simple realism may require that we seek professional help. That said, it must also be noted that there is as much danger in relying too much on socially sanctioned psychiatry as there is in erring on side of the biochemically naked soul risking the world undrugged. Having stumbled through the halls of the medical psychiatric system myself, I've seen too clearly how easy it is to

let “patient” and “pill taker” become the consuming whole of one’s working identity. Nothing will screw you up more than a team of professionals determined to help you.

Except, perhaps, believing that therapy and medicine can offer us no help at all. The fact that you’re depressed doesn’t necessarily mean that you’re not going through a dark night, but it is just as true, and as crucial to know, that seeking therapy, or taking medication for a biochemical affliction, doesn’t necessarily mean you have subverted your spiritual process or numbed your reality sense with muffling anesthetics. It is unrealistic to believe that any honest consideration of the night in our day and age can blink away the tares-and-wheat nature of the two conditions growing side by side in the field of many souls.

In any case, if we are not prepared to consider the possibility that what we are suffering is “just” inadequate serotonin reuptake, an Oedipal knot or attachment disorder, or a simple failure to buck up properly and see the glass as half full, we can be sure that those who love us will raise the issues for us.



One of the comforters who were among Job's greatest torments was Zophar the Namathite, who advised Job to examine his soul and root out his iniquities and "put them far away": "Then surely you could lift up your face without spot; yes, you could be steadfast, and not fear. . . . And your life would be brighter than noonday."

It is worth noting that the humanistic solution to existential distress has not changed much in three thousand years. Zophar was recommending an attitude adjustment, essentially, a return to right thinking: Get your head on straight, man, for God's sake. He probably had some self-help books on his shelf, and all manner of ancient Hebrew techniques to accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative, and don't mess with Mr. In-Between.

Zophar is also, perhaps, the one who would tell Job now, in the general eclipse of our sense of coming to terms with Yahweh's conditions: Get professional help. A little therapy can work wonders.

It is a pretty sure thing that almost anyone could profit by the self-examination and analysis of psychotherapy,

recognizing and releasing unconscious compulsions, touching old wounds and experiencing the healing of conscious suffering and forgiveness, and becoming more decent and authentic human beings in the process.

It is also true that the process of stripping away the self's unreal image of itself cannot properly take place in the absence of a viable, working ego in the first place. We have to be somebody before we can begin to be nobody. One of the major fallacies of the overeager spiritual seeker is the notion that since it is our ego that causes our suffering, we must destroy our ego. But even the attempted destruction of the ego is the ego's work, and there is nothing more obnoxious than some guy passing himself off as God's latest hollow reed.

At the same time, there are real and distinct limits to what psychotherapy can accomplish. Freud put it beautifully: the aim of psychoanalysis is to help the patient let go of the delusional suffering of his neuroses and experience the misery of actual reality. The best we can hope for under our own steam is to be modest and realistic in our

ordinary sinfulness as we try our ordinary human best to be decent.

But the dark night is not a higher order of psychotherapy; it is not some final and supereffective fixing of the ego. We need not be free of neurosis or even simple wrong-headedness to experience the dark night: the contorted life paths of any number of warped saints and twisted holy people testify eloquently enough to this. The recognition of the emptiness of the self and its projects without God's sustaining grace is a different order of experience entirely. The fruit of therapy is at best a realistic sense of one's true, irreducible value among other selves and in oneself, and a realistic uncondemnatory awareness of one's limits as an ego among egos, based on compassionate self-knowledge; but the fruit of the dark night is the surrender of the realistic self's ultimately mysterious meaning to God's unfathomable direction. We embrace this surrender, in the end, not because it is the right thing to do, not to become better people, and certainly not to become "brighter than noonday," but because we have realized

through prolonged and often bitter experience that is the only thing to do.

In this light, Job's reply to Zophar's therapeutic advice is notable, both for the lovely, heedless lucidity of Job's exasperation and for the deeper awareness of the nature of the process he is suffering: "What you know, I also know; I am not inferior to you.... But your platitudes are proverbs of ashes, your defenses are defenses of clay": "Who among you does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this, in whose hand is the life of every living thing, and the breath of all mankind?"

