

In the Doldrums
Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church
Worship Committee Service 3/20/16

OPENING WORDS/INTRODUCTION

In the eighteenth century, Robert Burns wrote an ode to despondency, which today we would call depression.

*Oppress'd with grief, oppress'd with care,
A burden more than I can bear,
I set me down and sigh;
O life! thou art a galling load,
Along a rough, a weary road,
To wretches such as I!*

In the nineteenth century, Charles Darwin spoke of his “bitter mortification” at a mental state that left him unable to do anything one day out of three. Work was the only way he could escape his gloomy moods, he said, “the only thing which makes life endurable to me.”

Today the Worship Committee offers its own perceptions of what once was known as “melancholia.” We do not offer facile cures for depressed moments, and we do not pretend to the medical expertise required for dealing with deep clinical depression. But we can offer a hopeful initial description of depression as a cold, dark force that when exposed to light this morning may lead us toward the warmth of mutual understanding and support; and as an enervating force that when firmly faced may lead us, like Charles Darwin, through struggle toward strength.

Think of amateur wrestlers exhausting each other on the mat, and in the process building muscle mass for future use. But before we put our tunics on, let's listen to our centering music.

What's in a Name?

by John Howard

At Allen Avenue UU our mission statement says that we celebrate diversity. A serious case of clinical depression is a terrible thing, and to talk about ‘celebrating’ it is obviously wrong. But to stigmatize this isn't helpful either, and we need to know that there are people with this condition who are managing it and doing quite well. I'd like to consider a wider range of disorders and conditions – loosely labeled mental illness – in order to explore the charge we have as U.U.'s to understand and embrace difference. I attend a support group for graduates of partial hospitalization in Portland. Partial hospitalization is out-patient care for people with depression or other debilitating mental disorder. My qualification for this group was a nine day stay at Spring Harbor for a bad reaction to medication about ten years ago. About six months later depression settled down on me making it difficult to work, and I remembered that while at Spring Harbor volunteers had conducted meetings - samples of this After Care group, designed for people who have problems with addictions and co-occurring mental disorders such as

depression. So I decided to check it out. I continue to attend because I've made friends there and find it helpful to talk about these things with others.

At this weekly meeting – right before I come here for choir practice – each person is invited to state their diagnosis as they check in: for instance, “I’m George, I have schizophrenia”, or “My name is Sara and I’m an alcoholic with borderline personality disorder”. Some have a long list of diagnoses, some choose to just say their name, which reveals a certain ambivalence we have about labels. Certainly the term ‘mental illness’ can be problematic. Are labels helpful or hurtful? Well, that depends a lot on the setting and who is using the label. People like affinity groups, and in a sense all affinity groups require some degree of self-identification. Labels provide handles and can alleviate stigma. But we aren’t necessarily defined by our labels, and leaving them unspoken can be a way of affirming that we are works in progress. Our stories unfold in complex ways, and new experiences or perspectives await around every corner.

My understanding of depression has evolved slowly. I think we all have “a-ha” moments when some unfamiliar condition or viewpoint is brought home to us for the first time. A man I greatly admired once told the group at an AA meeting that at an earlier time in his life depression had forced him to quit work for a long period, and this really made an impression on me, which shows how naïve I was. But I began to “get it”. Since so many of us get a sense of self by what we do for a living, I thought how awful and disorienting it must be to lose that. Around the same time, in the mid 1990’s, I discovered the book Driven to Distraction, about Attention Deficit Disorder in adults, and that was another ‘a-ha’ moment for me, since it is something I’d had all my life and didn’t know it. It’s a good example of how empowering finding a name for something can be.

What I really love about Allen Avenue UU is how people accommodate and support differences. There is such a richness of experience here. Any group of two or three or more will find commonalities and share personal angles on surprising matters, such as dealing with dementia, or depression, or learning disabilities or any number of issues that might be considered taboo subjects. We care about and encourage each other. And we respect and value authenticity.

If something unfamiliar makes me uncomfortable, it’s important to acknowledge this and go easy on myself. Maybe I’m just not ready for it today. Most of us have our off days, nobody is perfect. Ideally, if I look for commonalities and remain open and curious about new information, then everyone is better off. And I see examples of this behavior all around me here. The essential label of ‘human being’ can accommodate many varieties of perception and there are probably strengths and weaknesses in all of them. Thank goodness we’re not all the same.

This Is Me

by Molly Brewer

There are a lot of labels I could choose to use to define myself. Some of these labels carry privilege, and some of them don't. Daughter, sister, wife, friend. White, tall, fat, physically abled, bisexual, progressive. Artist, writer, blogger, geek, nerd, feminist. Pagan, UU, singer. Anxious, depressive, in therapy. Mentally ill.

You can know any of these things about me, or you can know them all, and still not know me.

You can talk to me and observe that I laugh and smile and dance in the sanctuary between services. My happiness is real in the moment. But you won't see it when I go home and worry obsessively that I've inadvertently offended not just "anyone", but "everyone". If I seemed too earnest, too intense, or not earnest enough. I obsess and I nitpick and I procrastinate because before I can make something new with my pen or my voice, it needs to be already perfect, sprung forth fully formed. And if it's not, I tell myself it wasn't worth doing, because everyone who seems to like me is too kind to tell me the truth, because how could anyone think that I have anything of value to contribute, because I'll continue to fail over and over, because I'm not worth the carbon I'm made of.

This feeling that exists only to devalue me and everything that I do, is a bully. But it's also insidious, a wisp of smoke that creeps in and inserts itself into any positive thought. I have to be very careful to make sure it's concealed. But I have no poker face, and sooner or later you'll see it come through. You'll hear it when I minimize myself or when my voice gets that little quaver that foreshadows an embarrassing public meltdown. Depression, for me, means living with a mask on all the time so I won't make others around me uncomfortable. Anyone who's worked in service knows the huge mental effort that goes into seeming cheerful in order not to risk one's job; imagine feeling that same pressure even in private moments. Many of us who live with this illness have a deficit of energy from simply getting ourselves through the day without showing it. And so there are times when even taking showers or cooking our own meals seem like impossible tasks. When everything already hurts because we've spent days or weeks holding ourselves stiff, even hobbies we love feel like an unhappy grind.

Depression robs us of a future. Our idea of tomorrow, next week, next month or year vanishes and our world shrinks to an agonizing pinpoint of NOW. Tomorrow I might regret the dirty dishes piling up in my sink and the laundry on my floor, but in this moment, the idea of getting it done is filling me with dread and making my hands sweat and I can't handle one simple thing; therefore I must be as stupid and worthless as I think. The cycle feeds itself. The idea of getting help may sound good one day, but it can feel like a pipe dream full of insurance red tape and mortification the next. The idea of making a phone call to a stranger specifically to talk about how vulnerable and dysfunctional we feel is nightmare fuel. And if we've been living this way for a long time, if this is part of our life experience and our truth, you may never see it.

On bad days, depression is there like an uninvited houseguest with a bad habit of throwing tantrums. But some days are good. Sometimes they extend into good weeks, good months. I've even had good years since I first became aware of having a depressive disorder in college. Those times are precious and valuable and wonderful, and with treatment they come more frequently. And in those times, the person I am when I'm depressed feels like she might as well be an alien from another planet. But I'm careful not to share this, and so you might never know.

While I was writing this piece, someone close to me asked "is that okay for you to talk about?" She didn't mean to ask if writing it and dredging up these feelings would make me feel worse; she meant "is it safe for you to be open about this?" I hope that it is. Above all things, I hope it's safe and acceptable to talk about this here, in what we sometimes call this beloved community. I wrote this not just for myself, but for anyone who has these feelings telling them they aren't enough and that they never will be. I wrote this to tell you that that feeling is wrong and it's lying to you. You are stronger than your worst impulses. You are better than your worst feelings. And so am I.

I hope this won't change the way other people see me.

I hope I can be more than just a list of labels and diagnoses.

And I hope that if someone, anyone out there has been feeling this way, isolated, trapped, or depleted, that you might recognize a grain of truth about yourself in what I've written. You aren't alone, and you don't need to be.

My Aunt Gail

by Erica Bartlett

I knew my aunt Gail, my dad's youngest sister, suffered from depression, but I didn't know the extent of it until too late. On June 26, 2006, my dad called to tell me that she had shot herself.

I was floored – literally. I had to sit on the floor, the most stable place I could find, to take it in. I couldn't believe things had gotten so bad, but looking back, I recognize how we fell out of touch, grew apart enough so I didn't see how she was doing, and how I suspect her depression played a part in that.