And Job concludes, in a classic formulation of the surrender necessary in the abyss of the soul's helplessness, beyond all therapeutic avail: "Though God slay me, yet will I trust him."



Job's comforters are reasonable, upright, pious men, and there is much of truth and wisdom in what they offer their suffering friend. Where they fall short is in their need to believe in the comprehensibility of Job's suffering, in

the smugness of their conceit that they can explain the ways of God to him and to themselves, and in their complacent sense that human efforts can suffice to end such suffering. In seeking comfort and security in a reasonable God and a tidy creation that can be comprehended, they must defend themselves against the glaring truth of Job's condition. It is Job alone, in the depths of his utterly disproportionate misery, who sees God truly: God stripped of all that human sense can make of him.

We do no one any good by encouraging a schizophrenic, a serial killer, or someone with a brain tumor to see their affliction as a dark night of the soul. But most of us fall somewhere on the semifunctional side of the line that marks the purely medical condition or untreatable character disorder. Often, too, depression is symptomatic of a Gordian knot of social dysfunctionality, and the communal compulsion to treat the "identified patient" with drugs to "solve the problem" (and thus avoid examining the pathological elements of the social matrix itself) is strong. At various times through my own years of depression I was strongly



urged to take antidepressants, but the social dynamic at those points was such that to do so would have felt like capitulation, surrender to a form of coercion. You may simply be the canary in the coal mine, the first to succumb to a bad atmosphere. I once saw a wonderful Gary Larsen cartoon in which a cow was lying on a therapy couch, with a cow therapist attentively taking notes in the background. “I don’t know, Doc,” the cow-patient was saying. “Sometimes I think it’s not me, it’s the herd.”

The point is, life is complex. Doubt as to whether you are in a dark night or “just depressed” is probably a very good sign; it means you’re alive and paying attention and that life has you baffled, which is the precondition for truth in my experience. It’s uncomfortable, but the more we learn to live with that discomfort—to just breathe and be amid the terror of uncertainty—the more reality can sing us its subtler songs. You may well be helped through your brutal moods or your bogged-down lows by prescription drugs; you probably need therapy (I attend my weekly sessions religiously); and your childhood was almost certainly a

mess; but what Viktor Frankl says in his wonderful book *The Doctor and the Soul* is likely still true for you: “The ‘symptom’ of conscientious anxiety in the melancholiac is not the product of melancholia as a physical illness . . . [but] represents an ‘accomplishment’ of the human being as a spiritual person. It is understandable only as the anxiety of a human being as such: as existential anxiety.”

In general, it is fruitless to treat such existential anxiety as an obstacle. It is more like the coastal fog of northern California, a natural product of prevailing conditions. The cold Humboldt current of the usual self meets the warm land mass of God—or reality, if you will—and the fog of anxiety arises. We cannot wait for the weather to change before we begin to live. The weather is beyond our control, and the climate of our lives is to be lived in, not changed. The journey to the bottom of the self is a risky one, whatever you call it, and while it may be true that ultimately the best course probably lies between the Scylla of a reductionistic psychiatry and the Charybdis of an arrogant “spirituality,” all we really have is a way of travel-

ing, however we map the sea of suffering in which we find ourselves. We are, inescapably, large-brained mammals with messy biochemistries; we are social beings riddled with the symptoms of civilization and its discontents; and we are spiritual animals subject to all the ills the soul is heir to. Our souls and selves do not develop under laboratory conditions; we mature toward our divine equilibrium in the real world, with its inevitable commingling of our neuroses, social dysfunctions, and simple life noise.

One thing is certain, whatever choices we make: we will not miss out on some crucial purgation by seeking treatment for depression or any other form of physical suffering. If we are ripe for what the dark night brings, God will find a way to bring the process to fruition no matter how hard we try to avoid it.