Growing up, I idolized Gail, who was only fourteen years older than me and had many similar interests, including writing, traveling, enjoying *Star Trek*, and loving cats. She had a quick and acerbic wit that I now realize likely covered great pain, the legacy of an abusive childhood. She never talked to me about it, but in retrospect, I suspect that the times she stopped communicating were particularly difficult for her. In my teenage years, I took it personally and got upset with her when she fell out of touch, only to later learn she had been thinking of me all along.

Only in the days following her death did I begin to understand what she had been going through. I learned that she had gone to many therapy sessions, tried medication, and even gone to the hospital to protect herself from herself. Her boyfriend also said he sometimes found her lying on the couch, sobbing, because she was in so much pain.

That was when I came to view Gail's death as the result of a terminal illness. Unlike my mom, who died of cancer, it was not a physical illness, but it was just as deadly.

I wish I had known all of this beforehand, known what Gail was really going through. I don't know if I could have helped, but I would have better understood her moodiness, and I could have reached out more, told her how much I admired her, that I majored in Computer Science because of her suggestion, told her again that I loved her. I wish, too, that she had found some other way to ease the pain, or at least felt like she had a better option for ending it than dying alone.

Although it's too late for any of that, I *have* been able to find a gift in all of this. Losing Gail made me reconsider some of the painful experiences in my own life, things I didn't talk about, to start bringing them to the light and find some healing. It helped me realize that my sorrows are not so damaging that I, unlike Gail, cannot choose another way. As a result, in the years since her death, I have deliberately tried to be more open to happiness and to honor her memory by living as fully as I can. And I can only hope that, somehow, she has found some peace.

Strains of Depression

by Rick Kimball

I strained my lower back recently. The pain led me to a nurse, then a doctor, and finally a physical therapist. They all asked how I had done it. I wanted to say I had single-handedly lifted a steel girder from the site of a collapsed building where 150 people were trapped. Instead I told the truth. I strained my back leaning over to pull on my socks. When I said that, all three practitioners glanced quickly back at my medical record. I knew they were checking my age. I might look 24, they were telling themselves, but if I had trouble getting my socks on, I must be a lot younger or a lot older. They all opted for older. And I at that same point opted for another round of depression.

Darling, we are growing old. Silver threads among the mold.

I have so far been spared the dangerous and debilitating rigors of deep depression and despair, the kind that makes it difficult to even think of pulling on your socks, the kind that once drove my twin sister to attempt suicide, the kind that has seared all of us, whether it is ours, or our friend's or our relative's.

But I have certainly and frequently felt the frustration with life that marks more common and less intense depression. When I was a child and spake as a child I once asked my mother, "What's the sense of living if you're just going to die?"

Today I speak as an older man, and I ask my question in different ways. "What's the sense of dying if you haven't really lived?" "What's the sense of living if you're just going to get depressed by the state of the world and the fact of approaching death?"

"What would be the sense of living if you were going to live forever?"

The questions contain their own answers. There would be no sense in living if you were going to live forever. You might as well be a rock, sitting there endlessly with no pressure to do a single thing before it's too late, because there is no such thing as too late, so why not just sit still, feeling neither pleasure nor pain.

And depression is a natural state of life, a state with as much reason and purpose for being as joy or elation. How can you not feel depression when you see friends struggling

with sorrow and illness, and strangers suffering all around the world? How can you not feel depression when you read or watch the daily news? How can you not feel depression when you hurt yourself pulling on your socks?

Darling, we are growing old. Silver threads all mixed with mold.

But let's scrape off some of the mold and keep going as long as we can. Because that mold of depression is not just a reasonable response to life but also a trigger for positive counter-response.

For some that counter-response may be entwining with a loved one and engaging in passionate, tongue-twirling kiss. I like that. For others it may be engaging in earth-saving, sanity-saving, people-saving social action. I like that too. There are yin and yang, there are opposites in interplay, there are positive highs growing out of the negative lows of depression.

For me the best positive counter-response to depression is creative act, and I recommend it. Make a photograph that shows not just what you saw but what you felt. Plant a little indoor garden to warm your room. Even a single plant is a start. Sing in the choir. Or write a little something, a poem, or an essay like this, and share it with somebody like you. That works for me, and so do your responses, your listening and your occasional laughter. I feel less depressed right now than I did when I woke this morning.

Darling, we are growing old. And darling, we are throwing bleach on all that mold.

Darling, let's find new, creative ways to pull our socks up over our old soles, perhaps by starting with them rolled, then darling, we will have won the undepressing, aging gold.

The Liar

by Anna Noyes Benoit

Depression you are a liar.

Some days it feels as if I am being lied to all day long. exhausted,
all I want is sleep sleep sleep.

The opposite of depression is not joy.

I think it must be truth.

You, smog of life,

Acid rain of the soul.

I must be perfect and am not.

I remember your voice patiently reminding me of all my failings.

My soul found purchase with those lies.

"You are nobody." " You are powerless"

And wonder if this is how it all started.

I perfectly absorb the criticisms.

You heavy and dark

Weighty in muted tones.

You rest in my bones, unwelcome malady.

You boring and so lonely.

You keep me stuck in a muddy rut

Rocking to and fro,
Afraid.
Rocking back and forth trying to get unstuck.

And sometimes there is traction and a surprising jolt forward
Or rather up and out of the sticky hole.
a window opening filling the room with fresh air and sunlight.
Or a bit of blue sky growing larger as the grayness lifts.
A connection made with a friend, new or old
My humanity embraces humility.
Bringing back the truth.

Sometimes I am a Lost Soul

by Elizabeth Forrest

At certain times I wander through the bare woodlands of my life and wonder why I live there, not someplace else.
Often I fret about the many wars,
starving children, illnesses,
people who walk miles or stand in lines daily to provide their families with necessities I barely even give a thought to~~
then I wonder what I have (or have not) done to deserve my fate instead of theirs.

The ancient Egyptian Goddess Ma'at
Impartial judge of humans,
weighed every departing soul's heart against a feather on her scale;
Only if the soul was the lighter of the two could the soul journey to the afterlife.

When I cease to exist in my body, will my heart be light enough? will my conscience be clear, or brackish and dark?
What good have I accomplished in my several years here that might matter to any one a few years hence?

It is at times when I am unable to think of answers to these questions
that I am sure that the feather will be the heavier
the scales will tip
and my life
and death
will mean nothing.

Pondering my "devils", remembering my failures,
negative thoughts winding me in circles that grow tighter and tighter,
I sink,

Imperceptably at first,
passive as sand flowing,
blind as a cave-dwelling fish
until I have somehow disappeared
Into that fog of gray and muffled numbness,
from which, while it surrounds me,
I cannot fathom an escape, or even an attempt one.
It is all encompassing, no hope of markers or reference points ,
no brightness or darkness ahead or behind.
And what will happen now?
Why should I care? I am not in any way connected.
Unmoving and unmoved
I am wrapped in netting
caught,
voiceless,
passive
without hope

Friends, if you care about a person who is lost in this quagmire,
.Keep on calling out to them.

I beg you--

Persist!

Sit with them

Hold hands with them so they know they are still real.

Talk to them of music, of koi ponds, of the monarch's amazing migration.

Help them rere-light the light in their own minds.

Keep on insisting that they, and you, and everyone
matters--

the good created by their simple existence on Earth is real--

the existence of a butterfly on the other side of the world **does** affect us and future
generations here.

They may not answer

or even acknowledge your presence

It may take a long time and many candles,

but some will emerge from beyond their desperate overwhelm

back into awareness of butterfly wings

sweeping sunward.

CLOSING SEQUENCE

Observation

By sharing who and what we are this morning, we share also the reasons we are here – to be in a place of love and welcome; to be in a congregation that accepts and seeks to understand diversity of mood and style and thought; to be in a gathering of people who nurture each other through all the ups and downs of life; to be in a collective of ministers and ministries, of spiritual enrichment groups, of committees that advance progressive

cause, of spiritual leaders who inform and assist, of individuals who give each other help and care.

In the spirit of this church, let's together sing our closing hymn, #95. There is More Love Somewhere

Closing Hymn

Closing Words

Please join hands for our closing words.

How Far?

*How far can feelings go?
As far, my friend, as from me to you,
And from you to me and back
Is as far as feelings can go.*

*As far as is
And as far as can be
And as far as was
Is as far as feelings can go.*

*As far as around
And as far as within
Is as far as feelings can go,
My friend.*

Blessed be.

Please be quietly seated for our closing music.